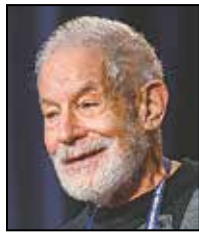




FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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an atheist in
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for policy, not
coach's prayer**

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America's quick descent into authoritarianism

This is the speech, edited for length, given by Professor Steven Levitsky at FFRF's national convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C., on Oct. 18. He was introduced by FFRF Executive Board member David Tamayo, who is co-founder of Hispanic American Freethinkers. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.us/con25. To read the full speech, go to freethoughttoday.com.

David Tamayo: Professor Steven Levitsky's background is of special interest to me as a Latino. He is the David Rockefeller Professor of Latin American Studies and director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard. He is senior fellow at the Kettering Foundation and a senior democracy fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He is co-author of "How Democracies Die," which was a New York Times bestseller and published in 30 languages. It was followed by the book "Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point." He is currently working with a colleague on a book about democratic resilience across the world.

Please welcome Professor Steven Levitsky.

By Steven Levitsky

Thanks, everybody. It is a great honor to be here. I don't think I've been surrounded by this many atheists since my bar mitzvah. . . .

Social scientists have discovered two seemingly rock-solid facts about democracies.

First, rich democracies never die. The wealthiest democracies ever to break down — Argentina and Hungary — had a per capita GDP of about

\$20,000 in today's dollars. The United States is four times richer than that.

The second seemingly rock-solid fact is that old democracies never die. No democracy over the age of 50 has ever broken down. Even if we date the birth of U.S. democracy at 1965 (when we achieved full suffrage), U.S. democracy is over 50. So, no democracy even remotely as rich or as old as the United States has ever broken down — not once, in the history of the world.



Steven Levitsky

Photo by Chris Line

So, we ought to be safe. And, yet, we're not safe: U.S. democracy is breaking down right before our eyes. To be clear, I don't think the U.S. is descending into fascism or single-party dictatorship. It closer to what Lucan Way and I call competitive authoritarianism.

Competitive authoritarianism is a political system in which parties compete in elections, but in which systematic incumbent abuse tilts the playing field against the opposition. In other words, governments don't eliminate elections or ban opposition — they weaponize state institutions and deploy them to punish critics, weaken rivals and bully the media and civil society.

This is what autocrats did in Russia, Venezuela, Turkey, Hungary and El Salvador — and it's what Trump is doing today. At the heart of competitive authoritarianism is the weaponization of the state, or the machinery of government.

See Levitsky on page 10

Judge: Texas schools must remove displays of Ten Commandments

A federal judge issued a preliminary injunction Nov. 18 requiring certain public school districts in Texas to remove Ten Commandments displays by Dec. 1 and prohibiting them from posting new displays.

The order, a win for religious freedom and state/church separation, is in response to a new lawsuit filed Sept. 22 by a group of 15 multifaith and nonreligious families with children attending schools in the districts. In his order, U.S. District Judge Orlando L. Garcia wrote that "displaying the Ten Commandments on the wall of a public-school classroom as set forth in SB 10 violates the Establishment Clause." He added, "It is impractical, if not impossible, to prevent plaintiffs from being subjected to unwelcome religious displays without enjoining defendants from enforcing SB 10 across their districts."

The order came in the case *Cribbs Ringer v. Comal Independent School District*, which was filed after the defendant school districts installed or were about to install Ten Commandments

See Texas on page 9



Freethought TV now available to stream

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proudly launching Freethought TV, an innovative streaming service delivering bold, thought-provoking secular content to your living room (or anywhere!) — and it's completely free!

Designed for smart TVs, streaming sticks and mobile devices, Freethought TV provides on-demand access to the latest FFRF programming, alongside an expansive archive of hundreds of classic episodes produced in-house over the years. The platform offers a dynamic mix of informative, inspiring and entertaining content aimed at freethinkers, skeptics and anyone curious about secular perspectives.

"Freethought TV is more than a streaming service — it's a hub for reason, critical inquiry and celebration of the First Amendment," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "We're giving the public direct access to a rich library of secular programming, empowering viewers to explore and engage with a wide spectrum of freethought voices."

Freethought TV will feature new FFRF programs like "Secular Spotlight" and "Freethought Radio: In Studio," as well as complete seasons of classic shows like "Freethought Matters" and "Ask An Atheist." In addition, the channel features speeches from FFRF national conventions, as well as musical and seasonal specials. There's also a section called "Greatest Hits," which features the most popular FFRF vid-

See Freethought TV on page 9

Changes to charitable giving rules in 2026

By John Friar

The One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), signed into law this year, introduces significant new rules for the tax treatment of charitable donations, effective for the 2026 tax year.

These changes impact all donors, creating a new incentive for non-itemizers while introducing new limitations for itemizers and high-income earners.

Consult your tax advisor to understand how these changes apply to your situation and to optimize your giving strategy.

For non-itemizers (standard deduction filers)

- New universal charitable deduction: Beginning in 2026, taxpayers who take the standard deduction can claim an above-the-line deduction for cash gifts to qualified public charities.
- Limit: Up to \$1,000 for single filers and \$2,000 for married couples filing jointly.
- Details: Applies only to cash gifts to operating charities, such as the Freedom from Religion Foundation. Contributions to donor-advised funds (DAFs), supporting organizations or private foundations are excluded.
- Impact: Roughly 90 percent of taxpayers who do not itemize will now have a direct tax incentive to give.

Donate to FFRF through CFC

If you are a federal employee, you may make donations to FFRF through the Combined Federal Campaign (CFC) until Jan. 15, 2026. If you wish to help FFRF through this campaign, the CFC code to designate your contribution to FFRF is 32519. Federal employees can donate through an Online Giving System, a Paper Pledge Form, Text-to-Donate, or on the CFC Giving App. Visit givecfc.org/donors/how-to-give.

It is recommended that all CFC donors check the box to include their name, mailing address and email with the donation. Donors will then receive an acknowledgment from FFRF when we receive pledge notification.

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

For itemizers

- New 0.5 percent AGI floor: Starting in 2026, charitable contributions are deductible only to the extent they exceed 0.5 percent of your adjusted gross income (AGI). Example: If your AGI is \$200,000, the first \$1,000 of giving is not deductible; a \$5,000 gift would yield a \$4,000 deduction.
- 60 percent AGI limit for cash gifts: Permanently extended contributions to public charities, providing certainty for larger gifts.
- Planning Tip: Smaller, frequent gifts may be less tax-efficient under the

new floor. Consider “bunching” donations — combining several years of giving into one tax year — to maximize deductions.

For high-income earners

- Cap on deduction value: Taxpayers in the top bracket (currently 37 percent) will see the value of itemized deductions capped at 35 percent. Example: A \$10,000 donation that previously saved \$3,700 in taxes will now save about \$3,500.
- Strategy note: This cap, combined with the new AGI floor, makes timing and structuring gifts more important

than ever. Discuss bunching and donor-advised fund strategies with your advisor.

What this means for you

Whether you give regularly or make large one-time gifts, familiarizing yourself with these new rules will help you maximize your charitable impact.

As 2025 comes to a close, consider reviewing your giving strategy now — **accelerating contributions before year-end may allow you to take advantage of current rules.** Please consult your tax advisor for personalized guidance.

If you have questions and would like to speak with FFRF's financial advisor, please contact Park Capital Management at 608-440-8608 or info@parkcapitalmgt.com.

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John Friar (CFP, AIF), is partner and senior financial advisor for Park Capital Management.

OVERHEARD

[My Oscar] begrudgingly shares the fireplace mantel with an equally lustrous naked emperor statue.

Irving, author of “The Cider House Rules,” for which he earned an Oscar for best adapted screenplay, on how the statuette is above his fireplace next to his “Emperor Has No Clothes” award he received from FFRF in 2019. He was being interviewed to discuss his 16th novel, “Queen Esther.”

Toronto Star, 11-9-25

I think its genesis is in Christian nationalism. There are believers that are confusing true religion — and religious liberty, and faith in God — with political power. And this Christian nationalism is the movement that is giving oxygen to this attempt to eviscerate the Establishment Clause.

Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond, speaking to Politico about the proposed public religious charter school (St. Isadore of Seville) that was eventual-



John Irving, speaking at FFRF's 2019 convention (remotely from his home), which shows both his Oscar and Emperor Has No Clothes statuettes on a table behind him.

ly shot down by the Oklahoma Supreme Court (and then the U.S. Supreme Court).

Politico, 10-28-25

All people of all faiths or no faiths should be able to come into that space, feel welcome and not feel alienated. And I would argue that having a prayer that is very much geared toward the Christian faith, and having councilmembers actually citing the bible, having all the speech be about demons and hell and all of that, is not only not appropriate for a child's celebration for school, it's also not appropriate for a government building where you would presume that there might be citizens who do not share your same faith because we are in America. . . It's not fine that thousands of people assumed we were in church when we were in a Town Hall meeting.

Tiana Torrilhon, a Fountain Hills, Ariz., resident who attended a City Council meeting after her son was invited to receive an award, only to be shocked by the political prayer that opened the meeting, such as Council member Hannah Larabee's impassioned denunciation after Charlie Kirk's assassination of “God's enemies” and Vice Mayor Allen Skillicorn's remarks that Kirk was “not murdered for his politics, he was murdered for his faith in Jesus Christ.” Torrilhon posted a photo of the meeting that went viral on TikTok showing her son, who has autism, being poked by an audience member signaling him to stand up during the prayer.

Arizona Republic, 10-29-25

Right-wing claims of tens of thousands of deaths of Christians [in Nigeria] appear far off the mark. Rigorous reporting by Armed Conflict Location and Event Data, an independent monitoring group, says that there have been 33 deaths so far this year in attacks against Christians in which religion was reported to play a role. The equivalent figure for Muslims is higher, 88 deaths. . . There's something else that I find offensive about the Trump/Hegseth bombast about Nigeria: If you care about religious repression of only your sect, you don't really care about religious repression. Persecution of

Christians, Muslims, Baha'is, Ahmadis and others is a global scourge and deserves more attention, but some of the most urgent cases today involve Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar and Uyghur Muslims in China.

Nicholas Kristof, in his column, “Trump's aid cuts kill more Christians than jihadists do.”

New York Times, 11-9-25

When the lyrics were coming together for that song, I just couldn't stop thinking of the wisdom of Thomas Jefferson's address to the Danbury Baptists. . . . What he said to the Baptists was intended to reassure them that they would be allowed to practice their faith, spirituality, religion, however you want to refer to it, freely under the Constitution. But he also makes a really important distinction that we aren't an autocracy. We're not a theocracy. We can't rule over people with our interpretation of an extremely opaque scripture and religion, as it pertains particularly to the Christian religion.

Musician/singer Brandi Carlile, who spoke to Variety about writing her new song, “Church and State,” which she performed on “Saturday Night Live” on Nov. 1. For her actions, Carlile was named FFRF Action Fund “Secularist of the week” on Nov. 7.

Variety, 11-2-25

I believe that probably the Texas Legislature and the Louisiana Legislature are hoping that this conservative Supreme Court might reinterpret the Constitution, but until that happens, I feel obliged to comply with the Constitution as it's currently interpreted, and that is that it's unconstitutional. I took an oath as a trustee that I would defend the Constitution. All of us did.

Elizabeth Beeton, trustee of the Galveston Independent School District, who led the effort to delay the required display of Ten Commandments posters in Texas public schools. Beeton was named FFRF Action Fund's “Secularist of the Week” on Oct. 31.

Houston Chronicle, 10-23-25

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FREETHOUGHT

TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

My unfinished journey to freedom

FFRF is extending support to the writer below under its “nonbelief relief” campaign, which largely helps freethinkers needing to flee Islamist nations. The hardships not only involve escaping such regimes, but then living in limbo in a temporary nation while awaiting a country that will extend asylum. FFRF asked “Aras” to share his experiences with its membership.

By Aras

I am an atheist born in Iran. I was raised in a religious family, but, fortunately, I had an enlightened and well-read father from whom I inherited my views. In my teenage years, encouraged by my father, I read works by modern Iranian writers such as Sadegh Hedayat, Shojaeddin Shafa and Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub. These shaped my perspective and sparked questions forbidden in an Islamic society. In Iranian schools, performing religious duties like praying, fasting, reciting slogans and wishing death upon other nations was mandatory. I was repeatedly reprimanded and punished at school for refusing to comply with these obligations.

At the age of 14, I lost my father, a compassionate mentor. Though he was gone, my mother’s support continued. During that time, access to the internet was gradually becoming common, introducing me to a new world filled with books and figures like Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, Baruch Spinoza, Carl Sagan and, my greatest inspiration, Christopher Hitchens. This highlights the importance of free internet access in religiously oppressive dictatorships and explains Iran’s heavy censorship. The vast amount of information and knowledge was the greatest gift I could have received.

Through hard work, I gained admission to a public university to study management. However, in 2009, during protests against dubious election results, I participated and spoke at student debates about the importance of separating religion from politics in Iran. This led to attacks from Islamist students and professors. On the evening of the debate, while returning home, I was assaulted by several individuals and stabbed in the



hand, leaving me with lasting issues in my right hand. They threatened that secular individuals in a society ruled by Allah are condemned to death. Bleeding and with only a small bandage, I was forced to return to my hometown, Shiraz, for surgery. To save my life, I had to abandon my university studies, giving up my greatest dream and right.

In 2011, I anonymously started a Facebook page to critique Islam and its political influence. By early 2014, cyberharassment and threats began. That year, several people in Iran were arrested for online activism and criticizing Islam, and one person, Mohsen Amir-Aslani, was executed in September 2014. I shut down the page and ceased my activities. In March 2015, I was abducted on the street by individ-

uals claiming to be agents of the Revolutionary Guard’s intelligence unit. They held me in a tiny room, where I endured torture, abuse, threats and humiliation. In those days, I witnessed the death of humanity and wished for death every minute. After a few days, I was released due to insufficient evidence, but they confiscated all my documents, including my passport, and forced me to attend daily religious classes at the local mosque and pray.

In late October 2015, I was summoned by phone to a Revolutionary Guard base, but unable to endure further humiliation and torture, I decided to flee Iran. I left behind my mother, family, friends and all my memories, carrying only a backpack and the longing to see my family again. Without a passport, which had been seized, I ille-

gally crossed into Turkey. After immense hardship, I reached Turkey and presented myself to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Ankara. The agency sent me to a remote city with no support, marking the beginning of my refugee journey.

In 2017, after posting on Facebook in support of sexual minorities using the hashtag #allahisgay, I was attacked by colleagues, who broke two of my ribs and my nose. With no one to support me, I realized Turkey was not safe either.

Unfortunately, with Donald Trump’s rise to power, resettlement operations were halted, and I had to endure four years of hardship, poverty and uncertainty, pinning my hopes on American voters in 2020. However, even with a liberal government, there was no place for me in the free world. Thankfully, with the support of Maryam Namazie and organizations like Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain and Center for Inquiry, I was referred to Canada under a secularism rescue program. My case was accepted in 2022, and the process of transferring to Canada began in 2023.

With Trump’s reelection in 2024 and its impact on immigration and refugees, my transfer process was extended from one year to five. After 11 years of living without rights in Turkey, I must wait three more years.

Throughout these years, I have lived with one dream: to live in a free society with the right to free speech and to study at a university — rights taken from me for defending the freedom of expression. I have been broken, bent, sometimes hungry, and have at times contemplated ending my life due to the hardships. Yet, I persisted, standing today thanks to the support of kind and freethinking people. I live and continue for the dream of a world without torture or persecution, where freedom of speech and thought are upheld.

I conclude with a quote from Mashal Khan, a Pakistani student brutally killed by his classmates on April 13, 2017, for expressing his atheist views: “Islamic culture and society are like a woman worried about her torn clothing revealing her body, not her poverty and destitution.”

CRANKMAIL

Here is your December installment of Crankmail, where we publish some of the vitriol FFRF receives in letters, emails and on social media. Printed as received.

Christianity is better; Being discriminated against by your pretentious staff motivated me to go back to being Christian, where I’ve been treated like a human being. Fuck you.

You’d better watch out!; I think you are a horrible, horrible organization. You think everyone wants freedom from religion. Well, I’m a Christian. Our

country was founded on Christianity and In God We Trust. Good moral values. You’re a bunch of woke people. Our God will prevail. He sees every little thing that goes on in his world.

More of us than you: Don’t push this junk on those who don’t want it. There are more Christians than atheists. Try to call upon the Lord to see how he can change you. Look what y’all are doing. If you wanna be atheists and take freedom and religion from people, it ain’t gonna happen. Go sit in a closet and be atheists.

Atheism is silly: I love when Atheists think they

have us normals when they say “Jesus would have wanted unlimited illegal immigration”. It’s almost like they know atheism is silly!

No separation: I realize that the goal now in America is to wipe out Christianity and create laws that will punish those practicing it. Regarding the Constitution: It reads “The government shall NOT infringe on religions”. There is nothing about separation of Church and State - people who hate Christians made that little ditty up. Bring in the lions! Quickly!

Just be quiet: I find people that can’t shut up about their lack of religion just as annoying as people that can’t shut up about how great their religion is, like the muslims.

Proof is irrefutable: You’re making fools of yourselves. Are 12 non-Christian sources within 100 years of Jesus’ death and 17 non-Christian sources within 150 years of Jesus’ death not enough for you? As the atheist NT scholar Bart Ehrman writes, ‘The view that Jesus existed is held by virtually every expert on the planet.’

It’s the truth: Hey geniuses. If God is just a fairy tale and he doesn’t exist, why does it bother you so much when believers pray in public? By your rationale you should just laugh and move on no? Deep down you know the truth and thats why it bothers you

Ron Reagan ad: “ not afraid of burning in hell” ... yet you are an atheist??? So you believe in Hell?? Uhhhhmmmmmm..... WHAT???

Heaven and hell: Heaven= eternal bliss, Hell=eternal damnation. If I am wrong what have I lost ? If he and others like him are wrong, what will they lose?

Forever Catholic: You asked to see God, and--since you did not see him the way you were expecting him--you decided he must not exist. Reminds me of the Bible-story of that man who prayed for God to come to him; and God did three times (in the story), but the guy refused to see him and went back and kept praying to see God

I dont care what u say i was born catholic and i will die a catholic i go to mass for jesus not the priest. Every institution has sex offenders like schools with teachers sleeping with students. That doesnt stop kids from going to school. Doctors taking advantage of examinations with their patients you still go to them. Every one sins no one is perfect .So i will get disagreements on my views but i will always be a catholic.

Foolish pride: This is foolish. How prideful do you have to be to begin to think there is no God?

Just look around at the corruption and anarchy now under Godless Democrat rule. Morals and the Bible keep Man from being in the ditches. The world is dark now with man left to their own devices without accountability to a greater God. You are spreading baseless lies.

ACTION FUND

Become an advocate!



Sign up at FFRF Action Fund, FFRF’s legislative arm. Receive action alerts about legislative issues affecting you and other freethinkers. Learn more: ffrfaction.org/join-us/

Paid for by FFRF Action Fund

Across

1. Capital of Azerbaijan

5. Make a choice

8. *Freethinking actress of “Pulp Fiction” fame

11. Second to last word in a fairytale

12. From square one

13. Wheel wedge

15. Pinta’s and Santa Maria’s companion

16. *H. H. Munro’s nickname, borrowed from freethinking Omar Khayyam’s poetry

17. Part of a TV transmission

18. *Natural selection process

20. Dour

21. Accustom

22. D.C. mover and shaker

23. Tabby’s mate

26. Type of rice

30. Beer acronym

31. Popular pet rodent

34. Ice, dark, and middle ones

35. Delhi policeman’s club

37. Charge carrier

38. Animus’ partner

39. Arborist’s concern

40. “Killers of the Flower Moon” tribal members

42. Health resort

43. Astringent drug

45. Kind of acid

47. ____ canto

Down

48. Form of civil disobedience

50. Test choice

52. *Freethinking Babs of “Funny Girl” fame

56. Man-made stone pile

57. Gray-haired

58. International Civil Aviation Organization

59. Kellogg’s All-____ and Raisin ____

60. Pretentiously artistic

61. Canter or gallop

62. *Freethinking Cecily Strong’s TV gig, acr.

63. Food coloring, e.g.

64. World’s longest river

Dark Materials” trilogy fame

19. Eel, at a sushi restaurant

22. Buddy

23. Leans

24. 1960s abstractionism (2 words)

25. Dude, to a pirate

26. Cherry variety

27. Anti-elderly one

28. Allegro and lento

29. *Freethinking fashion designer ____ Mizrahi

32. Reduced Instruction Set Computer

33. Long feather accessory

36. *Atheist Katharine ____ of “The African Queen” fame

38. Computer acronym

40. *Freethinking Upton Sinclair’s novel made into “There Will Be Blood” movie

41. Diner, e.g.

44. Not quite adults

46. Navy rank

48. *Short ____, atheist H. P. Lovecraft’s literary genre

49. Extremely angry

50. Mountain lake

51. Iranian currency

52. Herring’s cousin

53. Antioxidant-rich berry

54. Victim of nervous biting

55. Shower with affection

56. TV network with an eye

Freethought Today Crossword

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Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Freethought Today Cryptogram

K M A A B Y E X Y F A C E P G B V C Y P L

FXCYKUD PGZ YKNA YZSKUD YP LBAXCA YEA

CGLAZUXYGZXB XUV IPUIAUYZZXYA PU

KNLZPRKUD YEA FABMXZA PM EGNXU WAKUDC.

—ZGYE EGZNAUIA DZAAU

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: F => W. Answer is on page 21.

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

Enter FFRF’s 2026 law student essay contest

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

If you are a current law school student at a North American school, we urge to write an essay on this topic and prompt:
Analyze how the principle of “parental rights” has changed.

In 2025, the Supreme Court extended Wisconsin v. Yoder (1972), citing it repeatedly in Mahmoud v. Taylor, where the court sided with religious parents who objected on religious grounds to public school instruction that included books with LGBTQ themes or characters.

In 1,500 words or less, analyze how the principle of “parental rights” changes from Yoder to Mahmoud. What other constitutional or societal interests might conflict with this expanded understanding of parental rights in the First Amendment context? Discuss how the court could or should balance these competing interests in future cases.

Deadline is Jan. 30, 2026.

The first-place winner will earn \$4,000, second place \$3,000 and third place \$2,000. Any honorable mention(s) will get \$500. The prizes are generously do-

nated by the late Diane and Stephen Uhl.

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

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

The contest is open to all ongoing law school students attending a North American law school. You remain eligible to enter this contest if you will graduate from law school by spring or summer of 2026.

You are not eligible to enter if you will be starting law school for the first time in the fall of 2026. You may not reenter if FFRF has already awarded you for a law student essay.

Essay must be no longer than 1,500 words (not including footnotes), double spaced, standard margins, and font size 11 to 14 point. Include page numbers and the title of your essay on each page. Choose your own title. Indicate word length at end of essay. To apply, go to [ffrf.us/lawessay2026](#).

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

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[freethoughtnow.org](#)

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[ffrf.org/radio](#)

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Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers
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Create a Freethought Legacy Today.

FFRF FOREVER!

Plan for the future & protect the values you care about.

IN THE NEWS

Jewish group: We want religious charter school

A Jewish group based in Florida is seeking permission to operate the nation’s first taxpayer-funded online religious charter school in Oklahoma.

The National Ben Gamla Jewish Charter Foundation notified the Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board on Nov. 3 of its intent to apply for taxpayer funding for a virtual school initially serving about 40 students in grades 9 through 12.

That development, legal experts said, could restart a bitter fight over government support for religious schools that reached the U.S. Supreme Court this year.

The nation’s high court deadlocked, 4-4, leaving in force an earlier Oklahoma Supreme Court ruling that barred state funding for a Catholic online charter school, St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School. The state court found the school would violate Oklahoma law, the state Constitution and the U.S. Constitution.

Leslie Berger, a spokesperson for Oklahoma Attorney General Gentner Drummond, referred back to the state Supreme Court ruling in the St. Isidore case, taken by Drummond.

Donations pulled after school posts Ten Commandments

The installation of Ten Commandments posters on the University of Arkansas’ Fayetteville campus has led to the revocation of scholarships and discussions about the constitutionality of the displays.

In October, university officials announced they would hang around 500 Ten Commandments posters donated by the Christian organization Counteract USA to comply with a new state law that requires “a historical representation” of the tenets be “prominently” displayed in public school classrooms and libraries, public institutions of higher education, and public buildings and facilities maintained by taxpayer funds.

As a “very strong believer of separation of church and state,” UA alum Andy Kinslow said he was angry to learn about the posters. Learning about the Ten Commandments posters “was the tipping point” that made him decide to pull both of his scholarships from the Fay Jones School of Architecture and Design and remove the department from his will.

“Why would I give money to an institution that is not fighting this law when there are lots of other places that the money could go that would be appreciated,” Kinslow said.

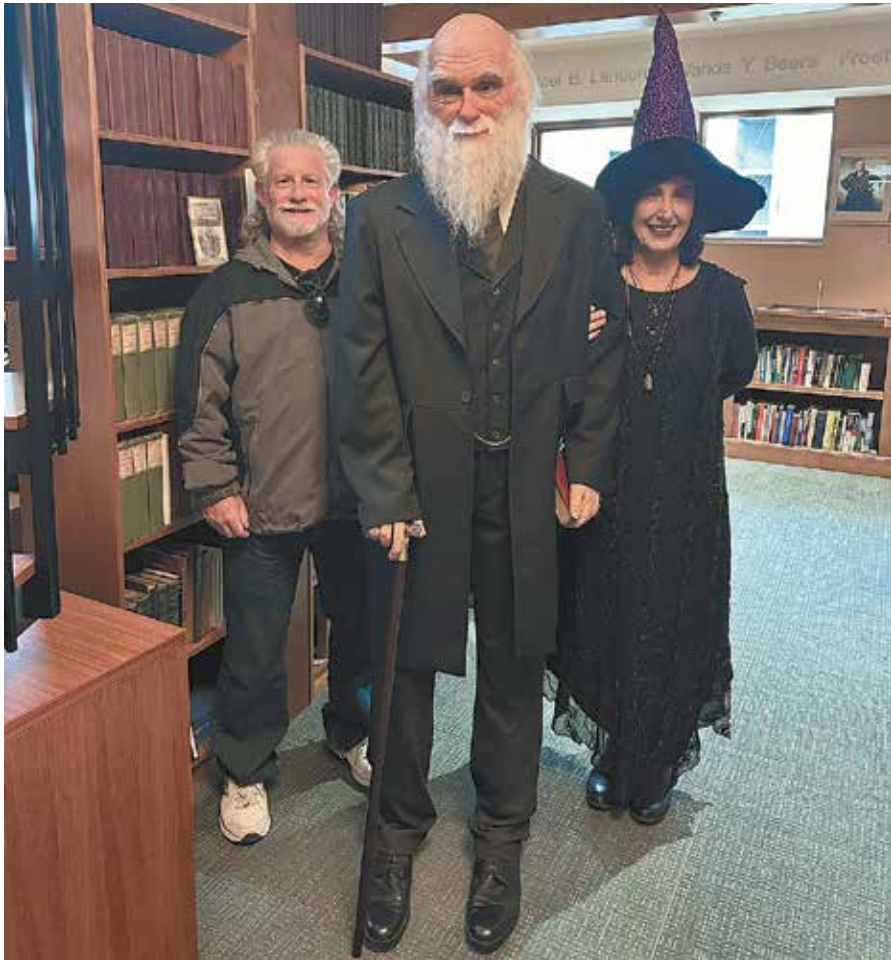
For his actions, Kinslow was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” on Nov. 14.

New Orleans abuse victims OK \$230M settlement

In a nearly unanimous vote, hundreds of victims of child sexual abuse by clergy and other church creditors approved a \$230 million bankruptcy settlement with the Roman Catholic archdiocese of New Orleans.

The archdiocese reported in a court filing in October that the deal was accepted by a staggering 99.63 percent of creditors, excluding a small group of bond investors who voted against it while suing the church and alleging it committed securities fraud.

Stopping in for a spell



On their October visit to Madison, Wis., Jeff Fiszbein and a bewitching Nancy Prena of Brighton, Mich., stand with the Charles Darwin statue in the Joel B. Landon and Wanda Y. Beers Freethought Library on the third floor of Freethought Hall.

The church did not report the total number of votes cast but said “hundreds of survivors voted overwhelmingly to accept the plan,” which will dole out payments to victims of abuse based on points assigned for the severity and effects of the abuse — and includes agreements to release files on abusive priests and deacons and set up stronger protections for children and vulnerable adults.

Court: Medication abortion restrictions are unlawful

A federal district court ruled Oct. 30 that the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) imposition of medically unnecessary restrictions on the medication abortion pill mifepristone violated federal law. While this ruling does not change patients’ ability to access medication abortion in the near term, it affirms the FDA’s legal obligation to consider the overwhelming evidence of mifepristone’s safety and not to impose restrictions that unduly burden patient access to this essential medication.

The court’s finding that the agency failed to justify its restrictions on access to mifepristone comes as the Trump administration appears to be gearing up to make it even harder for people to get the medication nationwide.

Earlier this year, the Trump administration announced that the FDA is conducting a new review of its mifepristone regulations. Secretary Robert Kennedy Jr. has indicated that the review centers on a junk science paper, issued by a Project 2025 sponsor, that purposefully distorts the excellent safety record of medication abortion. This paper is a six-page, non-peer-reviewed document that has been denounced by more than 260 expert researchers for its lack of transparency and gravely flawed methodology.

Bishops ban trans care at Catholic hospitals

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, during its annual fall meeting, updated its Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services by specifically prohibiting Catholic hospitals from medical interventions to help transgender individuals “transform sexual characteristics of a human body into those of the opposite sex (or to nullify sexual characteristics of a human body).”

Transgender Catholics object that the USCCB has failed to meaningfully consult their community. The bishops “really have shown no willingness at all to understand the reality that transgender people are experiencing and to shape our care and ministry around the realities of their lives,” said Marianne Duddy-Burke, executive director of the LGBTQ advocacy organization DignityUSA. “Any kind of barrier to health care just makes it harder for trans people and for lots of other Catholics to feel included in our church. It feels very discriminatory and like our lives and our health just don’t matter to church officials in the same way that other people’s do.”

Assemblies of God shielded sex predators

Since the 1970s, Assemblies of God churches have repeatedly reinstated ministers and volunteer leaders accused of sexual misconduct, returning them to pulpits and youth groups, an NBC News investigation found.

While some of the other largest Christian denominations now require safeguards such as background checks and mandatory reporting, national Assemblies of God leaders have resisted, arguing such rules would increase legal risk, undermine its commitment to local church autonomy and defy a core bibli-

cal command: to forgive. The result is a patchwork system that has protected accused predators and left generations of children in danger.

NBC News identified nearly 200 Assemblies of God pastors, church employees and volunteer leaders accused of sexual abuse over the past half century. Together, they allegedly abused more than 475 people — the overwhelming majority of them children.

Of the alleged abusers, 123 were ministers, and nearly half of those were youth pastors. Others were church employees, youth group leaders or Sunday school teachers. Dozens were accused of luring boys through the Royal Rangers, a Pentecostal version of the Boy Scouts.

Supreme Court won’t hear case over prayer at games

The Supreme Court on Nov. 17 declined to take up a legal fight involving a Christian school that wanted to broadcast a pregame prayer over the stadium loudspeaker before a championship football game, turning away a major religious liberty dispute on the heels of a 2022 decision involving prayer in schools.

In rejecting the appeal, the high court will not reconsider a 25-year-old decision that found student-led and initiated prayer at football games unconstitutional. There were no noted dissents.

The legal battle before the justices was brought by a Tampa-based Christian school that wanted to broadcast a brief prayer before a state championship football game through the stadium’s public-address system. But the Florida High School Athletic Association denied the request, which the schools argued violated their rights to free exercise of religion and free speech.

The school, Cambridge Christian, asked the Supreme Court to overturn its 2000 ruling in the case Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe. In that decision, the court held that the school district’s policy of allowing student-led, student-initiated prayer at football games violated the Establishment Clause.

Drop in U.S. religiosity among largest in world

The percentage of U.S. adults who say religion is an important part of their daily life dropped from 66 percent in 2015 to 49 percent today. That 17-percent change ranks among the largest Gallup has recorded in any country over any 10-year period.

Only a small number of mostly wealthy nations have experienced larger losses in religiosity, including Greece from 2013-2023 (28 points), Italy from 2012-2022 (23 points) and Poland from 2013-2023 (22 points).

As religiosity has declined in the United States, the gap between it and the global median has widened. The global median for religiosity has remained stable for nearly two decades, averaging 81 percent since 2007.

At the same time, attitudes in the United States are drawing closer to those in other advanced economies. Across the 38 OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) countries in 2024, a median of 36 percent of adults said religion is important to their daily lives. The gap between the United States and the median for these countries is now narrower than at any point in Gallup’s trend.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Alabama

In Alabama, the Cullman County Schools District superintendent apologized to FFRF after a parent reported that their child received a bible at school, and promised to speak with district principals to prevent similar events in the future.

A district parent reported that on Sept. 15, Fairview Elementary School invited three men to enter their child’s classroom during instructional time to distribute bibles to students. Reportedly, their child’s teacher described the three men as “visitors,” implying that the men were not school district employees. The complainant-parent further stated that, according to their child, the three men asked each student to take a bible, so the child took one “because everyone else did.”

“It is unconstitutionally coercive for a public elementary school to permit outside adults to enter classrooms during instructional time in order to distribute bibles to young students who, like our complainant’s child, will no doubt feel pressured to take a bible whether they want one or not,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to District Superintendent Shane Barnette.

FFRF’s letter received an emailed response from Barnette, emphasizing that he wished to apologize to the parent personally for the event that occurred. “I will follow up with my principals and make sure they follow the Constitution in matters such as this,” Barnette wrote.

Florida

FFRF reminded the Taylor County School District in Perry, Fla., that Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) clubs cannot be led by school staff members or the community’s religious leaders.

FFRF learned that Taylor County Middle School and Taylor County High School had a years-long pattern and practice of giving adult FCA representatives and local religious leaders inappropriate access to student-athletes as part of official athletics activities. Both the middle school and the high school appeared to have entangled their football programs with religion, specifically Christianity, in efforts to promote Christianity to students and possibly convert them.

FFRF learned of a meal on July 24, 2024, to the middle school team provided by Cavalry Baptist Church, along with an advertisement for services at the church being featured prominently on the meal boxes. Additionally, on July 30, 2024, Faith Baptist Church of Perry posted on Facebook that “Pastor Todd and Bro Josh” had been with what appeared to be the TCHS football team throughout the summer, and that “Pastor Todd gave them a good word on salvation, and encouraged them to find a good church, get locked in, be faithful, and serve God in and off the field.” In the same post, a person could be seen leading the students in a public prayer in the team’s own locker room. Additionally, the post acknowledges the team’s coach “wanting the day to be closed out in prayer.”

“Students know that their coaches control their playing time and positions, directly affecting students’ opportunities for college scholarships and recruitment,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “When coaches permit outside adults like FCA

New blood for Old Souls



FFRF Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker spoke on Nov. 19 to the women’s auxiliary of Old Souls Unitarian Universalist Church in Manhattan, N.Y. Several area FFRF members were in attendance, as well. Annie Laurie spoke on “Why we need freedom from religion,” and Dan entertained at the piano with some irreverent music by himself and freethought composers of the great American songbook. Pictured with them from left: Orin Kotula and Heli Blum, their hosts. Orin is the daughter of aviation artist Jo Kotula and activist Charline Kotula of New Jersey, who were instrumental in the national founding of the Freedom From Religion Foundation in 1978 and ran the New Jersey chapter for many years.

reps and pastors to promote religion to players, student-athletes will no doubt feel that agreeing with the religious viewpoints being promoted and participating in religious activities is essential to pleasing their coach and being viewed as a team player.”

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the district’s attorney, Angela M. Ball, reached out to FFRF to let it know that the district had taken action to affirm student-athletes’ right to be free from religious coercion. “In speaking with Superintendent Wentworth and discussing this matter with the school board, Mr. Wentworth has assured the board members that any religious activity which occurs on school property or in the district functions will be entirely student-led and voluntary,” Ball wrote.

Georgia

Teachers in the Whitfield County Schools system will not be promoting the explicitly religious See You At The Pole event through official district communication channels, thanks to FFRF’s advocacy.

A district parent reported that a fourth-grade teacher at New Hope Elementary shared a promotional flyer for SYATP via official school communications channels. FFRF learned that the teacher sent the promotional flyer to parents on the school’s “Remind App.” The flyer featured Latin crosses and stated: “Come out to the flagpole and PRAY with us!” FFRF understood that the teacher shared the flyer in her official capacity as a district employee in an effort to remind parents to send their children to the religious event.

“While students are free to participate in SYATP or similar religious events, the district and its teachers may not favor religion by promoting religious events and religious messages through its official communication channels,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the district sought guidance from legal repre-

sentative Cory O. Kirby. Kirby confirmed that the district appreciated FFRF bringing the violation to their attention, as well as the action the district had taken in response. “The district has already communicated to all principals that this type of communication and advertisement is inappropriate and should not continue,” Kirby wrote. “District administration will meet with school building administration to reiterate the district’s prohibition against advocating for a particular religious event or theology.”

Indiana

FFRF’s work to keep public schools secular prevailed when the Franklin Community Schools Board of School Trustees stopped opening board meetings with explicitly religious prayers.

A community parent reported that the board was regularly opening meetings with prayer led by members of the board of trustees. FFRF learned of a prayer on March 10, where a board member prayed that the board’s decisions “reflect [God’s] will,” concluding “in Jesus’ name we pray.” Immediately

following that prayer, the board recognized a number of students who were in attendance at the meeting to be celebrated by their school board. FFRF understood that recognitions immediately followed the prayer at every board meeting.

“Franklin students are asked to attend board meetings for a variety of reasons, including to receive recognition and awards from the board,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote. “It is coercive, embarrassing and intimidating for nonreligious or minority faith citizens to be required to make a public showing of their nonbelief or differing beliefs (by not bowing their heads or praying) or else to display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their school board members clearly do.”

While FFRF never received an official written response to the complaints, FFRF kept in close contact with the complainants who originally brought the issue to light. Thankfully, the complainants who attended the August and October board meetings reported that the board no longer opened the meetings with prayer, and instead began with a moment of silence in August, and the Pledge of Allegiance in October.

Kentucky

After learning that a student received a bible from school staff, FFRF stepped up to inform the Clark County Public Schools system in Winchester, Ky., of its constitutional duty to remain secular at all times.

A district parent informed FFRF that their child returned from Baker Intermediate School with a Gideon bible on May 22. Gideons International is “an evangelical association that equips and mobilizes Christian business professional men, along with their wives, to share God’s word.” The school’s assistant principal appeared to enter the student’s classroom to distribute the bibles on the last day of school.

“[T]his bible distribution needlessly marginalized all students and families who do not practice Christianity,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote. “Thirty-seven percent of the American population is non-Christian, including the almost 30 percent who is nonreligious.”

In response to FFRF’s concern, legal representative for the district Rebecca G. McCoy reached out to FFRF after



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ensuring that action had been taken. “After receiving your letter, this issue has been addressed with school administrators,” McCoy wrote. “The district is committed to ensure that school faculty will not be distributing bibles and other religious literature to students.”

Louisiana

The Livingston Parish Public Schools system in Louisiana shut down all school-related Fellowship of Christian Athletes activities after FFRF made sure the district was not crossing a constitutional line.

FFRF was informed that Seventh Ward Elementary School was sponsoring a chapter of the FCA. Posts from the school’s official Facebook page appeared in early March, celebrating the FCA club’s food donation collections. Since then, the FCA was seemingly continually school-sponsored and promoted by the school. A post from the same Facebook page on Sept. 1 listed an FCA meeting as part of the school’s weekly schedule.

“Religious clubs for students at elementary schools cannot genuinely be student-initiated and student-run, and as such are unconstitutional,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Charlotte R. Gude wrote to the district.

After FFRF sent the letter, the district’s legal representative reached out to confirm that the superintendent received the letter and understood the violation at hand. “While the school’s FCA activities were not sponsored by or organized by any school employee, the principal understands the collection of laws and is in the process of shutting down the school’s related FCA activities,” Mark D. Boyer wrote.

Missouri

FFRF is pleased to learn that the Sarcoux R-II School District in Missouri will not be sponsoring or promoting a day encouraging children to bring bibles to school.

FFRF learned that, on Sept. 25 and Oct. 1, the official district Facebook page promoted Bring Your Bible to School Day, telling students “Don’t forget!” the event. FFRF reminded the district that Bring Your Bible to School Day is an annual religious event created by the evangelical organization Focus on the Family, and by promoting the event, the district displayed blatant favoritism

toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths, by sponsoring, promoting and encouraging student participation in the event.

“The district serves a diverse population that consists of not only Christian students and families, but also atheists, agnostics and members of minority faiths,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “When the district sponsors and promotes religious events, it sends an official message that excludes all nonreligious students, families and community members.”

FFRF’s letter was sent to the district after the event was promoted on the district’s official Facebook page. The district’s legal counsel, Gregory D. DeBeer, reported that the district heard FFRF’s complaint and listened. “While the event in question already occurred this year on Oct. 2, 2025, the district will not be holding any Bring Your Bible to School Days moving forward,” DeBeer wrote.

Ohio

FFRF made sure that the Anthony Wayne Board of Education in Ohio would not be using state time and resources to promote Christianity at board meetings and in emails.

Concerned community members reported that at the Sept. 15 board meeting, a board member prayed during his comments while other board members bowed their heads in response. Two board members, including the member who offered prayer at the Sept. 15 meeting, included religious references in their signature, such as referencing Jesus, Jesus’ death and a bible quote from Psalms 19:14.

FFRF worked with the district to ensure that school board members would no longer unconstitutionally promote their religious views through public communications.

“Here, the inclusion of Christian prayer led by a board member is . . . unconstitutional,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Charlotte Gude wrote to the district. “This is also true of the inclusion of religious references in the board [members’ signatures].”

The district worked to bring the board back in line with the First Amendment. FFRF learned from the original complainant that the board member who delivered the prayer at the meeting stated at the Oct. 13 board meeting that he intended to no longer

pray at meetings. In further correspondence between FFRF and the district, Board President Kyle Miller confirmed that the violations occurring in board members’ email signatures were also being addressed. “With thoughtful discussion and guidance, the board has decided to move forward with the removal of all personal email signatures from official board communications,” he wrote.

Oklahoma

FFRF contacted the Poteau Public Schools system in Oklahoma after a parent reported their student was attending a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) club without their knowledge or consent.

The parent reported that Pansy Kidd Middle School was permitting an FCA club to operate and recruit students in the morning during school drop-off hours. FFRF was told that adult church leaders and school employees were often in attendance, participating in, and leading the FCA club, including leading students in prayer and other religious activities. The parent explained that the FCA club was allegedly authorized to operate in the mornings before school started, but the middle school was instead allowing the club to meet during morning drop-off. FFRF was told that during that time, students could be dropped off and were under the school’s supervision while they waited for classes to start.

FFRF’s complainant stated that their child was attending FCA meetings without their knowledge. They did not find out that the school was permitting their child to attend these religious meetings until their child came home with a bible. When the parent contacted the school, the school allegedly stated that the school was not required to have students bring permission slips to attend FCA or notify parents about FCA meetings even though the school was allowing FCA to operate during morning drop-off, and allowing outside adults to lure, interact with, and distribute food and religious literature to students on school grounds.

“Pansy Kidd Middle School’s practice of giving the FCA preferential treatment and allowing the FCA’s religious representatives unique access to its students in order to promote Christianity signals clear unconstitutional favoritism for religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superin-

tendent Scott Kempenich.

After receiving the letter, Kempenich emailed to confirm that action had been taken. “Pansy Kidd Middle School has worked with its attorneys regarding the issues you raised with us in July,” he wrote. “Among other adjustments, the school has made changes to ensure that any religious meetings held before school are led by students and that parental permission is obtained for participation.”

Oklahoma

The Marlow Public Schools system has been reminded that playing music with explicitly religious lyrics for students is a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

FFRF received a report that on the morning of Aug. 22, Marlow Elementary School played the religious song “He Won’t Fail” by Maverick City Music in the schoolyard while students were arriving. The lyrics to the song are explicitly religious, including lines such as “Christ is my firm foundation,” and “That I put my faith in Jesus.” Reportedly, the school has a practice of playing music in the schoolyard on mornings, and religious music is at least sometimes included.

“If Marlow Elementary School would like to play music for students, there are a multitude of secular age-appropriate options to choose from,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote. “A public school and its staff should be eager to set an example of acceptance and inclusion.”

District Superintendent Corey Holland investigated the situation and informed FFRF of his findings. While he could not confirm that the specific song was played on the day in question, he said an employee might have included what a reasonable person would consider a religious song.

“In any case, I used the notification letter by FFRF as a reminder during a staff meeting with district principals to communicate to employees that they should always be mindful of any music playing as part of our school proceedings and what the employees may expose our students to in any given circumstance,” Holland wrote. Holland additionally shared that he took the step of going to the elementary school in question and sharing the directive to employees who do the daily welcoming of students at campus, who acknowledged understanding of the directive.

Oklahoma court dismisses suit over bible mandate

The Oklahoma Supreme Court dismissed on Nov. 24 a lawsuit filed against former state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters and the Oklahoma State Department of Education over a bible-teaching mandate issued in June 2024 by Walters. The Freedom From Religion Foundation was one of the groups representing the plaintiffs.

In the order, the court officially accepted original jurisdiction over the case, known as Walke v. Walters, then said because new Superintendent Lindel Fields has dropped the mandate and an attempt by the state agency to spend \$6 million to purchase bibles for Oklahoma classrooms using taxpayer money, “the court finds that the matter should be dismissed as moot.”

A group of attorneys representing the plaintiffs — more than 30 Oklahomans — issued a joint statement. The attorneys

were from FFRF, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Oklahoma Foundation, and Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice.

“We are pleased that Superintendent Fields abandoned former Superintendent Walters’ attempts to incorporate the bible into the public-school curriculum, to place bibles in classrooms, and to buy bibles and biblical-instructional materials with state tax dollars and distribute them to public schools,” the joint statement said. “We are further pleased with the statement by the Oklahoma Supreme Court in today’s order confirming that Fields has “rescind[ed] and nullif[ed]” these Walters policies. Fields’ actions and the Supreme Court’s order mean that Oklahoma families and students — not politicians — will get to decide if, when and how to engage with the bible.”

secularspotlight

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freethinker n.

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Being an atheist in South Carolina

This humorous speech was given by Herb Silverman on Oct. 17 at FFRF's 48th annual convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C. He was introduced by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. To watch the video of the speech, go to ffrf.us/con25.

Annie Laurie Gaylor: Herb Silverman, who's an Afterlife Member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and lives in South Carolina, is a distinguished professor of mathematics at the College of Charleston. He founded the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry in Charleston, and he's president emeritus of the Secular Coalition for America, which he founded.

Herb is going to tell you how he won a unanimous 1997 decision by the state Supreme Court of South Carolina, striking down the state's religious test requirement to run for office. And, he's written a book about it, "Candidate Without a Prayer," as well as "An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land."

I'm going to surprise you, Herb, very belatedly, by naming you our Freethinker of the Year, which is reserved for individuals winning state/church lawsuits. We don't know how we missed giving this to you back in 1997. It's high time to correct this oversight. So, please, be our Freethinker of the Year.

By Herb Silverman

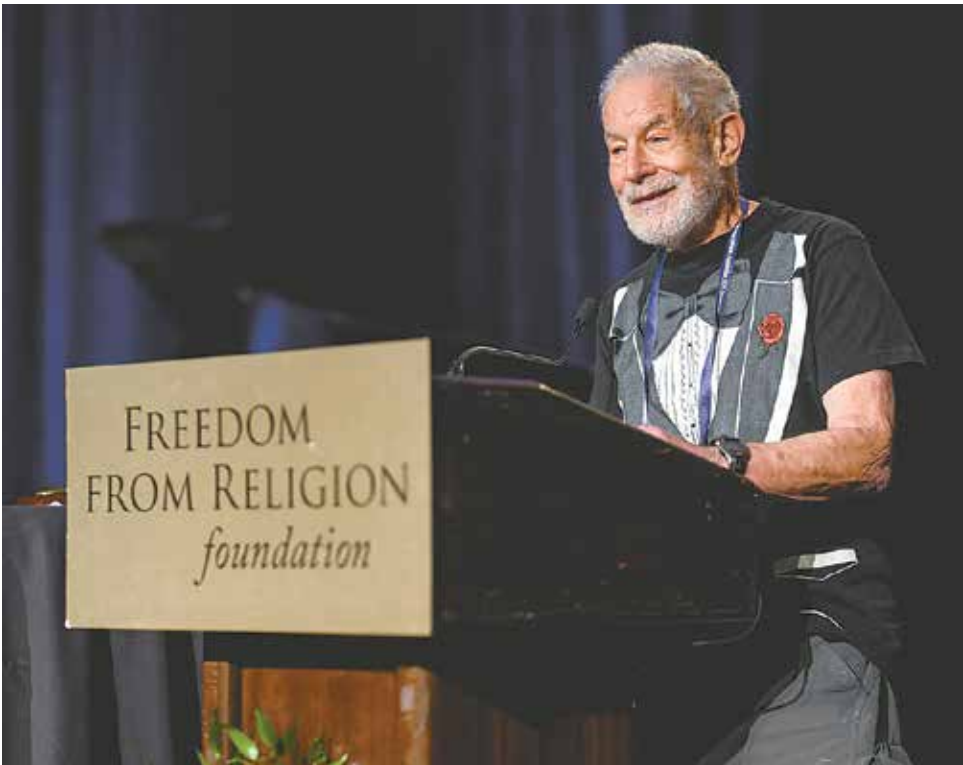
Thank you, Annie Laurie for that wonderful introduction. Seeing this large bunch of atheists and humanists meeting in South Carolina would have been quite a scandal back in 1976 when I moved here from Philadelphia to teach mathematics at the College of Charleston. It was my first trip below the Mason-Dixon Line. It was a bit of a culture shock for me, and for South Carolina, as well.

After teaching at the College of Charleston for 14 years, I underwent a major life change in 1990 when a colleague pointed out that our South Carolina Constitution prohibits atheists from becoming governor. I knew the U.S. Constitution barred religious tests for public office, so I went to our local ACLU and a lawyer there told me an atheist would need to mount a legal challenge by running for governor. He said the best candidate would be me. Well, I looked around and didn't see any other volunteers, so I agreed to become the candidate without a prayer.

I learned that "atheist" is a very provocative word, and not just in South Carolina. The Associated Press picked up the story, and the following day I got a call from a very distressed woman in Philadelphia — my mother. I admit, the Philadelphia Inquirer was not the best way for my mother to find out their only child is a candidate for governor — and an atheist. She didn't so much mind my being an atheist. The problem for her was going public about it. She always wanted me to appear respectable, but that never quite happened.

During my campaign, I heard stereotypical comments that atheists are mean and angry protesters who do nothing but ridicule religion. I wanted to show that we do have a sense of humor. Here's some questions that I was asked during my campaign, and my answers.

1. "What would be the first thing you would do if you were elected gover-



Herb Silverman tells the audience at FFRF's national convention on Oct. 17 how he won a South Carolina Supreme Court case, securing rights for atheists.

- nor?" "Demand a recount."
2. "What do you think are your chances of winning the election?" "Look, I'm an atheist. I'm not a fool."
3. "What would make you believe in God?" "Perhaps if I won the election, but it would take that kind of a miracle."
4. "What do you think will happen to you when you die?" "I'm going to medical school. Just like my Jewish mother always wanted me to do. I expect to use my body parts to their fullest while I'm alive, but I hope others can make better use of them when I'm dead."

Meanwhile, Republican Gov. Carroll Campbell said our South Carolina Constitution was fine as it was because our country was founded on godly principles.

I was invited onto a number of radio talk shows. Some callers would say things like, "As an atheist, I suppose you feel free to go out and rape and murder and do whatever you think you can get away with." My response at such callers would be "With an attitude like that, I hope you continue to believe in a god."

I realized I didn't just want to change the South Carolina Constitution, I also wanted to change the hearts and minds of some of my fellow South Carolinians.

Gov. Campbell knew he would have an easy reelection victory, and he refused to debate the other candidates. But, I participated in a number of three-person debates with candidates from the Democratic Party and the American Party. That's the old George Wallace racist party. This included a debate on South Carolina public television. My friends thought I had won that debate, while friends of the other candidates probably thought they had won. But, a year later, there was an objective way to determine the winner of the three participants in that debate: I was the only one who was not in jail.

The American Party candidate was in jail for driving without a license and refusing to get one, because it's none of the government's business. The Democratic Party candidate was in jail for more traditional reasons — tax evasion.

I eventually did have my day in court, but the judge decided he would only rule on the merits of my case if I won the election. Well, to the surprise of no one, I lost. But, I'm an optimistic kind of guy, and I always look for positives in a situation. The best for me was I met Sharon Fratepietro — and we've been together ever since. We met in church. It was the Unitarian Church — the only church that invited me to speak during my campaign. After living in sin for 10 years, Sharon and I got married in our home on Jan. 1, 2000, at 12:01 a.m. Sharon wanted me to get dressed up for the occasion. So, she got me this tuxedo T-shirt that I'm wearing now.

While campaigning, I heard from a lot of people who thought they were the only atheist in South Carolina. I took names and, in 1984, I helped form the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, which became a vibrant community with about 150 members. Many of them are here today.

After losing the gubernatorial race, and with politics now in my blood, I decided to fulfill my lifelong dream of becoming a notary public — someone who stamps documents. Actually, I learned in 1991 that the South Carolina Constitution prohibits atheists from serving in any public office, and notary public would be the easiest one to challenge.

When Gov. Campbell rejected my

application, I asked why, and he said it's too burdensome to respond to all notary public rejections. At the deposition three years later, we learned there were over 33,000 notary acceptances in that time period and that mine was the only one rejected.

As far as I know, I'm the only one in the history of South Carolina to be rejected as a notary public. I won my case in several lower courts, but the state kept appealing it up to the South Carolina Supreme Court. On May 27, 1997, the South Carolina's Supreme Court ruled unanimously in my favor, nullifying the anti-atheist clause in South Carolina's Constitution.

So, finally, I was granted a notary commission. I went to the county clerk's office with Sharon to pick up my notary certificate. We were both really excited. Sharon took pictures of the clerk handing me my notary certificate, and of me holding it above my head in triumph. Now, I don't know what your definition of the loser is, but the others in the county clerk's office who knew nothing of my case had quite a chuckle, thinking the high point of this guy's life was becoming a notary public.

During my campaign, I learned about several national atheist and humanist organizations, and I joined them all because they were involved with issues I supported. But, each was doing its own thing and ignoring like-minded organizations. I wanted to show our strength in numbers and cooperate on issues that affect all secular Americans, so, in 2002, I helped form the Secular Coalition for America.

Its mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for secular viewpoints, and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government. The Secular Coalition formed as a political activist advocacy group to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans. We now have 22 national member organizations covering this full spectrum of our movement, including, of course, FFRF.

Please check the Secular Coalition website, secular.org. We should always look for common ground with the religious people, where we can work together on selected projects, sometimes very difficult ones, like the following:

Now, what could I possibly have in common with Jerry Falwell? Well, Jerry Falwell once said that God does not hear the prayers of a Jew. I agree with Jerry Falwell, but for very different reasons.

That's my story, and I look forward to meeting many of you and hearing your stories. Thank you for coming, and thanks again to FFRF for meeting here in South Carolina.

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

FREETHOUGHT RADIO

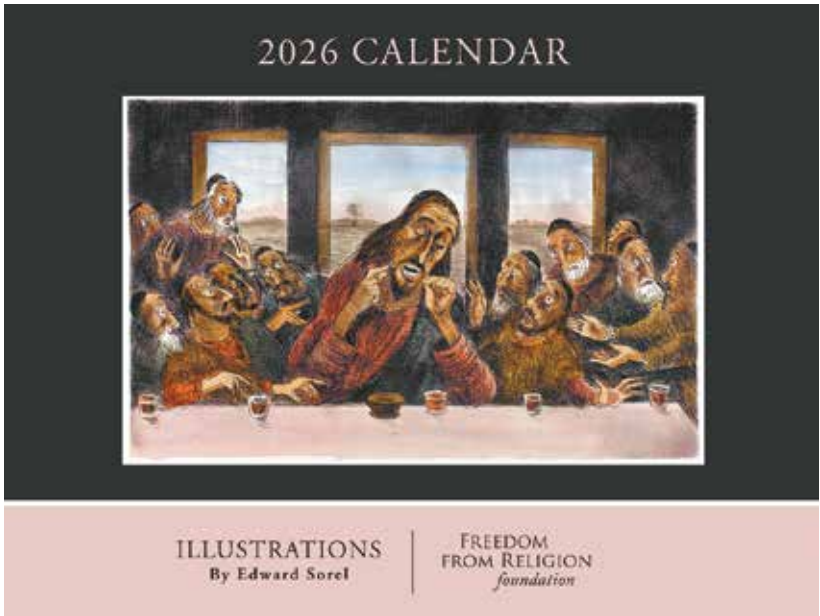
PODCASTS AND BROADCASTS

— Hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor —

Slightly irreverent views, news, music & interviews

Check out "Freethought Radio: In Studio" video versions of interviews. Visit FFRF's Youtube channel or Freethought TV app. ffrf.us/youtube

FFRF.ORG **FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION**



2026 FFRF wall calendars for sale!

Longtime FFRF Member Edward Sorel, whose drawings have appeared in the New Yorker, the Nation, Atlantic and Vanity Fair, is also the author of 20 books. He has been praised by the New York Times as “one of America’s foremost political satirists.”

In this keepsake calendar, he shares 12 of his irreverent cartoons and illustrations. Each month chronicles famous freethinkers by birthdate. The calendar is 12 inches x 9 inches and sells for \$12 at ffrf.org/shop.



Ed Sorel, who is 96, is pictured with FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker at the famous Monkey Bar in New York City on Nov. 15. The murals on the walls of the establishment were created by Ed.



Save the (convention) date!

We’re not even into 2026 yet, but FFRF has already lined up two big names for its convention in Milwaukee, Wis., next year! Jim Obergefell and Ron Reagan will speak the weekend of Oct. 16–18, 2026, at the Baird Center in Milwaukee. Obergefell is a civil rights activist who was the lead plaintiff in the 2015 United States Supreme Court case Obergefell v. Hodges, which legalized same-sex marriage throughout the United

States. Obergefell, an atheist, had sued the state of Ohio in 2013 due to the state’s lack of legal recognition of Obergefell’s marriage to his husband, John Arthur. Reagan is a political commentator and broadcaster and long-time ally of FFRF. Reagan’s ad that features him saying, “lifelong atheist, not afraid of burning in hell” has been aired hundreds of times on MSNBC and CBS and CNN.



Jim Obergefell



Ron Reagan

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.”

Texas

Continued from page 1

posters. The districts were proceeding with the displays despite Judge Fred Biery’s Aug. 20 order in a separate lawsuit, Rabbi Nathan v. Alamo Heights ISD, in which he called the Texas law requiring the displays “plainly unconstitutional.” After that order was issued, the organizations representing

families in both lawsuits sent letters to all Texas school districts urging them not to implement the law. While the preliminary injunction directly applies to the defendant school districts named in the Cribbs Ringer lawsuit, the organizations behind the lawsuit are urging all Texas school districts not to implement SB 10. All school districts, even those that are not parties in either ongoing lawsuit, have an independent obligation to respect students’ and families’ rights under the U.S. Constitution, which supersedes state law. The plaintiffs in both cases are represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, with Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel. “We’re extremely happy to have secured this victory for the plaintiff families we represent,” says Sam Grover, senior counsel for the Freedom From Religion Foundation. “But Texas never should have put parents and students in this position in the first place. The law is quite clear that pushing religion on students in public school is unconstitutional.”

Freethought TV

Continued from page 1

eos of all time. The app is available on Roku, GoogleTV and Fire TV platforms, as well as Android smartphones. Versions of Freethought TV for Samsung, LG, AppleTV and iPhones will be announced soon. With a built-in search function and an optional free personal account, users can instantly find and bookmark their favorite episodes. Freethought TV is simple to install — just search for “Freethought TV” in your device’s app store and follow the easy prompts to start streaming immediately. “There are scores of streaming channels out there run by megachurches and religious broadcasters,” FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor says. “Right now, Freethought TV is a lone voice for reason in a sea of religious propaganda.” “We like to call it ‘free content for free minds,’” she adds. For more information about Freethought TV, and for specific instructions on installing the app on your device, visit us at freethoughttv.ffrf.org.

Freethought Radio adds video portion

Freethought Radio, FFRF’s weekly radio show from the secular point of view, will now be adding a video component to each episode. The main interview portion of each show will now be broadcast on YouTube and FFRF’s new Freethought TV app. The first of the new broadcasts was on Nov. 27 (Thanksgiving Day) and featured lively excerpts of convention speeches. Freethought Radio (ffrf.org/radio) broadcasts weekly and is hosted by Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-presidents of FFRF. The show offers programming for nonreligious listeners, as well as countering the religious-right domination of our public airwaves. Freethought Radio features music and interviews with authors and activists. For more information about Freethought TV, and for specific instructions on installing the app on your device, visit us at freethoughttv.ffrf.org.

We’re on Instagram!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has listened to your requests and is excited to announce that it has officially joined Instagram. Please follow us at @ffrf_official for weekly updates and content. We look forward to connecting with you there!



Levitsky

Continued from page 1

The first step is to capture the referees. You purge key government agencies of professional civil servants, and pack them with loyalists. Trump has purged and packed the Justice Department, FBI, the Defense Department, intelligence agencies, Homeland Security, the IRS. He has packed regulatory agencies like the FCC and the FTC.

Once key government agencies are in the hands of loyalists, they can be weaponized and deployed in three ways that subvert democracy.

One is to punish critics through targeted prosecution. All elected autocrats deploy their justice departments, prosecutors, intelligence agencies and tax authorities to investigate and prosecute rivals — often for petty infractions.

The Trump administration rolled out politically motivated investigations with stunning speed. Dozens of Trump’s critics and opponents are now under investigation — James Comey, New York Attorney General Letitia James, and New Jersey Congresswoman Lamonica McIver have been indicted — and others (like Sen. Adam Schiff) appear to be on the way.

The Department of Justice is investigating Act Blue, one of the Democratic Party’s main fundraising platforms, and the Open Society Foundation. It’s going after major Democratic Party donors and pro-democracy organizations like Indivisible — increasingly, in the name of combatting what it calls “domestic terrorism.” It is now openly linking all opposition to domestic terrorism.

Victims of selective investigation and prosecution don’t have to end up in prison for it to be problematic. The investigation itself is a powerful form of harassment. Targeted individuals have to spend down their savings on lawyers. They are distracted from their jobs for weeks and months at a time. And their reputations are often seriously damaged.

The administration is also going after the media. The FCC has launched investigations into PBS and NPR. Trump has filed defamation suits against ABC, CBS, the Des Moines Register, the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times.

The administration has blacklisted law firms with ties to the Democratic Party. It has launched investigations into dozens of universities and illegally stripped top universities of congressionally approved research funding. And, it is threatening to withdraw the tax-exempt status from NGOs that defend immigrants, the environment and other progressive causes.

So, individuals and organizations across the country are getting punished for being on the wrong side of the government.

A weaponized state can also serve as a shield to protect government allies who engage in illegal or undemocratic acts. Trump’s pardon of the Jan. 6 insurrectionists wasn’t just a massive injustice, it signaled that acts of violence committed by his supporters will be tolerated and even protected. This is crucial.

The U.S. experienced a marked rise in political violence during the first Trump presidency. According to Mitt Romney, several Republican senators voted to acquit Trump in the wake of the Jan. 6 attack because they feared for their physical safety if they voted to convict him. Republican senators also received death threats during Trump’s cabinet confirmation hearings in early 2025. North Carolina Sen. Thom Tillis said that the FBI warned him of “credible death threats” while he was considering opposing Pete Hegseth’s nomination as defense secretary.



Photo by Chris Line

Professor Steven Levitsky gave his expert opinion on how the United States is falling into a competitive authoritarian-style government because of the acquiescence of the Republican Party and the abdication of responsibility by Congress, the media, universities, law firms, the Supreme Court and businesses to hold the Trump administration to account.

tary. Tillis voted for confirmation, and Hegseth was confirmed by one vote.

What we have seen over the last nine months is prototypical competitive authoritarianism — the systematic weaponization of government institutions and the deployment of those institutions to punish critics and bully or co-opt business, the media and civil society.

So, how will we know when we have crossed the line into authoritarianism? Let me suggest a simple metric: How costly is it to oppose the government? In a democracy, legal opposition should be virtually costless. In democratic societies, we don’t think twice about writing op-eds against the government, giving money to opposition campaigns, or joining peaceful protests — because there is no risk of government retribution.

Under authoritarianism, opposition comes with a price — and that’s what’s happening across the U.S.:

- Government critics know they may become targets of investigation.
- Media owners know they may face lawsuits or investigations.
- Wealthy donors who finance the Democrats now fear tax investigations.
- Law firms that work for Democrats know they may get blacklisted.
- Universities know they could face crippling funding cuts.
- NGOs know they can lose their tax-exempt status.

There is now a clear cost to opposing the Trump administration.

Hundreds of thousands of Americans who might have engaged in some kind of opposition behavior are now thinking twice about it — because they know there’s a risk associated with opposition.

The threat of government retribution is now visibly changing people’s behavior.

- Major law firms have stopped doing pro bono work for progressive causes.
- Universities have virtually eliminated students’ right to protest out of fear of government attacks.
- Columbia and the University of Virginia fired their presidents under government pressure.
- Jeff Bezos changed the Washington Post’s editorial policy.

That all suggests to me that the United States has crossed the line into competitive authoritarianism. And, it could

get worse.

Competitive authoritarian regimes like those in Hungary, Turkey and India weaponize the law. Outright dictatorships openly subvert the law. There are signs that the Trump administration is contemplating this. ICE’s transformation into what is essentially a paramilitary force goes beyond anything we see in Hungary or Turkey or Poland.

- We now have masked agents in unmarked cars abducting people off the street.
- Due process is routinely being violated.
- And, of course, the military is being deployed in U.S. cities.

In September, Trump called 800 military commanders to Washington and told them to refocus their attention on “internal enemies” — in U.S. cities. The most powerful armed force on Earth is being told to wage what Trump called a “war from within.” That’s Pinochet stuff. It’s literally the language that was used by military dictatorships in South America in the 1970s.

So why is this happening?

Let’s start with the Republican Party. Individual leaders can’t kill a democracy on their own. They always need accomplices among mainstream politicians. Trump has the complicity of the entire Republican Party. Trump has only been able to do what he has done because he enjoys the full, active support of the Republican Party. Republicans could have convicted Trump in the Senate after Jan. 6 and barred him from running for office. He tried to steal the 2020 election. But they acquitted him.

Republicans could have abandoned Trump after 2020. But, they didn’t abandon him — they renominated him in 2024. They backed him for president despite his authoritarianism. And, they have stood by silently as Trump repeatedly violated the Constitution, prosecuted his rivals and sent troops into cities. So, it’s not just Trump. The entire Republican Party has abandoned its commitment to democracy.

This is crucial: One of America’s two major parties has embraced authoritarianism. How could that happen? How could a mainstream conservative party that had been competing peacefully in elections for 160 years suddenly turn authoritarian?

In our book, “Tyranny of the Minority,”

Daniel Ziblatt and I argue that it’s fear of losing. We wrote that something similar happened to the Republican Party in the early 21st century. The U.S. experienced two major changes after 1965.

First, a massive wave of immigration has made the country much more diverse. Second, the U.S. began a transition to multiracial democracy — or a democracy in which the rights of individuals of all ethnic groups are protected equally. That transition generated a fierce backlash — one that has been far more consequential than many of us anticipated.

To understand how this reaction played out, we have to go back to 1964. The civil rights revolution generated a lot of resentment among white voters — particularly in the South, which was overwhelmingly Democratic.

The Republicans were the minority party in the 1960s, but white resentment over civil rights created an opportunity for them to expand their base. So, beginning with Barry Goldwater and continuing with Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan, the Republicans targeted racially conservative, white Christian voters. And it worked.

In a little more than a generation, Southern whites flipped from being overwhelmingly Democrats to being overwhelmingly Republican. The Republicans became the party of white Christians — winning the white vote in every presidential election since 1968.

And, because the U.S. electorate was still overwhelmingly white and Christian in the 1970s and ’80s, even ’90s, the Republicans became the majority party. The Republicans won every presidential election between 1968 and 1988, except for the Watergate election of 1976.

But, the strategy eventually ran into trouble, because, at the same time that the Republicans were becoming America’s white Christian party, America was becoming less white and less Christian. The percentage of Americans who identified as white and Christian fell from 80 percent in 1976 to 43 percent in 2016.

This posed two threats to Republicans.

The first was electoral. It became increasingly difficult for an overwhelmingly white Christian party to win national majorities in the 21st century, which is why the Republicans only won the popular vote for president once between 1988 and 2024.

In 1980, Ronald Reagan won 55 percent of the white vote and translated that into a landslide 44 state victory. In 2012, Mitt Romney won 59 percent of the white vote but still lost the election. When Republican leaders realized they were winning the white vote but losing the American vote, they started to panic.

But, the problem went beyond losing elections. For much of the Republican base, America’s transition to multiracial democracy felt like an existential threat. White Christians weren’t just any group. For two centuries, they occupied the top rung of this country’s social, economic,

HOW DEMOCRACIES DIE

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

Drawing on decades of research and global examples, from 1930s Europe to contemporary Hungary, Turkey and Venezuela, to the American South during Jim Crow, Levitsky and Ziblatt show how democracies die. — 320 pages / PB

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political and cultural hierarchies. They were the politicians, the judges, the CEOs, the university presidents, the football coaches, the newspaper editors, the TV talking heads.

All the way through my bar mitzvah, every single president and vice president, every single House speaker and Senate majority leader, every single chief justice and Federal Reserve chair, every single governor, every single Fortune 500 CEO, and every Miss America was white.

All of that is now ending — rapidly, relentlessly — right before our eyes. The number of Black and Latino members of Congress has more than quadrupled since my bar mitzvah — from 28 in 1980 to 114 today. For the first time in history, the percentage of African Americans in Congress equals the percentage of African Americans in the overall population. In 1965, all nine Supreme Court justices were white men. Today, only four of nine justices are white men — and only six of nine are white.

And the change extended beyond politics. We see it in the growing presence of non-white and multiracial families on our TV and movie screens. We see it in mounting societal pushback against acts of racism. Think of the Black Lives Matter protests. We see it in challenges in newsrooms and classrooms to historical narratives that downplay or ignore America's racist past.

The early 21st century saw an unprecedented assault on this country's racial and gender hierarchies. But, when your group has been at the top of a social hierarchy for 250 years, challenges to that hierarchy can feel threatening. Losing one's dominant social status can feel like an existential threat.

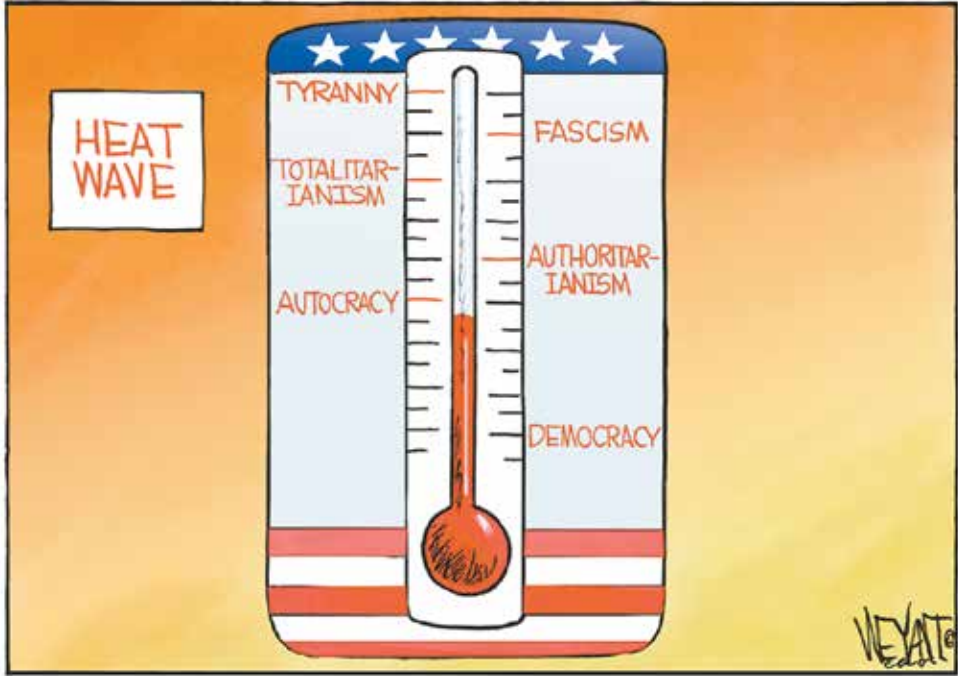
So, it's not just Trump. But Republican authoritarianism is only part of the story. The U.S. has powerful institutional and societal bulwarks against authoritarianism. We have the world's oldest and most successful Constitution — a Constitution that, for all its flaws, has a pretty good track record in limiting executive abuse. We have a strong bicameral legislature, an independent judiciary, an established rule of law and a robust system of federalism. Those institutions should protect us.

The U.S. also has a wealthy, well-organized civil society. We have a big, wealthy private sector. There are 900 billionaires in this country — and 22 million millionaires in this country.

There are dozens of private law firms that earn at least a billion dollars a year in revenue. There are hundreds of independent media outlets. There are more than 1,700 private universities, and a vast infrastructure of churches, labor unions, private foundations and nonprofits.

Finally, for all its problems, the Democratic Party is far better organized, better financed and more unified than oppositions in Russia, Hungary, Turkey, Venezuela or El Salvador.

So, American society has more than



enough muscle to blunt this authoritarian offensive. But, even the best-designed institutions don't operate automatically. Institutions are just pieces of paper. They have to be deployed. They to be defended — by people. And, so far, America's leading public officials and societal elites have been AWOL. Rather than defend our democratic institutions, they have capitulated, acquiesced or retreated to the sidelines. In other words, the people with the constitutional authority or societal influence to stop this authoritarian offensive have stood down.

There is a word for this: abdication. Democratic abdication occurs when those with the authority and responsibility to defend democratic institutions fail to do so.

- The U.S. Senate abdicated when it acquitted Trump after Jan. 6.
- The Supreme Court abdicated in 2024 when it derailed the federal cases against Trump and instead granted him vast immunity.
- Congress abdicated its oversight role in 2024 when it confirmed authoritarian cabinet picks — and in 2025 when it remained silent as Trump repeatedly violated the Constitution.
- Media companies like Paramount and Disney abdicated when they settled flimsy lawsuits rather than defending press freedom.
- Leading law firms and universities abdicated when they acquiesced to Trump's authoritarian demands rather than defend the rule of law and academic freedom.

This is not how you defend democracy. Trump hasn't seized power. We are ceding it to him. Civil society has more than enough financial and organizational muscle to blunt this authoritarian offensive by Trump. But we are abdicating our responsibility to defend democracy — and that is enabling autocracy.

Abdication facilitates authoritarianism in two ways.

First, it has an enabling effect. When we acquiesce to authoritarian measures like prosecuting critics, extorting law firms and universities, bullying the media, or sending troops into cities, we expand the authoritarian toolkit by making previously unacceptable measures acceptable. The more tools you give autocrats, the more damage they can do.

Second, abdication has a powerful signaling effect. Public officials' acquiescence to authoritarian acts tells citizens that those acts are acceptable. When governments cross red lines without serious resistance, it normalizes behavior that was considered unthinkable.

And, when our most prominent billionaires, media companies, law firms and universities acquiesce to authoritarianism, it sends a message to the rest of society that resistance is futile. If bil-

lionaires, senators and Ivy League universities can't stand up to Trump, what chance do the rest of us have?

The great danger is that we will start to silence ourselves, that fear of retribution will lead a growing number of Americans to retreat to the sidelines.

- To not give that speech or sermon denouncing Trump.
- To NOT run that controversial story or that critical editorial.
- To NOT join that protest.
- To NOT give money to an opposition group or candidate.
- To NOT run for public office.

When we all decide — out of fear, resignation or sheer exhaustion — to retreat to the sidelines, the authoritarians win. But, it doesn't have to be this way.

In South Korea, when President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law last year, South Koreans immediately mobilized in protest. Congresspeople rushed to Congress and literally scaled the walls to get inside and call a special session to annul the martial law decree. When troops tried to force their way into the Assembly chamber to prevent a vote, lawmakers barricaded the chamber doors with sofas and benches. Protesters outside the building helped them.

Barely two hours after Yoon declared martial law, 190 legislators, including members of Yoon's own party, voted unanimously to rescind it. President Yoon was impeached and is now standing trial for his attack on democracy. That's how you defend democracy!

In Brazil, when Trump ally Jair Bolsonaro tried to organize a coup to overturn the 2022 election, the courts moved quickly and aggressively to hold him accountable. Bolsonaro was barred from running in the next presidential election and then prosecuted and convicted of the crime of organizing a coup.

So, why are America's elite behaving like this? I think part of the story is that Americans lack a history or shared memory of authoritarianism the way that Koreans, Germany, Brazilians and

Argentines do. Koreans and Brazilians reacted more quickly and effectively to authoritarian threats because they know what it's like to lose a democracy. They have a collective memory of authoritarianism. South Koreans remember when martial law was declared in 1980. They remember the repression of that era. It is burned into collective memory.

Brazilians remember their 21-year military dictatorship. The Supreme Court justices came of age under military rule. They call themselves the Generation of '88, in reference to the 1988 Constitution that ushered Brazil's democratic era. They took the threat of a coup seriously.

That collective memory of authoritarianism doesn't exist in the U.S. Rather than remember historical abuses so as not to repeat them, Americans tend to whitewash our past. We don't teach ourselves about Jim Crow, lynchings, McCarthyism or the internment of Japanese Americans. Instead, we remain wedded to a myth of American exceptionalism — the belief that there is something in our culture or DNA that makes us immune from authoritarianism. We are living the consequences of that illusion.

So, where are we headed? I do not think the U.S. is headed toward a Putin-style dictatorship. The slide into competitive authoritarianism has been modest. It's reversible.

The Trump administration is pretty incompetent. It makes a lot of mistakes and it's overreaching in ways that are costing it support. This will give the opposition opportunities.

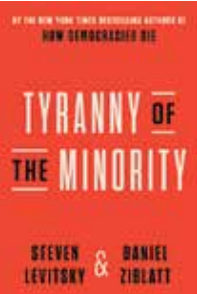
Second, and related, Trump isn't very popular. Autocrats do a lot more damage when they have 80 percent support than when they have 40 percent support. Chavez, Putin and Bukele all had 80 percent support. Trump will never have that kind of public support. His approval rating is already in the low 40s.

Unpopular autocrats have a harder time consolidating power. Trump and Bolsonaro were both in the low 40s when they tried and failed to overturn elections. South Korean President Yoon had a 20 percent approval rating when he tried and failed to declare martial law last year.

Finally, we have a strong civil society and a strong opposition party. This is not Russia or El Salvador. Our society has more than enough financial and organizational muscle to stop Trump. But, the opposition can only win if it stays in the game.

Democracies don't automatically defend themselves. People have to defend them. Authoritarians have to be beaten. That means politicians, judges, CEOs, media owners, university presidents and law firms have to have step up and show some courage. No one has ever defeated an autocracy from the sidelines.

Thank you.



Levitsky and Ziblatt issue an urgent call to reform our politics. America will either become a multiracial democracy or cease to be a democracy at all. — 320 pages / PB \$20 Item #FB194

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Former President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and former President Yoon Suk Yeol of South Korea, both authoritarian leaders, were eventually removed from office because their countries' democratic safeguards held strong.

FFRF’s 2025 grad student essay winners announced

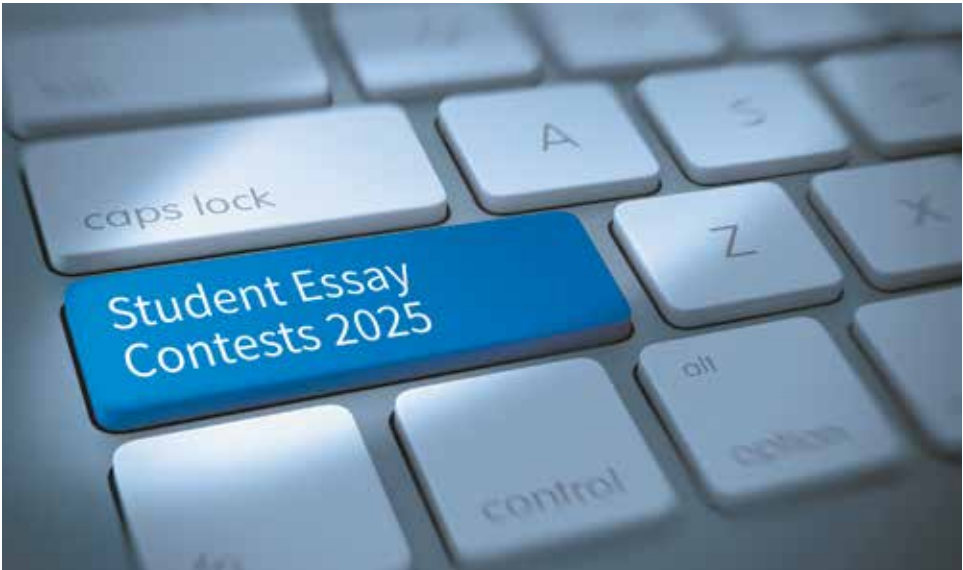
The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 10 top winners and four honorable mentions in the 2025 Cornelius Vander Broek Graduate/Older Student Essay Competition.

FFRF has paid out a total of \$16,250 in award money for this contest.

This year’s topic is, “State/church issues endangered by the Trump administration’s capitulation to Christian nationalism.” Students were asked to write an essay focused on one issue that is under threat by Christian nationalist policies in the current administration.

Winners, their ages, colleges or universities they are attending and the award amount are listed below.

- FIRST PLACE**
Julius Calvert, 26, University of North Texas, \$3,500.
- SECOND PLACE**
Kyria Santa, 24, Emory University, \$3,000.
- THIRD PLACE**
Ian Webb, 29, Georgia Institute of Technology, \$2,500.



- FOURTH PLACE**
Bailee Roberts, 23, Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling, \$2,000.
- FIFTH PLACE**
Jacqueline Thomas, 25, University of North Texas, \$1,500.
- SIXTH PLACE**
Claire Rosemary Lewis, 24, Duke University, \$1,000.
- SEVENTH PLACE**
Ione A. Rodriguez, 30, University of Texas at San Antonio, \$750.
- EIGHTH PLACE**
Megan Lyman, 29, Michigan State University, \$500.
- NINTH PLACE**
Michael Richardson, 25, Berklee College of Music, \$400.

- TENTH PLACE**
Matthew Reyes, 28, University of Texas at San Antonio, \$300.
- HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)**
Bailey Diaz, 25, San Jose State University.
Lewis Luis, 27, City College of New York.
Jeremiah J. Moore, 30, University of North Carolina At Pembroke.
Morgan Wegner, 26, Upper Iowa University.

FFRF thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF’s other student essay competitions. FFRF would also like to thank its volunteers and staff for reading and judging the essays, including Paul Baker, Dan Barker, David Chivers, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Tim Hatcher, Jeffrey La Vicka, Katya Maes, Tori Mizerak, Kurt Mohnsam, Henry Mongrain, Andrea Osburne, Brooks Rimes, Rose Mary Sheldon, PJ Slinger and Kimberly Waldron.

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

FIRST PLACE

‘You don’t belong in STEM’

FFRF awarded Julius \$3,500.

By Julius Calvert

Somewhere in the United States, a Black student is enrolled in an introductory neuroscience course. This student was previously a homeless youth and is now a first-generation college student following the death of both their parents. They balance studying while paying bills and dream of integrating cognitive neuroscience methodology into counterterrorism and public safety policy. Although they hope their institution will support them given their hardships, the fruits of their labor are then barred by financial challenges, and they are forced to withdraw from classes indefinitely.

This glimpse into my personal story offers a first-hand account of the consequences that the Trump administration’s destruction of science funding has on minority and low-income students.

My curiosity for science is under threat by the sweeping funding cuts implemented by this administration, further reinforcing decades of economic exclusion of Blacks from academia. In my specific situation, working full-time to fund basic living expenses forces me to cease continuing my education. As a Black STEM major, most of the research scholarships I applied for have been frozen due to the administration’s cries of “DEI.” The NIH’s Undergraduate Scholarship Program is one such scholarship designed to bridge the financial gap for historically underrepresented students in research. Many hopeful students who are underrepresented in STEM depend on these types of funding programs to afford tuition, and now we are watching as this administration destroys our last options for earning a basic college education that many of our white and higher-income peers take for granted.



Julius Calvert

In the dead of night, while we were sleeping, the vengeful stroke of a pen finalized an executive order that stopped our academic dreams. Executive Order 1415 demands that each federal agency, “terminate . . . all DEI, DEIA, and ‘environmental justice’ offices and positions; all ‘equity action plans,’ ‘equity’ actions, initiatives or programs, ‘equity-related’ grants or contracts; and all DEI or DEIA performance requirements for employees, contractors, or grantees.”

My dream of integrating research on facial recognition into counterterrorism policy is considered “DEI” under this order. Research, in nearly every scientific domain, along with public safety fields, is vilified and then defunded under this administration.

Even more disturbing than the defunding of research is the underlying message these actions send to students like me. “We don’t want you here, you are not as qualified as your white peers, and we are stopping you from stealing their jobs.” With this stroke of a pen, we found ourselves racing back to a period in science when people like me weren’t even legally allowed to be in white labs; a period that predates the late Louis T.

Wright, the first Black man to graduate from Harvard Medical School in 1915. His perseverance and commitment to medicine despite institutional barriers later inspired his daughter, Dr. Jane Cooke Wright, to revolutionize the way cancer was treated in 1951.

For now, federal law prohibits blatant segregation. Still, I am scarcely hopeful that Black contributions to STEM will not fade entirely, as many of the racist ideals inherent in white Christian nationalism have found a permanent home in our government. The Heritage Foundation, in particular, has influenced the president’s office to fulfill Project 2025, an anti-democratic wish list aiming to make America “great again,” which includes halting the incremental progress our institutions were making to dismantle systemic exclusion of minorities from STEM and research.

Despite their constant efforts to intimidate us from participating in research, many students like me consider science a medium for attempting to solve challenging issues plaguing our society. As an agnostic atheist, I believe that science communication is the only way for me to meaningfully serve my community, given my lack of belief in the afterlife. For this reason, I am committed to making the most of my limited lifetime by advancing access to science education for underrepresented communities. I hold the words of the late U.S. Rep. Shirley Chisholm in my heart: “Service is the rent we pay for the privilege of living on this Earth.” Therefore, in the face of authoritarianism, I hold that the dissemination of science and education can empower communities to

“We are watching as this administration destroys our last options for earning a basic college education that many of our white and higher-income peers take for granted.”

mobilize for their well-being.

This systematic dismantling of inclusion in science is a calculated attempt to erase the contributions of underrepresented communities in STEM. Our fight for equitable access to quality education will continue as long as we breathe. Science belongs to all of us, and no self-proclaimed “king” can erase our contributions, nor will they block our pursuit of knowledge.

Julius, 26, attends the University of North Texas and is seeking a degree in psychology/neuroscience.

“When I was 12, my mother passed away partly due to economic disparities in her treatment of lupus nephritis. After her death, I endured years of physical abuse from relatives before escaping at 15. Since then, I have navigated life independently. A pivotal internship at the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism introduced me to research on radicalization and fueled my interest in integrating cognitive neuroscience research methods used in the study of face perception into the study of radicalization.”

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll
By Orvin Larson
Prof. Larson writes with affection and respect of this illustrious 19th century freethinker.
— 316 pages / PB
\$15 Item #FB18
Published by FFRF

The book cover features a sepia-toned portrait of Robert G. Ingersoll, a man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit. The title "American Infidel" is prominently displayed in a stylized font, with "ROBERT G. INGERSOLL" below it. At the bottom, it says "A Biography by Orvin Larson".

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

SECOND PLACE

How Trump-era theocracy endangers autistic lives

FFRF awarded Kyria \$3,000.

By Kyria Santa

As Robert F. Kennedy Jr. stands in public discourse, both in person and online, and repeatedly states the debunked claim that vaccines cause autism, the public erupts — not in outrage, but in applause. These moments aren’t just pseudoscience in action, they’re dog whistles to a Christian nationalist movement that has long viewed autism not as a neurological difference, but as a moral or spiritual failing.

Under the Trump administration, this ideology has found fertile ground. Christian nationalism doesn’t whisper conspiracies; it shouts them into policy. The result: A renewed societal hostility toward autistic people, a dismantling of legal protections and a culture that views neurodivergence as something to fix, not accommodate.

This threat is rooted in centuries of religious cruelty. In the Dark Ages, people showing what we now recognize as autistic traits were labeled “possessed,” were exorcised or burned at the stake. Even in the 20th century, Christian institutions ran schools where autistic children were abused under the guise of salvation. These atrocities weren’t anomalies; they stemmed from a theology that equated atypical minds with corruption. Today’s Christian nationalist rhetoric — calling autism a punishment, a disease or demonic — is simply rebranded historical violence.



Kyria Santa

Under Trump, these beliefs became policy. RFK Jr.’s anti-vaccine rhetoric gained traction because Trump had already laid the groundwork by publicly linking vaccines to autism in multiple statements and tweets. The administration slashed public school funding, including programs under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), while funneling money to private religious schools that are often exempt from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and IDEA. This wasn’t budgeting; it was a declaration that schools excluding disabled children are more deserving of public funds than those that serve all.

“Religious liberty” also became a pretext to deny autistic people health care and community support. Trump’s Department of Health and Human Services has dismantled the Administration for Community Living, gutting programs like Home- and Community-Based Services (HCBS) and Centers for Independent Living. At the same time, the administration began dismantling the Department of Education and instructed the secretary to withhold funds from schools promoting diversity, equity, or inclusion — further undermining protections for autistic students. These aren’t abstract policy shifts. They are acts of calculated collapse.

This fight is personal. My younger brother is autistic. He was fortunate to finish school before these attacks escalated, but I can’t stop thinking about students coming after him. Autistic children are pushed out of classrooms, denied services or told they are broken in the eyes of a god. I’ve seen my brother struggle to be understood in a world that won’t listen. I’ve also seen how deeply he feels joy, curiosity and love. Watching a movement use religion to label people like him as lesser is enraging. If we remain silent, we are complicit in letting theocratic cruelty erase our neurodivergent loved ones — who are a beautiful, irreplaceable part of humanity.

What’s at stake is the dignity and safety of autistic people. This Christian nationalist assault doesn’t happen in isolation — it intersects with broader attacks on education, health care and science. If we let religious dogma define who is worthy of care

and rights, we dismantle the foundation of secular society.

We must respond with clarity and courage. Laws such as IDEA and the ADA must be protected and enforced without religious exemptions. Any institution receiving public funds — religious or not — must be held to the same nondiscrimination standards. We need to invest in inclusive public education and expand access to evidence-based mental health services, free from coercive theology. Organizations like the Autistic Self Advocacy Network and the Freedom From Religion Foundation are leading this fight, but they need support — through advocacy, donations, and grassroots organizing.

Christian nationalism says autism is something to fear, cure or erase. Secular society must answer with a louder truth: Autistic people are not projects for salvation, they are people who deserve autonomy, respect and full protection under the law.

Kyria, 24, attends Emory University’s Rollins School of Public Health, where she is seeking an MPH degree in epidemiology.

Kyria writes: “I was raised in a Black Pentecostal/Apostolic Christian household and never imagined leaving religion, until I did in early 2023, proudly embracing atheism and anti-theism. Since then, I’ve founded Emory’s chapter of the Secular Student Alliance, partnered with Black Nonbelievers, appeared on their show “In the Cut,” and spoke at their 2025 Revival of Reason event. I was deeply honored to receive the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s Percy B. Shelley Student Activist Award.”

THIRD PLACE

‘We’re still here’

FFRF awarded Ian \$2,500.

By Ian Webb

I live in Atlanta, which is a vibrant, progressive city surrounded by a state that’s become a testing ground for Christian nationalist policy and fearmongering. As a gay man and activist in my late 20s, I’ve spent the last decade working to elect leaders like Joe Biden, Kamala Harris, Raphael Warnock and Jon Ossoff — people who understand that LGBTQ rights are human rights and that the wall between church and state is not optional, but the bedrock of American society. But, now that foundation is crumbling under the weight of a coordinated, well-funded and rapidly accelerating movement: Christian nationalism.

Let’s drop the euphemisms. What’s happening in America isn’t some abstract culture war. It’s a calculated campaign to dismantle secular governance and replace it with a theocratic state — led by groups like the Heritage Foundation, emboldened by Donald Trump, and organized under blueprints like Project 2025. At the center of their agenda? People like me. Queer people, trans people, anyone who dares to exist outside their narrow, 1950s fantasy of what America should be. My siblings in life who choose to live life out loud and honestly.

Trump didn’t invent Christian nationalism, but he welcomed it with open arms. Under the guise of “religious liberty,” his first administration stacked the

courts, gutted civil rights enforcement, and greenlit open discrimination against LGBTQ Americans. Now, in his second term, he’s emboldened himself. In less than 100 days, he introduced the trans military ban, began rolling back health care protections and gender-affirming health care, and gave federal contractors a mandate to discriminate.

But the greatest danger lies ahead. Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation’s dystopian playbook for a second Trump term, outlines, in explicit detail, a future where LGBTQ people are systematically erased from public life in favor of a white, Christian traditionalist nation.

They want to scrap nondiscrimination policies across federal agencies, eliminate references to sexual orientation and gender identity in civil rights law, strip independent school systems and higher education institutions of inclusive curriculum, and revoke protections for queer youth. If this sounds alarming, it’s because it is — this isn’t hypothetical. This is written in a manifesto, and it’s backed by billions of dollars, media echo chambers and religious extremism dressed up as patriotism.

Christian nationalism is not about faith. It is about dominion. It weaponizes Christianity to justify the suppression of civil liberties, the erasure of marginalized communities, and the consolidation of political power in the hands of a select few.

I’ve seen this playbook before. I wrote about it in 2021 in an opinion piece for



Ian Webb

NBC News, when backlash to LGBTQ visibility began gaining momentum again on the state level here in Georgia. I’ve watched it escalate from statehouse attacks on trans kids to national efforts to dismantle the rights of an entire community. I’m not just studying this trend as a first-year MBA student — I’m living it. I’m organizing against it. And I’m preparing to lead in a world that is increasingly hostile to people like me.

But, here’s what Christian nationalists fail to understand: We’re not going quietly. We have history on our side. We’ve painstakingly fought for every inch of progress — through AIDS, through marriage bans, through bathroom bills. We

know how to fight. And more importantly, we know how to win.

To combat this threat, we need to treat Christian nationalism like the existential crisis it is. That means challenging its legal infrastructure — filing lawsuits, expanding federal protections, defending the separation of church and state with the same urgency we bring to defending the right to vote. It means investing in public education. It means organizing locally to keep extremists out of office and hold national collaborators accountable.

And, it means being visible — loudly, unapologetically visible. Because what they fear most is not our rights, it’s our existence. It’s queer kids growing up in a world where they are affirmed, not condemned. It’s trans people walking into clinics and getting the gender-affirming care they need without fear. It’s drag queens reading books about farm animals at their local public library. It’s me — an out, proud, successful queer man in Atlanta, living freely, loving openly and refusing to back down.

They want us erased. But we’re still here. And we’re not going anywhere.

Ian, 29, attends Georgia Institute of Technology with plans to get a degree in business administration.

Ian writes: “I am passionate about public education and protecting access to education for society’s most vulnerable populations. My work has been featured in NBC News and The Atlanta Journal-Constitution and at the Emmy Awards and Mellon Foundation. I live with my partner, Patrick, and our cat, Oliver, in Atlanta.”

FOURTH PLACE

Christian nationalism is just the costume

FFRF awarded Bailee \$2,000.

By Bailee Roberts

Somewhere in America, a woman lies in a hospital bed, unmoving, unknowing, and already dead. Her body is hooked to machines — not to save her life, but to preserve her womb. In the world of “The Handmaid’s Tale,” this would be expected: women’s bodies reduced to vessels, animated only by the state’s desire to reproduce.

This isn’t a dystopia. It’s Georgia. It’s the law. And because her pregnancy had progressed just three weeks beyond the six-week gestation limit, her body remained on life support — not for her, but for the state. Her family was left grieving a daughter they could not bury, because Georgia had other plans for her body.

Christian nationalism isn’t content with banning books or policing bathrooms. It’s building a future where your body doesn’t belong to you. It’s starting with trans people and immigrants, but it won’t stop there. Because, beneath the surface, this isn’t about faith, it’s about control. Christian nationalism is just the costume. What we’re watching is the rise of an authoritarian movement, using religion as a tool to legislate identity, morality and reproduction. Trans people are the test case. Immigrants are the distraction. The end goal is total bodily control: forced birth, stripped autonomy and a population raised not for freedom, but for labor and obedience.

Authoritarian movements can’t survive without an enemy. Christian nationalism thrives on moral panic — a manufactured



fear that frames trans people, immigrants and pro-choice individuals as threats to order, children or God. This isn’t new. Sociologists like Stanley Cohen warned how societies have used “folk devils” to justify fear, repression and social regression. But what makes this tactic so effective now is our empathy drought. We’ve lost the ability to sit with moral complexity. Abortion, gender, immigration — these are nuanced, deeply personal experiences. But Christian nationalism depends on black-and-white thinking. It needs you to stop asking questions. It needs you to stop feeling.

When outrage becomes a scroll, authoritarianism slips in quietly, dressed as tradition. And when black-and-white thinking replaces nuance, real people don’t disappear, they get rewritten into policy as problems to be fixed. Not because the system is working, but because it’s rotting.

And, from that rot grows the real agen-

da — not protecting children, but producing them — molded to fit a biblical blueprint that rebrands authoritarianism as “family values.” Under Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation wants the Department of Health and Human Services to “maintain a biblically based, social science-reinforced definition of marriage and family.” It is no coincidence that the same movement pushing for biblical education is also advocating for a total abortion ban. More children equals more control over culture, labor and the future.

Restrictive laws aren’t only ideological, but have devastating tangible impacts on millions of Americans. According to the March of Dimes’ 2023 Nowhere to Go report, a staggering 35 percent of U.S. counties are classified as maternity care deserts: places with no hospitals, clinics or doctors who provide pregnancy care. More than 2.3 million women of reproductive age live in these areas, and in 2022 alone, 150,000 babies were born without access to local maternal care. Worse, a study from the Commonwealth Fund found that maternal death rates were 62 percent higher in 2020 in abortion-restriction states versus states without such bans — a direct result of systemic neglect.

This didn’t happen overnight. During his first presidency, Donald Trump outsourced all three Supreme Court nominations to far-right think tanks like the Heritage Foundation and the Federalist Society.

“It is no coincidence that the same movement pushing for biblical education is also advocating for a total abortion ban.”

A Heritage legal expert helped shape the shortlist that gave us Justices Gorsuch, Kavanaugh and Barrett, the very court that overturned Roe v. Wade and dismantled federal protections for reproductive rights.

That same agenda lives on in Project 2025, the Heritage Foundation’s plan to reshape the U.S. government around Christian nationalist ideals: a federal abortion ban, the defunding of public education, expanded executive power and surveillance of dissent. But, peel back the language of faith and morality, and it’s not about Christianity at all. It’s authoritarianism in a clerical collar. It’s power, wrapped in scripture, sold like salvation, and enforced like law.

History doesn’t just repeat itself; it escalates. And silence is always its accomplice. Don’t let them numb you. Join something. Build community. Make noise. Look up. Feel something. It doesn’t have to be this way.

Bailee, 23, attends Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education and Counseling with plans to get a degree in art therapy.

Bailee writes: “At Syracuse, I studied sociology alongside painting and psychology, graduating summa cum laude with an award-winning thesis on gender inequality in the art world. Now I co-lead a passion project turned brand that uses handmade goods and design to spark reflection and inspire small acts of compassion. I enjoy volunteering at local farms and have also spent time as a mentor in children’s hospitals.”

FIFTH PLACE

The dangers of privatizing education

FFRF awarded Jacqueline \$1,500.

By Jacqueline Thomas

As a first-generation college student, I know the importance of accessible public education. I was raised by a single mother in a small town in Texas, and her lack of education meant that we often struggled to make ends meet. She made it clear to me that education was the way to create a better future and break the cycle of poverty. That’s why the Trump administration’s push for federal vouchers for private religious education is a direct threat to future generations of students. It’s not just about “school choice,” but rather the much more dangerous idea of Christian nationalism, which threatens to push conservative beliefs into society, violating the separation of church and state and threatening our democracy. The push for vouchers diverts taxpayer dollars to religious schools, which are not bound to strict curriculum regulations like public schools are. Instead, they are able to teach what they deem important, often promoting harmful ideologies such as creationism over evolution, abstinence-only sex education, and an “us versus them” attitude on different cultures and backgrounds.

With such limited perspectives, we are risking a generation of students who are not equipped with crucial critical-thinking skills and who do not know how to engage with world problems. Due to this, the shift also contributes to a less-educated

populace. This is alarming because uneducated citizens cannot effectively engage in decisions that shape our society. However, that is what the current administration is striving for, as Trump is quoted as saying in 2016 after a Nevada caucus win that he “loves the poorly educated.”

I experienced firsthand how private religious education can shape perspectives, as I attended a Catholic school throughout elementary and middle school. We were taken out of class to attend Mass, teachers denied the Big Bang, and we had an entire unit on pro-life rhetoric. While I was excited to finally attend a public high school starting in ninth grade, I quickly realized that limited funding meant a lack of advanced classes and extracurricular opportunities, especially in my rural area.

However, public school forced me to hone my critical-thinking skills and examine arguments from multiple points of view, which I had not been encouraged to do before. I am glad I switched to public schooling because it exposed me to diverse groups of peers and built my appreciation for our differences.

Trump’s plan to privatize education also hurts resources that students rely on. I was fortunate enough to participate in federal TRIO programs throughout high school and college, which are aimed at assisting first-generation college students. This program allowed me to achieve my goal of graduating with my bachelor’s degree debt-free, and I am now giving back to the program by serving as an adviser at



Jacqueline Thomas

a local high school where I serve over 200 disadvantaged students who come from backgrounds similar to my own. However, resources like these are under direct threat if Trump continues to tamper with the education system and divert federal funding to private, religious schools instead.

Public education is meant to be neutral, including people of all backgrounds. It should aim to give students a level playing field, and we should be using federal funding to create equitable opportunities for all instead of pushing Christian ideals.

We cannot sit back and let this administration destroy the foundation of our democracy. We must contact our representa-

tives and legislators, urging them to oppose vouchers and support education-based advocacy programs. It is time to get involved in campaigns, attend town halls and ask hard-hitting questions to hold our representatives accountable. We are the constituents and we hold the power. I recently attended an education policy seminar in D.C., and spoke with staffers on Capitol Hill to advocate for education in America. I found the most powerful tool was my own story. Nobody can argue with your experience. I shared my struggles and successes with staffers who connected with me on a human level, and I urge others to do the same, whether it be by phone, in person or via email.

Education free from religious influence is what builds a fair and equal society. It equips our future leaders with the skills needed to navigate our complex world, such as critical thinking and informed decision making. With an influx of voices, we can create change. Together, we can protect public education and ensure that future generations have access to fair and equal opportunities, regardless of their background.

Jacqueline, 25, attends University of North Texas and is working toward a master’s degree in higher education.

Jacqueline writes: “I work as a college and career advisor for at-risk high school students. I am passionate about education advocacy and mental health awareness, and hope to one day work within the government or hold a leadership position at an educational institution.”

SIXTH PLACE

‘Viewers who aren’t always like you’

FFRF awarded Claire \$1,000.

By Claire Rosemary Lewis

I have no concept of being introduced to Christianity. One of my earliest memories is my first day of preschool, when the teacher at my fundamentalist Christian school told us the Genesis creation story. I was 4 years old and already knew the story, even though I can’t recall anyone telling me the story before then.

We weren’t called Christian nationalists back then. In my early childhood, being a fervent, evangelical, America-loving Christian, particularly in the Midwest, was treated as the norm and was a very good, patriotic thing to be. Now, under President Trump, Christian nationalists are in the American zeitgeist like they never were when I was a child, accelerating and vocalizing contempt for the concepts of diversity, equity, and inclusion — contempt which existed in the early 2000s, but had yet to achieve a place in the public consciousness beyond those of us who grew up steeped in it.

I am unique among fundamentalist Christian school attendees in that my parents were not Christian nationalists. They were Christians — I wouldn’t have been allowed to enroll at those schools if they weren’t — but they were mainline Protestant and (nonpracticing) Catholic. My parents did not hold to a literalist view of the bible and certainly did not think America must be a nation exclusively made up of Christians the way my teachers and pastors at school did.



Claire Rosemary Lewis

Throughout my incredibly Christian upbringing, there remained a secular outlet for me to engage with concepts absent from my sheltered childhood: television. Though I didn’t watch nearly as much television as my friends who grew up going to public school did, it was possibly my only outlet to a non-Christian lens as a child. I vividly remember the cartoons I watched introducing me to things as specific as dreidels, vegetarianism and pop culture references too “out there” for my Christian school to impart on me. And, while I grew up with cable, PBS was the reigning champion of engaging, educational programming.

Republicans wanting to cut PBS funding is nothing new. On May 1, 1969, a then-relatively unknown Fred Rogers famously testified before the Senate Committee on Communications under the Nixon administration, pleading his case for publicly funded television, arguing for its beneficial aspects, particularly for the nation’s children. During his 2012 presidential campaign, Mitt Romney proposed cutting funding to PBS, even caveating, “I like Big Bird” during a presidential debate, spawning a number of memes online at the time. Today, Christian nationalists are pleased that it has been defunded because they are afraid of the fact that America is a diverse country where not everyone is like them.

The push to defund PBS is an attack on public access to information. It is an attempt to restrict access to high-quality educational content, particularly from those who don’t have cable, streaming services or well-funded academic resources in their area. Christian nationalists are often all too happy to push their message on the less fortunate.

The root words of “evangelicalism” and “evangelize” are one and the same, after all. I worry a lack of PBS (and public media more broadly) would lead to a rise in free content available online or over the airwaves pushing a Christian nationalist agenda under the guise of reporting the nightly news or teaching kids how to read. Public media, specifically publicly broadcast news and children’s content, is essential to create a

well-educated and equitable country. Especially in an age where fake news, shoddy for-profit content, and AI-generated clickbait roam rampant, publicly funded and nonpartisan media serves an egalitarian purpose to keep all Americans informed. Public broadcasting is worth the minuscule fraction of the federal budget spent on it.

In my tiny basement apartment in a fairly wealthy college town, PBS is one of the only networks my TV antenna can pick up, and I think about people in more isolated, less well-off parts of the country who rely on PBS for their news and educational content for their children. I think about kids who learned about dreidels, vegetarianism and Andy Warhol 20 years after I did because their parents let them have the TV on.

When people ask me if my Christian nationalist schools taught me anything, I often joke, “Well, I can read,” but in truth, I owe much of that to “Between the Lions” and the happenings around the brownstone apartment at 123 Sesame Street.

Claire, 24, attends Duke University and is working toward an MFA degree.

Claire writes: “I am a writer and animator currently earning her MFA from Duke University’s Experimental & Documentary Arts program. I grew up on the southern edge of the Kansas City metro and studied animation and media as an undergrad at DePaul University in Chicago. My creative work often deals with themes related to girlhood in the digital age, asexuality and intergenerational connection.”

SEVENTH PLACE

LGBTQ rights and the Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Ione \$750.

By Ione A. Rodriguez

On day one of Trump’s second term, his administration signed a slew of executive orders that were direct attacks on the transgender community, under the guise of protecting women and children. These executive orders have direct ties to the Christian nationalist movement.

Christian nationalism is the belief that the country was founded as a Christian nation and laws should be based on Christian values. According to the Public Religion Research Institute’s 2023 survey, roughly three in 10 Americans qualify as Christian nationalist adherents or sympathizers, meaning they strongly believe or support the idea that America should be Christian nation. Although the number is relatively small, Christian nationalists are well funded and now in government power under the Trump administration.

One of the most blatant examples of Christian nationalist policies is the Millstone Act that was introduced in various states to ban gender-affirming care for minors. The name itself is a biblical reference to Matthew 18:6, which states “Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to

be drowned in the depth of the sea.”

Gender-affirming care, which includes medical interventions, mental health care and social interventions, is lifesaving for transgender youth. According to The Trevor Project’s 2024 National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ Young People, 46 percent of transgender and nonbinary youth have considered attempting suicide. This is not due to being transgender or nonbinary, but due to the stigmatization and victimization they experience in our society. The survey also found that in schools that were gender affirming, suicide rates were significantly lower.

Another example of discrimination toward transgender individuals is the infamous bathroom ban, which restricts transgender individuals from using facilities that align with their gender identity. Currently, there are several states that have broad bathroom bans that cover a wider range of public and private settings, while others have bans on only school settings and government buildings.

The loudest voices behind these bans come from Christian nationalist politicians, such as Reps. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Nancy Mace. Mace even went so far as to introduce a resolution to ban transgender women from using women’s restrooms at the U.S. Capitol, specifically to target Rep. Sarah McBride, who is a transgender woman.

In 2015, the Supreme Court legalized



Ione A. Rodriguez

same-sex marriage nationwide in Obergefell vs. Hodges. Now, 10 years later, several states have pressured the Supreme Court to reconsider the law. So far, Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, Michigan and Montana have submitted resolutions to overturn the law protecting same-sex marriage and allow states to make the decision. Reasonings behind these resolutions directly link to Christian nationalist beliefs.

For example, Michigan state Rep. Josh Schriver has argued that marriage is a “covenant between a man and a woman, an institution to glorify God and produce children.” Additionally, Idaho state Rep. Heather Scott told “The Ranch Podcast” that same-sex marriage is an “abomination to God.” Currently, it is estimated that 70 percent of Americans approve of legally recognizing same-sex marriages. Although these legislators do not represent

the majority, they are in positions of power to cause significant harm to the LGBTQ community.

As a queer therapist who directly works with LGBTQ teens and adults, I have witnessed how the Trump administration has deteriorated the mental health of my clients. Many of my clients worry about their rights being infringed upon and not being able to live authentically. I have helped my clients through recognizing what is in their control and what is out of their control.

Unfortunately, what Trump and his administration says is out of our control. However, we do control how we respond and prepare to make changes for the future. We have control over what brands and companies we choose to support. We can volunteer to support marginalized communities that are being impacted. We have influence over how we can inspire and educate others to become more involved in politics. We also have control over our own involvement in rallies, town halls and bill hearings at state capitols. Change can happen, however, it involves participation and engagement from those who are willing to fight for it.

Ione, 30, attends University of Texas at San Antonio and is working toward a Ph.D. in counselor education and supervision.

Ione writes: “I am a licensed therapist who works with those who have experienced trauma or abuse in childhood. My goals in school and beyond are to research Complex PTSD and how to prepare graduate level therapists in treating those with trauma. I have eight brothers, seven of whom are younger than me, and much of what I do is motivated by being the best role model I can be to them.”

“Change can happen, however, it involves participation and engagement from those who are willing to fight for it.”

EIGHTH PLACE

Christian nationalism and LGBTQ rights

FFRF awarded M \$500.

By M Lyman

The future of democracy in the United States is currently under threat by the Trump Administration. Trump has created an oligarchy that is bringing the United States of America closer and closer to fascism. Christian nationalist policies are a huge factor in America’s fall toward fascism and the end of the separation between church and state. Merging of American and Christian identities is the ideology that makes up Christian nationalism. The separation between church and state has long been blurry — but it seems that Trump intends to erase the line altogether. After winning through a campaign rife with violent Christian nationalist imagery, now in office, Trump is bringing his vision to life.

Christian nationalists want the government to reflect and enforce traditional Christian values. In the first month of the Trump presidency, the words “transgender,” “gender identity” and “equity” were swiftly removed from official government sites. Research papers have been removed from publication and stripped of gender-related terms. The option of an “X” gender marker was removed from passport applications. Numerous bills have been introduced that intend to legalize discrimination on the basis of religious beliefs. The American Civil Liberties Union is currently tracking 456 anti-LGBTQ bills in statehouses across the United States.



M Lyman

The rights of LGBTQ folks are in peril. Only 10 years ago, after the Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court ruling, same-sex marriage was legalized in every state. At the time, I was only 18, and still deeply entrenched in the Christian cult I had been raised in. My family and community treated marriage equality as a loss. I remember my mother complaining that gay representation in television shows would normalize queer relationships and make “us” — the good Christian folks — complacent in our opposition.

In the home where I grew up, unbeknownst to me at the time, I was surrounded by a shroud of Christian nationalism. My now liberated and deconstructed self doesn’t remember a time before LGBTQ rights and marriage equality. I am queer, but I don’t have the experience of the

grief and fear that comes with obvious governmental oppression because of my age and my background. I am afraid, however, that I might come to know that fear in my lifetime.

A 2023 study found that support for LGBTQ rights has declined slightly in recent years. This decline can be linked to Christian nationalism. Ultraconservative people are terrified that equality and LGBTQ rights threaten the moral foundations of the country. The news sources created for and viewed by ultraconservatives relentlessly spew anti-LGBTQ messages to feed on this terror. With the president now spouting Christian nationalist rhetoric, these fear-based anti-LGBTQ messages may start reaching a larger portion of the population.

The separation of church and state is essential to American democracy, and, as we have seen, Christian nationalism is anti-democratic. Discrimination and violence toward LGBTQ people happen as a result of Christian nationalist policies.

How do we stop this movement toward Christian nationalism? Unfortunately, there is no quick and simple solution. A good first step, though, is education. More American citizens need to know what Christian nationalism is and understand how it works. A greater understanding, too, of how democracy works and of the Constitution would benefit the American people.

“My now liberated and deconstructed self doesn’t remember a time before LGBTQ rights and marriage equality.”

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution says, in part, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The United States was founded on a principle of religious freedom, and the Constitution prohibits the establishment of an official religion. Christian nationalism is antithetical to the First Amendment.

LGBTQ rights are in danger. The future of democracy in the United States is uncertain as Christian nationalists are gaining control in high governmental offices. We can, though, have hope. The future is not yet determined. There are organizations like the ACLU fighting against discriminatory bills. Citizens of the United States can come together. We can organize, protest and strike. We can be heard. If we work together, we can save democracy and stop the descent into a Christian nationalist government.

M, 29, attends Michigan State University and is working toward a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree.

M writes, “I have a spouse, two young kids and I am queer and polyamorous. I have learned and grown so much as a person through my relationships with my partners. I am passionate about the rights of LGBTQ folks and other minority groups. Once I earn my MSW degree, as a mental health therapist I hope to support people deconstructing from fundamentalist religion, LGBTQ folks and polyamorous people.”

NINTH PLACE

A heritage of destruction

FFRF awarded Michael \$400.

By Michael Richardson

Whether or not Donald Trump authentically considers himself a Christian, the policy aims of his second administration are informed by the ideology of the American Christian nationalist movement. A clear outline for Trump’s second term is Project 2025, a policy agenda written by The Heritage Foundation, originally founded by Christian fundamentalists to push the Nixon administration further to the right.

Project 2025’s scope is massive — 887 pages recommending the Trump administration strip social and voting rights, further unbalance tax policy, enfeeble the federal bureaucracy and empower corporations to pollute and exploit more of the country and its people. I am an LGBT individual, and it is terrifying to witness the erosion of the rights my community has fought for decades to win.

But overarching the personal is the societal. Climate change underpins all other issues. If the world is too hot on which to live, nothing concerning the living matters.

Per Project 2025, the Trump administration plans to accelerate climate change. It plans to eliminate government agencies which fund research and infrastructure regarding clean energy, and any regulation of carbon emissions. It wants to bring back coal. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change cites two degrees of warming relative to pre-industrial levels as the upper bound of tolerability for civilization. Computer modeling predicted the world might narrowly avert

that catastrophic level of warming with the United States as a signatory to the Paris Climate Agreement. Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the Paris Agreement on his first day in office in 2025.

A question demands asking: Why? Traditional explanations for vile policy fall apart here. Is it simply capitalism and the profit motive? Economic research is clear — renewable energy is the more profitable future compared to fossil fuels. Irrational action might require irrational explanation.

Dangerous elements of Christian nationalist ideology are clearly at play. “Prosperity gospel,” the theological idea that God brings success to good people, thus successful people are good, can explain the willingness among Trump’s base to support the concentration of power into the executive. Autocracy reflects the divine order: Success is godly, and concentrating power into one man’s hands makes him very successful indeed.

Christian nationalists can also seem disturbingly excited by the prospect of the end of the world. Their ideology is millenarian, expectant of the coming end of days, when their religious figure will return from the dead and lead them to the afterlife. They think the apocalypse is not a bad thing, but something to be accelerated toward; the material end of the world is desirable because of its spiritual implications.

There are certain tipping points in the Earth’s systems beyond which permanent system collapse is unavoidable. If our climate becomes any warmer, positive feedback loops trigger, ensuring runaway further warming.



Michael Richardson

For example, the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, the system of currents which draws warmer water from the tropics to the North Atlantic and returns cooler water to the equator, is very fragile. If the AMOC is weakened even slightly more by global warming, North and Central America would retain more heat and face dramatically stronger tropical storms, Europe would freeze, and the African Sahel would face frequent, catastrophic droughts. Modeling suggests the AMOC could already be on track, by the 2050s, to weaken by more than 15 percent relative to pre-1950’s strength. Warmer water is less saline, and less saline water is a worse conductor of heat energy, concentrating more heat in the tropics, and so on. The United States withdrawing from the Paris Climate

accord and other climate agreements is a direct threat to the stability of the planet and its inhabitants, most of whom do not welcome the coming apocalypse with the same zeal as the Christian nationalists who seem determined to force us all to join them in dooming the planet.

It’s a bleak picture. Fortunately, the rest of the world is positioned to capitalize on the United States’ mistakes. China and Europe are increasing investment in renewable energy; spending in America should support those efforts while domestic enterprise refuses to modernize. Resisting the concentration of power is essential, as well, making every action by the Trump regime difficult to carry out slows this climate death sentence. Support for progressive groups protecting civil liberties is as important now as it has ever been. The government employees and contractors who are tasked with carrying out the demands of this presidency have an obligation to be sand in the gears, as slowing these actions is essential to limit damage while legal challenges unfold.

Michael, 25, attends Berklee College of Music and is working toward a Master of Arts degree.

Michael writes: “I have a tremendous love for jazz, indie rock and fingerstyle folk guitar, all of which I perform and compose. I’ve been performing in Northern Virginia and the Washington, D.C., area for nearly a decade, and I’ve always felt a responsibility to use whatever platform I have to promote humanist social progress. I’ve had an especially close relationship to abortion rights groups in D.C., for whom I’ve played numerous benefit shows. As a teenager, I toured Senegal with a big band as a ‘jazz ambassador,’ an experience which solidified my passion for the world’s diversity.”

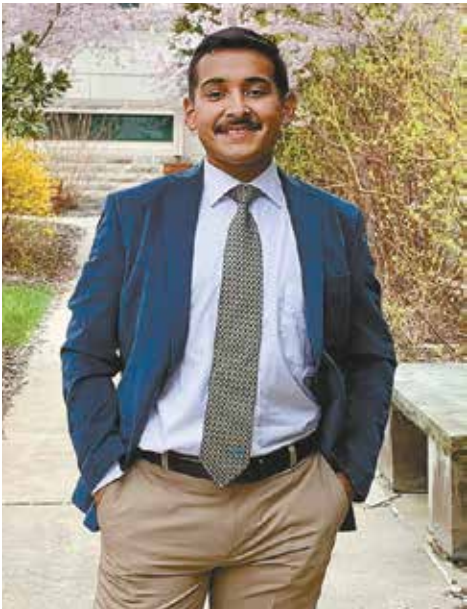
TENTH PLACE

LGBTQ research as part of spending cuts

FFRF awarded Matthew \$300.

By Matthew Reyes

The threat to secularism in the United States most adversely impacts my ability, as a researcher on LGBTQ topics, to contribute to scholarship on equity, social attitudes toward political movements and socioeconomic conditions within the queer community. With the Trump administration’s ongoing destruction of the federal research-funding apparatus, several grants that contribute to our understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ individuals have been voided. For example, the Department of Government Efficiency recently cancelled a grant for a professor at Ohio State University to study the nexus between cannabis use disorder and queer women. Federal funding for such research projects that advance equity for the LGBTQ community will continue to be targeted for the foreseeable future, and this administration will do so to signal support for the Christian nationalist agenda. Though this phenomenon is a facet of the larger trend to dismantle LGBTQ support and cut federal spending, such action, in particular, will be one of the more impactful blows to the queer community. The LGBTQ community is a minority group with limited rights and legal protections, and research that analyzes



Matthew Reyes

the health, socioeconomic and sociological conditions of the LGBTQ community is just beginning to burgeon into a proper field of study. While we have decades of research on other minority communities that inform public policy and equity investments, research on LGBTQ individuals is slim and nascent. In the example of the researcher from Ohio State University, such work could reasonably go on to inform methods of treatment for substance abuse disorders in queer women and/or policies that address the criminalized element of cannabis use in the queer community. Without

this work, our general understanding of our underserved community will be hindered and admonished by Christian nationalists in the United States. Within my own research, I continuously seek to understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ refugees and queer individuals living in repressive conditions in the Global South. As a graduate student at Cornell University, I was able to start the first queer studies course in the College of Art, Architecture and Planning. Through an interdisciplinary approach to analyzing queer spaces, students and researchers were able to evolve our understanding of how the LGBTQ community coalesces and thrives — even under suppressive conditions. As the Trump administration continues to target diversity and equity initiatives, such scholarship will be harder to conduct and promote. Beyond LGBTQ research, Christian nationalists are actively attacking the broader state of the queer community in the United States. Legal debates on the future of same-sex marriage are the most clear and obvious aspect of this, but the movement against trans rights is perhaps the most egregious. The Trump administration has found a scapegoat in a population that constitutes less than 1 percent of the American populace, and discourse from the 2024 campaign focused heavily on “bathroom” legislation, trans individuals in sports, and

false stories of children being “forced” to transition when not legally or medically permissible. Such issues have no relation to the legitimate socioeconomic and inequitable conditions of most Americans, yet the fierce debate around trans issues clearly took front and center in the Christian right’s support for Donald Trump in the 2024 election (and in the 2016 election, too). As previously demonstrated, the ongoing attacks from Christian nationalists on LGBTQ research will continue to erode policies and services that seek to bolster the conditions of the American queer community. While same-sex marriage and trans activism are the most visible targets, the subversive nature of cuts to LGBTQ research efforts will have a long-lasting impact on our community. This underscores the importance of nongovernmental funding from sources like the Freedom from Religion Foundation, which can support equitable work via the research I seek to conduct as a doctoral student in applied demography at the University of Texas at San Antonio. Matthew, 28, attends University of Texas at San Antonio while working toward a degree in applied demography (sociology). Matthew writes: “I am a fifth-generation Texan, LGBTQ advocate and urbanist. My research looks at intersectionalities in inequity, queer socioeconomic conditions and public policy implications.”

Grad student essay honorable mention excerpts

Falling vaccination rates

By Bailey Diaz

Christian nationalism existed in the United States long before the Trump administration, but has been brought to the forefront of conservative politics in recent decades, and now poses a threat to public health. Science, and, by extension, public health initiatives are data driven and do not adhere to the moral standards of any religion or ideology. As such, Christian nationalists perceive scientifically backed policy as a restriction of their religious freedom and more broadly as a threat to the role of Christian values in the United States. Trump’s appointment of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. as the United States secretary of Health and Human Services represents a step away from scientific evidence driven health recommendations toward a Christian nationalist approach to public health initiatives. Discrediting scientific authorities with pseudoscientific claims is a foundational principle of Christian nationalism. The goal of this practice, within the framework of public health, is to transfer moral authority from the scientific community to autocratic leaders so they may legitimize and enact belief-based practices in alignment with Christian nationalist ideology. Bailey, 25, attends San Jose State University and is working toward a master’s degree in occupational therapy.



Bailey Diaz

Theocratic overreach

By Lewis Luis

LGBTQ+ people face substantial increases in discrimination because of rhetoric from both the Trump base and evangelical Christians. Trans people especially face increased scrutiny. In fact, Trump signed an executive order called “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government.” This order, signed on day one of Trump Version 2, attempts to end legal recognition of transgender and nonbinary persons in federal law. This would allow for legal discrimination of these persons in the workplace. Additionally, it would also include discrimination in federal health care, education and housing, which creates a dangerous position for trans people. The order has direct roots to Christian nationalism. The framing of the order is also isolationist as it claims to defend women from extremism of a gender ideology. This order creates a dangerous precedent — note the already increased rate of hate crimes — and it becomes clear that Christian nationalism, Trumpism and Project 2025 are all children in a trench coat guising themselves as independent movements. Lewis, 27, attends City College of New York while working toward a master’s in electrical engineering.



Lewis Luis

Conflict theory analysis

By Jeremiah J. Moore

Christian nationalism emerged as a key motivator behind anti-DEI activism. It conflates white racial identity with conservative Christian ideology, casting DEI as a secular threat to a fantasy of a Christian nation. From this perspective, policies aimed at equity are understood not as inclusive measures, but rather as assaults on a white Christian identity. Language around religion is used to argue that DEI discriminates against Christians, appealing to a false narrative of victimization and hiding an agenda of maintaining cultural hegemony. The history of Christianity’s abuse is a track record of legitimizing slavery, segregation, colonialism and the subjugation of women and LGBTQ folks. This is why today’s backlash against DEI brings that legacy back. The political deployment of religion as a means of social power and social control rather than informed living of moral codes is again at play. Rather than risk explicit racial supremacy in their political agenda, white nationalists and conservative leaders often wrap the ideals in rhetoric of “faith and freedom,” broadening the appeal of a white supremacist agenda by masking its exclusionary intentions under the guise of religious values. Jeremiah, 26, attends University of North Carolina at Pembroke and is working toward his master’s degree in social work.



Jeremiah Moore

Danger to LGBTQ+ youth

By Morgan Wegner

Encouraged by authorities such as President Trump, Christian nationalists are empowered to believe that they are true Americans where others are not. People who do not fit the white, cisgender, heteronormative box are vilified with fearmongering tactics that present them as a threat to the Christian American way of life. Christianity itself is not inherently anti-LGBTQ+. However, Christian beliefs tend to tie sexuality and gender expression with morality, perceiving the LGBTQ+ community as anti-Christian and immoral. On Jan. 29, Trump signed an executive order called “Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling” that threatens to cut off federal funding to schools that supported LGBTQ youth and/or implement lessons the order describes as “‘anti-American ideologies,’ including education that is ‘based on gender ideology and discriminatory equity ideology.’ Our children are dying at the hands of hatred and discrimination. This order is not only validating people who hate and discriminate, it also discourages allies from stepping in out of fear of collective punishment. Morgan, 26, attends Upper Iowa University and is working toward a master of science degree in clinical counseling.



Morgan Wegner

Percy Bysshe Shelley Student Activist Awards

Student stands up for policy, not coach’s prayers

Natalie Laymon earned FFRF’s Percy Bysshe Shelley Student Activist Award (established by FFRF Member Michael Meek) of \$1,000 for speaking out at a school board meeting over unconstitutional prayers by a coach at her high school.

By Natalie Laymon

Recently, my school was contacted by the Freedom From Religion Foundation addressing a complaint from a student who was uncomfortable about a coach leading prayer before a cross-country meet. The superintendent, new to the school district, provided some communication to the district with the reminder of an existing school policy that staff are not allowed to lead prayer. In addition, he added it as an agenda item to the already scheduled staff workday. He was not implementing a new rule, he was simply upholding what was already there.

I have lived in the same small town my whole life and am very aware of the strong faithful beliefs that many here have. It was no surprise that many did not receive the news very well. Within 24 hours of the communication, people already had T-shirts made and wore them to the football game with the school’s logo and text that read “Put me in coach, I’ll pray.” The excitement about the situation only continued to increase throughout the weekend as news spread, and talk continued both around town and online. A petition was even started that got over 1,000 signatures and raised more than \$1,000.



Natalie Laymon

My mom and I had talked about the topic many times and we were both aware that it would be addressed at an already scheduled school board meeting. Initially, I didn’t feel the need to attend, especially considering that it conflicted with drumline practice. However, during school, I found out that another student, the creator of the petition, was going to be speaking at the meeting that evening. Gathering support for her petition with QR codes all over school, I knew, “If she can speak, I can, too.”

After school, we quickly researched the rules regarding public speakers at the board meeting, and I was going to be

allotted three minutes. I quickly wrote my speech, edited it, went to drumline for a brief time and sent a few more video thoughts for my mom to add before she printed it out.

When I arrived at my old elementary school, knowing that I was going to speak out about something I believed in so deeply, but also knew that the majority of my town did not agree with, it was terrifying. As I walked in, I saw my mom and many of her friends who knew me well, and were all there to support me. While there were hundreds of people who commented online and around the community, there were only five us signed up to speak — myself and one other adult in support of the superintendent and policy, and another student, an alumnus and another adult who disagreed.

My speech focused on the existence of the policy, the reaction from it and what I believe we should do going forward. The policy didn’t say that kids couldn’t lead prayer, it only focused on paid staff, who are government employees and hold positions of authority affecting kids’ playing time. If kids feel passionately about this topic or anything else, I wanted to encourage them to focus on the opportunity it gave them to speak up about something they cared about, rather than just getting upset and complaining without taking action.

In our community, I have felt judged and treated poorly because my views are different than most who live here. In this case, the topic happened to be religion, but, oftentimes, it doesn’t matter

what the issue is — if you have a view that is different from the majority, people are mean. They say very negative things, treat people unfairly and act like it doesn’t exist. Here, you are expected to fit in or keep quiet. If you think differently, they think you’re wrong.

Opinions aren’t about right versus wrong, they should be thought out and discussed in a calm, mature, meaningful way. The school board meeting gave us an opportunity to do just that.

After my speech, I got a lot of compliments and felt like I had done what I needed to do. The news station that was present focused on me and the other student in its story later that night. If I had not chosen to speak up, the public reaction would have been skewed.

In the days that followed, the online commenters suggested that I had an underdeveloped teenage brain and lack of life experiences. There were a lot of online comments, but we tried not to read most of them. However, it was incredible to also get a lot of positive feedback at school, even from the superintendent, and online from people who I have not interacted with before who were encouraging and congratulated me on my courage.

Natalie is a junior at Lake Local High School in Uniontown, Ohio. “At school, I am involved in marching and debate, and am a member of our speech and band team and have been in many musical theater productions,” she writes. “Over the last two years, I have been fortunate enough to be in the Girl Scout Media Girl program, where we can be selected for radio, TV and news spots and available for public speaking events.”

Christianity in schools smudges state/church line

James Reed earned FFRF’s Percy Bysshe Shelley Student Activist Award of \$1,000 for writing this column, which first appeared in the Daily Orange (the Syracuse University student newspaper) on Oct. 7. Reprinted with permission.

By James Reed

Under President Trump’s administration, we’ve seen Christianity gradually infiltrate the country’s academic curricula in exceedingly blatant ways. Fifteen states have proposed legislation requiring schools to display the Ten Commandments, with Texas, Arkansas and Louisiana passing laws to require it.

These laws are just a way for Christian-based nationalism to get its foot in the door of public education; in Oklahoma, State Superintendent Ryan Walters mandated that each classroom “contain a copy of the bible” and every teacher “teach from it.”

Walters claims he wants to teach the bible’s “historical impact” and hopes for children to learn “the full and true context of our nation’s founding and of the principles that made and continue to make America great and exceptional.”

Although the claimed purpose is to strengthen “historical accuracy,” it’s apparent that the true intention of these mandates is to push the Christian version of history on impressionable kids and standardize religious values.

This agenda becomes even more frightening when looking at Walters’s proposed partnership with Turning Point USA, a far-right Christian nonprofit.

Following the assassination of far-right



James Reed

political activist Charlie Kirk, Walters announced a statewide partnership with Turning Point on social media.

This is becoming a concerningly common occurrence. The nonprofit claims it already has over “1,000 chapters in high schools across the country,” according to Education Week.

In the days following Kirk’s death, 54,000 institutions inquired about starting chapters of their own, indicative of a great threat to the separation of church and state. Allowing Turning Point — founded by a far-right political podcaster — to teach our children would effectively destroy any semblance of religious freedom we have left.

The Department of Education announced partnerships with many right-wing organizations, such as Prager U, Turning Point and Moms for Liberty, in hopes of “renewing patriotism, strengthening civic knowledge and advancing a shared understanding of America’s founding principles in schools across the nation.”

Our government sponsoring this pattern of religious indoctrination shows how far we’ve fallen under the Trump administration.

But, the United States government is no stranger when it comes to religious favoritism, with 77 percent of kids attending private schools with religious affiliation, according to Pew Research.

Trump’s “One Big Beautiful Bill” greatly expands the school voucher program, allowing parents who have not previously needed financial aid to siphon even more money from our public schools and put it toward their child’s religious education. It also makes households with 300 percent of their area’s median income or less eligible, according to NPR.

The program is commonly referred to as “welfare for the rich,” and the Joint Committee on Taxation predicts that Trump’s expansion of the program will divert \$26 billion worth of tax revenue to private institutions.

Permitting parents to tap into public funds for their child’s religious education decimates any illusion of the United States being a “secular state.”

Money that could’ve been used for special education or transportation services is instead sent to religious and private schools that don’t have to adhere to the same, if

any, regulations that public schools must.

This issue isn’t exclusive to K-12 education either — colleges have also been experiencing the same push for desecularization. Turning Point USA currently has more than 800 chapters established on college campuses across the country.

Higher education should be a place that fosters and encourages religious freedom with equal opportunity for all. Fortunately, many colleges have been left relatively untouched. Syracuse University’s Hendricks Chapel allows for students of many faiths to gather together and celebrate as a group.

We need these pillars of religious freedom if we want to adhere to our Constitution and our label as a “secular state.” Implementing harmful programs such as TPUSA or school vouchers will only lead us toward Christian nationalism.

We can’t turn a blind eye to the already omnipresent looming of one religion, with “In God We Trust” chiseled into every aspect of our nation, from currency to courthouses.

Being complacent in these policies and the interjection of Christianity in our classrooms will allow for the First Amendment to be effectively dismissed, leaving minorities in our country susceptible to religious violence and deepening America’s religious exclusion.

James Reed is a freshman at Syracuse studying political science. He writes: “I am very passionate about journalism and political advocacy. I am currently a columnist for The Daily Orange, writing opinion pieces on contemporary political issues. I hope to begin a career in political journalism after graduation, bringing attention to social injustices across the country.”

CHAPTER UPDATES

Dan Barker to visit Western chapters

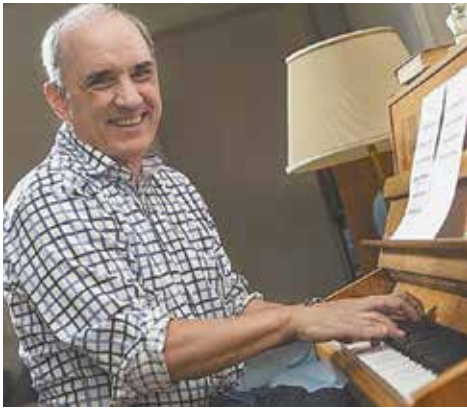
FFRF Co-President Dan Barker will head west in January for a multi-city series of public events across Northern California and Utah, with stops in San Francisco, Palo Alto, Sacramento and Salt Lake City. Audiences can look forward to an energizing mix of thoughtful commentary, literature discussions, live music and engaging freethought conversations. All events are open to the public. The events will be hosted by the San Francisco Bay, Greater Sacramento and Salt Lake Chapters of FFRF, with the Palo Alto event also being co-sponsored by the Atheist Community of San Jose and Humanist Community of Silicon Valley.

San Francisco

Saturday, Jan. 17, 2:30–4:30 p.m.
Dan Barker speaks about his book, “God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction”
San Francisco Public Library, Main Branch
Latino/Hispanic Community Room on the lower level
100 Larkin St, San Francisco
Hosted by the SF Bay Chapter of FFRF
Contact: info@sfbayffrf.org

Palo Alto

Sunday, Jan. 18, 2:30–4:30 p.m.
Music and conversation with Dan



Barker
Unitarian Universalist Church of Palo Alto
505 E Charleston Rd, Palo Alto
Hosted by the SF Bay Chapter of FFRF, Atheist Community of San Jose, and Humanist Community of Silicon Valley
Contact: info@sfbayffrf.org

Sacramento

Monday (MLK Jr. Day), Jan. 19, 1–3 p.m.
Dan Barker on the battle of church and state with a musical performance
Sacramento Reason Center
1300 Ethan Way #675, Sacramento
Hosted by the Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF
Contact: sac@ffrf.org

Salt Lake City (Sandy, Utah)

Saturday, Jan. 24, 2 p.m.
An Afternoon with Dan Barker
Sandy Library — Large Conference Room
10100 Petunia Way, Sandy, UT
Hosted by the Salt Lake Chapter of FFRF
Contact: ffrfslc@gmail.com

FFRF Kentucky

To set the stage for what happened in Oldham County here in Kentucky, it’s important to know that we are a solid red county where 70 percent of voters voted for our current president, and we had fairly solid intel that at least two of the school board members were strongly sympathetic toward LifeWise Academy trying to gain a foothold in our public schools. LifeWise Academy is an Ohio-based Christian educational program that provides off-site bible education for public school students during school hours under released time laws.

Between Aug. 6, when LifeWise was brought to FFRF Kentucky’s attention, and Aug. 25 for the first actual public airing of LifeWise, we partnered with Kentucky Citizens for Democracy, a local group of Oldham County activists, and Americans United Kentucky, to form a coalition of allies to inform and educate the community about the concerns, risks and dangers of LifeWise Academy.

In preparation for that school board meeting, we worked to ensure that at that meeting we had speakers in place who would address the LifeWise issues from all aspects, including classroom disruption, student disruption in school, peer pressure, as well as concerns and stories from parents and members of the clergy who were against LifeWise.

At that meeting, despite LifeWise having a significant number of people in the audience and a number of speakers, it was clear to most of us that our plan of speaking first and strategically covering all aspects of LifeWise was more effective.

After that meeting, we felt that the school board had enough information that it was likely to vote at its next regularly scheduled meeting on Sept. 22. We set up a meeting with a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigative reporter from the Courier-Journal, the largest newspaper in the state, hoping he would take interest in writing an exposé on LifeWise Academy — and he did!

In addition to that, we ran a full-page ad



FFRF Kentucky chapter educated its community about the dangers of LifeWise Academy.

in the local county paper with a public call-to-action that included statements from well-known and respected school administrators, as well as QR codes that linked to school board members’ email addresses and to a 3-minute chalkboard video created locally, which does a good job of explaining what LifeWise Academy is.

Because of the combined social media, newspaper coverage and phone calls to local news media, we had a significant presence and coverage from local news and TV outlets.

Despite our belief that the school board would vote on Sept. 22, it decided to wait until it had direction from the attorney general’s office. The board scheduled a special meeting for Oct. 8 solely to address LifeWise. At that meeting, there were no public comments allowed and it was made clear by each of the board members that, as a result of our efforts, they had received hundreds of emails and voicemails expressing concern about LifeWise from the community. Ultimately, all of the board members, including the two who were sympathetic to LifeWise, voted against allowing LifeWise into the schools.

For more information on the FFRF Kentucky Chapter, contact ffrfky@gmail.com.

Upstate NY Freethinkers

The Upstate New York Freethinkers chapter reports explosive growth, reaching more than 300 members! Our presence is deepening in all seven regions — from Western New York to the Capital District, North Country, Southern Tier and beyond — with new members joining from downstate, neighboring states and Canada. This proves people will travel for freethought!

Chapter momentum allows us to organize regional events, including an “American Freethought” discussion with author David Hoffman and panelist : FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor, and host Annual Chapter Gatherings, this year featuring a lineup of three keynotes: Gaylor and

Dan Barker, and author and columnist Kate Cohen.

We organize local meetups to empower participants in legislative advocacy, supporting crucial bills like New York’s Equal Rights Amendment and the NYS Medical Aid in Dying Act, and join national efforts to ensure public grounds host the Bill of Rights scene rather than religious nativity displays.

Invest in the future of New York freethought by visiting unyft.org/Donate. For confidential inquiries about legacy or major gifts, please email us at info@unyft.org or call 585-454-9921. Our address to mail checks is 620 Park Ave # 209, Rochester, NY 14607.

FFRF-East Tennessee

FFRF-East Tennessee co-hosted Katharine Stewart after her appearance at the Scopes Trial event in Chattanooga in July. The event was shared by the Rationalists of East Tennessee, Americans United of Tennessee and the Atheist Society of Knoxville.

In September, FFRF-East Tennessee and the Rationalists of East Tennessee shared a booth at Blount Pride. It was a rainy day, but the turnout was still impressive. Volunteers at the event discovered that the canopy was no longer waterproof, so it was necessary to get creative with the display of materials. A new canopy has been procured and will certainly be helpful for future occasions.

Contact: info@ffrfetc.org.



Terri Lenoci and Carl Ledendecker (with Max the dog) of the FFRF-East Tennessee chapter worked the booth at Blount Pride in September.

THEY SAID WHAT?

Arbeit Macht Frei.

A float entered by the St. Joseph Catholic School in Hanover, Pa., which resembled the Auschwitz Concentration Camp gate, included the words “Arbeit Macht Frei.” The German phrase — translating to “Work Makes You Free” — was prominently displayed at World War II-era concentration camps across Europe, including the front gate at Auschwitz, where more than 1 million people were executed. The U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum notes the phrase was used to mock the largely Jewish populations the Nazis sentenced to back-breaking forced labor. The Roman Catholic Diocese of Harrisburg formally apologized for the offensive float’s appearance during the Halloween parade.

New York Post, 11-3-25

The truth is, the Marxists, the radicals and the Islamists the Democratic Party promoted this weekend. They cannot handle the truth. And the truth is that there is a king, and that king is Jesus. And the president has been willing to say it. His administration has been willing to say it.

U.S. Rep. Chip Roy of Texas, bemoaning the No Kings rallies around the country on Oct. 18 protesting the Trump presidency. Roy was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Oct. 31.

The New Republic, 10-20-25

God is an anti-vaxxer, and he needs you to speak up.

Del Bigtree, a former top Robert F. Kennedy Jr. political adviser and head of the anti-vaccine group Informed Consent Action Network, at the Children’s Health Defense annual convention in Austin, Texas.

Washington Post, 11-10-25

We Americans are the sons and daughters of the Christian pilgrims that poured out from Europe’s shores to baptize a new world in their ancient faith.

Rep. Eric Schmidt, R-Mo., in a speech to the National Conservatism Conference.



Photo: Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0

Del Bigtree

LETTERBOX

The human spirit is our ‘personal soul work’

Are you disappointed by the church but still wonder about a higher power? I think the human spirit is as high as it gets. It has brought us from campfires to modernity, from fear and ignorance to understanding the world we live in. It flows out of every action we take and joins the web of life in which we live. If the action is done with love and kindness, it builds civilization. If done with greed or anger, it will divide and people will suffer. This is our spiritual legacy, and it lives and evolves here on Earth forever. I call it our “personal soul work,” which may be as small as a passing smile or as large as leading a nation, but it will continue through time, even after we are long gone. We are surrounded by the soul work of the billions that came before us and that is the highest power on Earth.

Colorado

Rational response greeted with vitriol

While visiting New Jersey recently, I read in the local paper where a clergyman had diplomatically scolded a writer who had raised some questions about the validity of the Holy Trinity. After reading the clerics comments, I wrote a response to the paper and diplomatically scolded him for his narrow-mindedness and provincialism.

Well, the No. 2 really hit the air circulator! A few days later, letters to the editor were flying out of mailboxes like pedophiles out of a rectory, condemning my impertinence and lack of faith.

Just before leaving for home, I received a phone call from a woman about my letter. Without hesitation, she bombarded me with a cornucopia of expletives that would have made a tomcat blush for criticizing the Father, and for not accepting the “obvious truth” of the Holy Trinity.

When I pointed out that the Trinity was not in the bible, she shot back, “That’s not true! You must be reading a Protestant bible.” When I reminded her of what Bertrand Russell once said about the Trinity: “If we were born in India, we would be worshipping a god with three heads instead of three gods with one head.” She responded: “What’s that thin-lipped heathen windbag know? He’s just another ascot-wearing, hedonistic, insufferable ingrate birdbrain from across the pond.”

Finally, I told her that I think there is no danger in people expressing their honest thoughts and opinions in a civil manner, and that I find people who think are at least as good as those who do not.

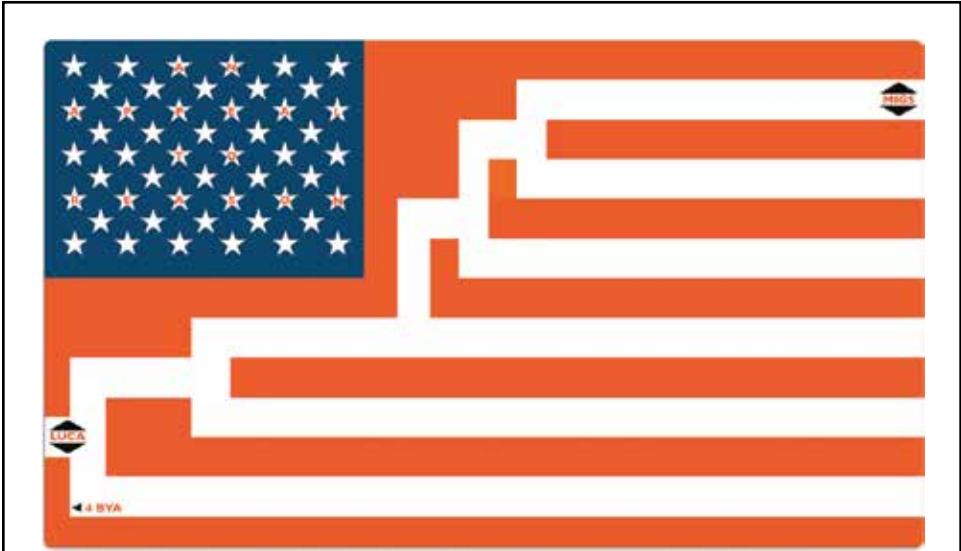
With that, I heard a click on the other end of the phone. Then, blissful silence!

Florida

What’s the historical basis for Christianity?

As a growing segment of the U.S. population endorses a religious faith best characterized as Christian nationalism, and as the Trump administration moves to blur the separation of church and state, it might be well to ask how accurate our understanding of historical underpinnings of the Christian faith are.

The authors of the Christian gospels wrote about 50 to 100 years after



Patriotic flag shows evolution of Earth life

I decided to create a patriotic flag not unlike so many of the other flags favored by the anarchist or the authoritarian or the Christian nationalist right.

The stars in the canton of this flag have embedded text stating “An Appeal to Reason” (not heaven), whereas a generic evolutionary “Tree of Life” stands in place of the six white stripes of the field. The root of the tree at the lower hoist end has a place marking for the “Last Universal Common Ancestor” (LUCA) of all cellular life, which existed roughly 4 billion years ago (4 BYA), while the upper fly end has a place marking the time when “Mankind Invents the God Story” (MIGS) near the tip of the upper branch, on the opposite end of the tree, much closer to current time.

This flag highlights the well-supported idea that life was evolving on this planet billions of years before humans could even think about the possibility of God, and that this runs counter to the magical thinking of evangelicals (and many other Christians) that all things were created by a god just a few thousand years ago. Thus, reason should be used to govern our nation, not faith that God makes all things, even irrational things, possible.

Gary Stuart
Indiana

the reported public life and death of Jesus. The gospel stories were not written by eyewitnesses, but by unknown elite authors probably living far from where the events reportedly occurred. They wrote in Greek, not Aramaic, the language likely used by the early followers in the Jesus movement. The Apostle Paul admitted he never met the historical Jesus, but he knew the Christ of faith in his thoughts.

It is important to consider much of Christian faith is based on reports of “miracles and wonders,” which was not unusual for the period of history. That kind of descriptive language was used in ancient Greek and Roman times to emphasize the political or religious significance of a special public figure, and Jesus was not unique in having his history so recorded.

Virgin births and God-men saviors were common religious descriptors. We know through science and the philosopher David Hume that a miracle is the least likely explanation of an event claimed as supernatural by a faith community.

Wisconsin

Alito’s comments were ignorant or intentional

In Annie Laurie Gaylor’s article (September issue) about a new Hillsboro, she mentions a quote from Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito: “A government burdens the religious exercise of parents when it requires them to submit their children to instruction that poses ‘a very real threat of undermining’ the religious beliefs and practices that the parents wish to instill.”

It seems that Alito is either ignorantly or intentionally saying that only the rights of Christian parents matter! What happens to the rights of parents who don’t believe in religion

or believe in another religion besides Christianity?

Whether Alito is indeed being ignorant or intentional, it is tragic to think a Supreme Court justice would be either.

Minnesota

There’s a lot of godly nonsense in the U.S.

Through the ages, humankind has invented something like an estimated 12,000-18,000 gods, including a couple from my own Nordic country: Thor and Odin, plus Freia for equal sexual fairness.

So, why has the God-fearing crowd left all the previous ones, focusing all their superstition on the last god? Have they realized that all the previous ones were made up, but still believe the last one is the real thing? It is so childish to believe that there is a god way up there, one who sees and knows everything, keeping track of everyone and all that is going on, with the ability to interfere and change anything and everything.

There’s no question America is a God-infested country, with “In God We Trust,” “God with Us,” “So help me God” all around us. As a child growing up in a Nazi-occupied country, I remember what was at my eye level: The German soldiers’ belt buckle, with “Got Mit Uns” (“God with Us”). Yeah, I’m sure he was!

Close to my hometown in Norway, there is a railway station with the sign: “Hell Gods Expedition,” where the word “Hell” is just the name of the place, which simply means a downward slide in the terrain, while “Gods” simply means “stuff to be sent.” Indeed, languages can be funny at times, even exposing silliness.

California

New York City schools mix religion, government

The New York City public schools were closed on Monday, Oct. 20, for the Hindu religious holiday of Diwali, which is also celebrated by Jains, Sikhs and certain Buddhist sects. The schools were previously closed for the Jewish holidays of Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah. In the spring, the schools will be closed for the two “Eid” Muslim holidays.

So much for the separation of state and church in New York City! When I attended the NYC public school system back in the 1950s and 1960s, the public schools were only closed for one religious holiday, Christmas, a national holiday that always occurred during the winter break. How times have changed.

New York

‘Under God’ in pledge undermines ‘indivisible’

Earlier this year, I attended a public meeting of our local county commission. Like many public meetings, it opened with the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Pledge of Allegiance, which in its original form was nationalistic but not religious, has become fraught with religious influence.

In 1954, under the anti-communist panic of the Cold War, Congress added the words “under God” to the pledge. This is where it went off the rails.

The basic problem, once a deity is inserted, is that the notion of the nation being indivisible is destroyed. By adding “God” to the pledge, they were dividing the nation into as many factions as there are gods — or no god at all.

I love the country where I was born, where I was raised and where I live, but not to the exclusion of all other countries, whose citizens and inhabitants have every right to love their countries just as much as I love mine. I am not comfortable reciting a pledge that, when read or taken literally, only serves to divide my country.

As an American, who believes in the core values expressed in the Pledge of Allegiance, I simply omit the words “under God” when reciting the pledge.

Religion, in any form, has no place in the public arena.

Michigan



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IN MEMORIAM

Sandra Burlingame was editor, jazz aficionado

Sandra Gast Burlingame died April 12 in Portland, Ore. She was born Feb. 25, 1937, and she and her sister Teddy were raised and mothered by their beloved nanny Margaret Renken. Sandy graduated from the University of Oklahoma, where she was a member of Mortar Board, Kappa Kappa Gamma, and represented the school as Miss O.U. in 1957. She received her master's degree in English literature from the University of Rhode Island in 1961.

In Bartlesville, Okla., she worked with a group to establish the Washington County SPCA and opened the Talisman Art Gallery with Jody Kirberger. In 1969, she moved to New York City, later settling on Glen Wild Lake in Bloomingdale, N.J., where she joined the Lake's governing board and constructed crossword puzzles, one of which was published in the New York Times Sunday Magazine.



Sandy as Miss O.U. in 1957



Sandy Burlingame

In 1982, she moved to the Pacific Northwest, first living on Orcas Island, Wash., before settling in Seattle in 1985. A lifelong interest in jazz led her to join the newly formed board of the nonprofit organization Earshot, where she edited the newsletter. She also published and edited 5/4 Magazine, contributed interviews to Paul de Barros' book, "Jackson Street After Hours," and edited books by singer Jay Clayton and pianist Randy Halberstadt. She worked for and traveled with jazz singer Ernestine Anderson. She discovered a passion for quilting and spent the next 25 years making quilts for family, friends and nonprofit organizations.

She moved to Portland, Ore., in 1997, where she served as editor of the website Jazz Standards until retiring.

Sandra left a bequest to FFRF, and her son Jason Burlingame writes: "My mother was inspired by your work during her lifetime and wore her FFRF pins on all of her hats and often gave them as gifts. She greatly enjoyed telling people about FFRF. I am sending this gift with immense gratitude for your work."

Bill van Druten founded FFRF chapter

Psychiatrist Dr. Bill van Druten, who founded the Lake Superior Freethinkers, died Sept. 30.

He attended Abraham Lincoln High School in San Francisco and then went to Stanford University. He worked as a psychiatrist for USAF and Duluth Clinic (now Essentia). Van Druten was a psychiatrist at the Duluth Clinic when it merged with the Catholic-based St. Mary's Medical Center. He retired rather than abide by the organization's Catholic-based principles.

The Lake Superior Freethinkers (LSF), one of FFRF's chapters and based in Duluth, Minn., was formed in 1997 by Bill, initially as a friendship group in support of morality without superstition, freedom from religion, state/church separation and rational thought.



Bill van Druten

On Dec. 27, 2000, van Druten and others from the Minnesota Secular Council met with Gov. Jesse Ventura. They presented the governor with a Political Courage award from Atheist Alliance International and a First Amendment Freedom Fighter award from their own secular council.

In 2001, van Druten went to the administrator of St. Luke's Hospital to explain what a merger with Catholic Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother would mean. Both major Duluth hospitals (the other being St. Mary's) for the city would then be under Vatican restrictions. Van Druten knew this affiliation would lead to imposition of the "Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care," which place restrictions on the lawful rights of patients in matters concerning sterilization, fertilization, contraception, emergency contraception for victims of rape, pregnancy termination and end-of-life decisions.

This led van Druten to form a coalition with the Women's Health Center. With the important presentation to the Gynecology

Department by LSF Member Dr. Robert Goldish, the hospital board reversed the decision and the merger was blocked.

On June 25, 2002, van Druten wrote to the Duluth News Tribune pointing out that the Boy Scouts of America's national resolution of Feb. 6 made clear that "duty to God . . . is an obligation" and praised "faith-based values." But a growing number of Americans resented having their sons excluded from the ranks of the Boy Scouts because they are nonbelievers. In August that year, former Eagle Scouts, including van Druten, returned their medals and badges to the Boy Scouts, marked as Badges of Shame.

In a 2002 interview with Minnesota Public Radio, he said, "Most people in this area, as I think all over America, are surprised a little to find that people would openly say that they don't believe in the God stories and all of the mythology. I point out to people that you don't get your morality from Sunday school. You get it from the rough and tumble in the neighborhood, your family experiences, and just the experience of rubbing up against other people."

Paul Heffron co-founded HumanistsMN

Longtime FFRF Member Paul Allen Heffron, co-founder of HumanistsMN, died Sept. 27 at the age of 88 in Shoreview, Minn.

He was born March 3, 1937, in Yankton, S.D., and attended St. Paul Central High School there. He was a former camp counselor at Camp St. Croix, a 1959 graduate of Yankton College and graduate of Andover Newton Theological Seminary in 1963.

He worked as an assistant minister at United Church of Christ in Greenfield Mass., from 1963-64 and minister in Wauseon, Ohio, from 1965-67.

Paul was also a professional musician and lifetime member of the Twin Cities Musician Union. He was involved in the founding of the HumanistsMN, which began Dec. 27, 2000.



Paul Heffron

FFRF 'crosses' paths with church group



FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor spoke in October to The Crossing, a dinner-and-speaker program for university students at the United Methodist Church in Madison, Wis., that's put on by that church and several others, including a United Church of Christ congregation. Annie Laurie, who spoke about FFRF's work, reports a very friendly audience. Pictured, from left, are Rev. Ben Weger, United Methodist Church, Stoughton; Rev. Michael Birch, executive director The Crossing; Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president; Carolyn Betz, University of Wisconsin emeritus and The Crossing board director, and Richard Betz.

Cryptogram answer

I feel that we should stop wasting our time trying to please the supernatural and concentrate on improving the welfare of human beings.

— Ruth Hurmence Green

Crossword answers

BAKU	OPT	UMA
EVER	ANEW	SPRAG
NINA	SAKI	AUDIO
EVOLUTION	GLUM	
INURE	POL	
TOMCAT	BASMATI	
IPA	GERBIL	AGES
LATHI	ION	ANIMA
TREE	OSAGES	SPA
STYPTIC	ACETIC	
BEL	SITIN	
TRUE	STREISAND	
CAIRN	HOAR	ICAO
BRANS	ARTY	GAIT
SNL	DYE	NILE

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Is God just Santa Claus for adults?

By PJ Slinger

I know this isn't a unique thought by any means, but it was an original thought by me when I was much younger: God is just Santa Claus for adults.

It's a pretty simple comparison, which is undoubtedly why it occurred to me when I was a middle-schooler (after I knew of the Santa scam but before I was convinced of the God scam).

- Both entities are considered wise old men with big white beards.
- Both allegedly treat those who are good better than those who are bad.
- Both are, for all intents and purposes, invisible.
- Both accept (but don't always act on) human requests for things.
- Both do things that can be considered magic or supernatural.
- Both live "up there." God lives up in the sky, and Santa lives at the North Pole, which, to small children, is essentially the same thing. It's "up there."

Even the lyrics of "Santa Claus is Comin' to Town" portend an omniscient being. (If you didn't know that song was about Santa, who would come to mind?)

"He sees you when you're sleeping.
He knows when you're awake.
He knows if you've been bad or good
So be good for goodness' sake!"

When I was a small child, my great-grandmother visited us for Christmas, but because we didn't have a spare room for visitors, she had to sleep on the couch in the living room, right where Santa would be coming down the chimney. I was excited that someone would be in the vicinity when the jolly old elf would make his appearance. (My parents had previously rejected all efforts by me to sleep in the living room on Christmas Eve.) I told my great-grandmother to wake up my siblings and me when he showed up. Of course, the next morning, with new gifts scattered about the living room, I asked why she didn't wake us. She had the



PJ Slinger



simple answer that she was sleeping and Santa must have been super quiet. It was hard to believe that a big man like Santa could climb down our chimney and unload all those toys undetected, but, since the evidence of presents was undeniable, I reluctantly believed her. I was mostly disappointed that I didn't get to witness Santa in person.

A few years later, when I figured out that Santa wasn't real, it took only seconds to realize that the Easter Bunny and Tooth Fairy were also made up by the Parent/Capitalist Complex. But, I didn't take my thoughts any further at that point.

Yes, learning the truth about Santa took a portion of my youthful innocence that I could never get back. But, I do remember being empowered by that information more than disappointed. It all made sense at that point. Of course, it was the parents. How could I have thought otherwise?

And, I guess I felt the same way when I realized God was another fiction perpetrated by parents and Big Church. It all made sense at that point. How could I have thought otherwise?

Perhaps the main reason I didn't equate God with Santa is because of the multitude of churches — the actual physical buildings seemingly everywhere. Why would people go to such great lengths to build these huge cathedrals for a known lie? Perhaps a bit of edifice complex?

Now, young children can be excused for not understanding the physical limitations of Santa's annual journey. (How can one person visit the home of every child in the world in one night?) But, one of Santa's qualities is that he has magical powers (including being able to make reindeer fly). So, zipping around the world in one night is not impossible, it's magic!

How is that any different than with God and his "magical" properties? He's allegedly omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. (That's a lot of omnis!) Many adults are seemingly fine with this description of their invisible white-haired man from the sky as an all-powerful, all-knowing, ubiquitous being.

Since I was curious, I turned to the trusty internet to see how many others have equated God to Santa. Turns out, it's quite a lot! However, almost all of them, perhaps 95 percent of the sites I saw on the topic, were from Christian-based writers or sites.

The interesting thing was reading how they had their own reasons for why Santa and God should or shouldn't be compared.

One writer, Timothy Fox, claims that because children see that presents have been delivered (as promised!), and that they just didn't show up out of thin air, someone must have put them there. He then claimed that believing in God is no different because right there in front of us is the proof — the creation of the uni-

verse. Someone had to put it there, right?!

"What are the consequences if Santa doesn't exist?" Fox writes on *CrossExamined.org* (a Christian Apologetics site). "Then kids must get their Christmas presents another way, because we know from experience that presents exist (unless you were on the naughty list, I guess). But if there's no God? Then the universe came into existence uncaused from nothing for no reason. Life came from nonlife and consciousness from nonconsciousness. There are no objective morals and values. Exactly the same? No. Not a chance."

Wow. Sounds like Fox is mad that people would even consider comparing Santa to God. The problem is, while Fox admits that Santa is not real (because it's the parents, duh!), that he jumps to the conclusion that because there are no "parents" who are secretly pulling the strings of God, that God therefore must be real. Hence, there can be no other reason for the creation of the universe. End of story.

And, then there's Neal Plantinga, a senior research fellow at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship, who wrote the column, "Is belief in God similar to belief in Santa?" for *The Banner*, which is published by the Christian Reformed Church in North America.

"Periodically, unbelievers will claim that belief in God is like belief in Santa Claus," Plantinga writes. "Both figures are taught to children. Neither can be seen or heard. Both have helpers. Both have songs sung about them. Both have many names in many cultures. But the similarities are superficial and vastly outweighed by the differences. Mainly, of course, Santa Claus in his current incarnation is only a mythical figure (though based on the real, historical person of St. Nicholas), while *God is an actual being*." [emphasis mine]

Again, wow. So, what Plantinga is saying is that he, like Fox, believes that God is an actual being, not at all unlike children believing that Santa is an actual being. The only difference is that Plantinga appears to still be in his childhood stage of belief, apparently not yet armed with enough facts to make an informed decision.

Just like children believing in Santa, many adults believe in God until it is proved otherwise. So, yes, the hypothesis that God is just Santa for adults is true.

PJ Slinger is editor of Freethought Today.

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