

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



Don't talk about
menstruation
— period

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Unshackling
ourselves from
holy handcuffs

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Join us for
Scopes Trial
Centennial event

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Vol. 42 No. 1

Published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

January-February 2025

FFRF sues over unconstitutional exemption

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and three Madison residents filed a lawsuit in mid-January against an unconstitutional law exempting rental properties owned by two religious entities in their hometown.

The action challenges an exemption that was created and then amended to benefit specific church-owned rental properties in the city of Madison, Wis., to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. This forces all other Madison property owners to pay more in property taxes. The Pres House and Lumen House Apartments, both catering to student renters and owned by two of the defendants, are explicitly relieved of paying their share of taxes. No other properties in Wisconsin can ever qualify under the special exemption.

The exemption is unlawful under the Wisconsin Constitution on several counts, the plaintiffs contend. The exemption harms property tax-paying plaintiffs Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, FFRF co-presidents, and David Peterson, by



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor (and a third city resident, not pictured) are suing over a law that allows the church-owned Pres House and Lumen House Apartments in Madison, Wis., to be exempt from taxes.

forcing them and all other city of Madison property taxpayers, to pay higher property taxes to make up for the unlawful omission

of these properties from the tax rolls. Further, the exemption harms plaintiff FFRF, since it favors rental properties owned by

two religious nonprofit organizations to the exclusion of all other nonprofits that may desire to run student apartments in the future. The plaintiffs seek a declaratory judgment that the exemption violates the Wisconsin Constitution.

The problem started in 2009 when the Wisconsin Legislature enacted this property tax exemption to benefit the Pres House Apartments, owned by the Presbyterian Student Center Foundation. Then-state Rep. Spencer Black explained that he introduced the measure because he believed the Pres House Apartments should be property tax exempt. In 2011, then-state Sen. Alberta Darling, co-chair of the Joint Finance Committee, referred to the exemption as “an aberration and earmark.” The Joint Finance Committee voted to repeal the exemption, but then-Gov. Scott Walker vetoed the repeal.

The Legislature approved an amendment in 2013 to benefit the Lumen House Apartments, owned by a Catholic congregation within the Diocese of Madison. The

See *Pres House* on page 24



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Okla. state Rep. Mickey Dollens

Okla. state Rep. Dollens joins FFRF

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is delighted to announce that Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens will join the organization as FFRF's first regional governmental affairs manager, enhancing FFRF efforts to uphold the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and counter Christian nationalism.

“The Freedom From Religion Foundation is at the forefront of defending the constitutional principle of separation between state and religion,” says Dollens. “During my time in the Oklahoma Legislature, I witnessed how this line can be weaponized, harming public policy and

See *Dollens* on page 4

FFRF legal team builds upon successes

By Patrick Elliott

The last year involved many changes for the legal department at the Freedom From Religion Foundation. In April, FFRF's longtime legal director, Rebecca Markert, accepted a position with Americans United for Separation of Church and State. I was promoted to legal director after more than 14 years on the legal team. Over the years, I have met many FFRF members by responding to their emails, phone calls or at FFRF conventions. For those who I haven't met, I am pleased to share with you a summary of FFRF's work over the past year.

I want to start out with an anecdote from my own life to help explain what we do on the legal team. As I was driving my 4-year-old son last year, we passed an old and ornate church. While I grew up going to Catholic Mass every Sunday, he has never been to church and was interested in the building. As we both were looking at the church he exclaimed, “Dad, look at that castle!” I can use that as a reference point when he gets older and asks what I do for a living. “Keeping castles and the government separate,” is one way to respond.

Later in the year, as he was a much wis-

er 5-year-old, I thought it would be interesting to see if he had an idea of what I do for work. I asked him, “What does dad do for work?” He had a sense of what it means to be a lawyer at FFRF, although he was a bit optimistic. His response was, “You go to the judge and get people in trouble.” I wish it was so simple.

While we don't always “get people in trouble,” FFRF has been able to adroitly navigate changes in both the judiciary and in the law. While our goals remain the same, our efforts and our strategies have had to evolve in response to a new paradigm. Christian nationalists have increased their efforts to abuse govern-

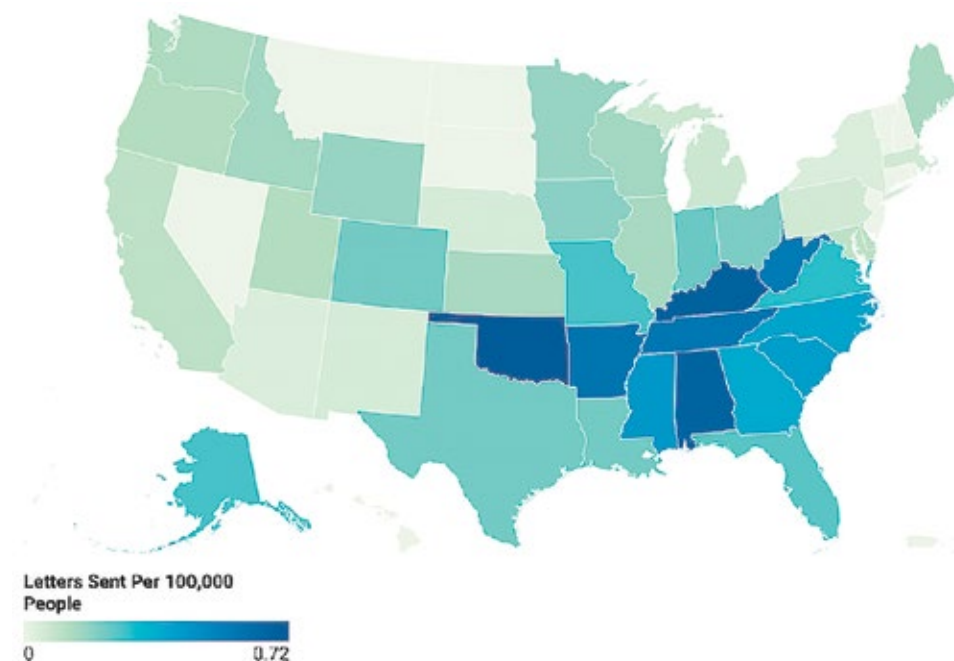
mental authority to adopt and promote religion, especially in public schools. We have responded with new coalition lawsuits, continued legal advocacy and renewed efforts to educate the public and governmental actors.

Here is an overview of our legal work in 2024:

Staff changes

Our work is naturally “team work” and we have an experienced team. Liz Cavell was promoted to deputy legal director after 12 years of working at FFRF. Sam Grover was promoted to senior litigation

See *Successes* on page 16



THEY SAID WHAT?

We are Christians who are nationalists. We are people who believe that we have a Christian nation. I mean, Christian nationalism would probably be the most accurate aspect of what I believe.

Project 2025 architect Russ Vought, who has been named to run the White House Office of Management and Budget, in a February 2024 interview with Charlie Kirk.

Talking Points Memo, 11-28-24

Everything that has happened in my life has led me to where I am right now — the deaths, the tragedies, the addiction, the recovery, finding a deep belief in God.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr., in a presidential campaign video. Kennedy, an anti-vaxxer, is now nominated by Trump to lead Health and Human Services.

New York Times, 12-1-24

Our American crusade is not about literal swords, and our fight is not with guns. Yet.

Pete Hegseth, the embattled nominee for secretary of defense, in a book he wrote in 2020, “American Crusade.”

New York Times, 12-5-24

Without any apology, I believe those who bless Israel will be blessed, those who curse Israel will be cursed. I want to be on the blessing side.

Mike Huckabee, who has been

named ambassador to Israel by Trump, being interviewed by podcaster and activist Charlie Kirk.

Washington Post, 12-2-24

I want to encourage you tonight to allow God to bring you cover, allow God to do what only God can do for the human heart. God has more resources than you. He has a million ways he could have stopped yesterday. A million. He has every resource at his command and he allowed it to happen.

Tom Flaherty, pastor of City Church, hosting a vigil for Abundant Life Christian Church in Madison, Wis., after a school shooting there left three dead, including the 15-year-old shooter, and six wounded. He went on to counsel listeners not to “blame themselves,” yet failed to address why a deity that had a “million ways” to stop the shooting did nothing.

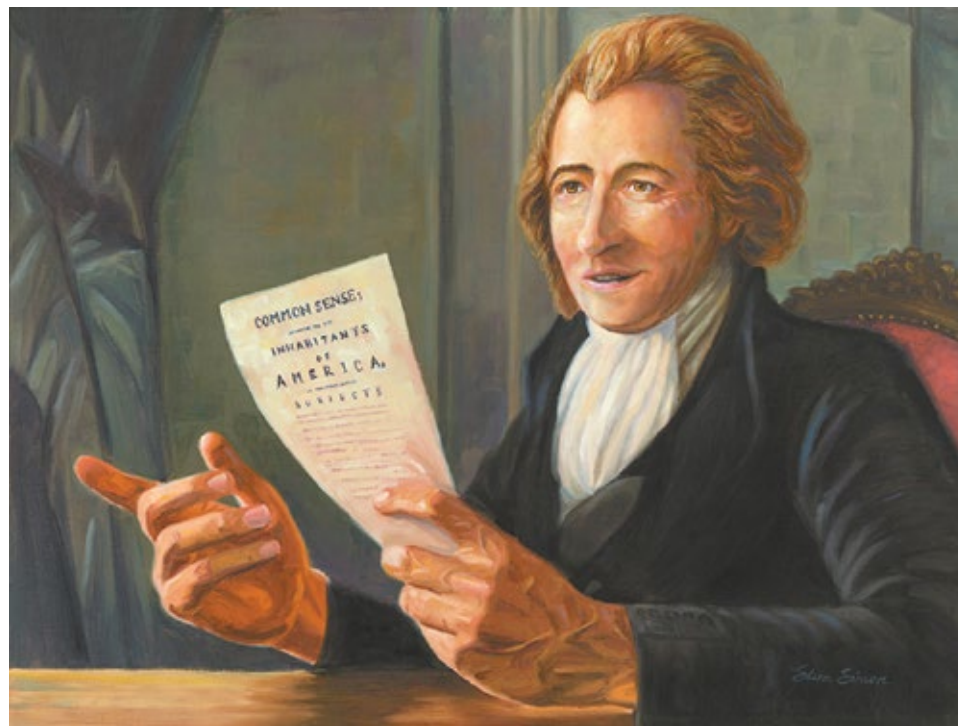
Wisconsin State Journal, 12-18-24

Why not do that to the atheists? Why not do that to someone who is trying to publicly tarnish the name of Christ?

Christian nationalist advocate Stephen Wolfe, who was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Dec. 6, 2024, arguing that Christians should use their “social power” to force atheists out of their jobs and sully their reputations, paralleling how society treats racists.

FFRF Action Fund, 12-6-24

Join FFRF, others for online Thomas Paine celebration



Please join FFRF and several other sponsors for a Zoom webinar celebration of the birth of Thomas Paine on Wednesday, Jan. 29, at 7 p.m. EST.

The Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA), Freedom From Religion Foundation, Center for Inquiry/Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science (CFI/RDFR&S), Black Nonbelievers (BN), American Humanist Association (AHA), the Freethought Society (FS), and the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) are sponsoring the webinar.

Thomas Paine’s birth was officially recorded in Thetford, Norfolk, England, as Jan. 29, 1737. While the Gregorian calendar we use today changes his birthdate to Feb. 9, 1737, we are “historical documentation purists.”

Rep. Jamie Raskin plans to be the welcome speaker if his hectic Washington, D.C., schedule allows. Margaret Downey, president of TPMA, will also welcome everyone to the event and introduce the special guest speaker, artist Steve Simon. Simon will talk about Paine’s life and accomplishments, while the artwork he created and dedicated to honor the underappreciated and oft-forgotten Founder is

on display. The Simon portrait is actually the logo for this event.

Following the Simon presentation, a video about the Thomas Paine Hotel located in Paine’s birthplace (Thetford, England) will be shown. The director and owner of the hotel, Gez Chetal, will usher us through the hotel’s Paine-themed displays and educational exhibits.

After the two presentations, audience members will be able to ask questions of the artist and Paine experts Gary Berton (president of the Thomas Paine National Historical Association) and Frances Chiu (professor, TPMA board member, and author of “The Routledge Guidebook on Paine’s Rights of Man”). SCA’s communications manager Nnenna Onwukwe will host the Q&A portion of the event.

Representatives of the co-sponsoring organizations will deliver closing messages. They are Robyn Blumner (CFI/RDFR&S), Annie Laurie Gaylor (FFRF), Fish Stark (AHA), Steven Emmert (SCA), Mandisa Thomas (BN) and Downey (FS).

Pre-registration for this Zoom event is required. Below is the registration link: ffrf.us/paine.

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.”



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FFRF FREETHOUGHT TODAY

Published by Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.

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‘Our Future, Our Fight’



On Oct. 23, 2024, FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line went to the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse to host a table at an event titled, “Our Future, Our Fight: Understanding Project 2025.” Chris distributed information regarding FFRF’s “Vote like your rights depend on it” campaign and provided students with information about how Project 2025 would impact the separation between state and church. Other groups tabling at the event included Human Rights Campaign, Climate Alliance for the Common Good and the Sierra Club.

Cambridge Union debate

Are feminism and religion incompatible?

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor was invited to take part in a Cambridge Union debate on Nov. 14 with the topic: “This House believes feminism and religion are incompatible.”

The Cambridge Union, a student club, is the oldest debating club in the United Kingdom. Students choose the topic and the three or four individuals to represent each side. Joining Annie Laurie to argue “yes” were Maryam Namazie, an Iranian-born activist based out of London who is founder of the Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain; Phyllis Zagano, senior research associate-in-residence and adjunct professor of religion at Hofstra University; and student debater Pollyanna Greene Wright, a third-generation atheist.

Arguing “no”: Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the first Black female Anglican bishop who formerly served as chaplain to the House of Commons and is best known for being chosen to lead a prayer at Megan and Harry’s royal wedding; Rabbi Charley Baginsky, chief executive officer of Liberal Judaism; Peter Hitchens, conservative brother of Christopher Hitchens; and Lindsay Hansen Park, a self-described “independent Mormon” who is critical of the Mormon Church.

The “yes” side won by a resounding 235-165, with 88 abstaining, Annie Laurie is pleased to report.

“We actually won regardless of the votes because, with the exception of Peter Hitchens, every debater — including on the other side — made at least some remarks condemning patriarchal religion,” says Annie Laurie. “That’s progress!”

Here are Annie Laurie’s remarks at the debate:

•••

Can you hear me? If so, I’m violating Paul’s clear directives against women speaking in public. More about that in a moment.

Feminism means advocating for the economic, political and social equality of the sexes. By definition, feminism is inherently incompatible with patriarchal religions, whose doctrines, actions and history are predicated on the inequality of the sexes.

I prefer to frame the question not as “feminism is incompatible with religion” but as “RELIGION is incompatible with feminism.” When I first read the bible as a young woman, I was shocked at its ugly misogyny and violence. Man is in God’s image; Eve, in the favored version of creation, a mere afterthought fashioned from man’s spare rib. How absurd, when it is women who birth men.

By chapter three of Genesis, woman has been cursed for seeking knowledge and has lost her identity: “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

One bible verse alone, Exodus 3:16, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live,” resulted in tens of thousands, if not millions, of women for over six centuries being hunted down, tortured and executed for an imaginary crime. Why would anyone belong



FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor gives her remarks during the Cambridge Union debate on Nov. 14, 2024.

to an institution that treated its female adherents that way?

The bible instructs that women are male possessions, as the Tenth Commandment teaches, inferior, unclean. Mothers are unclean for giving birth — Mary even has to be purified after having Jesus! Fathers can sell daughters into bondage. Mosaic Law sanctions rape under most circumstances, and virgins are spoils of war. God orders rape. Jehovah is a rapist. Check out Isaiah 3:16. Wives are subject to bedchecks as brides and no-notice divorce.

Many lewd biblical passages characterize women as “harlots” and “whores.” The few bible heroines are glorified for their obedience or battle spirit. (Vashti is dethroned.) Jesus was not a feminist. He said every jot and tittle of the old law must be upheld. He refused to praise his mother for

bearing him, and warned Mary Magdalene not to touch him. Please don’t trot out Galatians, which says in God’s kingdom there is neither male nor female, because that verse in context only means women are eligible to be saved. Big deal: Pie in the sky when you die.

Over and over, the New Testament instructs: “Let the women learn in silence in all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. And Adam was not deceived, but the woman being deceived was in the transgression.” First Timothy.

First Corinthians: “I would have you know, that the head of every man is Christ; and the head of every woman is the man; and the head of Christ is

God.” That is the AN-tithesis of feminism.

American agnostic Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the first to call for women’s suffrage, recorded, “In the early days of woman-suffrage agitation, I saw that the greatest obstacle we had to overcome was the bible. The bible was hurled at us from every side.” Every freedom won by women, from wearing bloomers to riding bicycles to not wearing head coverings in church, to being permitted to attend universities and enter professions, own property, vote, was opposed by the churches.

The bible and other so-called “holy books” continue to be hurled at women seeking freedom. In Islamist Iran, women (as Maryam pointed out) can be arrested, jailed, have died because a strand of hair is visible, are arrested for singing. The Taliban, which bans women from speaking at all in public, is the purest embodiment of patriarchal religion in action with its total erasure of women, from coffin-like shrouds to virtual house arrest. The religious war against women rages unabated not just in theocracies but in the United States, thanks to right-wing Catholic control of the Supreme Court and a Christian nationalist takeover of politics.

The pope recently mansplained why women still can’t be priests, or even deacons, saying women’s role is one of “fruitful welcome, nurturing and life-giving dedication.”

In America, the Southern Baptists, the largest single Protestant denomination, officially bars women pastors. Christianity is more than 2,000 years old, but The General Synod of the Church of England didn’t pass a vote to ordain women until 1992, and we saw the first only in ’94. Even my opponent, Bishop Hudson-Wilkin, has said that “women are being trampled on in the church, in effect, being told it’s a man’s ministry.”

Judaism is nearly 4,000 years old, Rabbi Baginsky. Yet, we didn’t see the first women rabbis in reform Judaism until 1972 and in conservative Judaism until ’85. These reforms came about not because of religious teachings but in spite of them. Feminists within Judaism or Christianity can be applauded for behaving unbiblically — but that doesn’t make your religion feminist. Mary Daly put it this way: “So long as God is male, male is God.”

While Anglicans and liberal Jews no longer take the bible literally, their allegiance to this book gives credence to the fundamentalists. (To the rabbi: Fundamentalist are creationists — they don’t evolve.) Horrific, sexist, degrading verses lie in wait to be trotted out by true believers. Don’t ignore or sugarcoat these verses — join me in denouncing them.

American freethinker Helen H. Gardener, who like me had no use for religion, wrote: “I do not know the needs of a god or of another world. I do know that women make shirts for 70 cents a dozen in this one. I do know that the needs of humanity and this world are infinite, unending, constant and immediate. They will take all our time, our strength, our love and our thoughts; and our work here will be only then begun.”

Religion perpetuates a master/slave hierarchy that has retarded human progress, particularly on women’s rights. It is women’s worst enemy. Vote YES.

“Religion perpetuates a master/slave hierarchy that has retarded human progress, particularly on women’s rights. It is women’s worst enemy.”



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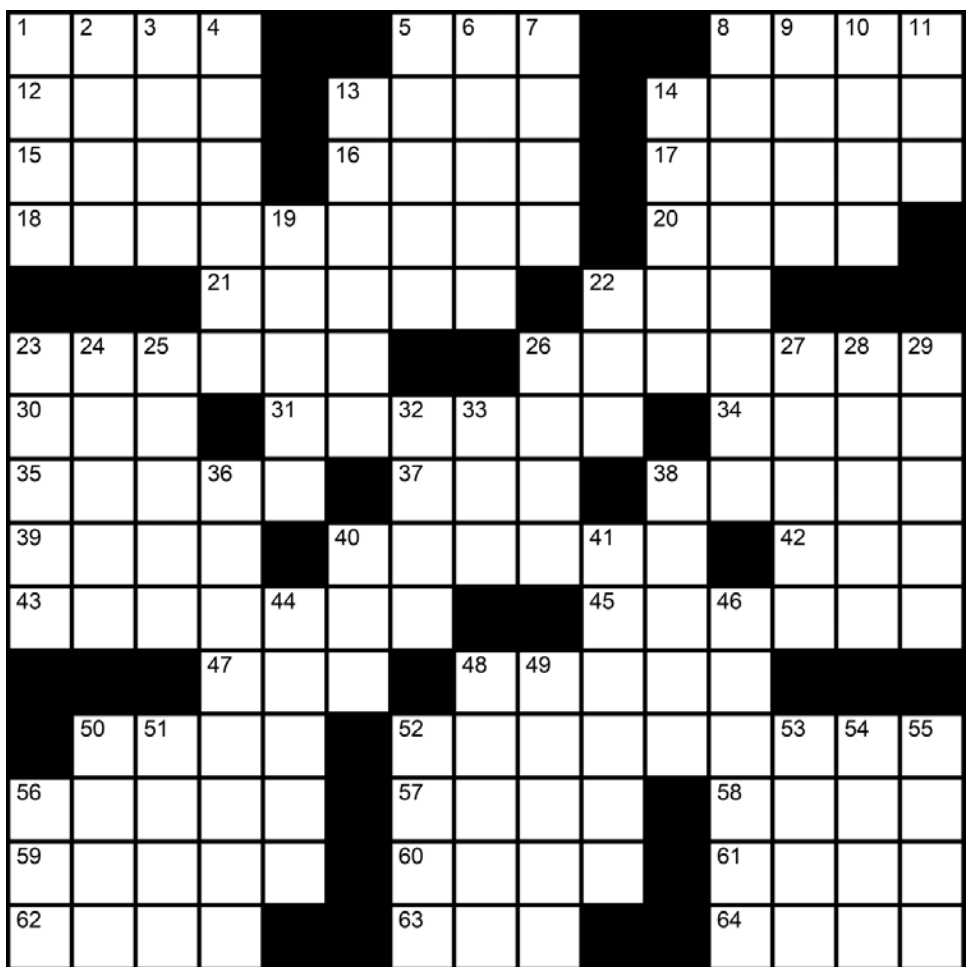
- Across**
1. Terrestrial gastropod
 5. South American tuber
 8. Tatami and such
 12. Actress Sorvino
 13. Snob
 14. Sacrum, pl.
 15. Yemen's neighbor
 16. "Pro" follower
 17. Set of values
 18. *Barry ____: "Religion has no place in public policy"
 20. Individual unit
 21. *19th U.S. President Rutherford B. ____, believer in separation of church and state
 22. Campfire leftover
 23. Soil, in the olden days
 26. Imitation of nature, in art
 30. Labor grp.
 31. Barterer
 34. Yellowjacket
 35. Sobs
 37. Computer network acronym
 38. Like certain suspects
 39. Country dance formation
 40. *"Peanuts" creator and self-professed secular humanist Charles ____
 42. Mai ____
 43. All assets, pl.
 45. Of contemptible kind

47. Cremation ashes container
48. Sleeper's woe
50. Five-star review
52. *Freethinking Anthony Burgess' novel "A ____ Orange"
56. Western neckwear, pl.
57. Eyeball rudely
58. Beauty salon straightener
59. Desert wanderer's hope
60. *This freethinker heard "America singing"
61. Back of the neck
62. Shoe emanation?
63. Bovine hangout
64. High school club

- Down**
1. Smoke plus fog
 2. Stretched ride
 3. Eurasian mountain range
 4. *Freethinking Indira, India's first prime minister
 5. Perform on a dais
 6. Gives a ticket
 7. Lab gel
 8. *Agnostic Dave ____ of "Big Whiskey and the GrooGrux King" fame
 9. Advil target
 10. Barbershop request
 11. Bag, in French
 13. *Engel v. Vitale: banned ____ in public schools

14. Quake
19. ____ and all, or unappealing qualities
22. Lungful
23. *Asimov: "Properly read, the ____ is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived"
24. Island off Manhattan
25. Silver to Lone Ranger
26. List of dishes
27. Quickly fry
28. *First name in #23 Down
29. Banana treat
32. Not NLCS
33. Morse code dash
36. *Atheist and author of "The Second Sex" Simone de ____
38. Uzbekistan native
40. D.C. bigwig, abbr.
41. Surgeon's knife
44. Lock of hair
46. Chewing, or talking incessantly
48. Pool scum, pl.
49. Tom Sawyer's aunt
50. *Freethinker Robert Frost's poem "The ____ Not Taken"
51. As well
52. Loose hood
53. Not written
54. Tug-of-war prop
55. Tibia/fibula hinge joint
56. Fan's discontent.

Freethought Today Crossword



Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Dollens

Continued from page 1

individual freedoms. Joining FFRF is a chance to defend religious freedom on a broader stage and ensure our government serves all people, not just a select few."

Dollens' experience in the Oklahoma House of Representatives highlights the critical need for the separation of church and state and policies based on reason and evidence. He has been a prominent voice as minority whip, actively opposing measures that blur this line, such as proposals to display the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms and legislation permitting the employment of chaplains in public schools. Dollens has also been outspoken in his criticism of Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters and his blatant efforts to promote bibles in public schools and undermine secular public education.

Dollens, born and raised in Bartlesville, Okla., received a football scholarship to attend Southern Methodist University, where he majored in English. While attending an NFL combine, he was surprised to be recruited by the U.S. Bobsled-Team. After representing Team USA, he worked as a roughneck in the Oklahoma oilfields. Following a downturn in oil production, he became a high school English teacher at U.S. Grant High School in Oklahoma City. In 2016, he was among 208 Oklahoma City Public School teachers laid off due to budget cuts imposed by the Legislature. This experience galvanized him to run for office, leading to his election as the representative for House District 93 in Oklahoma City in 2016. Dollens serves on a number of committees. In

2019, he was honored by the Oklahoma Democratic Veterans with their prestigious Legislator of the Year Award.

Dollens has appeared on FFRF's "Freethought Matters" television program and spoke at FFRF's 2024 national convention, where he discussed his efforts to challenge Christian nationalism in Oklahoma. Dollens has also written for MSNBC about the bible mandate in Oklahoma's public schools. In August, Dollens released his book, "The Citizen's Guide to Political Change: How to Win with Ballot Initiatives and Defend Direct Democracy," a comprehensive, step-by-step guide on shaping public policy at the grassroots level through ballot initiatives, veto referendums and election recalls.

"Rep. Dollens' unwavering commitment to secular values and his courageous work in Oklahoma make him an exceptional addition to our team," says Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

Dollens will join a legislative team that includes FFRF Governmental Affairs Director Mark Dann, who is based in Washington, D.C., and concentrates on federal issues, plus Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne and State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley, who primarily work at the state legislative level. Dollens' new role at FFRF will focus on identifying and advancing key legislative priorities, building coalitions in strategic states and developing initiatives to counter Christian nationalism. His addition to FFRF staff underscores the state/church watchdog's growing influence to combat Christian nationalism and protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church at all levels.

Freethought Today Cryptogram

Y X Q M A Q M Q Z L X W O Q A C W Y P A Y M A C W X C Y A W

CLVPW. X C W M A Y D W K L D W P A L J V P C A C Q A E V A A L M,

Y X Q M A X C L W Z W I P D Q R Y M U A C W O W K Y P Y L M A L

V M O W I P A Q M O A C Q A L M K W Y A P J V P C W O, Y A P L Z

W I. H Y M Y A L. A C W G I W M L A U L M M Q C Q Z W S V M K C

X Y A C N W P V P. — B V W M A Y M E V H L S U W

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: D => M. Answer is on page 20.

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



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By Orvin Larson

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IN THE NEWS

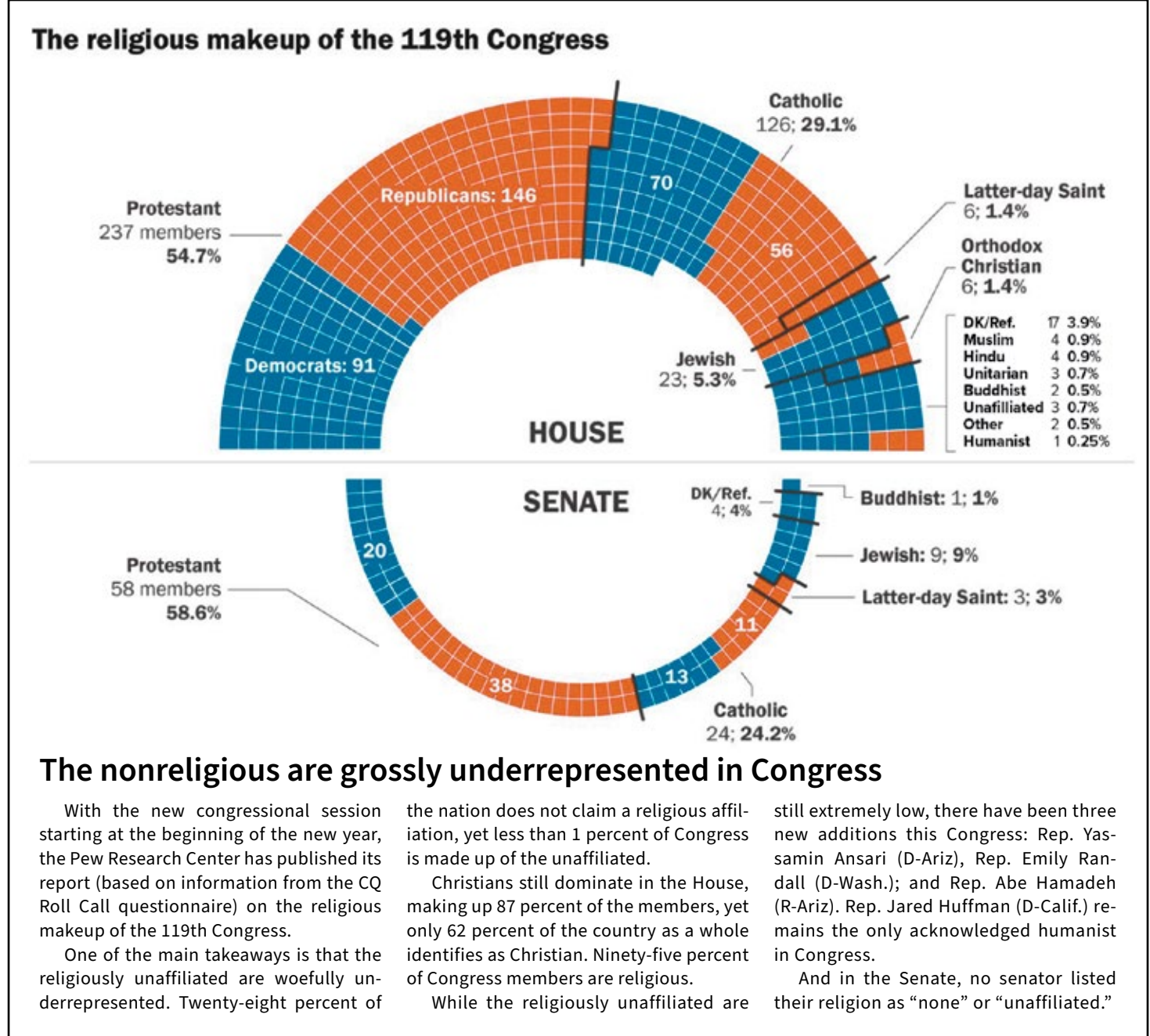
Louisiana Supreme Court revives librarian’s suit

On Dec. 27, the Louisiana Supreme Court ruled that Louisiana librarian Amanda Jones’ 2022 defamation case against two local men who accused her of pushing pornography to children can continue. In a 4-2 ruling, the court found that an appeals court erred in denying Jones’s appeal based on an apparently missed deadline.

The closely watched case began in July 2022 after Jones, a school librarian, spoke up against a bid to pull a number of mostly LGBTQ-themed books from her hometown public library in Livingston Parish, La. In response, she was attacked online by two men who accused her of grooming children and making pornography available to kids. Jones then fought back by filing a defamation suit against two men who publicly accused her online.

Judge Erika Sledge of Louisiana’s 21st Judicial District Court dismissed the case in September 2022 before arguments ever reached a jury, holding that Jones was a limited public figure — a designation that raises the bar for proving defamation — and finding that the statements against Jones did not rise to the level of defamation. Sledge reaffirmed her decision in November 2022. And in January 2024, the Louisiana 1st Circuit Court of Appeals denied Jones’s appeal on a technicality, finding that she had missed the deadline to file her appeal.

But in a major reversal, the Louisiana Supreme Court in its Dec. 27 ruling remanded the case back to the appeals court with an order to hear the case on the merits.



The nonreligious are grossly underrepresented in Congress

With the new congressional session starting at the beginning of the new year, the Pew Research Center has published its report (based on information from the CQ Roll Call questionnaire) on the religious makeup of the 119th Congress.

One of the main takeaways is that the religiously unaffiliated are woefully underrepresented. Twenty-eight percent of

the nation does not claim a religious affiliation, yet less than 1 percent of Congress is made up of the unaffiliated.

Christians still dominate in the House, making up 87 percent of the members, yet only 62 percent of the country as a whole identifies as Christian. Ninety-five percent of Congress members are religious.

While the religiously unaffiliated are

still extremely low, there have been three new additions this Congress: Rep. Yasamin Ansari (D-Ariz.), Rep. Emily Randall (D-Wash.); and Rep. Abe Hamadeh (R-Ariz.). Rep. Jared Huffman (D-Calif.) remains the only acknowledged humanist in Congress.

And in the Senate, no senator listed their religion as “none” or “unaffiliated.”

Court to hear charity unemployment taxes case

The U.S. Supreme Court on Dec. 13 agreed to decide whether charities run by religious groups have to pay unemployment taxes that cover their employees.

Most, but not all, states generally exempt religious groups from having to pay into the state’s unemployment tax system. Federal law does exempt religious schools from having to participate in the federal-state program. But the court has never ruled on the question of participation by charitable organizations run by religious groups. Now, the court has agreed to tackle the question in a case brought by Catholic Charities against the state of Wisconsin.

The Catholic Charities Bureau of the Diocese Superior, Wisconsin, a non-profit corporation, is the social ministry arm of the Catholic Church.

Catholic Charities applied to the state for an exemption from paying unemployment taxes for its employees. But the state labor commission refused the application on grounds that the charitable group was engaging in activities that “are not religious, per se,” and thus are not entitled to be exempt from paying unemployment taxes.

“The next stage of this is getting these large employers to be exempt,” FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott told the New York Times. “The exemption is there to protect churches from interference, and now they’re taking it and running with it and saying it covers anything religiously affiliated,” he said. “It’s not a good system if a religious entity can just opt themselves out even when it’s not interfering with their religious practice.”

Latino voters helped Trump win Catholic vote

Both Latino and white Catholic voters shifted toward Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential election, according to the a post-election survey that breaks down Catholic voters by their ethnicities.

Exit polls showed that Trump won the overall Catholic vote by a double-digit margin after losing that demographic to Joe Biden in 2020.

According to a survey by PRRI in December 2024, a large portion of Trump’s improved performance among Catholics came from Latino voters, while a smaller part came from white voters.

Harris’ 12-point margin of victory among Latino Catholics was much narrower than Biden’s victory among the demographic in 2020. That year, Biden claimed a 35-point margin with 66 percent of the Latino Catholic vote compared with Trump’s 31 percent, according to the Pew Research Center.

Satanic celebration in Iowa ‘forcibly canceled’

The Satanic Temple is threatening possible legal action against the Iowa Department of Administrative Services after the agency refused to approve the religious group’s holiday celebration in the Capitol building, arguing it would have been “harmful to minors.”

The Satanic Temple of Iowa said that the Iowa Department of Administrative Services “forcibly canceled” its Dec. 14 event. The Temple’s legal representative sent a letter to the state demanding the proposed event be rescheduled for Dec. 21 or work to “facilitate my client’s free expression and avoid potential litigation.”

“This letter arises from a potential legal dispute in which you prohibited my client’s holiday event from equal access to state facilities on equal terms as other religious events,” Satanic Temple’s general counsel Matt Kezhaya wrote.

Atheism recognized by Kenya as constitutional

The High Court of Kenya delivered a landmark decision Dec. 5 by dismissing a petition filed by Bishop Stephen Ndichu in 2022, which sought the deregistration of atheists in Kenya. The petitioner also wanted a declaration made by the courts that Kenya is a religious state.

But, in his ruling, Justice Lawrence Mugambi said it is a matter of conscience what a person chooses to believe in or not. Mugambi underscored the fact that Kenya does not operate as a theocracy. He said it would be unconstitutional to impose a belief upon an individual who does not subscribe to it, as such an act would constitute theocratic tyranny. He cited Article 8 of the Constitution, which states: There shall be no state religion.

Ban on religious tests for colleges faces review

A federal judge is considering whether to overturn a Minnesota law that bans religious tests for colleges that participate in a state program that allows high school students to take college courses for credit.

The state argued at a hearing that the 2023 law rightly protects high school students who are not Christian, straight and cisgender.

The law targets the state’s two conservative Christian colleges that require students to sign statements of faith — Crown College in St. Bonifacius and the University of Northwestern in Roseville. A group of

parents and high schoolers who are earning college credits at those institutions, or would like to, are suing to overturn the law, saying it violates their religious freedom under the First Amendment to choose schools with campus atmospheres that reflect their values.

The longstanding Minnesota Postsecondary Enrollment Options program lets high school students earn free credits at state expense at public or private colleges of their choice, although the courses must be nonsectarian. State education officials learned more than a decade ago that Crown and Northwestern bar students who aren’t Christian or who are LGBTQ-plus from campus activities, and started trying to change the law regulating the program.

British lawmakers vote to legalize assisted dying

Britain’s lawmakers on Nov. 29 voted to allow assisted dying for terminally ill patients in England and Wales under strict conditions, opening the way to one of the most profound social changes in the country in decades.

By a vote of 330–275, members of Parliament gave their support to a bill that would permit doctors to help some terminally ill patients to end their lives.

The vote was not the final say on the matter for Parliament, as it will now be scrutinized in parliamentary committees and amendments to the bill may be put forward. But it is a landmark political moment, setting the stage for a significant shift that some have likened to Britain’s legalization of abortion in 1967 and the abolition of the death penalty in 1969.

Assisted dying is already legal in a handful of European countries, as well as in Canada, New Zealand, 10 U.S. states and the District of Columbia.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

California

The Gateway Unified School District agreed with concerns raised by FFRF and moved to cancel a motion that would begin board meetings with prayer.

In early 2023, the board passed a motion 3-2 to open school board meetings with prayer. FFRF wrote to the district, ensuring that they were aware of their constitutional obligation not to needlessly entangle religion with education.

“Board members are free to pray privately or to worship on their own time in their own way,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote. “However, the board ought not to lend its power and prestige to religion or coerce attendees into participating in religious exercise.”

After the initial letter was sent in 2023, FFRF followed up in August 2023 and August 2024, which finally yielded a response. The district clarified that it was “experiencing significant turmoil among staff and governing board members, which even resulted in the loss of legal counsel,” which is why the district had not fully responded to FFRF in that time. However, the superintendent and the president of the board of trustees assured that the practice had been abandoned, writing, “Since this incident, the district has made it a priority to ensure compliance with constitutional standards regarding the separation of church and state.”

Florida

Representatives from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) are no longer entangled in the Sarasota County Schools athletic program in Sarasota, Fla.

FFRF learned that the district allowed the FCA to provide religious “character coaches” for its football teams to preach to students, lead them in prayer and host religious team “huddles.”

“Public school football teams cannot appoint or employ a chaplain or character coach, seek out a spiritual leader for the team, agree to allow someone to act as a religious character coach, or otherwise infuse the team with religion because public schools may not promote religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

FFRF worked closely with Patrick J. Duggan, who represented the school. Duggan emailed FFRF in September, reporting that the violation was “promptly addressed” to ensure no violations of the Establishment Clause occurred. “Please note the coach allegedly involved is no longer an employee of this school district and no further other alleged incidents — regardless of whether they were violations — are known to have occurred,” he wrote.

Florida

The Tavares, Fla., Lake County Board of County Commissioners will welcome non-believing invocations before meetings in the future after offering a “corrective” religious invocation stirred controversy.

In December 2022, a Central Florida Freethought Community director was invited by the county manager’s office to deliver an invocation before the board. The director delivered a respectful secular message of equality and diversity. However, immediately following the secular invocation, a man approached the podium and said, “Hello, I was just asked a few minutes ago if I would lead in prayer. So,



I am happy to do so. If you would like to join me, feel free to do so.” He then led those gathered in a Christian prayer.

“As this inappropriate ‘corrective’ prayer has demonstrated, prayer at government meetings is unnecessary, inappropriate and divisive,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the chairman of the board.

FFRF did not hear back from the board for over a year, and had been mailing follow-up letters to the board. Finally, in September, a representative from the board took the time to respond to FFRF. “The Lake County Board of County Commissioners has a fair and inclusive invocation process despite the isolated event that occurred 21 months ago. Members of the Central Florida Freethought Community have provided invocations since that time and are welcome to continue to do so in the future,” they wrote.

Georgia

A Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) club is no longer operating in the Trion City Schools system, thanks to FFRF.

FFRF learned that Trion Elementary School was organizing and promoting an FCA club being led by a Christian pastor. In February, the school’s official Facebook page posted, “[The pastor] did a great job leading our FCA meeting this morning! Thank you for sharing God’s love with our students.”

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

Superintendent Phil Williams wrote back to FFRF in late October, stating that district administration was unaware of the activities associated with the social media post in question. “Upon receiving your correspondence, we immediately addressed the issue and have taken steps to prevent a reoccurrence,” Williams wrote. He additionally confirmed that there is no longer any FCA club at Trion

Elementary School.

Kentucky

The Barren County Schools system will no longer allow coaches and staff to give a pregame prayer on the field before football games.

FFRF learned that a prayer took place at midfield before Barren County High’s Sept. 20 game against Glasgow. Both teams appeared to have formed a large circle, and a coach or other adult was at the center of the circle.

“Coaches are free to express their religious beliefs however they wish outside of their roles as public school coaches, but they cannot use their position to foist their personal religious beliefs onto students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

The district’s superintendent, Amy Irwin, responded to FFRF’s claim in early November. “I have addressed the concerns contained in your letter and consider the matter to be resolved,” she wrote.

Michigan

FFRF has secured another victory, this time in the Pontiac School District in Pontiac, Mich., after the district was forcing prayer onto employees during mandatory meetings.

FFRF learned from a concerned district employee that the district had included a Christian prayer and gospel choir in the 2024 staff development convocation event. Multiple videos were sent from the complainant, one showing a gospel choir singing lyrics such as “Bless Me, Bless Me, Bless Me God Indeed, Death Has Been Defeated, He Is Our Victory.” Another video captures a prayer led from the stage that begins “we know we can’t do anything, at any time, until we pray.” The ensuing prayer contained references to God, “Our Lord,” and “Jesus the Christ, our lord and savior.” FFRF’s complainant reported feeling extremely uncomfortable with the religious messaging and at one point they were forced to leave the room.

“Including prayer and worship at dis-

trict events, such as staff development, needlessly alienates employees, such as our complainant, who are members of minority religions or nonreligious,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district in September.

After months without response, the district’s attorney finally got in contact with FFRF via phone. Lawrence noted that the school’s attorney stated that the district will not have prayers at future employee meetings.

Missouri

The Niangua R-V School District has decided against promoting religious events on the district’s official Facebook page in the future, thanks to FFRF’s activism.

A concerned employee reported that the district promoted a religious event via its official Facebook page. The district’s Nov. 3 Facebook post partially read, “FCA is sponsoring a trip to YthCon in Seymour, Mo., on Wednesday, Nov. 6. The bus will leave at 5 p.m. and will return between 9 and 10. This is a free trip for all JH and HS students, not just athletes. The night will consist of food, games, worship and messages from guest speakers.”

“Government religious speech promoting Christian viewpoints marginalizes and excludes non-Christian students, teachers and parents whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school staff,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to District Superintendent David Baker.

Baker himself responded to FFRF’s concerns in an official letter from the district. “In an effort to avoid any confusion regarding district sponsorship or promotion of non-district activities, Niangua School District has determined to only post district-sponsored events and school related information on its school media going forward,” Baker wrote.

Missouri

FFRF worked to ensure that the Adair County R-II School District in Brashear, Mo., will no longer impose prayer before the National Honor Society.

A community member informed FFRF that a district employee commenced a Brashear High School National Honor Society induction with prayer. Video confirmed the account, featuring an overtly Christian prayer.

“A prayer’s popularity is immaterial; courts have continually reaffirmed that the rights of minorities are nonetheless protected by the Constitution,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

FFRF was informed by the district that they would investigate the situation. In a later letter, the district concluded that the district will abide by the Constitution, and the district “affirms that sponsors of student activities have received additional direction regarding the propriety and/or impropriety of invocations by staff with students and the parameters related thereto.”

Missouri

After a religious “See You at the Pole” event, the Mansfield R-IV School District in Missouri learned from FFRF not to allow religious events to take place on school grounds.

A community member informed FFRF that district staff led students in prayer at a SYATP event on Sept. 25, 2024. After the

large group prayer, teachers, students and outside priests formed small groups where they worshiped and prayed together. Teachers and staff led these small groups. Reportedly, a teacher also presented on Christianity and faith to students after the small group worship. After the event, the district used its official Facebook account to tout the religious event.

“It is inappropriate and needlessly divisive for the district to allow its staff or outside adults to promote, participate in and organize See You At The Pole events,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

District Superintendent Clint Hall wrote back to FFRF, explaining that the district and the student yearbook team both use the district’s social media presence to cover various events, including events that are not strictly district-sponsored. Regardless, the post was taken down, and Hall wrote, “In order to address any concern about the district’s involvement in the FCA student group, I have spoken with the supervisor of the FCA regarding the parameters that are appropriate for religious, noncurricular, student inhabited-groups and their activities.”

Missouri

After being contacted by FFRF, the Lee’s Summit R-7 School District has taken steps to ensure that students are not being preached to through the football program.

A district parent informed FFRF that a local pastor was given special access to students and used said access to preach and encourage students to attend bible study. The pastor identifies as an official staff member of the district, and according to his LinkedIn Profile, the pastor holds himself out as a football coach who “leads chapels and [is] involved with coaches/players daily lives,” and he additionally admits to using his coaching position at LSNHS as grounds to advance his ministry.

“When [this pastor] is acting on behalf of the district, either as an official staff member or as a volunteer, he may not promote his personal religious beliefs to students, or encourage them to attend religious events or clubs,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

The district’s legal counsel, W. Joseph Hatley, addressed FFRF’s concerns in full. “Following the receipt of your letters, the district’s assistant superintendent of human resources . . . conducted a thorough investigation into your allegations under my direction,” Hatley wrote. Hatley also detailed several changes, including changing the names of Friday afternoon meetings before football games to something other than “Chapel,” ensuring that the pastor will not initiate discussions of religion or participate in student-led religious clubs.

Oklahoma

A Christian organization is no longer allowed to solicit donations through the Jenks Public Schools system in Jenks, Okla.

A concerned parent reported that Jenks Southeast Elementary School was soliciting donations through the school’s official House Team Service Projects for the benefit of John 3:16 Mission, a Christian organization. John 3:16 Mission’s website states that its mission is “to minister to those experiencing hurt, hunger and homelessness, by offering Christ-centered solutions for Tulsans who need hope.”

“It is inappropriate for public school administrators and teachers to use their

authority to encourage students or parents to donate to religious fundraisers,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

The district contacted John E. Priddy of Rosenstein, Fist & Ringold to seek guidance on FFRF’s concerns. Priddy wrote back to FFRF, bringing news that the district investigated the situation. “Additionally, the superintendent has spoken to the administration about their service opportunities at Jenks Southeast Elementary and she assures me they understand their legal obligations.”

Tennessee

FFRF was assured that a religious quote was removed from an employee for the Bi-County Solid Waste Management (BCSWM) in Woodlawn, Tenn.

A city resident reported that a BCSWM employee was sending bible quotes to residents as part of official correspondence. According to FFRF’s complainant on Feb. 1, they received an email from a BCSWM employee with the bible quote from Phil 4:13 in the email signature, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” The employee also signed off the email with “Have a blessed day!”

“By including biblical scripture in official emails to community members, BCSWM displays favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the executive director of the department.

FFRF heard from W. Timothy Harvey, the BCSWM’s legal representative. Harvey wrote, “Proper supervisory personnel have addressed directly with the employee the referenced email and official business communications.” When pressed further for details, Harvey promised that the “organization acted on the issue you raised.”

Texas

FFRF has worked to ensure that future “See You At the Pole” events will not entangle school staffers in an attempt to lead students in prayer at the Calallen

Independent School District in Corpus Christi, Texas.

FFRF learned that the Calallen East Elementary Parent Teacher Association hosted a “See You at the Pole” event on Sept. 25, 2024, at the school. The explicitly Christian event and organization was led by parents and teachers, leading attending students in prayer.

“It is inappropriate and needlessly divisive for the district to allow its staff or outside adults to promote, participate in and organize See You At The Pole events,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

Superintendent Emily Lorenz replied to FFRF’s letter via email, thanking the state/church watchdog for bringing the violation to her attention. “I have communicated with campus administration, and we will be reminding all staff of the separation requirements, and the need for activities of this nature to only be student led,” Lorenz wrote. “We will additionally share your concerns with the PTA Board of East Elementary and the restriction requirements.”

Texas

The Silverton Independent School District learned a lesson from FFRF after the state/church watchdog warned them not to allow prayer to open state-funded school football games.

FFRF learned of a prayer over loudspeakers before every SHS home football game, such as at the Oct. 24, 2024, game, where a long Christian prayer was recited prior to the game. Additionally, that occurred on senior night, where graduating seniors of the football team were celebrated.

“Prayer over loudspeakers at student athletic events coerces student athletes and all others in attendance into observing and participating in a religious exercise,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district. “That coercion is at the heart of the Establishment Clause.”

FFRF heard back from the district in the form of a letter from Fred A. Storm-

er, an attorney with the Underwood Law Firm. “Please be advised that there have been no further prayers delivered over the public address system at an SHS football game since the district received your letter,” Stormer wrote. “The district has instructed the individual providing announcements during football games that such a prayer is not permitted and the district will inform anyone else announcing other school sporting events to likewise refrain from reciting a prayer, Christian or otherwise.”

Virginia

FFRF brought First Amendment rights back to the Caroline County Public Schools in Bowling Green, Va.

FFRF learned of multiple violations in the district, with the complainant reporting that most school events within the district begin with Christian prayer, including both athletic events and school board meetings.

FFRF learned of a state/church violation in August of 2023, through a social media post confirming that some staff and faculty meetings included Christian prayers. A similar post in September 2023 confirmed the existence of an afterschool Christian club, with the sole goal being proselytizing and converting public middle school students to Christianity. Further violations of this club, known as the 180 Club, occurred throughout October of 2023, with students engaging in Christian worship and prayer after school on school property, a guest speaker sharing religious testimony with students at the club and the distribution of bibles to students.

Violations stretched into 2024, as well, as a board member asked all attendees at a February board meeting to stand and participate in a prayer delivered to the “Heavenly Father,” with references to “Lord God” throughout.

“The district may not legally allow adults to lead, organize or regularly participate in ‘student’ religious clubs at CMS or any of the district’s other secondary schools,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

The district’s legal representative, Pakapon Phinyowattanachip, wrote an email to FFRF after the group had reported the violations. In the email, Phinyowattanachip confirmed: “The School Board is not conducting prayers at meetings and that school staff is not leading prayers at school or student-led clubs.”

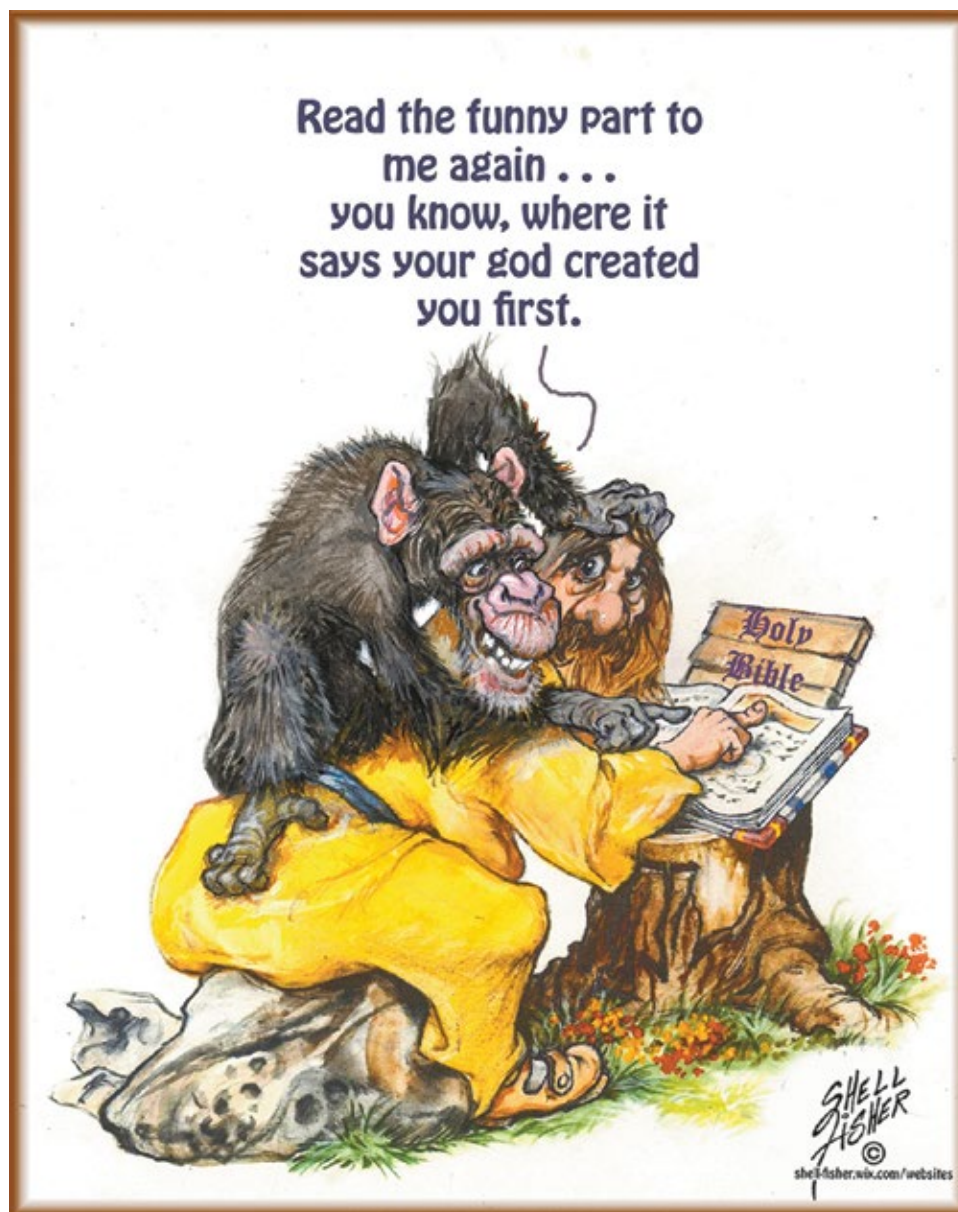
Virginia

FFRF came to the aid of students in Fauquier County Schools in Warrenton, Va., where a pastor was attempting to proselytize public school football players.

A district parent reported that a pastor from the Bridge Community Church led a “Jesus Time Out” with the Fauquier High School football team after football practice in early September 2024. The Bridge Community Church’s mission is to “Connect You to God, Other People, & the Marketplace.” The Fauquier High School official Facebook page reposted a photo and description of the event from the Battlefield Fellowship of Christian athletes.

“It is beyond the scope of a public school system to grant access to speakers who advocate Christianity to students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the district.

District Superintendent Major Warner emailed FFRF in November, acknowledging the letter and stating that the situation would be investigated. Warner concluded the investigation shortly after, writing back, “The practice was addressed under policy and will not be taking place in the future.”



FFRF Action Fund’s state advocacy team Highlighting a year of success and expansion

By Ryan D. Jayne

An old Chinese proverb says that when the winds of change blow, some people build walls and others build windmills. The winds of change are certainly blowing in the United States today, and the FFRF Action Fund’s state advocacy team is committed to building metaphorical windmills, making the most out of the political chaos we find ourselves in.

In particular, while the federal government begins a new era of Trump dysfunction and a nonstop flurry of distracting news stories, the focus for those seeking positive change shifts evermore toward state and local governments. The

FFRF Action Fund is ready to hit the ground running in 2025, after a highly productive year and prospects of expanding our reach even further.



Photo by Chris Line

Ryan D. Jayne

Overall, we tracked more than 1,600 bills this legislative session, and mobilized our advocates to sway legislators through phone calls and emails on almost 200 of those bills.

This led to several notable victories, including ending child marriage in Michigan, Washington, Virginia and New Hampshire. Our advocates also helped to repeal an archaic adultery ban in New York, and to remove the statute of limitations for clergy child abusers in Kentucky.

In addition to fixing bad laws, we’ve worked on proactive legislative priorities in states across the country. We worked with legislators in five states to introduce bills regulating health care sharing ministries (HCSMs). Three of those bills were introduced (in South Dakota, Minnesota and Arizona). This session we will work to get those bills over the finish line to rein in HCSMs’ predatory practices.

Through our advocacy efforts in our own backyard at the Wisconsin state Capitol, we found ourselves on a list of the governor’s allies upon whom he calls for photo ops when he takes action on legislation. This past year, we were invited to a bill signing ceremony for legislation FFRF AF had backed as well as a veto ceremony for legislation we opposed. We are more optimistic than ever about the direction Wisconsin is headed.

We were invited to speak at a number of events highlighting our expertise on a variety of issues, ranging from Project 2025 to vouchers and other issues addressing state/church separation. FFRF State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley and I each made appearances around the country to invigorate advocates and to spread education on crucial topics. These local advocates make possible all of our work influencing state legislatures.

Unfortunately, in addition to supporting good bills, we’ve also seen an overabundance of bad bills introduced. After Texas kept us very busy in 2023, this year we got a break because the Texas Legislature mercifully only meets every other year. However, seemingly desperate to fill the void of ridiculous legislation that Texas left behind, Louisiana lawmakers fully committed themselves to the Christian



Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers, second from left, stands with FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne, FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat Grant and FFRF State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley on April 2 in the Wisconsin Capitol.

nationalist playbook in 2024. Most notably, they passed a wildly unconstitutional bill requiring schools to display a particular version of the Ten Commandments (which hilariously includes 11 commandments) in every public classroom in the state from kindergarten through college. Challenging that law is now in the FFRF legal team’s capable hands, and a federal court has already ruled it unconstitutional. Nevertheless, we’ve already seen lawmakers in other states pre-filing copycat bills for 2025.

While we were not able to halt that legislation in Louisiana, we did help to defeat other Ten Commandments bills in some other states. Arizona and Oklahoma, to name a couple, had proposed similar legislation, but both of them failed to be enacted. Overall, of the thousand or so bad bills we tracked this year, almost 90 percent failed to pass.

Meanwhile, other states followed Texas’ lead by allowing public school boards to adopt policies permitting public school chaplains to replace school counselors and social workers. Such legislation requires school boards to vote on whether to pursue the chaplain hirings. The public school chaplain issue highlights an important trend — just as we shift our focus from federal to state laws when Congress refuses to do its job, we increasingly must shift our focus from certain state legislatures to local governmental bodies, including school boards. To that end, we are excited to have a new software tool that allows us to monitor and build relationships with school boards like never before.

Public schools will continue to be the main battle venue for the battle of church and state next session. We have seen private school voucher programs become hopelessly bloated as states

ffrf ACTION FUND

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move to “universal” vouchers (meaning everyone with children, even the wealthiest families who already send their children to private schools, can receive taxpayer funds to pay for parochial education). As legislators shamelessly ramp up the rate at which public school funds are redirected to private religious schools, they are largely abandoning any pretense that these programs are intended to help the needy or to improve academic results. There is hope, though, that the public is gradually waking up to the fact that “school choice” is just a euphemism for defunding secular public education.

Simultaneously, public schools face religious encroachment from other foes. As one example, throughout the Midwest, an organization that offers off-campus religious instruction to public school students during the school day has spread like wildfire, leading several school districts to ban the practice once they realized the harm it caused. In response, the organization lobbied lawmakers in several states to attempt to take this decision away from school boards, forcing them to allow the divisive religious instruction — incidentally exposing a blatant hypocrisy, since these same lawmakers ordinarily insist that they advocate for local control of education. When these bills received public hearings, the Action Fund was there to remind legislators of their constitutional duties and to stand up for public school students.

These battles, and many more, will continue in state and local bodies around the country in 2025. We will be there, along with our growing legion of advocates.

Thank you to all of our advocates who are signed up for action alerts and took the time to contact your elected officials this past session. You are the force behind our efforts, the windmills that can make the most of our nation’s ever-changing winds. For any readers who have not signed up as Action Fund advocates, please do so at ffrfaction.org. Together, we can harness the winds of change to better protect the vital constitutional principle of separation between religion and government.

Ryan D. Jayne is FFRF senior policy counsel.

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

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

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

Year in review

FFRF Action Fund makes strides in D.C.

By Mark Dann

Looking at 2025, we know the stakes will be high. The return of the Trump administration and the expected implementation of its Project 2025 agenda will test the resilience of our democracy and the separation of state and church as well as the secular community. We've faced significant challenges before. We will prevail because we've already laid the groundwork for a strong and strategic resistance.

Let's take a moment to celebrate our victories from 2024 and outline the path forward. Last year we achieved remarkable victories, built new alliances, and fortified our movement for the challenges that await us.

Legislative victories

Last year, we made significant strides in advancing our mission to protect secular values and promote transparency and accountability in Congress, showcasing the impact of our initiatives both on Capitol Hill and nationwide. Early in the year, we implemented our Dynamic Scorecard, which is available on the Action Fund website (ffrfaction.org). The scorecard ranks legislators based on their co-sponsorship of critical bills and participation in key caucuses throughout the congressional session. This scoring system highlights which members support our initiatives and identifies true champions. This innovative approach has enhanced the FFRF Action Fund's visibility and influence on Capitol Hill, directly leading to increased co-sponsorship and the introduction of key bills such as the Health Share Transparency Act with Rep. Huffman and the Judiciary Act with Rep. Johnson, while also encouraging lawmakers to join the Congressional Freethought Caucus.

On Capitol Hill, we led efforts on critical bills that strengthen the separation of state and church such as the Health Share Transparency Act (regulates Health Care Sharing Ministries), judicial reform measures (promotes transparency and accountability in the Supreme Court), and the repeal of the Comstock Act — a zombie law from 1873 that is still on the books and bans the mailing of materials deemed "obscene," including information or devices related to contraception and abortion. The Trump administration could decide to enforce it.

We advanced bipartisan bills and secured a prestigious placement for a memorial honoring Thomas Paine in a highly coveted location in Washington, D.C. We celebrated our community and victories by establishing the first Congressional Reason Reception on the Hill with the Congressional Freethought Caucus and provided support for the



FFRF Action Fund Governmental Affairs Director Mark Dann stands with Rep. Jared Huffman outside his office on Jan. 3. Also pictured is Guthrie Graves Fitzsimmons from the Interfaith Alliance.

founding of Rep. Huffman's Project 2025 Task Force.

Ballot achievements

The FFRF Action Fund played a helpful role in supporting successful abortion access ballot measures in seven states, including Arizona, Colorado, Maryland, Missouri and New York, where voters decisively protected abortion rights. Florida's similar measure narrowly missed the required threshold, but its strong showing of majority support for abortion rights reflected growing momentum nationwide. These results underscore the impact of our targeted efforts to keep religion out of our private health care decisions.

Equally significant were the defeats of measures to divert public funds to private religious schools in Kentucky, Nebraska and Colorado. These victories demonstrated that when voters are given a choice, they reject Christian nationalism.

To secure our lobbying gains in the election, we developed focus groups on Gen-Z nonreligious voters in the key swing state of Wisconsin, paved the way for FFRF to underwrite four campaign fellows at critical universities in Wisconsin to focus on voter registration and pledges to vote.

The FFRF Action Fund candidate endorsements also yielded strong results. In our first year endorsing candidates, we achieved a 70 percent win rate, including victories for all our endorsed candidates in the Wisconsin Legislature. Aiding this effort was our investment in youth voter registration and youth pledge to vote initiatives in key Wisconsin state House and Senate districts. Our work is putting us within striking distance of a pro-separation of state and church majority in the Wisconsin state house in 2026.

Strategy in D.C.

Our strategy in Washington will center on blocking the most harmful aspects of Project 2025 while strengthening our alliances in Congress. Leaders like Reps. Jared Huffman and Jamie Raskin, both pivotal members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, will be instrumental in amplifying our efforts to safeguard secular values. As we work to expand the Freethought Caucus, we will also focus on countering expected moves by the Trump administration to enforce the Comstock Act, which threatens to

restrict access to abortion medication, and to issue an executive order dramatically expanding religious exemptions. Through our partnership with Huffman's Stop Project 2025 Task Force and with other congressional allies, we are committed to exposing and challenging these dangerous policies at every turn.

In addition, we are bracing for an intense battle over judicial and executive branch appointments. Trump's nominees will undoubtedly reflect a Christian nationalist worldview, including Pete Hegseth for secretary of defense and Russ Vought for the head of Office of Management and Budget. These individuals are poised to play key roles in implementing Project 2025, making

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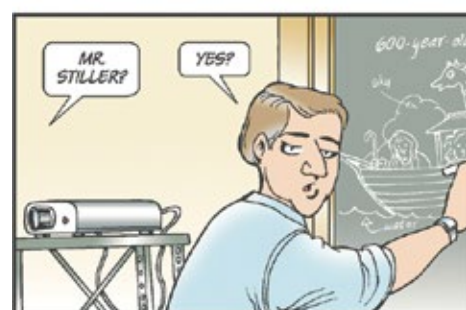
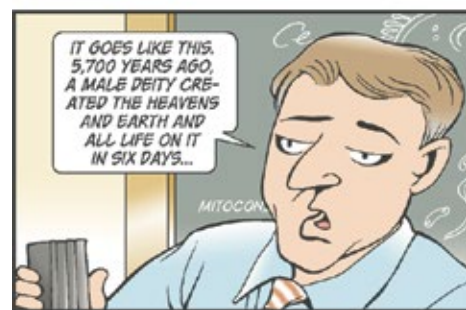
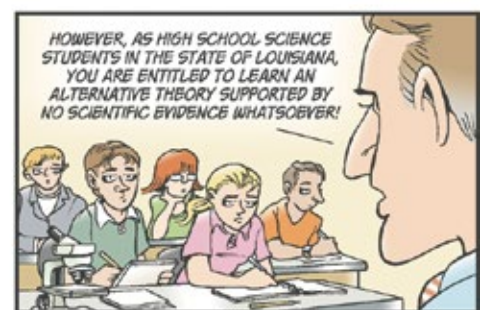
it essential for us to scrutinize their records and mobilize opposition. Our work with partners like the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights will be critical in this effort.

Budget reconciliation will be a key legislative battleground. This legislative tool, which allows certain measures to pass the Senate with a simple majority, could be used to repeal the Johnson Amendment or expand school vouchers. We are prepared to counter these efforts by mobilizing our supporters and working closely with our allies in Congress.

We will also continue our campaign to diminish the influence of the National Prayer Breakfast. Scheduled to return on Feb. 6, this event has long been a platform for discriminatory policies and Christian nationalist rhetoric. Through collaboration with the Congressional Freethought and Equality Caucuses, we aim to reduce Congressional participation and shine a light on its harmful impact.

Thanks to you, we've achieved a lot together in 2024 and we'll do more in 2025. Together, we will defend the principles of secular democracy, protect the rights of all secular Americans, and continue building a future rooted in reason. Thank you for being an essential part of this fight.

Mark Dann is FFRF's governmental affairs director.

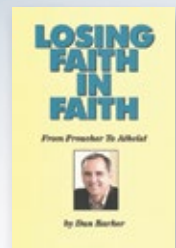


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Convention speech

Don't talk about menstruation — period

This is the (edited) speech given by Kate Cohen at FFRF's national convention in Denver on Sept. 27 (which was about a month before the 2024 election). Kate Cohen was introduced by Freethought Today Editor PJ Slinger. To watch her speech (or any of the convention speeches) go to ffrf.us/con24.

PJ Slinger: I'm pleased to introduce our next speaker, Kate Cohen, who is back by popular demand! Last year, FFRF honored Kate with the Freethought Heroine Award for, in part, writing the wonderful book, "We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (And Maybe You Should Too)."

Kate is contributing columnist for the Washington Post and is an Emmy-award-winning documentary script writer. Her essays have appeared in Slate, Salon, BuzzFeed, Bustle, Vox and Fine Cooking. She has a degree in comparative literature from Dartmouth and has written three books, including "We of Little Faith."

So, please, let's give it up for Kate Cohen!

By Kate Cohen

It's so good to be with my Freedom From Religion Foundation friends again!

I was invited last year because of my book about why I decided to be honest about being an atheist — "Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe" — and why I think America needs more nonbelievers to do that.

I was also invited because of my work as a columnist for the Washington Post. Not everything I write is about religion, but everything I write is about finding and examining the cultural assumptions behind what's in the news, what's on screen, what's in my wedding vows, what my kids are learning in school, what we take for granted, what we should rethink. Since I saw you last year, I've kept at it. Same old angle, just more self-consciously now because, although receiving the Freethought Heroine Award was a great honor, it also felt a little bit like an assignment. Well, I take my homework very seriously.

In the spirit of this annual meeting, and in the hopes of being invited back again, I thought I should give a little annual report on my progress. Let's pretend this is a regular thing, OK?

Most of the columns I've written since October are on different topics, but they all ask readers to focus, for a few minutes, on some part of our culture that bears, shall we say, further examination.

I asked readers to think about the National Day of Prayer and all the ways we've forsaken the Founders their one truly revolutionary idea — the separation of church and state. I asked readers to take a moment to consider the lives and the liberty that have been lost since *Roe v. Wade* was overturned; to notice that col-



Kyle Hilker

Kate Cohen makes her grand entrance to the stage to give her talk on Sept. 27 in Denver.



Steve Solomon

Kate Cohen speaks about the role of religion in the pervasive stigma of menstruation.

leges were lowering their standards for male applicants in an attempt to even up the gender ratio, in effect, practicing affirmative action for men.

I've written about Louisiana's new law requiring that the Ten Commandments be posted in every classroom and what other documents we could post that might be enlightening for students. I've pointed out that Christian nationalism and gun violence are tightly linked. I've talked about what a book ban means to the students, teachers and librarians in my hometown Virginia school district. I've asked whether the new weight-loss drugs are going to pressure all of us to conform, and therefore to exacerbate anti-fat stigma and social inequality.

I've also written about Barbie, the Bachelorette, beaches and soup . . . because even a freethought heroine gets to be free sometimes, too!

So, that's what I've been doing this year, as well as getting to talk to amazing people all around the country about my book.

2024 lowlights

But, alas, as you well know, I'm not the only one who's been busy. Christian nationalists have, too. Here are some 2024 highlights of the attempts to inflict one small group's religious beliefs on everyone else:

- Louisiana passed a law requiring every classroom in the state to post the Ten Commandments, along with other "historical documents."
- But then Oklahoma said: There has to be a bible in every classroom and schools have to teach from it.
- There still are some public schools, even though some states are trying to kill them off with voucher systems that funnel billions of dollars of public funds to religious schools. The Washington Post just reported that 87 percent of school voucher dollars — taxpayer dollars — ultimately go to religious schools.
- But wait, we can top that, said Ohio, which passed a law allowing public tax dollars to go straight to building religious schools, no detouring through parents and pretending it's all about choice.
- Oklahoma would like to point out that its schools superintendent included an additional \$3 million in its budget to buy the bibles its classrooms now have to stock. So there. They really do seem like they're trying to outdo each other.
- Not to be bested by Texas, Florida and Louisiana are now inviting chaplains into public schools, although they're not sure how they feel about it if the chaplains come from the Satanic Temple.
- Meanwhile, there have been 13 measles outbreaks so far this year, which doesn't sound religious, but of course it is. It's a direct result of a concerted effort to allow religious exemptions to vaccinations.

- Technically, Project 2025 was written last year. But we have to pay attention to it now, because the 900-page conservative policy playbook — which, to be clear, Donald Trump has still never seen or heard of and also doesn't like — is like a Christian nationalist wish list.

As Katherine Stewart might say, when they're telling us what they're going to do, we should listen. Which is — among other things — eliminate federal public school funding entirely, allow publicly funded religious foster care and adoption services to discriminate as they please, and require that workers be paid time and a half on the Sabbath.

Speaking of the Republican nominee for president, he's now selling bibles — just \$59.99! If you ask me, it's cheaper just to take the one out of your bedside table if you're staying at, say, a Sheraton, which is owned by Marriott, which is supposed to put them in every room. I didn't find one in my room, but I guess it's possible Trump sold it for lawyers' fees.

Anyway, like the Gideon Bible, the incursions of religion into our public life are everywhere. They're so common, I can't keep up, and I really admire the people who do, including the FFRF legal team, to which I have directed many concerned citizens over the past year. So, thank you and sorry.

'Tampon Tim'

I want to point out one little footnote in the Christian nationalist story I thought would be useful to examine. Maybe it doesn't seem to have anything to do with religion, but, like so much in our culture, it actually very much does. What I'm talking about is the brief attempt to deal a political deathblow to the Democratic nominee for vice president by dubbing him "Tampon Tim." So, what's that all about?

In 2023, Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz signed into law a budget provision requiring public schools to provide students from fourth grade and up with free menstrual products. The law took effect in January. No one really cared. Lots of states do this. The idea is menstrual care is basic hygiene and health care. It's like making toilet paper or band-aids free and available to students.

This small compassionate requirement did not inspire the same outpouring of love that the free school lunch bill did. But why in the world would it inspire criticism? How does this law invite Republican scorn? Is it that awful to provide a necessity for free to needy kids? Well, maybe. But what they really didn't like was the fact that the law does not specify gender. It purposely does not specify gender.

It says: "The products must be available to all menstruating students in restrooms regularly used by students in grades 4 to 12." This inclusive language — which allows for the possibility that a trans boy or a nonbinary child

might need menstrual products, which invites (but does not require) schools to stock those products in both the girls and the boys bathrooms — is what Donald Trump and his team were hoping to get voters riled up about.

This inclusivity, this acknowledgement that trans and nonbinary kids exist, enrages the Christian right. Or, perhaps it's better to say that it's given them a concrete issue to try to get other people enraged about.

I'm not sure how much is genuine. It's hard for me to imagine that people care this much. But I do know that at the base of this insistence that boys are boys and girls are girls is . . . religion. It's right there in Genesis if you want to go looking for it — which they definitely do. [Shows image of protesters holding a banner that reads "God created them MALE & FEMALE (Gen. 5:2)"]

That's it. That and an entire doctrinal hierarchy that makes women subservient to men, and men subservient to God, a hierarchy that depends on a strict and immutable, God-given, binary Adam and Eve, male and female. I mean, that book was written a long time ago and you know we made progress in our understanding of human biology and — oops, no, never mind.

In April, the Vatican's Department of Doctrine issued a 20-page document called "Dignitas infinita" (Infinite Dignity) to remind everyone that God created man and woman as biologically different, and changing one's gender is a grave threat to human dignity. And this is from the "good" pope.

Francis was a little late to the party, actually. Ten years ago, the largest group of Protestants churches in this country — the Southern Baptist Convention — included this resolution in its annual meeting. "Whereas God made two sexes and whereas public schools aren't enforcing that division sufficiently, we're resolved to use our pulpits and the law to make life a living hell for trans kids." Something like that.

And that, my friends, is how you end up with legislation like the Millstone Act, sponsored by Oklahoma state Sen. David Bullard, which makes it a felony to provide gender transition procedures to anyone under the age of 26. It's named from a bible quote — Matthew 18:6: "But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it is better for him that a heavy millstone be hung around his neck, and that he be drowned in the depths of the sea." The idea being that we should drown doctors who provide gender affirming care. You know, metaphorically.

This bill didn't go through, but Oklahoma's bathroom bill did.

In the last 10 years, the number of anti-trans bills introduced has skyrocketed. There were 21 in 2014, when the Southern Baptist Convention made that resolution. This year, so far, there have been 658, and 45 of those are now law.

Across 16 states, 45 anti-trans laws, including laws that force students to use the school bathrooms correlating to their birth sex, not gender identity, laws that ban trans students from participating in school sports according to their gender identity, laws that ban gender-affirming care, and laws that out students to their parents. All this year.

For that we have God to thank, I guess.

So, by reminding us that Tim Walz made tampons and pads available to "menstruating students" — not just to girls — the Trump campaign is trying to remind us of how Democrats are subverting the divine order in a scary and even apocalyptic way.



Kyle Hilker

Kate Cohen talks with a convention attendee after signing a copy of her book, "We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (And Maybe You Should Too)."

Juvenile tactics

But, there's something else that's going on with "Tampon Tim." It's not just the coded reference to bathroom bills and Democrats' insufficient policing of gender and sacrilegious acceptance of trans kids. There's also the juvenile attempt to make us all giggle at the word "tampon." I'm serious.

Here in America, tampons and menstrual pads are embarrassing and menstruation is shameful. Girls whisper to one another when they need to borrow one, if they can overcome their embarrassment enough to ask. Overcoming embarrassment is not typically a talent

of your average adolescent. That's one reason why Walz had to sign a bill making schools provide them — so kids wouldn't have to ask for them from their friends, their

teachers or even their parents. And, God forbid, any man would have to go buy one. It's a cliché in pop culture: The terrified husband or dad being sent to the grocery store to get "feminine hygiene products." Has anyone here ever seen a sign in a pharmacy with the word "menstrual" on it?

Remember Michael Keaton in "Mr. Mom" trying to act casual picking up Kotex for his wife and then — horrors! — the cashier calls for a price check. "Irv, are these Kotex maxi pads on special?" Comedy gold.

This embarrassment, this yuck factor, about something that happens every month to half the population for half of our lives, where does it come from? Did you guess . . . religion?

According to the Old Testament and the Quran, menstruating women are unclean and impure. There are elaborate rules for what they can and cannot touch while they are menstruating, where they can and cannot go, and what they have to do to become clean again at the end of their cycle.

This is true in the Hindu religion, as well. Hindus cannot, for example, enter temples when they are menstruating. In some places, they are banished from the home and barred from touching food, religious icons, cattle and men.

That's awful, but that's religion, right? If you're not an Orthodox Jew or a conservative Muslim or Hindu, if you don't care what St. Thomas Aquinas thought about menstruation — who cares? We don't have to abide by those rules. Why

should it matter to us?

Well, these things have a way of trickling down, so to speak. Even when those specific rules aren't followed, the general sense of menstruation as a state not just of impurity, but something apart from and toxic to normal daily life, something we need to hide and to look away from, has seeped into even the most secular cultures, above and beyond just your garden-variety misogyny.

I learned from an early age not to talk about my period. If I had to take a tampon to a public bathroom, I learned to be discreet about it. We used euphemisms instead of the word "period." We would talk about it being "that time of

the month." My mother says she used to say her "friend came to visit" or, mysteriously, she "fell off a roof." We've all heard "Aunt Flo's in town." There's also "Satan's waterfall," which

seems about right. In France, apparently, they say, "The English have landed." In Australia, they call it "Shark Week." Russians call menstruation "Defrosting the steak" and "The Red Army." Apparently, the Danes say, "There are communists in the summer house."

"There are communists in the summer house." That is my gift to you today.

Ignorance and misogyny

Euphemisms are just one evidence of societal discomfort around menstruation. Here's another. [Shows image of tampon use instructions.] If you bought a box of tampons today and you didn't know how to use it, you would be confronted by line drawings that are so squeamish about female anatomy, they are functionally useless. You see it's pretty clear how to unwrap a tampon — although hey, how about a photograph? — but then we are absolutely not allowed to see where exactly a tampon goes. Why would you show it from the side? They would rather cut off this woman's left leg than show us, I don't know, labia. You know what would be helpful to see? Urethra, vaginal opening, anus. That would be useful information.

Our culture is so afraid of and grossed out by female bodies that we can't even show females the basic landscape.

Can you imagine if we showed people how to brush their teeth using a profile line drawing that showed the tonsils and the jawbone but not the, um, place where you insert the toothbrush? No lips or tongue?

It's comical, I know, but the ignorance and misogyny this packaging represents is not so very funny.

The fact is that medical research having anything to do specifically with the female body is woefully underfunded, that doctors routinely underestimate and discount women's pain, and that the quality or even existence of education about menstrual and sexual health in schools depends very much on how enlightened your state government is, which, in some states, is not very. A 2023 expansion of Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law prohibited sex education of any kind before sixth grade, which is, of course, after many girls have gotten their first periods.

Meanwhile, it should come as no surprise to you that menstrual products themselves are undertested and understudied. But, you may be surprised how badly. The first disposable menstrual pads were sold in the 1880s. The tampon was patented in 1931. And there was no published scientific study of menstrual products using actual blood until *last year*. They tested them — when they tested them at all — with water. I'm told that's not as thick.

The problem with not knowing how much menstrual products hold is that how much you bleed or don't bleed can, believe it or not, be a symptom of problems. But, you know, female problems, so I guess that doesn't matter.

The good news is that "Tampon Tim" as a putdown didn't really take. People didn't care. The good news is that there are plenty of people who look at this guy and see someone trying to help kids — all kids, whatever their parts might be — and who see his association with tampons as a badge of honor. Plenty of people who are grossed out **not** by tampons, but by the sniggering childish bullies who are trying to play on our deep-seated prejudices.

The bad news is that those prejudices run deep. Menstrual stigma is just one small symptom of the misogyny enshrined in and enforced by the world's major religions. A progress report on that would take all day, and this year it would have to begin with "pro-life" absolutism that "saves the lives" of two-inch fetuses but kills actual living women with actual futures and families. Our immediate, urgent job is to fight for them.

But, as we mobilize to get right-wing religion out of our laws, we have to stay alert to the fear and control of female bodies that religion has embedded throughout our culture. From discriminatory school dress codes to the sorry state of women's medical research to misleading sex education to the assumption that women's bodies can be used for unpaid domestic labor, elder care and childcare, as God and JD Vance intended. We've got laws to repeal, but we've also got an entire culture to shift.

Listen, if you've read my book — you should really read my book — you know, although I'm an atheist, I don't hate religion. I appreciate Renaissance paintings and small chapels and matzo ball soup. I appreciated the organization that goes into organized religion. I understand that people look to religion for a lot of the things that human beings need: meaning, morality, a way to think about death, ways to mark time and celebrate life. We've got to respect that if only so we can think clearly about how to replace it.

But, as we try to live thoughtful, intentional lives, we also need to remember that religion has given us a lot of crap that we're so used to we barely notice it anymore, like all the transphobia and the misogyny behind "Tampon Tim." You'll find it everywhere. You just have to follow the thread.

Thank you.

Convention speech

Unshackling ourselves from holy handcuffs

This was the speech (slightly edited) given by Jon Huertas on Sept. 28 at FFRF's 47th annual convention in Denver. He was introduced by Margaret Downey, who is the founder of the Freethought Society, president of the Thomas Paine Memorial Association and an FFRF state representative. To watch the video of his presentation, go to ffrf.us/con24.

Margaret Downey: Good evening, everyone. Hasn't this been the most wonderful conference ever?

It is my honor to introduce my friend and fellow atheist, Jon Huertas, who is attending this conference with his spouse, Nicole Burgess. Many of you may recognize Jon from his remarkable career as an actor. He has captivated audiences with his dynamic performances in hit television programs such as "Castle" and "This Is Us." Jon is particularly proud of his performance as Sgt. Tony Espera in the HBO miniseries "Generation Kill." Being a veteran himself, Jon says that his "Generation Kill" character was the most meaningful role of his career.

Jon is also proud to say that in real life he was an atheist in the foxhole, having served eight years in the United States Air Force. Currently, Jon is working as a screenwriter, director and producer. Jon is a passionate advocate for secularism and the separation of religion and government. Jon has an unwavering commitment to the principles of freedom, reason and humanism.

Since 2020, Jon has volunteered to participate in the online annual International Secular Day of the Dead — Dia de Los Muertos. Each time Jon opens our Dia de Los Muertos secular program, he conveys an inspiring and passionate message.

Jon's dedication to ensuring that individuals are free from religious coercion is commendable, and his promotion of separation of religion and government is very impressive.

I'm confident that the Freedom From Religion Foundation convention audience will enjoy what Jon has to say tonight as he presents his speech titled "Blacks and Latinos: Unshackling Ourselves from the Holy Handcuffs."

Please welcome Jon Huertas.

By Jon Huertas

Good evening. Thanks for that introduction. That was very nice. I'm a little nervous. This is my first AA meeting, so bear with me. Sorry. I'm Jon Huertas, and I am an American atheist.

Wow. I mean, that was a pretty good applause, but I thought that that would have a little more impact, but I guess being an out and proud atheist at an atheist-based conference is kind of like being a vegan at a salad bar. No one here is impressed. But can you imagine if more atheists made that proclamation proudly? Wouldn't the world be a better place, right?

Anyway, thank you all for having me here tonight. And thank you for being here. If my speech "Blacks and Latinos: Unshackling Ourselves from Holy Handcuffs" doesn't grab your attention, well, don't worry, because I got a backup plan. We can all bond over how to survive those family gatherings where your aunt comes up and ask you if you found Jesus yet.

Now, let's just be real. Where did Jesus go? Where has he been? It's been over



Photo by Chris Line

In his convention speech on Sept. 28, 2024, Jon Huertas questions why Blacks and Latinos still shackle themselves to Christianity.

2,000 years. If Jesus hasn't noticed, shit is fucked up here on Earth. And back then, every guy in the Middle East had a beard, dark skin, curly hair — basically me. And, finding an empty tomb and thinking that Jesus was back because he supposedly made an appearance is like mistaking every other guy at the gym for your buddy Dave. Plus, grave robbing was practically a national sport back then. An empty tomb. Come on, that was probably just some guys trying to get an easy score. And all those appearances of Jesus. Come on. They likely happened after a bunch of wine was drunk. I mean, they drank a lot of wine back then, according to the Good Book.

Anyway, tonight is about taking a journey through the tangled corridors of our shared histories, our complex identities, and to envision a future free from the heavy chains of religious indoctrination that have weighed down on Indigenous peoples in the Americas to Africa and beyond.

I stand before you tonight not just as a speaker, but as a living testament to the power of personal freedom. I'm an atheist and I am free from religion.

Clinging to beliefs

My goal tonight is for us to unravel the layers of religious devotion that have bound us as humans, but especially some of the most devout in our communities — the Blacks and Latinos.

It boggles my mind. I mean, come on, it is so ironic. My ancestors were introduced to Christianity with chains and whips, not appearances of the Messiah.

And yet, centuries later, here we are, still clinging to the beliefs once used to control, enslave and murder us.

But we're going to talk about breaking those chains so that we can free our communities and hopefully do some good. Imagine an Afro-Latino me, raised in the bosom of Catholicism since the day they snipped my foreskin and nearly drowned me in that baptismal bowl of sorrow. As a kid, I walked the line between

altar boy duties and the fact that I had already become a nonbeliever by the age of 9.

(I got privileges for being an altar boy, so I stuck with it.)

Now, as someone who's always favored the hard facts of science

over the soft comfort of scripture, I can't help but think that if we treated science with the same reverence that we've given these ancient texts, we would have probably all teleported here tonight instead of Ubered.

Let's talk about the historical chains. Religion in the Latino and Black communities has always been like that double-edged sword, part sanctuary and part prison, reminding us of the days that when faith was handed out not as a choice, but as a set of shackles on an auction block. Wandering through my Catholic school hallways and sitting through chapel in college — I went to TCU — I always felt the weight of those invisible chains. And I'm not talking about the baller kind you might wear with your sexy outfit. I'm talking about the sneaky heavy kind that route back to slavery, promising you heaven while keeping you in line. Today's religious walls in America aren't just

metaphorical barriers from your grandma's "back in my day" tales. No, they are huge. They are real. And they mess with everything from our paychecks to our political power, deciding who rises to the top and who stays at the bottom. Much like the actual walls that used to segregate slaves, the house slaves from the field slaves. Today's holy divisions slice up our marginalized communities by design.

You have the devout on one side looking all sanctified and skeptics like me on the other, wondering how is this ridiculous religious Kool-Aid still so damn popular?

It's like a bizarre civil war over who owns the moral high ground. Meanwhile, as everyone is distracted fighting over ideas like divine real estate — hello, Gaza Strip — the real goals of unity and equality just keep getting pushed further and further away in an endless game of spiritual keep away. Questioning the piety. Now for Blacks and Latinos, questioning religious norms and our culture is like telling your grandmother that her legendary recipe could use a little more salt? It's necessary, but you'd better duck.

Now, the church is lauded far and wide as this grand beacon of hope, but it's also quite the bouncer at the club of life, isn't it? Setting the rules, telling you what you can and can't do. And, let's not forget, it often squashes more spirits than it uplifts. You want to talk about a power trip? They call this strict adherence "piety."

But, really, it's just a fancy way of not letting anyone ask "Why are we still doing all this?"

Think about this. Why do Blacks and Latinos still cling so tightly to the doctrines delivered by the same ships that brought Blacks over in chains and genocide and scores of native peoples? Seems a bit suspect, right? It's like asking directions from the person who just stole your car.

Why should the road map to our freedom be drawn with the fairy tools of our

past oppression? It's not just ironic. It's fucked up. Speaking of fucked up, I mentioned earlier my journey toward true freedom. Well, it didn't come without some spiritual speed bumps.

The Sears saga

Enter the Sears saga. A tale of faith, folly and frisky encounters. Let's rewind back to my high school days. Seventeen-year-old me slinging merchandise at Sears and Roebuck and Co., moonlighting as a skeptical atheist, and then enter the captivating, blond-haired beauty, 24-year-old brand new co-worker who, when I walked up to her, quizzes me with the "Are you a Christian?"

Well, in a tangle of teen confusion and, let's just be honest, raging hormones, I blurt out, "Yes, absolutely! I'm Catholic." And, of course, she turns to me and says, "Well, then you're not really a Christian." It's because she says I'm not saved. So, there I was, suddenly, all in on getting saved. I mean, she was really cute. I had to just do what I had to do.

Now, was it divine intervention or was it just the hot chick in the women's department? It's hard to tell, but as a person of color, I have this theory. Maybe we are just predisposed to fall for European sales pitches, spiritual or otherwise.

Or, maybe, it's just my bad luck in spiritual encounters doubling as dating. More on that later . . . I have another story.

Anyway. Her husband — yes, you heard that right — he was a youth pastor at the church and the basketball coach. Oh, yeah. It was the classic move. Something straight out of the old colonial playbook. You know the type. Anglos using religion as a front to exploit the physical prowess of Black and Indigenous populations. His outreach wasn't about saving my soul. It was about leveraging my athleticism to salvage his basketball team.

And his wife, by day, she was all casseroles and choirs — the model churchgoer, making everyone believe that she was as pure as communion wine. But, by night, she morphed into the seductress with less than holy intentions. She was supposed to be my guide to the light, but she was more interested in turning down the lights. There I was, freshly saved, and the coach's wife invites me over for dinner, as they did often on Friday nights, with the coach conveniently out of town on a church retreat.

Halfway through the dessert, she decides to make that move, slipping my newfound Christian faith into a full-blown spiritual meltdown. And, it's really perfect timing. Nothing nudges you back into atheism faster than holy hypocrisy, served up as a side dish. Now, this very personal and true story is way more than a detour on the road to enlightenment. It deeply affected me.

It was like accidentally taking the highway to absurdity. It's a hilarious peek into how history just repeats itself over and over again with religious exploitation. Only this time, it happened in a Sears store. Turns out people will use any excuse to manipulate, be it for basketball or something a little steamier.

Now, breaking free for progress.

Ditch the shackles

Look, it is critical for us in the Black and Latino communities to get one thing straight. We have to ditch these old-school shackles. Our ancestors fought way too hard for our freedom for us to just be walking around with these historical handcuffs on, like there's some kind of fashion statement. Imagine if we took all the energy that we're using to defend the ancient doctrines and actually put it into something



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Actor Jon Huertas wonders why Blacks and Latinos "cling to a past that doesn't serve us when we can build a future that does?"

useful, like educational empowerment, economic independence or getting more deeply involved in politics.

Why hold on to a broken record when you can upgrade to streaming? Spotify is great.

Let's swap out those rusty chains for something that's actually going to get us somewhere. It's time to move forward and start writing our own story, instead of being stuck in someone else's outdated script.

I have one more tale on my road to personal freedom, and I call it "Seeker in the city: Rediscovering religion in the Hollywood Hills."

Now, you guys know what a seeker is, right? Raise your hands if you know what a seeker is. A seeker is someone who's seeking Jesus, but he's not really Christian. Back in 2003, I didn't have a clue until life decided to give me a crash course. Literally. You see, when I started off in Hollywood, I was on a high note. And then it quickly spiraled into the lean years, meaning I ran out of money.

First, I crashed my girlfriend's car, a cool \$8,000 right down the drain. Then my dog decided to tangle with a monster truck. That stunt cost me \$10,000 to save her. And then for the grand finale, my girlfriend decided to dump me because I wasn't making TMZ headlines yet. I'm still not, and I'm fine with that.

So, there I was, a perfect mix of broke and heartbroken, the perfect sucker to fall into the seeker trap. I thought maybe little baby Jesus had some pull in Tinseltown. I popped into this Presbyterian church in the Hills, hoping for a bit of celestial guidance, and instead, I get this dude pastor Mark up there condemning the gay crowd that was sitting right in the middle of church, like he's auditioning for the next villain in the next "Mission Impossible" movie.

His sermon was more fantastical than a Harry Potter novel. I mean, come on, who writes this shit? Really? Oh, that's right, prehistoric man. And just then, to add spice to the saga, I ended up dating a girl at this church. Yes, Jesus knows my Kryptonite.

Everything was going pretty well until the bible came up. You see, she was against premarital sex. I was not. We weren't compatible. So she's told me that she's celibate because the bible says so. And I couldn't help but point out that "Yeah, but the bible also endorses slavery, promotes it, even." Needless to say, pointing that out went over just about as well as explaining quantum physics at a frat party.

Then it hit me. Diving back into religion after such a catastrophic run of luck was like ordering the same bad dish at a restaurant because you forgot how terrible it tasted the first time.

It's high time that we put aside these ancient fairy tales. Imagine if we, as Blacks and Latinos, channeled our energy into advancing health care access. Imagine fostering community entrepreneurship or amplifying our voices in the tech industry instead of going to church on Sunday. Why cling to a past that doesn't serve us when we can build a future that does?

Crafting our freedom

Now, in conclusion, crafting our freedom. We can craft ourselves a new era where our spirituality is defined not by the doctrines of old, but by the diverse, vibrant and inclusive values that we all hold dear. Let's build communities that encourage dialogue and dissent where questioning is not just accepted, it is encouraged. An era where Black, Latino and all identities are celebrated in all of their facets, free from the dogmas that once sought to define, divide and confine us.

Let's sketch out a new chapter with a vibrant, inclusive spectrum that actually suits us. With events like this one, we're setting up kind of a spiritual debate club, right? Where questioning isn't just allowed, it's the main event. Now, this isn't just crucial for Black and Latino communities. It's essential on a global scale.

Take the ongoing drama in Gaza and Israel, for example. It's what happens when you let age-old religious texts call the shots in a modern world. It's like using a typewriter to send a text message.

Organizations like the Freedom From Religion Foundation get it, trying to stop the world from continually rebooting these ancient, conflicting programs.

Imagine instead of fighting over divine land rights, we're all just chillin', arguing over something that really matters — like whether pineapple truly belongs on pizza. It does not. Do not put it on there!

As we move forward as a group of nonbelievers, as people who know real freedom, let's be proud. Step out of the shadows. Let's celebrate ourselves. And when the confetti settles, let's not just stand there brushing it out of our hair, let's pledge to explore these freedoms that genuinely resonate with us. Let's celebrate our aspirations. It's about time that my people define what it means to be truly free. Shaking off these holy handcuffs of imposed beliefs to step into a liberty that fits every aspect of our identity. Just like the perfect Spotify playlist.

Now, as we wrap up tonight, let's leave all this heavy stuff I've been talking about behind. Let's focus on enjoying the moment. We've all come together for something really cool and really special. Go grab a drink, mingle and let's have some fun without any celestial oversight.

After all, life is too short to miss out on a good time because you're stressing about a higher approval. Let's cheer to freedom, to new ideas, and to a night where the only judgment you're going to face is from the bartender for ordering that extra cocktail. Thank you very much.



Photo by Chris Line

Jon Huertas responds to a question from an audience member following his speech.

FFRF CHARITABLE GRANTS

FFRF offers its chapters a \$1,000 grant per chapter, per year, to be used for direct charity and activism. Annually, the chapters individually decide what local organization should receive the grant within their local community. To learn more about chapters, and to join, visit: ffrf.org/outreach/ffrf-chapters.

FFRF Valley of the Sun



December's "Highway to Hell" event brings TSTAZ members from around the state to clean a stretch of the interstate between Phoenix and Tucson.

FFRF's Valley of the Sun Chapter awarded the Satanic Temple Arizona Congregation (TSTAZ) with its 2024 charitable grant. This \$1,000 award recognizes TSTAZ's significant contributions to Arizona communities and the advancement of our shared values of reason, compassion, and social justice. TSTAZ's ongoing initiatives, like Devil's Playground and Paved with Good Intentions, highlight the congregation's dedication to community service and civic engagement through park and road cleanup events. Their efforts in supporting sober recovery, harm reduction and mutual aid with From the Ashes programs further exemplify their commitment to empathy, noble action and the well-being of others.

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Ozarks Chapter of FFRF

In 2024, the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF contributed \$500 to TrailMix NWA, whose mission is to empower individuals to make a positive impact in northwestern Arkansas by providing a secular community, promoting environmental stewardship and facilitating values-based education.

The chapter also provided \$250 to the NWA Women's Shelter, and also have committed to volunteering at its thrift store again in 2025.

Also, the group contributed \$250 to KUAF Public Radio, whose mission is to be a leader in public media, serving its audience with programs that challenge, entertain, educate and inform.



Ozarks Chapter member Chip Ballew meets with TrailMix Founder and Board President Nico Follett.

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Greater Sacramento Chapter

The Greater Sacramento Chapter of FFRF awarded its 2024 grant to two organizations: The Wind Books Program and the Capital Stage Company.

Partnering with Wind Youth Services in Sacramento, the chapter assisted in helping local young adults who have aged out of the foster care system or are otherwise homeless to go to a used bookstore to purchase any book for themselves. This began a weekly program at the center focusing on life-long learning and reading. The chapter installed a bookcase at this facility with a plaque at the top showing the chapter name and a second similar bookcase and plaque at a different teen shelter.



Beers Used Books in Sacramento is where the youth who are housed at Wind Youth Services are able to shop for a book for themselves to keep forever, thanks to grants from the Sacramento chapter.

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San Francisco Bay Chapter of FFRF

The chapter used its 2024 charitable grant to partner with the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ Community Center in San Jose to earthquake-proof the bookcases in its library of 5,000 books. The remaining funds were used to fix a leaky skylight and provide pizza for a Rainbow Bingo Night at the center.



Dana Treadwell, secretary of the SF Bay Chapter, is shown in the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ Community Center's library with Gabrielle Antolovich, board president of Billy DeFrank LGBTQ+ Community Center.

...

Denver Chapter of FFRF

The Denver Chapter of FFRF donated its 2024 charitable grant to two organizations that make a significant impact locally.

The chapter donated \$500 to Planned Parenthood of the Rocky Mountains, which has been committed to delivering the highest quality reproductive and sexual health care; teaching medically accurate, age-appropriate sexuality education; and working diligently to protect the right to access safe, legal abortion for over 100 years.

The chapter also donated \$500 to the Food Bank of the Rockies, the largest hunger-relief organization in the Rocky Mountain region. The bank's mission is to meet people where they are, with the food they need, based on their unique circumstances and culture. The bank distributes enough food for 196,000 meals every day.



Donations are loaded for distribution at the Food Bank of the Rockies.

Central Florida Freethought Community

The Central Florida Freethought Community volunteered and donated to the Coalition of the Homeless in Central Florida. The chapter assisted with two different volunteering shifts. During the first shift, the chapter helped with general cleaning of the Center for Women and Families Kitchen, assembled items for the daycare play area, performed minor landscaping for the youth playground area, and washed and detailed two outreach vehicles. During the second shift, the chapter served the entire campus dinner, which included hundreds of meals.



Members of the Central Florida Freethought Community take a break during a volunteering shift at the Coalition of the Homeless.

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Maine Chapter of FFRF

The Maine Chapter of FFRF donated the \$1,000 grant to Maine Family Planning, which offers abortion services, birth control, primary care, gender-affirming health care, family support services, virtual visits, and support two WIC offices. The organization is quite concerned about what might happen to their federal funding in the near future, and have embarked on a capital campaign to try to cover that projected gap, just in case.



Maine Chapter President Ray Vensel is pictured with Jennifer Capen, development associate of Maine Family Planning.

...

Lake Superior Freethinkers



From left, Rod Froseth, Alicia Gaskin, Tom Patten and Charles Gessert of the LSF Planning Committee are shown with Amber Sadowski and Sophie Clock of Life House leadership.

The Lake Superior Freethinkers' (LSF) held a brief ceremony on Aug. 23, 2024, when it made its charitable grant donation to its community partner, Life House.

The chapter selected Life House in light of its work with young people who are on the streets of Duluth. The total of the donation was \$2,035, which included the \$1,000 grant from FFRF and \$1,035 in matching funds donated by LSF members.

Grand Rapids Atheists & Freethinkers



Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers helped deliver \$500 checks to two worthy causes.

Six members of Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers (GRAF) delivered \$500 checks to two local non-profits dedicated to helping individuals and families in the city of Grand Rapids and surrounding communities in Itasca County, Minn.

Grace House, a shelter for homeless individuals and families, is in the final stages of a \$2 million major renovation.

Advocates For Family Peace provides support services for people in abusive situations. Services include crisis intervention for battered women, emergency housing for survivors actively fleeing domestic violence, visitor rooms for court-ordered supervised visitations and exchanges, intervention programs for male and female partners, and free and confidential behavioral and legal counseling.

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Upstate New York Freethinkers

Upstate New York Freethinkers recently awarded its annual \$1,000 charitable grant to the Rural Health Network of South Central New York, which provides vital health care services to underserved communities in the Southern Tier and Central regions of New York. This support will assist the Rural Health Network in addressing critical health care needs, including improving access to care, managing chronic diseases, and tackling social determinants of health, such as transportation barriers and food insecurity.

...



Upstate New York Freethinkers' Jeffrey Galante and Tim Heywood deliver a \$1,000 donation to Cindy Martin, director of resource development at Rural Health Network of South Central New York.

FFRF East Tennessee

The FFRF East Tennessee chapter again chipped in an additional \$500 to the charity grant provided by FFRF. This allowed the chapter to give \$750 each to two abortion access agencies in Tennessee, which has a "heartbeat law" that has banned abortion in the state. These two agencies (now merged into one) provide assistance in finding and traveling to abortion providers out of state.

Triangle Freethought Society



Members of the Triangle Freethought chapter are shown with other secular volunteers at the Rise Against Hunger event.

On May 19, 2024, the Triangle Freethought Society participated in a Rise Against Hunger event coordinated by the Ethical Humanist Society of the Triangle and joined by members of Sunday Assembly and Women Without Religion in the Triangle.

Rise Against Hunger targets remote, last-mile communities within hunger pockets that are designated "serious" or higher on the Global Hun-

ger Index. These pockets are the hardest places to reach and are often difficult to access, have lack of communication and poor infrastructure. During the event, all groups together packaged 5,000 meals to be delivered to the Philippines. Additionally, over \$4,000 (including the \$1000 FFRF charitable grant) was donated to RISE from these secular communities.

Cincinnati Metro Chapter



From left, Hayden Miller, president of the SSA at the University of Cincinnati, stands with Cincinnati Chapter Board Members Jeff Tingle, Bill Messer, Mark Davis and Mark Lightfield after giving \$1,000 to Quinn Jensen from the SSA at Ohio State University.

The FFRF Cincinnati Metro Chapter awarded its 2024 grant to the winner of the Student Secular Alliance's annual essay contest, organized by the local SSA chapter at the University of Cincinnati.

Our chapter reviewed and rated the entries for the states of Ohio and Kentucky, presenting the top entries back to SSA. Together, both groups selected the winner of the essay contest. The winner of the contest happened to be the president of an SSA chapter at Ohio State University, and he received the \$1,000 grant.

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Austin Area Chapter of FFRF

The Austin Area Chapter supported the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund, which fights book banning and censorship. Chapter Board Members Andrew Bushard, Judith Sokolow and Steve Bratteng visited its headquarters and the coordinator informed them that the majority of the staff were attending hearings about "bible-infused curriculum."



Steve Bratteng, Andrew Bushard and Judith Sokolow are pictured with a staff member from the Texas Freedom Network Education Fund.

Kenosha Racine Atheists & Freethinkers (KRAFT)

The Kenosha Racine Atheists & Freethinkers chose to donate the 2024 charitable grant to Woman's and Children's Horizons, a local non-profit that's mission is to provide support, shelter, education, training and healing services to victims of sexual and domestic abuse, their families and the community. The chapter felt as though the support of nonprofits that advocate for women are of utmost importance while we enter the new political climate.



Kenosha Racine Atheists and Freethinkers member Rob Moore presents the grant check to a representative at Woman's and Children's Horizons.

FFRF's 2025 convention

Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Oct. 17-19, 2025

Save the date!

Successes

Continued from page 1

counsel after 11 years working on FFRF lawsuits.

We also added some new staff members. FFRF hired Sammi Lawrence as a staff attorney after she completed a two-year fellowship. Hirsh Joshi (University of Missouri Law School) started as a legal fellow in January 2024. Kyle Steinberg (University of Minnesota Law School), started as a legal fellow in September. We also hosted three law student interns and two undergraduate interns.

Litigation

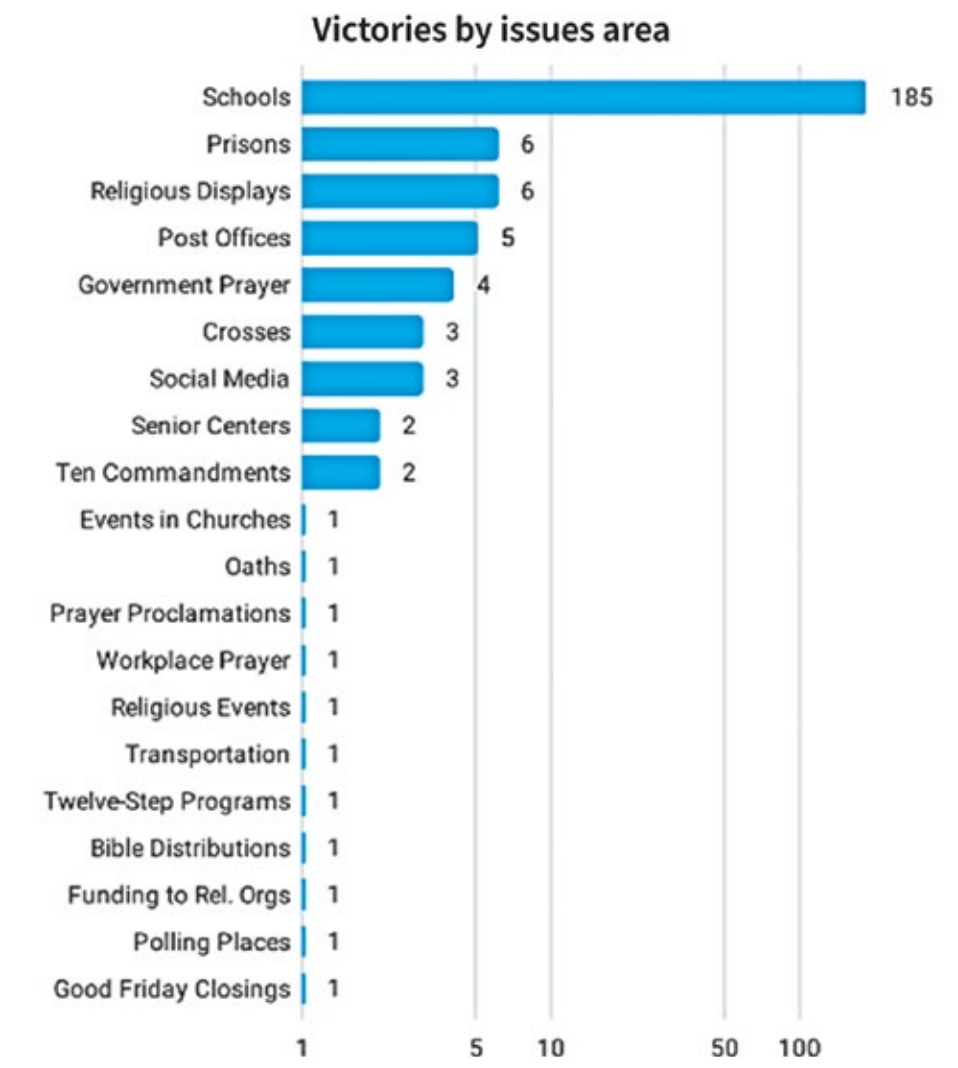
In 2024, FFRF favorably settled two lawsuits and filed three new court challenges, adding to our three other ongoing cases. Increasingly, we have worked with partner organizations to challenge state laws that significantly violate constitutional rights.

In October, FFRF was part of a coalition that filed a petition with the Oklahoma Supreme Court to block State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters' mandate that all public schools incorporate the bible into their curricula. The petition asks the court to stop the state from spending millions of taxpayer dollars on bibles to support Walters' mandate.

FFRF and a similar coalition filed a lawsuit in June challenging a new Louisiana law that requires all public schools from kindergarten through college to display the Ten Commandments. This law mandates that every classroom display a particular version of the Ten Commandments. On Nov. 12, U.S. District Judge John DeGravelles ruled in our favor and issued a preliminary injunction blocking the implementation of the law. That decision was appealed by state officials and local school districts to the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, which is expected to rule this year.

FFRF's other new lawsuit involved preferential treatment provided to the evangelical Good News Club by a Tennessee school district. In March, FFRF filed a lawsuit on behalf of The Satanic Temple (TST) against a Memphis-area school district for unlawfully discriminating against the After School Satan Club's request to meet in a district elementary school. The Good News Club, which is Christian, was being treated far more favorably. The district was charging the TST club excessive fees, canceling its reservations and refusing to communicate with it. The lawsuit was settled after the district agreed to treat TST's club equally going forward. The district paid FFRF and our cooperating attorneys over \$15,000 in fees and costs.

It's finally over! FFRF filed a lawsuit in 2016 challenging Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's removal of FFRF's approved Bill of Rights "nativity" display from the



Texas Capitol while permitting a Christian nativity. After winning in the district court and several favorable appeals court decisions, 2024 marked the end of the road for Abbott. After previously granting a final judgment in FFRF's favor, the district court awarded FFRF and outside law firm Boardman Clark \$358,000 in attorneys fees and costs.

FFRF and other organizations also successfully resolved a lawsuit against eight federal agencies that had rolled back civil rights protections as President Trump was leaving office in January 2021. In May, the lawsuit was voluntarily dropped after new rules reinstated safeguards that ensured people receiving social services are not forced to attend or participate in religious activities. The Biden administration rules additionally eliminated Trump-era provisions that were designed to allow social service providers to refuse to provide key services and that were intended to open the door to discrimination in taxpayer-funded programs.

FFRF attorneys have also been busy preparing informative friend-of-the-court briefs. We set a record this year by filing 12 such briefs in cases around the country.

Nonlitigation advocacy

We primarily resolve disputes through letters of complaint to government officials or by providing information to members and other complainants pursuing matters on their own. FFRF's legal intake team handles incoming complaints over constitution-

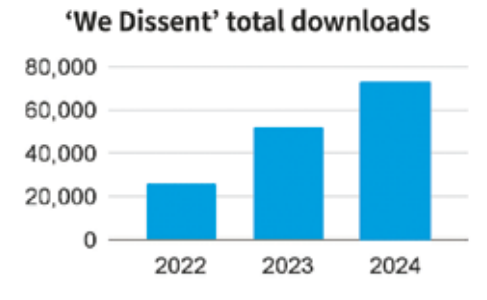
al violations from FFRF members and members of the public, at no cost to complainants. In 2024, our intake attorneys processed 2,451 incoming state/church contacts. Our attorneys sent 667 letters of complaint to government agencies across the country.

While we work on matters from all over the country, a disproportionate number of complaints last year originated in one region of the country. We handled a higher number of complaints per capita from Oklahoma, Arkansas, Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Mississippi and Alabama.

In 2024, FFRF was able to achieve 227 victories through nonlitigation efforts. Those victories will continue to come in through 2025. The vast majority of the victories we achieved involved protecting public school students from religion.

In Raleigh County, W.Va., a teacher was prevented from continuing to read elementary school students bible stories and to lead them in prayer. Likewise, in Decatur, Miss., a kindergarten teacher was forced to cease leading students in daily prayers. We stopped many other religious practices forced on students by school teachers and coaches.

Our victories have had an impact in other communities. In Itasca County, Minn., FFRF was successful in having a



new jail facility remove a giant Ten Commandments display. In San Diego, Calif., FFRF ended segregation in a correctional facility based on religious affiliation.

Education

The FFRF legal team works to provide legal education and highlight the importance of state/church separation. This endeavor is becoming increasingly important given the ultra-conservative majority of the Supreme Court and its fixation on increasing religious privilege for Christians by strengthening the Free Exercise Clause and diminishing the Establishment Clause.

FFRF attorneys regularly respond to news media requests on legal issues related to religion, including 63 interviews or responses in 2024. We also frequently write or speak on FFRF media platforms about our work. In addition, FFRF attorneys were featured speakers at eight events last year.

FFRF jointly produces the "We Dissent" podcast with Americans United for Separation of Church and State. American Atheists was also a production partner during 2024. It is a monthly podcast featuring FFRF Deputy Legal Director Liz Cavell and secular women attorneys discussing religious liberty issues in the state and federal courts and our joint work to keep religion and government separate. The podcast has 37 published episodes with more than 70,000 downloads. This past year, "We Dissent" episodes covered the 2024 Supreme Court term, the urgent state of reproductive rights, escalating public school violations, taxing churches, Christian nationalism and current threats in state legislatures.

Looking ahead

FFRF is preparing for significant threats to the First Amendment in 2025. We have prepared two new lawsuits to start the year with a bang. Emboldened state officials and an incoming Trump administration will undoubtedly abuse their secular authority to advance Christian nationalism. We stand ready to defend the vaunted wall of separation between state and church.

Patrick Elliott is FFRF's legal director.

Freethought Matters

An antidote to religion on the airwaves and Sunday morning sermonizing

Freethought Matters TV talk show airs in:			
Chicago	WPWR-CW (Ch. 50)	9 am	<div style="background-color: #003366; color: white; padding: 5px; font-weight: bold;">Watch our show every Sunday!</div>
Los Angeles	KCOP-MY (Ch. 13)	8:30 am	
Madison, Wis.	WISC-TV (Ch. 3)	11 pm	
New York City	WPIX-IND (Ch. 11)	10 am	
San Francisco	KICU-IND (Ch. 36)	10 am	
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW (Ch. 50, 23, 3)	8 am	

Changes for 2024 in FFRF broadcasting.

Watch Freethought Matters anytime on FFRF's YouTube channel!

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

Include FFRF In Your Estate Planning

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

IT'S EASY TO DO!

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

Lisa Treu
at (608) 256-8900
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Freedom depends on freethinkers

A note to FFRF Members

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Celebrating the Winter Solstice Season 2024

FFRF’s “Bill of Rights nativity” is an irreverent display by artist Jacob Fortin, which depicts Founders Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and George Washington kneeling in adoration before a “baby” Bill of Rights in a manger.



Wisconsin: FFRF’s annual Winter Solstice exhibit at the Wisconsin Capitol has now been there for more than 25 years. The secular display, put up by FFRF’s Matt Langer, Sadie Pattinson and Matt Kenyon, is back in the state/church watchdog’s hometown legislative building for a 29th time. FFRF first placed its Winter Solstice sign in 1995, after a fight with a

governor who removed a sign advocating separation of church and state.

Composed by the group’s founder, Anne Nicol Gaylor, the gilt sign states: “At this season of the Winter Solstice, may reason prevail. There are no gods, no devils, no angels, no heaven or hell. There is only our natural world. Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds.”



Maine: A sign celebrating the Winter Solstice was erected in Veterans’ Memorial Park in Fairfield, Maine, thanks to Maine Chapter President Ray Vensel. The display counters

a nativity exhibit (which the town later categorized as “private”). When Vensel called the town manager to complain about the nativity scene, he was allowed to set up FFRF’s sign, as well. There is a menorah at the site, too.



California: FFRF’s Greater Sacramento Chapter is pleased to return to the California Capitol with a constitutional Winter Solstice exhibit.

Chapter Board Members Angela Garvie, left, and Rae Howard put up the display on the Capitol grounds in Sacramento, Calif. The FFRF chapter first put up the exhibit in 2016 as a counter to religious displays on government property.



Olympia: FFRF’s Washington South Sound Chapter has returned to the state Capitol grounds with an exhibit for the 18th year in a row. The display, set up near the Tivoli Fountain on the Capitol premises in Olympia, Wash., is FFRF’s whimsical Bill of Rights “nativity.” FFRF

thanks member and volunteer Darrell Barker for his help in putting up the exhibit. In the above picture from left to right are Barker, Lewis Foerster and Rachel C.



Arlington Heights, Ill.: The “Bill of Rights nativity” display at was put up at North School Park in Arlington Heights, Ill., thanks to Metropolitan Chicago Chapter members Kathi Wise and Fred Dix.



Minnesota: FFRF Members Conni Conner and Tom Picquet worked together to set up FFRF’s Bill of Rights exhibit in the East Hall on the ground floor at the Minnesota Capitol. It was the second straight year the exhibit was displayed.

Glenview, Ill.: FFRF’s Metropolitan Chicago Chapter erected a Winter Solstice banner in the village of Glenview, Ill., underneath a lighted Scarlet “A” sign. FFRF thanks the Chapter Executive Director Steve Foulkes and member Brian Emerick (pictured) for their work in putting up the display.



New Hampshire: FFRF member Jack Shields has put up an exhibit at the New Hampshire Statehouse grounds in Concord, N.H., to balance religious displays erected there during this time of the year. The display is FFRF’s 6-foot-tall whimsical Bill of Rights “nativity”



2024 FFRF Winter Solstice party



FFRF Member Jeff Brinckman talks with FFRF Deputy Legal Director Liz Cavell.



Recording artist Shelley Segal entertains the audience with her irreverent songs at FFRF's annual Winter Solstice party, held on Dec. 19 at Freethought Hall, FFRF's national office, in Madison, Wis.



FFRF Program Manager Lisa Treu, left, speaks with FFRF Members Sue Schuetz and Linda Josheff.



Noah Gilfillan of Audio for the Arts makes sure the piano is tuned properly before the start of the program.



FFRF Help Desk Specialist Sheryl Lindmeier chats with FFRF Members George Savage and Donna Silver.



FFRF Events Coordinator Sadie Pattinson welcomes the guests to the Winter Solstice party.



FFRF Attorney Sam Grover, right, holds a discussion with Joan Wallace and Steve Salemsen.



FFRF Member Elaine Wheeler grabs a mimosa to go with her plate of treats.



FFRF members listen to singer Shelley Segal and pianist Dan Barker perform.



FFRF members check in for the Winter Solstice party in the lobby of Freethought Hall. The program streamed live and can be viewed at ffrf.us/solsticeparty.



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker addresses the crowd before singing a few "nontraditional" holiday songs.



Guests line up at the hors d'oeuvres table prior to the start of the program.

Photos by Chris Line

Reason prevails in a Michigan city hall

By Douglas Marshall

For 15 years, I have been managing a protest in the Warren, Mich., City Hall against the city for its violation of the First Amendment because it has been allowing religions to proselytize in City Hall with a “Prayer Station.”

When this started in 2009, I contacted the city — without success — to end the violation. I also contacted the Freedom From Religion Foundation that year and I joined the organization soon after. In 2014, I requested permission to set up a “Reason Station” to protest the violation and counter the prayer station. The city stated that my freedom of speech was superseded by the churches’ right to practice their religion unchallenged.

With the help of the FFRF, ACLU and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, I successfully obtained a federal consent decree allowing for a Reason Station to exist. (I am most proud that the Reason Station lawsuit was the first in which the ACLU, FFRF and AU joined together to represent a plaintiff.)

Not being a person who likes to offend, I first put up table displays noting statements by Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, the Dalai Lama, George Gershwin and the bible, to mention a few. Later, we added displays against racism and bigotry and promoted rights that were in danger — such as a woman’s right to bodily autonomy — hoping that just our presence would cause the religious organizations to leave City Hall. Although liked by many passersby, these displays did nothing to stop the city’s violation.

This all changed in the spring of 2024 when we started putting “blasphemous” table displays on the Reason Station that more directly countered the Prayer Station. I was amazed by the reaction of some, even in the nonbelief community,



Douglas Marshall stands at his Reason Station with FFRF Member Norma Jean.

who stated that blasphemy was offensive to believers and, therefore, not a way to start a nonconfrontational discourse. My response has been that, after more than 15 years of walking past a Christian prayer station in my own City Hall, I did not want to start a discourse where everyone agrees to some common ground, and we all sing “Kum Ba Ya.”

I wanted to end this longstanding constitutional violation. My purpose was to be so blasphemous that the people would demand that we be thrown out. None of the table displays directly insulted the religious, but rather were directed at religions themselves.

I have addressed the City Council a couple of times and put them on notice that the Reason Station would increase the level of so-called blasphemy until we reached a level that proved intolerable to all parties. Since starting the “blasphemy” campaign in April 2024, the number of religious who stopped by the table and expressed that they were insulted increased dramatically. If I was

at the table, I advised those offended to tell the mayor. Conversely, the number of people who gave us a thumbs up or stated that they liked the table display had also dramatically increased.

I realized that the way to counter people claiming that there is a god — and that praying to that deity is an effective way to deal with real problems of the day — is to state that there are no gods and that “nothing fails like prayer.” I hope all who read this will use their freedom of speech to insult a religion every day.

In May, the city sent me a letter in response to the “blasphemy,” telling me that the permission to table would be on a month-to-month basis. In September, after the City Council started discussing the tabling at City Hall, some council members questioned how banning private tabling would affect the federal consent decree between the city and myself.

I went to the next council meeting and told the council that none of the Reason Station volunteers necessarily wanted to sit at a table in City Hall, but that we would in-

crease the level of blasphemy until religion was removed. The city attorney then wrote to the City Council on Nov. 6, requesting that it pass a resolution suspending all tabling in City Hall until new rules can be implemented.

On Nov. 12, I spoke at the City Council meeting supporting the suspension of all nongovernmental tabling in City Hall. I promised that if the city allowed religion to return to city property, the Reason Station would also return with new “blasphemous” table displays. That same day, the city notified all groups that private tabling would end.

The Reason Station started tabling in April 2015 and, except for the pandemic, has been in the City Hall atrium twice a week since. The Reason Station was in the Warren City Hall for 400 hours per year, making it the state’s most public secular organization. Since 2015, the Reason Station volunteers have given over 4,100 hours.

The fight is not over, as I must convince the Downtown Development Authority to make the ban on private tabling permanent. Still, I believe that having the federal consent decree giving me access if religion ever returns will help keep religion out of City Hall.

The year 2024 was a really good one for stopping First Amendment violations as the city also stopped putting a nativity display in City Hall during the December holiday season, and the nativity display, which used to be in the median of Mound Road on county property, has for the past five years has been on a church lawn, which is another victory.

These last 15 years have been wonderful, fighting for the separation of state and church. I have expanded my social contacts by meeting great people and received great satisfaction from these accomplishments.

Douglas Marshall is an FFRF member and state representative from Michigan.

OVERHEARD

The Islamic Republic ruined the days of my youth, as it did to millions of others. Days that could have been filled with passion, happiness and sweetness were spent in prison, doing irreversible damage to my body and soul.

Kianoosh Sanjari, 42, in a social media post before an announced suicide in protest of Iran in November. He was first arrested as a dissident at 17, endured periodic solitary confinement and humiliating psychiatric abuse intended to break prisoners, as punishment for protesting the regime.
New York Times, 11-21-24

The foundational principle [of state/church separation is] being directly threatened by far-right forces

that found a home in Trump’s Republican Party, like Oklahoma’s Department of Education and its leader, Ryan Walters.

MSNBC anchor Ali Velshi, who was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” on Dec. 6, 2024, in his compelling segment on how far-right forces are trying to impose Christian nationalism on the country.
MSNBC, 11-23-24

When a public school plays religious favorites by emphasizing Christianity more than any other tradition, and by teaching about Christianity in a way that’s likely to promote encouragement of Christianity’s religious claims, then that violates all of our religious freedom.

Mark Chancey, a religious studies professor at Southern Methodist University, quoted in the article, “Religion in public schools is being tested by Christian conservatives.”
NBC, 12-1-24

Parents who have been swayed by vaccine skepticism love their children and want to protect them, and we need leaders who will help them do that, not conspiracy theorists who will scare them into decisions that will put their children at risk of disease.

Michael R. Bloomberg, who has given billions of dollars to promote public health, decrying Health and Human Services nominee Robert F. Kennedy for his “nutty conspiracy theories.”
New York Times, 12-4-24

Men in power did not wake up one morning and decide to give women the vote. White Southerners did not wake up one morning and decide to dismantle Jim Crow. Those things happened, if imperfectly and still incompletely, because hundreds of thousands of people worked together for years to make them happen.

But where preserving biodiversity is concerned, we don’t have years. Where stabilizing the climate is concerned, we don’t have years. Once a species becomes extinct, it remains

extinct forever. Once the climate hits an irreversible tipping point, it will tip.

Columnist Margaret Renkel, in her column, “How to keep your own soul safe in the dark.”
New York Times, 12-14-24



Jimmy Carter

I think the government ought to stay out of the prayer business and let it be between a person and God and not let it be part of a school program under any tangible constraints, either a direct order to a child to pray or an embarrassing situation where the child would feel constrained to pray.

President Jimmy Carter, speaking to a group of news editors in 1979. Carter died on Dec. 29, 2024, at age 100.
Time, 12-29-24

While faith can connect you to others, obviously there are so many ways in which faith, through all of human history, has been a source of division.

Former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, commenting on why he sees religion as a private matter and about the pitfalls of candidates discussing religious identity.
New York Times, 12-23-24

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LETTERBOX

To an all-knowing God, prayer is redundant

I live in a retirement home now and my in-home neighbors are of various religious backgrounds. Anticipating that it probably won't be long before someone at my dining room table remarks that it's my turn to lead a pre-meal prayer, I came up with this tongue-in-cheeker:

"God, it is said that you are all-knowing. If this is true, your awareness of our every thought would render a prayer only redundant to you, so to spare you the annoyance, we'll just turn to our food now, trusting that the chef has anointed it with his usual magic."

North Carolina

Not all Baby Boomers grew up religious

This is in response to the college essay by Zoe Lilly, "The flower lost its power." It was a good essay, but her assumption that Boomers were religious in their early lives is not universally true.

I chose not to enjoy the comforts of faith and divine purpose. I am a Boomer (born in 1956) and turned against any belief in a God at the tender young age of 7. My mother insisted I attend Sunday school at a Protestant church, and, right from the start, none of it made any sense.

In my mind, the idea of this invisible being looking down on us was ludicrous. I never revealed my disbeliefs to my parents but spent the remainder of my youth justifying to myself: "If there is a God out there who created me and gave me a brain, then he can't punish me for thinking the way I do." That was all the comfort I needed. I finally told Mom when she was in her 90s that I never believed in a God. I may be one of the few exceptions, but not all Boomers believed in a higher power during their youth.

Pennsylvania

CRANKMAIL

Here is the first batch of Crankmail for 2025, where we reprint some of the negative correspondence we get via mail, email, phone or social media. Printed as received.

Prayer: Your organization wants to stop praying. Have the people that don't like it leave or close their ears. People pray. I'm glad you have never had the need for prayer, some do it most every day some don't. If people don't like it-IGNORE IT!

Stay out: We pray at football games. Keep your two cents out of our lives here in Alabama!!

Hell is waiting: I'm gonna pray for you guys. You realize what is down the road for you, right?

Nativity: I wish you would stop interfering with people of faith who believe Christianity. Enough is enough. I thank God that our Iowa nativity got put back up after two atheists from outside our own state had a problem with that. Knock it off. Mind your own business. Our very first right is freedom OF religion.

Losers: You will burn in hell with your godless gospel.

You are pathetic: You know Charles Darwin admitted that he was probably wrong. This is the lie you live off of. Stop spreading your scum to other Earthlings. If you don't believe in a creator, you might as well kill yourself. Pathetic liberal losers.

Wrong: Why are all of your supporters gay? There's not a real human to back up anything you stand for.

Constitution: Show us the separation of church and state. You can't, 'cuz it's a fucking lie.

Get educated: Please learn the Constitution.

Celebrity sightings



At the Palo Alto Farmers Market on Dec. 13, FFRF's San Francisco Bay Chapter leader Dana Treadwell, left, stands with Victor Harris, who read his poetry at the 2018 FFRF convention in San Francisco. Harris stopped by the booth and introduced himself and thanked the chapter for being there.

Also stopping by the booth was Wayne Maines, the father of Nicole Maines, who is the subject of the book, "Becoming Nicole," by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Amy Ellis Nutt. As Treadwell writes, "'Becoming Nicole' was the first book that I read after my daughter came out as trans. I cannot describe how thrilled I was to meet this man."

I appreciate the well-written college essay by Zoe Lilly in the November issue, but many Boomers, such as this almost 80-year-old Boomer, started their paths into atheism at an early age, as I did. I was 7 in 1952 (and I loved reading R.G. Ingersoll by the time I was 10). And many of my same-age friends (and some older ones) were not and are not religious. We were and are not flowers of "divine faith that guided generations be-

fore" the Gen Z members were born. We were and are also "now guided by compassion, empathy and an appreciation for the fleeting beauty of life." Before the Gen Zs arrived, some of us experienced threats and danger in helping people who were trying to live independent of religion. And many of us have not lost our power. And many of us hope that the Gen Zs keep up their power for saving freedom from religion.

Nevada

President Carter kept us out of prayer business

Although Jimmy Carter was a Baptist, he respected Jefferson's constitutional "wall of separation between church and state," and didn't abuse his office by promoting religion. Instead, he largely kept his personal religious beliefs to himself and away from his role as president.

When the 52-year-old Georgia governor entered the Presidential race in 1976, he was touted as a Southern Baptist born-again Christian, who had been teaching at a Sunday School, and, needless to say, that caused some unease among the nonbelievers.

But during the campaign, Carter reassured the nation he respected the Founders intent to maintain a secular nonreligious government. Once he secured the nomination, he won over many on the left, who initially backed the more liberal Congressman Mo Udall.

After Carter's victory in 1976, he didn't abuse the Office of the Presidency by pandering to evangelicals, or by parading around St. John's Episcopal Church with a bible over his head. Instead, he governed in a nonreligious manner and, on April 7, 1979, made his position clear, as he stated: "I think the government ought to stay out of the prayer business."

While many right-wing politicians today routinely interject "thoughts and prayers" in situations that instead call for concrete human action that might actually accomplish something, Carter wasn't that bad on religion. I only wish that those who do belong to an organized religion shared his secularist outlook.

In his post-presidential years, Carter practiced a form of humanism through the Carter Center by creating programs in many countries that advanced education, fought disease and monitored free and fair elections. Jimmy and Roselyn also joined the Habitat for Humanity, a group that builds

You have no idea what it's all about. You all are the biggest idiots I have seen in all my life. It was not to take God out of schools. America WAS founded on religion, on God. It's idiots like you from the devil's heart who try to fight against God. But the devil never wins against God.

FFR: People like you are who are taking this country down, which by the way was founded by religious people, and our Constitution written by and for religious and moral people.

No more liberals: LIBERALISM is what this country needs freedom from. It was brought woke people, BLM, Antifa, gender dysphoria, Alphabet people, genocide, hunger, destruction of the US economy, the climatic change lie, abortion, migration invasion, should I continue?

NONE of those were created by RELIGION, so tell me why religion must go???????????

Devil: You've allowed the Devil to corrupt your heart and mind so much and so far from the love of God. You didn't free yourself you've become a puppet for the Devil's agenda.

Find God: You may not believe in God, but God believes in you. I can't show you what God looks like. But I can show you what happens when you remove God from the equation. Let's take San Francisco California one of the most Godless places on earth. A city of limitless prosperity reduced to streets paved with excrement. Zombie drug addicts walk the streets. The demons in charge dine at expensive wineries and shop for the finest things while the rest of everyone lives in hell. Yes, it is very hard to figure out where God is. But it's very easy to see where he isn't.

TRUST GOD: GOD IS THE ONLY SOURCE OF LIFE, FREEDOM FROM GOD IS DEATH. TO KNOW GOD THE

PERSON IS LIFE ETERNAL IN HIS SON JESUS !!!!!!!!

You are hellbound: Without God there is no morality. I feel you atheists are causing a rift in society. I strongly believe that atheists are going to Hell for all eternity. Man's wisdom is foolishness to God.

Please pray! Satan has a hold on you, you need to believe that, you need prayer

Target Muslims: You people are disgusting trying to force someone to go against their religion when you could just go somewhere else and why don't you targeting Muslim families who own cake shops how come how come how come because you only hate Christians it's only the real God who you fear. Sickening accusing someone of honoring their faith of discrimination. YOU TARGET & DESTROY CHRISTIANS ONLY NOT TARGETING MUSLIM Cake Shop OWNERS. YOU ARE THE EVIL.

God is real: if you are an atheist, you did believe at one time. God is REAL AND TRUE! When you hit the fires of hell, it will be TO LATE to change your mind(s)!

Meet the Lord!: The problem with people who

Cryptogram answer

I want an avowed atheist in the White House. When time comes to push that button, I want whoever's making the decision to understand that once it's pushed, it's over. Finito. They're not gonna have lunch with Jesus.

— Quentin Bufogle

claim to have once been a Christian, but now don't believe in God, is that they never met the Lord Jesus Christ. If you ever knew him, you may later choose to no longer submit yourself to his Lordship, but you would never deny his existence.

God is everywhere: We all know that reality goes far beyond what is visible. We once couldn't see bacteria and viruses, but they existed and certainly made their presence known. God is our Creator and the evidence of his existence and presence is LITERALLY EVERYWHERE!

The foolishness of having an evil heart of unbelief in God is also evident: Miserable people. And one day in eternity you will see God.

Crossword answers

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M	I	R	A		P	R	I	G		S	A	C	R	A	
O	M	A	N		R	A	T	A		E	T	H	I	C	
G	O	L	D		W	A	T	E		I	T	E	M		
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B	E	M	I	R	E				M	I	M	E	S	I	S
I	L	O			T	R	A	D	E	R		W	A	S	P
B	L	U	B	S		L	A	N		U	S	U	A	L	
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O	A	S	I	S		W	A	L	T		N	A	P	E	
O	D	O	R			L	E	Y			G	L	E	E	

homes for the needy.

Carter should be remembered most for his humanist activities right here on Earth, as it was those concrete actions that made him a good role model for all of us today.

Wisconsin

Trump victory spurred this donation to FFRF

Enclosed please find my contribution to the Freedom From Religion Foundation in honor of Donald J. Trump, convicted felon. Please use my contribution for FFRF education and defense of freedom from religion in every state and territory in the United States.

Texas

Why are there chaplains in the House and Senate?

When I watched the election of the House Speaker and the swearing in of the new House and Senate, I was surprised to see the Senate chaplain give an Invocation. I learned that there are separate House and Senate chaplains, both paid salaries somewhat over \$200K per year. Furthermore, there is a “prayer room” in the Capitol.

At a time when cutting SNAP eligibility and reducing Medicaid benefits are contemplated as agenda items for the incoming legislators, the presence of chaplains seems to be creating a patina of moral uprightness, when promoting food insecurity and poorer access to health care is immoral. Wanting to balance the budget while renewing tax cuts for the rich seems hypocritical at best.

I guess that’s why Shakespeare put “scurvy” with “politician.” Here’s to a greater measure of Carterian “decency.”

Wisconsin

Trump was not asked questions about evolution

I watched all of the primary and presidential debates in 2016, 2020 and 2024. I found it striking that despite the strong support for Donald Trump among white evangelical Christians, I do not recall one question from a panelist asking him whether he agreed with his evangelical base that evolution and the Big Bang Theory were lies fabricated by evil scientists and that the Earth and entire universe are no more than 6,000 years old.

How would he have answered? I assume Trump has very little knowledge or interest about evolution and modern cosmology, but I doubt that he is actually a creationist. If he sided with the evangelicals, he would have been subjected to widespread ridicule as unfit to be president. This may have been a factor in the Northern, more secular swing states that he won in 2016 and 2024. If he said he accepted evolution and modern cosmology, he would have alienated his evangelical base.

In addition, I do not recall a single question on the GOP and evangelical attacks against public education in any primary or presidential debate I have ever watched. With 90 percent of American children attending the nation’s public schools and most public school parents rating the schools their own kids attend either good or excellent, Donald Trump, who never set foot in a public school, should have

Honoring Maine’s Tom Waddell



The Maine Chapter of FFRF honored former President Tom Waddell on Dec. 7 with a plaque and honorary title. Current President Ray Vensel wrote the following in honor and appreciation of Tom’s work.

“Tom Waddell has served as the public face of the Maine Chapter of FFRF since the chapter’s charter was filed back in 2015. Since then, Tom has published over 100 newspaper columns, countless commentaries, given morning invocations at the state legislature, delivered numerous public talks, and managed booths at many public events, most notably Pride days and the Common Ground Country Fair. Tom has even appeared on radio and television, participated in public lectures and debates and represented the chapter at FFRF’s annual national convention. Tom has done all this (and much more) with a monumental level of energy and commitment, as well as a steely-eyed focus on the cause. The Maine chapter of FFRF and the national office of the Freedom From Religion Foundation proudly thank Tom for nearly a decade of support as a chapter leader. Members like Tom keep FFRF afloat, and we cannot express our gratitude enough. Thank you, Tom!”

been asked whether he shared the hostility of so much of his party and base to what they disdainfully refer to as “government schools,” and supports the privatization of education. How he answered may have had an impact on the outcome of the various primary and presidential elections he participated in. As far as I am aware, those questions were never asked.

New York

Religion less successful now as tool of control

Reading the student essays in the November newsletter made me think about religion and society, especially in the present-day United States. In my opinion, religion has (for a long time) primarily been a tool to control (and oppress) the masses. However, we have long known that oppression relies heavily on controlling information.

Nowadays, conservatives are banning books and the teaching of certain subjects in public schools to try to prevent children from learning of viewpoints that disagree with conservative religious positions. In today’s world, though, trying to contain knowledge is far more difficult than it was before the internet. Today, children can obtain information through computers and smartphones, and they can join social media groups of likeminded individuals, whether or not there are such individuals in their physical communities. Someone who begins to doubt religious indoctrination can find ways to examine those doubts, even while hiding them from local community members.

Religion is still being used as a tool of control, but it is a less successful tool in present times. Once upon a time, it sufficed to say that something was required because “God wants it that way.” Even now, almost everything the conservatives are forcing on the U.S. population today is justified, in their minds, because “God

wants it that way.” The problem is that fewer and fewer people accept “God’s wishes” as a justification for controlling others, especially when it is clear that God’s wishes are always interpreted to align with the views of the people invoking him to give them power over others.

I think Christianity, and similar religions, are powerful because they give people what they want. As children, we had parents to protect us, and as adults, we wish we still did. Unlike the religions it has replaced, Christianity restores that protection. It provides an all-powerful father and a loving Mother Mary. As in our childhood families, if you don’t follow the father’s rules, you are punished, which is a boon to those who claim to be the interpreters of those rules. Unfortunately, many powerless people still need religion because they need hope in the face of despair in their lives, and I am not sure how to replace that kind of comfort without a belief in the magical. Perhaps, someday, though, someone can find a solution to that problem, and the existence of religion as a tool of control can finally be ended for all.

Colorado

Public education needs to be free from religion

There are few things more important to the future of this country than the education of our children, and our system of public education. That principle is once again under attack. Oklahoma’s superintendent of schools has mandated that bibles be placed in every public school classroom in the state and that teachers give lessons from it.

Public education does not exist to confirm or promote people’s religious beliefs — it’s there to educate, not indoctrinate. If we turn over our schools and science classes to people who believe that the Earth is only 6,000 years old; that man was created out of a pile of dust; that a snake carried

on a loquacious conversation with a naked lady in an enchanted garden, we’re not going to remain the world’s leader very long.

With wisdom, Robert Ingersoll wrote: “Students need to be taught to think, reason and question, not believe. How to think, not what to think, must remain the essence of public education. Without it, there can be no such thing as a school.”

The proper place for teaching devotional religious beliefs is in the home or one’s church, not in public school science classes.

Florida

What is more dishonest and untrue than religion?

What can be more untrue than religion, and what can make people more dishonest than religion? The two go hand-in-hand! Religion needs dishonesty, while dishonesty keeps religion alive, especially in this country, where religion thrives on dishonesty, supported by sheer stupidity. Religion is all based on lies, made-up stories and fictional, impossible characters.

The worst part is that religion hampers and affects negatively science, education and, especially, politics, where uninformed people are lured into electing totally incompetent, superstition-infested characters, notably on the Republican side. George H.W. Bush even allegedly said that atheists shouldn’t be allowed to be citizens, while his son, George W., started unnecessary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, thanks to a fictional, divine voice inside his head that told him to do so!

In the more progressive countries, like Scandinavia, religion is pretty much passé, left behind as a medieval oddity. You are more likely to get a good laugh, if you ask someone if he or she believes in God. Why is that? For one thing, Scandinavian people aren’t that easily fooled. In general, they are better educated, very rarely indoctrinated from birth, and not raised in an environment saturated with religion. As a politician, you wouldn’t get very far by claiming divine backing!

Going back some 70 years, in my own high school class, there was only a single religious guy, raised in a sect-like family, where the grandmother dictated all, with a firm, religious hand, often applied to the children’s bottom. But even he grew up to become a decent citizen. In front of me in class there was a son of a bishop, although my classmate was not at all interested in religion and was basically an atheist.

California

We are wishing for FFRF to have great success

We value and admire your efforts and thank you for that. You are doing a great job and we are confident you will continue to do so. We wish you great success!

Robert and Charlotte Sigman
Wisconsin

Thanks for helping us through next 4 years

Other than paying bills, your organization is the only one I am contributing to for the remainder of 2024. I cannot express enough thanks for your 2025 calendar and for your continued existence to get us through the next four years.

Here’s to a delightful 2025 to you.

Michigan

100th anniversary of historic trial

Join us for Scopes Trial Centennial event

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and the Center for Inquiry will host a celebratory conference in July to mark the centenary of a milestone trial in U.S. history.

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

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

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

Edward Larson, who wrote the 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning "Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion," will be presented with the "Clarence Dar-



Judge John Edward Jones III



John de Lancie



Brenda Wineapple



Edward Larson



Richard Katskee



Katherine Stewart



Susan Jacoby



Bertha Vazquez



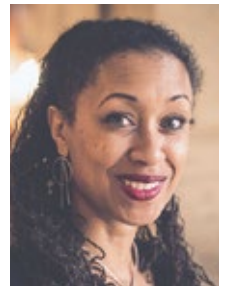
Chris Cameron



Tahira Clayton



Dan Barker



Leighann Lord



row Award," and Judge Jones will receive the "Defender of the Constitution Award."

Additional featured speakers include **Richard Katskee** of Duke's Appellate Litigation Clinic and former vice president and legal director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, who helped argue against intelligent design in the Dover case; **Katherine Stewart**, award-winning journalist and author who has covered religious nationalism for over 15 years; **Bertha Vazquez**, the award-winning science educator who heads the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science (TIES); **Susan Jacoby**, New York Times

best-selling author and secularist; and **Chris Cameron**, history professor and author of "Black Freethinkers." The marvelously funny **Leighann Lord** will entertain and also emcee the event. Other entertainment will include internationally known jazz singer **Tahira Clayton** singing popular songs from 1925, accompanied on the piano by FFRF Co-President **Dan Barker**.

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

Inquiry to Columbia University linguistics professor and New York Times columnist John McWhorter. The two will engage in an on-stage conversation.

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

Again, there are only 250 seats available for what is certain to be an amazing conference!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is a national association of 40,000 members whose purposes are to protect the constitutional principle of separation between state and church and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism.

The Center for Inquiry (CFI) is a nonprofit educational, advocacy and research organization headquartered in Amherst, N.Y. It is also home to the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism. The Center for Inquiry strives to foster a secular society based on reason, science, freedom of inquiry and humanist values.

Pres House

Continued from page 1

Legislature at that time adopted language to prevent additional properties from ever qualifying for this property tax exemption. The local Catholic Diocese of Madison recognized that the amendment was created for its benefit. No other properties in Madison or Wisconsin can ever benefit, and the exemption specifically targets properties serving University of Wisconsin-Madison students to the exclusion of students at all other colleges.

The Pres House and Lumen House Apartments are extremely profitable commercial rental properties that would owe the city hundreds of thousands of dollars in property taxes annually if not for the exemption, FFRF points out. The Pres House Apartments' current market value likely exceeds \$25 million, with estimated property taxes owed in excess of \$300,000 annually. The Lumen House Apartments' current market value likely exceeds \$7.6 million, with estimated property taxes exceeding \$94,000 annually. Based on their combined estimated \$33 million in value, omitting these properties from the tax rolls is approximately the equivalent of exempting an entire neighborhood from paying property taxes, FFRF asserts in the legal complaint.

The city of Madison, which is also named as a defendant in the suit, is unwilling to cease applying this unlawful tax exemption. On April 4, 2024, FFRF's counsel sent a letter to the city of Madison assessor, Michelle Drea, laying out the legal reasons why the exemption is unlawful under the Wisconsin Constitution. Within hours, Drea replied, strongly disagreeing. In an effort to resolve the unlawful omission of these properties from the city's property tax rolls, plaintiffs Gaylor, Barker and Peterson filed objections to their

most recent property tax assessments.

The tax exemption that the Pres House and Lumen House Apartments benefit from is unconstitutional, the plaintiffs contend.

The exemption violates the Uniformity Clause of the Wisconsin Constitution, which states, in part, "The rule of taxation shall be uniform." Uniformity is violated when a statute imposes arbitrary methods of assessment and unequal taxation of comparable properties. This exemption benefits only a handful of

grandfathered-in rental properties located in Madison that primarily rent to UW students. The exemption breaches, too, the Equal Protection Clause set forth in Article I, Section 1 of the Wisconsin Constitution by creating a distinct classification, student rental properties meeting extremely specific criteria, and treating this class significantly differently from all other similarly situated properties.

The exemption also infringes Article I, Section 18, of the Wisconsin Constitution, which states that no "preference" shall "be given by law to any religious establishments or modes of worship." The exemption was enacted to benefit for-profit commercial apartments owned by a religious organization and the 2013 amendment specifically benefits another church-owned apartment.

And the exemption is in contravention of Article IV, Section 18, of the Wisconsin Constitution, which states: "No private or local bill which may be passed by the Legislature shall embrace more than one subject, and that shall be expressed in the title." The circumstances under which the exemption was enacted in 2009 bear the hallmarks of an unconstitutional private bill because the exemption was passed in order to benefit a specific property and only properties in Madison qualify for the exemption. The Legislature is meant to pass laws that benefit and apply to the



Photo by Chris Line

The Lumen House Apartments in Madison, Wis., are exempt from property taxes because of a law that FFRF says is unconstitutional.