

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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May 2025

Oklahoma schools superintendent sues FFRF

The Freedom From Religion Foundation vows to continue its work to uphold secular public schools in Oklahoma despite the baseless and frivolous lawsuit filed against it March 31 by the state's Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters.

"We will not stop our work defending the constitutional rights of students and families in Oklahoma," says FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott. "Walters is mistaken if he thinks free speech and religious freedom are subservient to



Ryan Walters

his religious beliefs."

The case is now in the courtroom of U.S. District Judge John F. Heil III. It appears to be an unprecedented lawsuit against a group working for the constitutional principle of separation between religion and government.

A national nonprofit state/church watchdog since 1978, FFRF offers legal advocacy at no cost to the public, ending more than 200 constitutional violations around the country last year alone.

FFRF has received recent requests to end religion in public schools from parents with students in Oklahoma public schools. It successfully ended serious violations in Achille Public Schools involving mandatory prayer over the intercom and schools spon-

soring bible readings to open elementary and high school classes.

When FFRF cannot correct violations through education and persuasion, it also litigates and has brought more than 100 lawsuits, winning many significant First Amendment victories. It currently is part of the coalition lawsuit against Walters and the state Education Department for seeking to spend millions of tax dollars to purchase bibles and bible-infused instructional materials for Oklahoma schools.

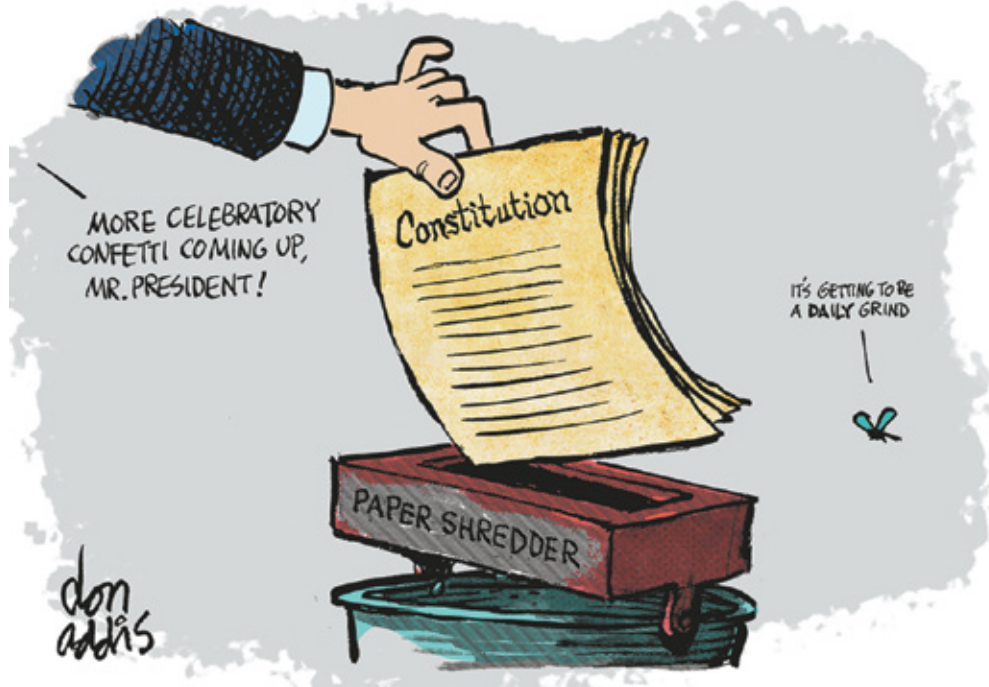
FFRF has called on Walters to resign on numerous occasions because of his misuse of his office to promote religion in Oklahoma schools, such as supporting prayer over the intercom at Prague Elementary School. Walters said about FFRF at that time, "I hope

every Oklahoman prays that this radical, out-of-state, Soros-funded group learns about our Constitution and the rights it guarantees." (FFRF, regretfully, does not receive funding from George Soros.)

In announcing the lawsuit, Walters said: "Oklahoma will never be bullied by radical, out-of-state atheists who use intimidation and harassment against kids." He then accuses FFRF, a group that works to uphold the First Amendment, of "trampling" on it.

"Walters has it backward," comments FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "He claims FFRF is 'trampling on the First Amendment' when he is the bully attacking religious free-

See Oklahoma on page 2



FFRF: 'Anti-Christian bias' directive unconstitutional

The Freedom From Religion Foundation denounces a new State Department directive that encourages employees to anonymously report alleged "anti-Christian bias" among colleagues.

This is a dangerous and unconstitutional move that promotes religious favoritism under the guise of protecting religious freedom. As reported by Politico, the directive is part of a broader executive order to "eradicate anti-Christian bias" from the federal government. The directive states that the department is soliciting reports of "anti-religious bias" on the part of the previous presidential administration. It specifically urges employees

to come forward if they experienced repercussions for "refusing to participate in events or activities that promote themes inconsistent with or hostile to one's religious beliefs" — language broad enough to include diversity trainings or inclusion efforts that were standard policy under the prior administration.

"This directive is reminiscent of the Red Scare or authoritarian regimes where citizens are encouraged to inform on each other, which creates fear, paranoia and the suppression of dissent," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "It is

See Anti-Christian on page 3

Biggest threat to public education is the Supreme Court

This article first appeared on Politico on April 9 and is reprinted with permission.

By Aaron Tang

The greatest threat to public education in America isn't Donald Trump.

Yes, he's moving to dismantle the Department of Education, and yes, he's trying to restrict what schools can teach about race. But the most dangerous attack on the horizon isn't coming from the president, it's coming from the Supreme Court.

This is a particularly disheartening reality because the Supreme Court has often been one of public education's greatest champions. As far back as 1954, in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the court described public schooling as "the very foundation of good citizenship" and the "most important function of state and local governments." Just four years ago, in an 8-1 opinion involving a Snapchatting cheerleader, the court proud-



Aaron Tang

ly declared that "Public schools are the nurseries of democracy."

In late April, however, the court heard oral argument in a pair of cases with the potential to radically destabilize public schools as we know them. And there is reason to be deeply worried about how the conservative majority will rule.

The first case, *Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board v. Drummond*, poses the question of whether the 46 states with charter schools must offer public funds to schools that would teach religious doctrine as truth. The second case, *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, involves the claim that religious parents should have a right to opt their children out of controversial public school curricula.

Taken together, *Drummond* and *Mahmoud* threaten the twin cornerstones of the American education system that Brown affirmed six decades ago: Since *Brown*, America's public schools have operated under a norm of inclusive enrollment, and they've offered all children a shared curriculum that reflects the values that communities believe are essential for civic participation and economic success.

If the court tears down these

See Supreme Court on page 8

100th anniversary of historic trial

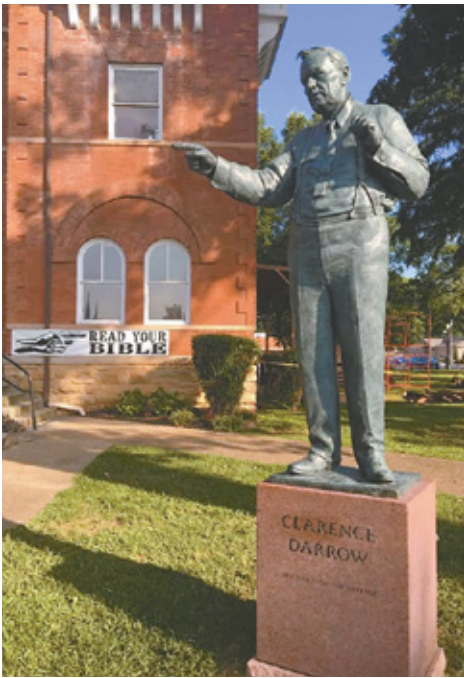
Don't miss the Scopes Centennial event

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

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

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

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



The Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn.

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

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

Hotel information

July 18 – 20 (Friday – Monday)

The Chattanooga Hotel,
Curio Collection by Hilton
1201 Broad Street
Chattanooga, TN 37402

\$189/night: Standard King,
Standard Double, King Bed
Mountain View Suite, or King Bed
Courtyard View Suite

Reserve your room

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

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

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

Reservation cut-off date

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

Oklahoma

Continued from page 1

dom and seeking to force his personal religious beliefs on a captive audience of schoolchildren."

FFRF notes that 26 percent of adult Oklahomans are atheist, agnostic or nothing in particular, and another 2 percent belong to non-Christian faiths. Oklahoma cannot adopt Christianity as a state religion under the federal and Oklahoma Constitutions.

FFRF will continue its patriotic commitment to uphold the First Amendment with its constitutional principle of a secular government. The association is confident that the courts will reject Walters' meritless claims and thereby reaffirm that public schools must remain free from religious coercion and indoctrination.

Okla. Superintendent Walters: 'Take on the woke radicals'

Todd Starnes, the conservative podcaster, had Oklahoma state Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters on his show recently to talk about his frivolous lawsuit against FFRF.

Here's a brief excerpt of that interview:

Starnes: Well, the Freedom From Religion Foundation is a Wisconsin-based gang of atheists and agnostics — very nasty people — they get triggered by the holy bible and Jesus Christ. State schools Superintendent Ryan Walters has now filed a lawsuit against the out-of-town atheists and he joins us live. Why, exactly, are you suing the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

Walters: What they are doing is using these legal tactics to bully districts and claim to have jurisdiction where they have none. So, we're telling them, you're not going to go into our schools anymore. If you wanna deal somebody, you can deal with us.

Starnes: I love this approach here because, I get it, it's America, if you wanna be a godless heathen atheist, you can do that out of the Constitution. But, you don't have to be a jerk, and that's what these people are. They're being jerks to these small towns and communities — and bullies.

Walters: Todd, we have got to start playing offense as conservatives. We have sat back and allowed the left to dictate education and indoctri-

nate our kids, control every aspect of the education system. The teachers unions bully our teachers, the federal Department of Education bullies our kids, parents and teachers. Thank God for President Donald Trump for getting rid of the federal Department of Education. We are going to unapologetically respect the First Amendment in our schools. We're going to unapologetically bring the bible back in its historical context. We're gonna make sure that prayer is back in our schools, as well. If people wanna pray, they can pray. So, it's so essential that we get back to some of our foundational values in this country and we've got to take on the woke radicals head-on.



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The only freethought newspaper in the United States.



We Dissent is a monthly podcast by secular women, who also happen to be powerhouse attorneys at major U.S. secular organizations, including FFRF.

Join us as we discuss developments affecting the separation of church and state in the US Supreme Court and lower federal courts.

Join us @ we-dissent.org

We've joined Instagram!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has listened to your requests and is excited to announce that it has officially joined Instagram.

Please follow us at [@ffrf_official](https://www.instagram.com/ffrf_official) for weekly updates and content.

We look forward to connecting with you there!



2025 FFRF convention

You'll get a warm welcome in Myrtle Beach



Mubarak Bala



Katherine Stewart



Maggie Carpenter



Bailey Harris



Eli Frost



Heather Meyer



Andy Smith



Monique Priestley



Mickey Dollens



Herb Silverman



Mary Trump



Jamelle Bouie



John Fugelsang



Nancy Northup

Don't miss out on the Freedom From Religion Foundation's annual convention later this year in Myrtle Beach, S.C.!

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

As always, FFRF's lineup of speakers is impressive. You won't want to miss a single minute!

Here's a list of the confirmed speakers (so far):

- **Mary L. Trump**, who is a sharp critic of the current administration, will receive FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award, reserved for public figures who make known their dissent from religion.
- **John Fugelsang**, who is an actor, comedian and broadcaster and host of "Tell Me Everything" weekdays on SiriusXM. He's also appeared at Montreal's "Just for Laughs" Festival, HBO's U.S Comedy Arts Festival in Aspen, and hosted "America's Funniest Home Videos" for ABC. His new film "Dream On," examining the American Dream, features

200 interviews in 55 cities including 17 states. His new book is "Separate Church and Hate: A Sane Person's Guide to Taking Back the Bible from Fundamentalists, Fascists, and Flock-Fleecing Frauds."

- **Katherine Stewart**, last year's "Freethought Heroine" honoree, returns to talk about her chilling tour de force, a new exposé, "Money, Lies and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy."
- **Dr. Maggie Carpenter**, a brave abortion rights activist under prosecution by Louisiana and Texas for dispensing medication abortion pills to patients there, will receive FFRF's "Forward" Award.
- **Jamelle Bouie**, the distinguished New York Times columnist, will be given FFRF's "Clarence Darrow" Award.
- **Mubarak Bala**, the Nigerian atheist and human rights activist recently released from prison in Nigeria after five years' detention for committing "blasphemy," will get FFRF's "Avijit Roy Courage Award."
- **Nancy Northup** is president of the cutting-edge Reproductive Rights Center, which is receiving FFRF's Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism" award of \$50,000.
- FFRF's new Regional State Manager **Mickey Dollens**, a seated state representative in the Oklahoma Legislature, will be speaking directly on the convention theme

with his talk, "F.O.R.W.A.R.D.: Your Blueprint for Effective Citizen Lobbying." With real-world stories and actionable tips, Mickey will offer hope and a clear path to influence policy at the grassroots level.

- Speaking of secular state legislators, the convention also will host FFRF's third annual panel made up of such representatives. **Rep. Monique Priestley** is a member of the Vermont House of Representatives (Orange-2 District). **Rep. Heather Meyer** is a member of the Kansas House of Representatives. **Rep. Andy Smith** is in his second term in the Minnesota House.
- **Dr. Herb Silverman**, who overturned South Carolina's unconstitutional religious test to run for office, will give a short welcoming address.
- Two student activists: **Bailey Harris**, 19, who is receiving the Diane and Stephen Uhl Out of God's Closet Scholarship of \$5,000, and **Eli Frost**, 18, who is receiving the Beverly and Richard Hermesen Student Activist Award of \$5,000.
- Other presenters include students winning FFRF 2025 essay competitions, and reports on the year's highlights by FFRF Co-Presidents **Dan Barker** and **Annie Laurie Gaylor**, by FFRF's legal team led by FFRF Legal Director **Patrick Elliott** and Deputy Legal Director **Liz Cavell**, and by the legislative team, led by Director Governmental Affairs **Mark Dann** and State Policy Counsel **Ryan Jayne**.

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

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

Early birds can check-in on the afternoon of Thursday, Oct. 16, and enjoy light appetizers and a cash bar before relaxing on their own. The convention opens formally at 9 a.m. on Friday, Oct. 17, following a complimentary continental breakfast. Friday evening ends with the traditional complimentary dessert reception and cash bar. The convention runs through Saturday evening, with FFRF's annual membership and state representatives' meetings taking place on Sunday morning, Oct. 19, ending by noon.

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

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

Happy 95th birthday, Dick!



Longtime FFRF member Dick Hewetson turned 95 on March 31.

Dana Treadwell, one of the leaders of FFRF's San Francisco Bay Chapter, was on hand to celebrate with Dick.

Dana writes: "Dick remembers those first FFRF conventions. He's now in hospice at a residence in San Jose, Calif., where he's still smiling and still playing bridge with friends online three or four times a week. Having spent his entire adult life being an instigator and activist, he's finding it very frustrating being on the sidelines during this tumultuous time. He also deeply misses the yearly FFRF conventions (which he refers to as the Academy Awards for the freethought community). He says that these gatherings were always a highlight of his year. He only missed two of them from 1979–2019. Happy birthday, Dick!"

Anti-Christian

Continued from page 1

deeply antithetical to the values of a secular democracy and poses a direct threat to genuine religious liberty."

By singling out "anti-Christian bias" — and only that — the State Department is signaling unconstitutional religious favoritism. The directive ignores the existence of discrimination against religious minorities and the nonreligious, instead reinforcing a false narrative that Christians are uniquely persecuted in a nation which protects the free exercise of religion and where they remain the dominant majority. Christians make up roughly two-thirds of the U.S. population and 87 percent of Congress.

The State Department's internal task force was scheduled to meet on April 22 to review any complaints it receives. But the very premise of the directive is flawed: It presumes Christians are frequent victims of discrimination in federal workplaces and ignores the actual religious diversity — and the potential for religious coercion — in public

institutions.

"What exactly qualifies as 'anti-Christian bias' in this context?" adds FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. "Displaying a rainbow flag? Saying 'Happy Holidays'? Upholding science-based public health policy? This directive isn't about fairness or equity — it's about enforcing a Christian nationalist agenda."

FFRF warns that this initiative will have a chilling effect on free speech, workplace cohesion and constitutional governance. By encouraging employees to report on one another for perceived slights, the government is prioritizing political theater over the real needs of a diverse federal workforce.

"This isn't about protecting Christians — it's about promoting Christian supremacy," says Gaylor. "And it's part of a larger campaign to undermine the constitutional wall separating church and state."

FFRF calls on the State Department to immediately rescind this directive and cease its "anti-Christian bias" witch hunt. Government policies must protect the rights of all employees equally — without promoting or privileging any religious viewpoint.

Across

1. *Irreverent Noam Chomsky: “It is the responsibility of intellectuals to ____ the truth and to expose lies”

6. Public health approver, acr.

9. Gallup’s inquiry

13. Butterfly, pre-metamorphosis

14. Jar cover

15. Free-for-all

16. Burning crime

17. Big head

18. E.T. or Yoda, e.g.

19. *Atheist Henri ____ of Fauvism fame

21. *Irreverent “All the President’s Men” actor Robert ____

23. Morse code dash

24. Four years, for U.S. president

25. Got done

28. Near in space or time

30. Waterproof overshoe

35. “Good grief!”

37. *Freethinking Whoopi Goldberg’s show, with “The”

39. Marilyn Monroe’s given name

40. The lowest female voice

41. Tapestry

43. The only thing to fear?

44. Dip a ____

46. Fail to mention

47. Unit of pressure

48. “The Green ____”

50. Way, way off

52. Pig pen

53. Graveside sound

55. Famous frat house letters

57. *Freethinking Erich Maria Remarque’s “All Quiet on the ____ Front”

61. *Freethinking Auguste Rodin’s sculpture “The ____”

65. Ethanol, a.k.a. ____ alcohol

66. *Atheist Will Ferrell’s “Funny or ____”

68. Smooth

69. What Edward Scissorhands does

70. Weary traveler’s welcome spot

71. Made a mistake

72. Cassette contents

73. Time in NYC

74. Ex post facto

Down

1. Wimbledon is a Grand one

2. Prefix with ‘graph’

3. Formerly, formerly

4. Steer clear of

5. Dorothy Gale, e.g.

6. What refugees do

7. Like a lot

8. Love intensely

9. Slang for money

10. Miscellany

11. Lecherous look

12. Do banker’s work

15. Insane one

20. Jewish postmortem tradition

22. Unit of work or energy

24. Like certain underwear

25. *Leviticus 20:9: Anyone who curses their parents “shall surely be put to ____”

26. Ice house

27. Rendezvous habitué

29. Skiing helmet manufacturer

31. Dwelling choice

32. Sandwiches for dessert

33. TV classic “Get ____”

34. *Atheist Daniel Radcliffe’s famous role

36. Joey Tribbiani: “How you ____?”

38. Oliver Twist, e.g.

42. Narc’s find

45. Handrails’ main supports

49. Feather glue

51. Grower

54. Not mainstream art

56. Accustom

57. Used to be wild?

58. Highest volcano in Europe

59. Use FedEx

60. A or O, for blood

61. Circus venue

62. Go-____

63. Second to last word in a fairytale

64. Do over

67. Not outs

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12	
13						14				15				
16						17				18				
19						20			21	22				
			23				24							
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44				45		46					47			
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57	58	59	60					61				62	63	64
65						66	67			68				
69						70				71				
72						73				74				

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Freethought Today Cryptogram

J B M S X C L H P B H A C M C J X, D H C X M K J N X P H P J X

T N G H B T F C F C J X, C T, G H B K J B V H, X J F T V C H X F C K C V.

S X P S A A F O S F I O C V O C T X J F T V C H X F C K C V — F O S F

C T, F B N F O K N A — Y N T F D H D J A T F H B H P N G D R

K J B V H, K H S B S X P K S A T H O J J P. — H A D H B F O N D D S B P

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:
U O G R L Q T M H Y V B F D V P S L A C N V W G Y U O G K J E Z X V I.
T H E Q U I C K B R O W N F O X J U M P S O V E R T H E L A Z Y D O G.
This month’s clue: K => V. Answer is on page 21.

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

Action Fund in action



The FFRF Action Fund hosted an information table at the National Association of School Boards Conference in Atlanta in April. Helping spread the word were, from left, Sean Meloy, a member of the Action Fund’s Board of Directors, Mark Dann, FFRF’s director of governmental affairs, and Ryan Jayne, FFRF’s senior policy counsel. The three educated and built new bridges with school board members from all over the country, sharing the FFRF Action Fund’s work to keep public schools secular.

What are you missing? Check out our other offerings!

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

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

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

Freethought Now blogs
freethoughtnow.org

Freethought Radio weekly show
ffrf.org/radio

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

FFRF press releases
ffrf.org/releases

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

We Dissent monthly podcast
wedissent.org



Plan for the future & protect the values you care about



Help carry forward FFRF’s vital work into the future. Create a **WILL FOR FREE** using FFRF’s trusted partner at FreeWill.

 Create a Freethought Legacy Today.

FFRF FOREVER!

IN THE NEWS

Report: Little progress in religious liberty

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has issued its annual list of countries it considers to be the most egregious violators of religious liberty.

The commission’s 2025 report, released in late March, included a list of countries nearly identical to its 2024 list — a reflection, according to the report, that in most of those countries, things have not improved but often have worsened.

“The administration of President Donald J. Trump faces a complex international environment in which to build on its previous success of centering religious freedom as a cornerstone of foreign policy and global leadership,” reads the report. “Confirming this commitment to advancing freedom of religion or belief will require calibration and joint action with like-minded governments.”

The eight current commissioners of the bipartisan, independent agency asked Congress to halt the visits it receives from representatives of countries designated as the most egregious religious freedom violators.

Very few U.S. Christians believe in the trinity

According to the most recent American Worldview Inventory series, just 40 percent of respondents believe that God exists and affects people’s lives. That figure rises to 53 percent among self-identified Christians. While a majority of those surveyed (59 percent) believe in the existence of Jesus Christ, a significantly smaller share of adults (29 percent) believe in the Holy Spirit.

The Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University recently released the survey, which is based on responses collected from 2,100 U.S. adults.

It also shows that just 11 percent believe in the trinity — that the God of the bible is “three distinct but inseparable and equal persons in one infinite being.”

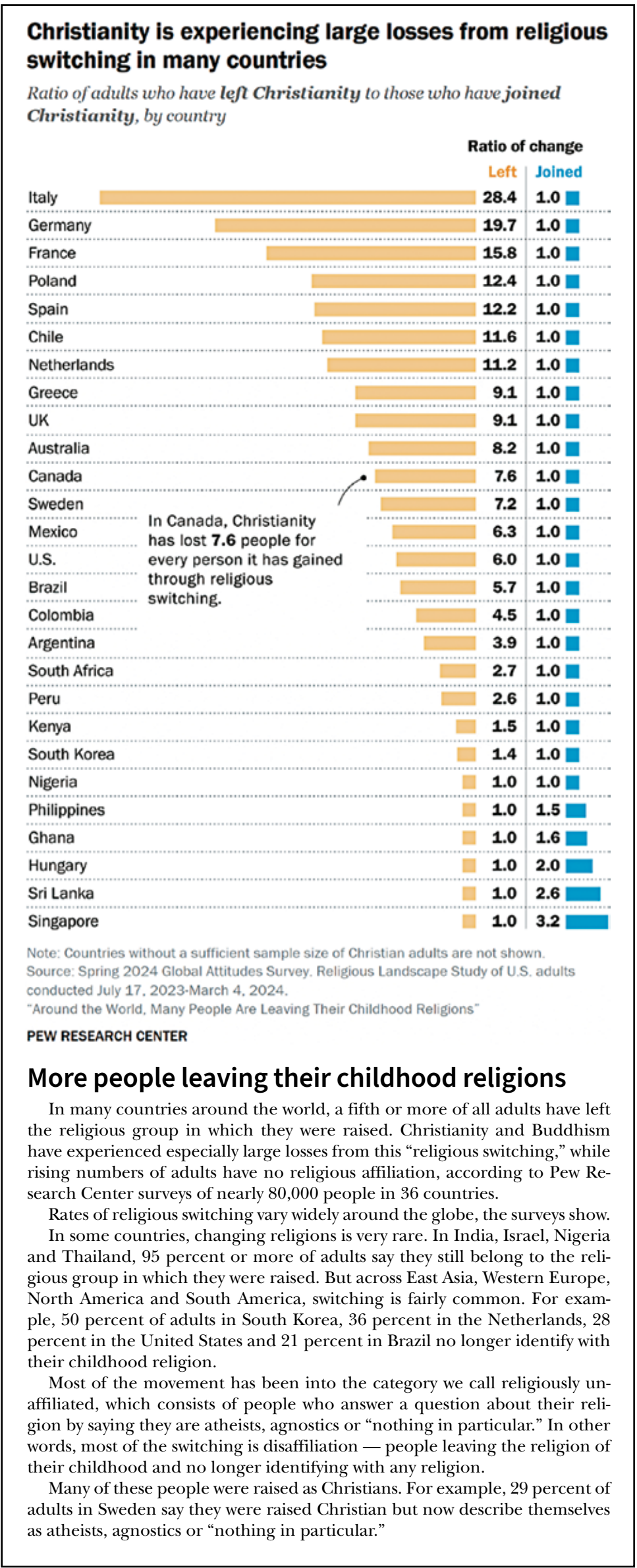
“Even the statistics for the groups that are most in-tune with biblical teachings, such as belief in the nature and impact of the trinity, are shockingly low for a nation in which most people claim to be Christian,” said CRC Director of Research George Barna.

Evangelical clergy reject climate change consensus

According to a recent report from the National Survey of Religious Leaders, 78 percent of evangelical Protestant clergy reject the scientific consensus that human actions are a major cause of climate change. Only about a quarter of other clergy also reject that consensus. However, the vast majority of evangelical clergy (87 percent) do believe that the climate is changing, but they are much more likely than other clergy to deny that human actions are a major cause.

On some other scientific issues, the percentage of evangelical clergy who agree or disagree with a particular view is similar to that of Black Protestant clergy. On these other issues, both groups stand in sharp contrast to viewpoint percentages among mainline Protestant and Catholic clergy.

For example: A majority of evangelical and Black Protestant clergy (68



percent and 79 percent, respectively) say that scientific findings conflict at least a little bit with their religious beliefs, in contrast to a minority of mainline Protestant and Catholic clergy (36 percent and 39 percent). Likewise, a majority of evangelical and Black Protestant clergy (75 percent and 73 percent) believe that God created the world in six 24-hour days. Only a small number of mainline and Catholic clergy — 17 percent in each group — believe that.

Ala. groups can help with travel for abortions

Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall cannot threaten groups in the state with prosecution for helping women travel out of state to obtain abortions, a federal judge ruled on April 1.

“It is one thing for Alabama to outlaw by statute what happens in its own backyard,” U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson concluded in a 131-page decision. “It is another thing for the state

to enforce its values and laws, as chosen by the attorney general, outside its boundaries by punishing its citizens and others who help individuals travel to another state to engage in conduct that is lawful there.”

That right to interstate travel, which Thompson deemed “one of our most fundamental constitutional rights,” was central to the lawsuit. So, too, was the First Amendment.

The case was prompted by statements Marshall made in 2022, soon after the U.S. Supreme Court toppled Roe v. Wade and triggered strict abortion bans in Alabama and more than a dozen other states. In a radio interview, Marshall claimed he had the right to prosecute anyone who helped an Alabama woman get an abortion in another state — comments that advocates say limited their ability to best advise people seeking to end their pregnancies.

Okla. gov.: Prioritize religious freedom

Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt signed an executive order on April 1 instructing state officials to ensure Oklahoma’s laws are “the most robust” in the nation at protecting religious freedom, with the governor also criticizing the state attorney general for attempting to block a proposed Catholic charter school there.

The order initiates a review of various state laws and policies to allegedly ensure they comply with religious freedom protections enshrined in both the U.S. Constitution and the Oklahoma Constitution.

The directive explicitly targets several state laws, including one requiring charter schools to be “nonsectarian” in their operations.

The order comes just weeks after the U.S. Supreme Court began considering a proposed Oklahoma school that could be the nation’s first publicly funded religious charter school. The ongoing litigation has since reached the U.S. Supreme Court, where the landmark decision could reshape school choice and religious freedom in the United States.

Belief in Jesus rises, fueled by young adults

According to the State of the Church 2025 initiative by Barna Research, 66 percent of all U.S. adults say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus that is still important in their life today. That marks a 12-percentage-point increase since 2021, when commitment levels reached their lowest in more than three decades of Barna tracking.

Commitment to Jesus was lowest in 2021 and 2022, when it bottomed out at 54 percent. Since then, the research shows a steady, year-over-year increase in the key indicator. In aggregate terms, the multi-year climb in public sentiment toward Jesus equates to nearly 30 million more U.S. adults who claim to be following Jesus today than in 2021.

Among the biggest drivers of the Jesus resurgence are younger generations — particularly Gen Z and Millennials. This is a significant change from previous Barna tracking, which showed Elders and Boomers as more committed Christians than younger generations.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Alabama

FFRF made sure that student athletes in the Morgan County Schools system would not be coerced into religious baptisms by a high school baseball coach.

A community member and MCS alumnus reported that the A.P. Brewer High School baseball coach recently baptized at least one student athlete during an official practice that occurred on MCS property. A post from the official Brewer High School Baseball Facebook page included photos of the coach baptizing a student in a large tub on what appeared to be a school athletics field. The post was captioned “More than a game,” with an additional baseball emoji and a Latin cross emoji, followed by “#raisedtolife.” An additional post from a community member stated that the coaches were helping to lead student-athletes “to a deeper understanding of Christian values,” and contained an additional photo of one of the coaches baptising a student.

“Student athletes have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination when participating in their public school’s athletics program,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “It is illegal for public school athletic coaches to lead or encourage student athletes to participate in religious activities, including baptisms.”

In a letter from the district’s legal representative, Zachary B. Roberson, FFRF learned that the district had taken corrective action to protect students’ First Amendment rights going forward. “The district has taken appropriate action to address the findings of its investigation,” Roberson wrote. “The district will ensure that baptisms or similar religious ceremonies are not performed on school property or while school employees may be perceived as acting in an official capacity.”

Connecticut

FFRF took action to ensure that secular students at Three Rivers Community College in Norwich were allowed to form a Secular Student Alliance (SSA) chapter on campus after initially being denied.

FFRF learned that a student attempted to form a local chapter of the SSA on the Three Rivers campus. Despite fulfilling each of the Student Government Association’s (SGA) requirements for student organization recognition, SGA denied the group’s application, despite the fact that Three Rivers does recognize a Christian student organization, the Alpha Omega Christian Club.

No explicit reason was given for the denial of the SSA’s student organization application. Given that the SSA club met all of the requirements for recognition and the SGA recognizes other clubs such as the Alpha Omega Christian club, the denial appeared to be based on the viewpoint of the SSA club.

“Preventing our complainant’s group from forming not only violates the law, it is also bad policy,” FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott wrote. “Students seeking to make their college a better place for themselves and their classmates by building a community and forming a student club shouldn’t be subject to the whims of their classmates for club approval.”

After FFRF’s letter, Dr. Chaisson-Cardenas, vice president of diver-

We’re in for a bad spell (and bad logic)



FFRF Member Jack Church of Iowa sent us this photo and wrote: “I recently drove past a Catholic church outside of Lourdes, Iowa, and saw this sign. I just happened to be wearing my ‘Freethinker’ T-shirt, so I stopped to get a picture. I found it interesting that they are so sure of their god, yet they don’t know how to spell the word ‘atheist.’ Thank you for all of the hard work you do to keep church and state separate in this nation and especially during these crazy times!”

sity, equity and inclusion, informed FFRF of policy changes, which included, “vacating the previous decision by the SGA. [The complainant] will be allowed to resubmit the club application for review and approval. This new review will be based on the content of the organizational application, and not the style or approach of the applicant.” Additionally, the SGA leadership would be receiving additional training in order to clarify Connecticut state policy and procedure.

Florida

FFRF reminded the Broward County Public Schools System of its duty to keep school events free from religion, after an outside speaker began promoting Christianity at an assembly meant to discuss financial literacy.

A district employee reported that on Feb. 27, Coral Springs High School held a student assembly in the school’s gymnasium that was ostensibly going to feature a guest speaker from Bank of America discussing the importance of financial literacy. FFRF learned that the Bank of America-affiliated guest speaker began the presentation with a religious invocation given “in the name of God,” and stated something to the effect of “whatever race, religion, creed you are ... we all know that there is one God.” After the invocation, the guest speaker reportedly started to discuss the Lord’s Prayer, at which point administrators finally intervened, cutting off the speaker’s microphone.

“In this case, while administrators did eventually intervene, Coral Springs High School still violated students’ First Amendment rights by permitting a guest speaker to lead students in unconstitutional coercive prayer and promote his personal religious views to students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After FFRF’s letter, general counsel for the district Marylin Batista responded to confirm that the district was aware of its First Amendment ob-

ligation to students. “The speaker, an employee from the Bank of America, was warned upon his initial mention of God, that he may not make any further religious statements during the assembly, and was subsequently escorted off the stage and removed off campus upon a second statement pertaining to the Lord’s Prayer,” Batista wrote. Batista confirmed that the school district is aware of its obligation to students, and did not intend for the violation to occur. The district is additionally taking steps to better vet future speakers, which includes providing a clear directive that speakers may not advocate for any particular religion or political cause while participating in a school function.

Louisiana

FFRF ensured that a post office in Louisiana took down an unconstitutional sign promoting Christianity. A concerned community member informed FFRF that a wooden “JESUS” sign was stationed at the main counter of the Lafayette Post Office. FFRF wrote the post office to remove the symbol immediately.

“United States postal regulations prohibit the display of religious materials, other than stamp art, on postal property,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote.

Thanks to FFRF’s work, the display was taken down quickly. A letter from the customer service manager, John E. Jordan Jr., reported that, “the wooden ‘JESUS’ sign on the main counter of the Lafayette Post Office, 3603D Ambassador Caffery Parkway, was immediately removed.”

Louisiana

Meetings conducted by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife & Fisheries will no longer open with sectarian prayers, thanks to FFRF.

A community member informed FFRF of a prayer at an official Wildlife & Fisheries event. The complainant ref-

erenced a specific instance on March 24, 2024, at an event titled, “Becoming an Outdoor Woman.” According to the complainant, the event opened with prayer over a speaker. The prayer made the complainant and others uncomfortable as they did not share the sectarian religious views of the speaker.

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

While FFRF reached out to the department multiple times throughout the year, there was no response. Finally, in April of this year, the complainant reported that at the more recent Becoming an Outdoor Woman event there were no prayers or other religious activities during the entire group meetings.

Minnesota

FFRF reminded the Fergus Falls Public Schools system that speakers must not be allowed to promote religion to children.

A district parent reported that on Jan. 23, Kennedy Secondary School hosted Christian evangelist Bob Lenz for an assembly during the school day. FFRF learned that Lenz invited students to a pizza party at the school at 7 p.m. that night. According to his website, Lenz “shares the love of Jesus to give teens hope for this life and the next.” His public school programming included coordinating an evening program with local churches “where students hear an interactive and compelling message on the love of God and are given an opportunity to respond to the gospel.”

“Allowing an evangelical minister even one-time access to recruit students and encourage their attendance at a religious event is a violation of the Establishment Clause,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote.

Thanks to FFRF’s work, district superintendent Jeff Drake assured that while the assembly remained consistent with the values of the district’s middle schools, “the presenter did err in promoting an evening event at the end of his assembly. We have taken steps to ensure this doesn’t happen in the future.” Drake promised that the district does have policies regarding the use of facilities, and they will continue to apply the policy with consistency to ensure that all groups are treated fairly going forward.

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New Jersey

The Hopewell Valley Regional School District in Pennington, N.J., will no longer allow outside religious leaders to lead the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, thanks to FFRF.

A district community member informed FFRF that outside adults were being permitted to enter Timberlane Middle School to lead the school’s chapter of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes.

“Schools cannot constitutionally allow religious organizations to treat schools as a recruiting ground for their religious mission,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote.

FFRF prevailed, with FFRF receiving a letter from the Schenck Price law firm. Attorney Paul H. Green confirmed that the district conducted an investigation into the matter, and action was taken as a result of FFRF’s complaint.

“Dr. Treece is directing the Timberlane Middle School Principal to immediately stop the direct involvement of any outside adults in the meetings of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, and to ensure that the group’s activities comply with the requirements of the Equal Access Act, the First Amendment and relevant provisions of New Jersey law,” Green wrote.

North Carolina

FFRF took action after learning that the Wayne County Public Schools system allowed student athletes to be baptized on school grounds by school officials.

Multiple concerned community members reported that the Eastern Wayne High School football team was being entangled with religion. FFRF learned that 23 student athletes were baptized by one or more football coaches on the practice field following practice. FFRF further learned that Eastern Wayne High School accepted a donation from its Class of 1979 to fund bibles for its FCA group.

“It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for public school coaches to engage in religious practices or prayer with students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the district.

After FFRF’s letter, the district reached out to Schwartz Law P.L.L.C. for guidance. Richard A. Schwartz and E. Alexander Groskurth worked with the district and wrote back to FFRF, informing it of the changes that had been made as a result of the letter.

“After learning that the baptisms occurred, the district launched a person-



The Freedom From Religion Foundation’s Metropolitan Chicago Chapter set up a display at the Chicago Daley Center Plaza to counter Easter activities there. Each year, the chapter erects a banner display to protest a Catholic prayer shrine and worship service taking place annually on the city plaza during the Christian “holy week.” The FFRF banner was stolen last year in broad daylight, showing that such so-called public forums are viewed as belonging to the dominant religion. This year, the chapter added a lock and chain securing the banner to its stand and said, “We will not be silenced.”

FFRF thanks chapter members for their work in setting up the display, left to right: Brian Emerick, Bob Hunter, Bob Elmore and Jeff Kramer. FFRF also thanks chapter Executive Director Steve Foulkes for working to transport the display and former chapter director Tom Cara.

nel investigation into the circumstances surrounding the baptisms,” Schwartz and Groskurth wrote. “As a preliminary matter and to prevent future occurrences, Superintendent Whichard reviewed with all school principals the guidance we drafted for him about religion in schools and sports at a meeting in October.”

Oklahoma

The Eastern Oklahoma Youth Services (EOYS) confirmed that juveniles housed in EOYS facilities are not restricted to only Christian reading material as a reward for good behavior.

A concerned community member reported that an official EOYS policy appeared to favor Christianity and the Christian bible over other religions. FFRF learned that juveniles housed in EOYS facilities were subject to restrictions on which reading materials and media they could access based on good behavior.

Per official EOYS materials provided to FFRF, juveniles who received a ‘C level’ score were permitted to only access “a bible or self-help book,” with the policy referring to the Christian bible.

“While it’s understandable that EOYS wants to promote self-help materials to juveniles, it’s constitutionally problematic to specify that the only religious text available to “C level” residents is the bible,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

FFRF’s concerns were addressed by Executive Director Linda Shaw, who confirmed that the document displaying the policy was not official. “Residents are not limited to only reading bibles, they may read any type of religious material requested,” Shaw confirmed.

South Dakota

FFRF stepped in after the South Dakota governor pushed religion on employees in an official email.

A South Dakota state employee informed FFRF that on March 21, Gov. Larry Rhoden sent an email to all state employees announcing administrative

leave for Good Friday and Easter Monday, stating that he hoped they would “spend time with those [they] love as [they] celebrate the resurrection of our good Lord.”

The employee who reached out to FFRF is not religious and felt deeply alienated by the suggestion that they should “celebrate the resurrection of a good Lord,” in whom they do not believe. Such a statement from a government official not only presumes religious belief but also excludes and marginalizes employees who do not share that faith.

“Explicitly tying official leave to a religious event — especially in a way that urges state employees to participate in a specific faith practice — crosses a constitutional line,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the governor’s office.

FFRF received a letter from General Counsel Katie Hruska, addressing the email. “While specific steps will not be shared, I have taken action to address the concern,” Hruska wrote.

Virginia

The Roanoke County Public Schools system is no longer allowing the teachers to promote and organize a bible study before school.

A district parent reported that a teacher at Hidden Valley Middle School was organizing a bible study for students, and was promoting the bible study via the school’s news program. During the Sept. 24, 2024, broadcast of the school’s “Eagle News” program posted on YouTube, a teacher advertised “Connected Through Christ,” a bible club she hosted in her room at 7:45 each Wednesday morning. According to the broadcast, students in the club were being given a lesson about the bible and were instructed on how to use faith to solve common middle school problems. The teacher heavily implied an offering of free food to entice students to attend. Another teacher also encouraged students to attend the bible study.

“To avoid coercing students into participating in a religious club, the district

may not allow staff to be involved in student religious clubs beyond a supervisory capacity,” FFRF Staff Attorney Maddy Ziegler wrote in November 2024.

After FFRF’s letter, the Haney Phin-yowattanachip responded with a letter representing the district. “Roanoke County Public Schools encourages student participation in clubs and other common interest groups,” Matthew Woodward wrote. “However, Roanoke County Public Schools does not permit teachers, administrators, or other staff members to lead or promote clubs which have a religious affiliation.” Woodward confirmed that the teachers have ceased promoting the club, and the school board employees also received renewed guidance regarding the board’s prohibition against school staff promoting religious activity while on school grounds.

Washington

The North Thurston Public Schools system in Lacey, Wash., will no longer be coercing student athletes into making “faith” a priority after FFRF spoke up for student rights.

A concerned parent reported that in November 2024, Timberline High School’s wrestling program issued a priority list for student-athletes. “Faith” was listed as the top priority among five priorities that students are meant to practice and balance. FFRF’s parent complainant expressed frustration over the wrestling program’s choice to include a religious concept, “faith,” among the program’s official priorities.

“Religious favoritism and promotion occurring within the school’s wrestling program is particularly troubling for parents and students, such as our complainant and their child, who do not subscribe to any religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

After FFRF’s letter was sent, Assistant Superintendent of Operations Sean Dotson communicated the school’s corrective action in regard to the violation. “We have reviewed the matter and wish to inform you that the word ‘Faith’ has been removed from the Timberline High School wrestling program’s priority list.”

Wisconsin

FFRF and the American Civil Liberties Union of Wisconsin worked together to ensure that the Germantown, Wis., social media pages would not unconstitutionally promote Christianity

A Germantown resident informed FFRF and the ACLU of Wisconsin that the Germantown Police Department (GPD) included a biblical quote and citation in a recruitment post for new officers on its official Facebook page. On Sept. 13, 2024, GPD posted that it was looking to hire up to six new officers, followed by a quote from Matthew 20:26 of the New International version, reading “Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,” followed by the biblical citation.

“As an institution entrusted with substantial authority, GPD must serve all residents equitably, regardless of religious belief or nonbelief,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi and ACLU of Wisconsin Foundation Staff Attorney Hayley I. Archer wrote to Chief Michael S. Snow.

After the joint letter was sent, FFRF was happy to hear from Snow. Snow emailed both organizations, writing, “the language has been removed from the post.”



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Supreme Court

Continued from page 1

foundational norms, the schools that remain in their wake will be a shell of the democracy-promoting institution the court itself has long lionized — and that healthy majorities of parents continue to support in their local neighborhoods. And although there’s a way to avoid the worst outcome in both cases, the path ahead is uncertain: It will require the court to follow history in an evenhanded manner (in Drummond) and progressives to accept a middle ground (in Mahmoud).

The legal challenges presented in Drummond and Mahmoud did not arise out of thin air. They are part of a long-term conservative movement strategy aimed at eroding public education.

A major component of this strategy has been a consistent call to fund school choice, a broad umbrella term that encompasses various programs such as school vouchers and educational savings accounts that channel taxpayer dollars away from traditional public schools and into private ones. Drummond’s call for a constitutional right to taxpayer-funded religious education can thus be thought of as a major front in Project 2025’s “core principle” of “significantly advanc[ing] education choice.”

Conservatives have likewise sought to brand public schools as purveyors of “woke” ideology rather than facilitators of a shared set of community values. The claim at issue in Mahmoud — a parental right to opt out of curricular choices that some find religiously objectionable — is accordingly another salvo in the broader culture wars, and one in which conservatives are asking the court to grant them a legal trump card.

Ultimately, to a significant cross-section of the Republican Party, public schools are now the “radical, anti-American” enemy. And viewed from that perspective, Drummond and Mahmoud may represent the greatest chance for delivering a knockout blow.

Drummond case

Technically, the Drummond case is just about Oklahoma. That’s because it arose out of Oklahoma’s refusal to fund a religious charter school named the St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School. (According to St. Isidore’s handbook, “the traditions and teachings of the Catholic Church and the virtue of Christian living permeate the school day.”)

But make no mistake: It is blue states that have the most to lose in this case. For if St. Isidore has a right to public funding in Oklahoma, that same right would exist for religious charter schools in California and New York — places where, until now, taxpayer funds have never been used to teach religion as truth to K-12 students.

It is hard to overstate how big a sea change this would be. Nonreligious charter schools currently receive more than \$26 billion in public funds and educate some four million children. So a ruling in favor of religious charter schools could mean billions of dollars for religious education — a prospect that one Catholic school executive called “game-changing” for how it would enable religious schools to “grow [their] network.”

But the implications are far more than monetary. They strike at the very vision of public schools as places where students come together from all walks of life to learn what the Supreme Court once called the “values on which our society rests.” Bankrolled by taxpayer dollars, Drummond would transform the American education system into a taxpayer-funded mechanism for transmitting



Image by Shutterstock

each family’s preferred religious tenets.

What is more, religious charter schools will likely argue that they have a further Free Exercise right to restrict enrollment only to adherents of their particular faith (indeed, a religious private school in Maine has already advanced this claim). At the end of that argument is a publicly funded K-12 education system that tribalizes the American people at a time when we need to be doing exactly the opposite: forging bonds of connection across our differences.

Justice Thurgood Marshall once cautioned that “unless our children begin to learn together, there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.” If the court rules for the religious charter schools in Drummond, we will come one giant — and regrettable — step closer to the world Marshall feared.

Mahmoud case

The Mahmoud case emerged out of a 2022 Montgomery County, Md., school board policy that introduced a new set of LGBTQ-inclusive storybooks into its pre-K through 12th-grade language arts curriculum. In general, the books aimed at instilling respect and civility for people from different backgrounds. In practice, though, the books led to controversy. One of the books, entitled “Pride Puppy,” was directed at pre-K students and invited students to search for images of a lip ring and a drag queen.

Montgomery County initially permitted parents to opt their children out of reading these new books. But the district soon changed course, which is what led the Mahmoud family to sue. Their argument was that the Free Exercise Clause grants parents like them the “right to opt their children out of public school instruction that would substantially interfere with their religious development.”

This is a truly difficult case, even for someone who, like me, holds an unyielding commitment to ensuring that all LGBTQ students feel safe at school. But one can hold that commitment while also acknowledging that the choice to force children as young as five years old to read books like “Pride Puppy” over their parents’ objection is not an obvious one. Indeed, Montgomery County has since removed “Pride Puppy” from its curriculum — a reasonable concession.

The great danger in this case, though, is not about the parental right to opt 5- and 6-year-olds out of controversial cur-

ricula. It’s that a decision recognizing a parental opt-out right would be difficult to contain via a sensible limiting principle. Would parents of middle or high school children enjoy a similar right to opt their children out of any assignment or reading that espouses support for LGBTQ rights? How about a right to opt out of science classes that teach biology or evolution? And what of history classes that some religious parents may find too secular for their liking?

In all of those contexts, lower federal courts had unanimously rejected the contention that simply because a parent finds something to be religiously objectionable, they can excuse their child from a shared curricular goal. Mahmoud could upend that settled consensus and replace it with a world in which public schools are forced to offer bespoke curricula to all different families based on their particular religious commitments.

That’s a recipe for an education system that would certainly teach some values to our children. But this much is for sure: They would no longer be shared ones.

Saving public education

The plaintiffs in both Drummond and Mahmoud may be optimistic that the 6-3 conservative supermajority will side with them. After all, religious litigants have fared remarkably well at the Supreme Court of late.

But a surprising obstacle exists in the Drummond case — and Maryland officials, if they are smart, may yet have the final word in Mahmoud.

In Drummond, the best argument against the claimed Free Exercise right to taxpayer-funded religious schools comes from the very place that the conservative Supreme Court has lately looked to move the law right on abortion and guns: history and tradition.

As Ethan Hutt, a leading historian of education, and I show in a forthcoming paper, it turns out the denial of funding that St. Isidore complains of today is something that happened routinely during the founding era. Yet no one — no parent, no religious leader, not even a religious school that was denied funds on equal terms with its nonsectarian counterparts — ever filed a lawsuit (much less won one) arguing that the right to Free Exercise demanded otherwise.

This is precisely the historic pattern that the Supreme Court relied on to reject the right to abortion in Dobbs: “When legislators began to [ban abortion

in the 19th century], no one, as far as we are aware, argued that [they had] violated a fundamental right.”

If the absence of legal contestation in the face of government action 200 years ago shows that the Constitution’s original meaning does not encompass a claimed right to abortion, it’s hard to see why that logic should differ when the claimed right involves religious school funding. Put simply, the court can be consistently originalist, or it can recognize the religious charter school funding right claimed in Drummond. But it can’t do both.

The legal argument to protect public education is less clear in Mahmoud. But in that case, there is another way to steer clear of a Supreme Court ruling that would imperil evolution, biology, history and LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in the upper grades: Maryland officials can override the Montgomery County policy and extend an opt-out choice to parents of young children like the Mahmouds.

There would be clear precedent for such an action by the state. After New York officials took a similar step to eliminate a policy dispute in a major gun case in 2020, the court dismissed that case as moot — putting off a dangerous ruling for at least the time being.

Of course, doing so would require lawmakers in Maryland to accept parents of young children choosing to withdraw their children from reading controversial LGBTQ-inclusive books. But perhaps lawmakers can see a principled distinction between the desire to make schools a safe space for LGBTQ children — a nonnegotiable, core value — and the desire to use elementary school classrooms as a tool for changing hearts and minds on controversial topics more generally.

In truth, progressives were probably never going to win that battle in kindergarten classrooms, especially with the present political climate. Progress on social attitudes concerning the transgender community was always more likely through the same mechanisms that produced rapid change for the gay and lesbian community — mainstream media, social media and the critical realization that our friends, family and other loved ones are members of these different communities and deserve equal respect.

In the end, the Supreme Court may choose simply to ignore history and tradition in Drummond, where it is inconvenient for a movement conservative cause. And a policy change in Maryland could simply delay the inevitable, as new cases could always be brought advancing a parental opt-out right in the future.

The bigger takeaway, then, is about the war against public education and its likely toll. Public schools were a major part of what made America great. So in seeking public education’s demise, the Drummond and Mahmoud cases could portend staggering consequences: less social tolerance, reduced international competitiveness and continued inequality along economic and racial lines.

But the greatest cost may be for our democracy. After all, the Supreme Court reminded us just four short years ago that public schools are where our democracy is cultivated. That’s why the timing of these cases could not be any worse. In a moment when American democracy is being tested like never before, the court should be the last institution — not the leading one — to dismantle our public schools.

Aaron Tang is a law professor at the University of California, Davis, and the author of the book “Supreme Hubris: How Overconfidence Is Destroying the Court — and How We Can Fix It.”

‘Satisfying alternative’ to religion not needed

By Ryan T. Cragun

“Seek, and ye shall find” (Matthew 7:7) aptly describes Lauren Jackson’s recent column in the New York Times titled, “Americans haven’t found a satisfying alternative to religion.” She went looking for nonreligious people who feel lost without religion — and found them.



Photo by Chris Line
Ryan T. Cragun

Unfortunately, that’s not a scientific way to understand nonreligion. It’s akin to studying soccer fans by interviewing only hooligans, or exploring readers of fantasy fiction by focusing solely on roman-tasy enthusiasts. It’s what social scientists call sampling on the dependent variable: looking only at people who exhibit the outcome you’re trying to explain.

Jackson set out to learn about the nonreligious but focused almost entirely on those who feel they’re missing something. She notes in passing that many “Nones” are doing just fine — but largely

sidelines them in favor of those who are unhappy, sad and lonely. That’s a serious methodological problem.

Let’s start with the empirical claim that religion leads to greater happiness and health. At first glance, the evidence might seem to support this. But, look closer, and the picture gets fuzzier. The happiest countries in the world are the Nordic nations — places like Finland, Sweden and Denmark — where religious attendance is minimal, atheism is widespread, and few people consider religion important to their lives. These nations routinely top global rankings for life satisfaction, social trust and well-being.

Closer to home, my colleague Jesse M. Smith and I analyzed data from the General Social Survey — widely regarded as the gold standard of U.S. survey research — in our recent book, “Goodbye Religion.” We found no meaningful differences in health or happiness between religious and nonreligious Americans. None.

So, how do we explain the studies that do show a correlation between religiosity and well-being? The answer lies in un-

“The truth is this: Being religious or nonreligious has little to no bearing on whether someone is happy, healthy or fulfilled.”

derstanding the difference between statistical and practical significance. Many studies claim victory because they achieve a statistically significant result — like winning the lottery — but neglect to tell you they only won \$20. The effect sizes are tiny, often accounting for just 1 percent or less of the variance in outcomes like health or happiness. That’s the case for every study mentioned in Jackson’s article. One study she cites didn’t even bother to report effect sizes — likely because they were so small.

If you’re hoping to feel better, you would be better off sleeping in than going to church.

If a well-designed, representative study ever found that religion substantially improved people’s lives — that it offered lottery-jackpot-sized benefits — that would be big news. But no such study exists.

The truth is this: Being religious or nonreligious has little to no bearing on whether someone is happy, healthy or fulfilled.

And this brings us to a deeper point. The very premise of Jackson’s article — that secular Americans need a “satisfying

alternative” to religion — is misleading. It implies that religion is the natural baseline, and anything else must justify itself as a substitute. But that’s backward.

Religion didn’t descend from the heavens. Humans created it. Over millennia, religions evolved to meet core human needs — for meaning, morality, community, ritual, transcendence. But those needs are human needs. They aren’t religious needs.

You don’t have to believe in a god to want a purpose in life, or to seek out beauty, belonging and wonder. Those desires can be fulfilled through philosophy, science, art, service, friendship, or even just a walk in the woods. Millions of people around the world — including some of the happiest — live rich, meaningful lives without religion or spirituality.

If you’re looking for awe, purpose or peace, by all means, seek. But don’t assume you need to return to a pew to find them.

Ryan T. Cragun is a professor of sociology at the University of Tampa and co-author of several books, including “Beyond Doubt: The Secularization of Society.” He spoke at FFRF’s convention in Denver in 2024 and his speech will be published in the June/July issue of Freethought Today.

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.”

THEY SAID WHAT?

Jeremiah 51:20 — ‘You are my war club, my weapon for battle. With you I shatter nations; with you I destroy kingdoms.’

From the Facebook bio of Phoenix Ikner, the gunman in the mass shooting at Florida State University on April 17.
Local10.com, 4-18-25

Your obedience to align yourself with the desires of God [can] release seven specific supernatural blessings for your body, your family, your finances and your future.

Televangelist Paula White, who leads the White House Faith Office, said the blessings will come if one donates \$1,000 during the Easter season to her ministries.
Baptist News, 3-25-25

We’re going to make God first in Kansas. I’m going to restore divine providence and the Founding Fathers’ original intent: prayer in schools, defending our Judeo-Christian heritage and values, ensuring that state policies reflect our spiritual foundation and the traditional family values that built Kansas and America.

Right-wing broadcaster Doug Billings, who announced he will be running for governor of Kansas.
Right Wing Watch, 4-1-25

The IRS doesn’t have the authority to go monitor the speech of pastors and of church leaders. Let’s have them do tax collection. That’s what their job is. Not monitoring free speech.

Sen. James Lankford, R-Okla., in an interview with Tony Perkins, speaking about his “Free Speech Fairness Act,” a bill that would undo the Johnson Amendment, which states that nonprofits and churches cannot endorse political candidates.
The Friendly Atheist, 4-14-25

You cannot treat Christianity like a pile of evidence to be examined neutrally. You must defend it as a coherent, God-revealed system. The gospel does not need to be proven — it needs to be preached, explained and contended for. . . . Christ is your King whether you acknowledge him or not. What you will not surrender by submission, he will eventually take by force. If you’re rejecting him, know this: your rebellion is no match for the risen Christ. He con-

quered death. He will conquer you.

Pastor Jerry Dorris of the Reformation Church of Shelbyville, Ky.
Facebook, 4-6-25

Lord Jesus, please give us the strength, the knowledge, the ability to articulate our words and have fun and be confident. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Karoline Leavitt, White House press secretary, moments before stepping onto the stage to face the media.
Fox News, 4-11-25

We must carry out disciplinary measures, perform prayers and acts of worship. We must enter Islam completely. Islam is not just limited to a few rituals; it is a comprehensive system of all divine commands.

Taliban leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, stating that executions are a part of Islam, days after four men were killed by gunfire in Afghanistan after they were convicted of murder.
Associated Press, 4-14-25

Rely on the Almighty. Do not rely on this world for your happiness.

Actor Denzel Washington, addressing the University of Colorado football team via video at the request of head coach Deion Sanders. FFRF has called out Sanders for his religious intimidations at the public university. (See page 16.)
Daily Citizen, 3-24-25

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New York City	WPIX-IND	(Ch. 11)	10 am
San Francisco	KICU-IND	(Ch. 36, Cable 6)	10 am
Washington, D.C.	WDCW-CW	(Ch. 50, 23, 3)	8 am

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I told the President that our church was the subject of an IRS investigation launched under the Biden administration that spanned several years and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars due to complaints from the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Robert Jeffress, pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, confirmed in an email that he told Trump at an Easter event at the White House that he had been investigated by the IRS.
Religion News Service, 4-18-25

Thomas Jendrock Student Activist Award

Bible-infused lessons ignore law, hurt students

Rajasi Agarwal has earned FFRF’s \$1,000 Thomas Jendrock Student Activist Award for writing an op-ed that appeared in the Austin American-Statesman.

Rajasi writes: “I am a freshman at Westlake High School in Texas, where I am a reporter on the school newspaper, a member of the politics club, a delegate of Model United Nations and a violinist in an orchestra ensemble. In my free time, I love to read books. My favorite book series are Harry Potter and The Hunger Games, but my current interest is in dystopian novels. I particularly enjoy books by authors George Orwell and Suzanne Collins. Some of my other interests include keeping up with the news, playing the violin and writing opinion pieces. To me, the most interesting thing is human behavior. Why do cultures have the beliefs they do? Why do politicians do certain things? What are the dynamics within our own government? These questions are what drive me to read and write about politics.”

The following is Rajasi’s op-ed that ran in the Austin American-Statesman on March 24.

By Rajasi Agarwal

Starting this fall, a bible-influenced curriculum approved by the state Board of Education last November will be allowed in Texas public elementary schools. The lessons could reach as many as 7,000 schools and 2 million K-5 students.

As a second-generation Hindu teenager in Texas public schools, I find this curriculum worrying. Minority students can feel socially ostracized. Adding lessons that emphasize one religious tradition will increase social alienation for those who don’t identify with that faith.

Secular education, which has contributed to maintaining peace in classrooms, is being threatened. Young students rarely understand religious differences between themselves and their peers, in my experience. When a particular tradition — whether a place of worship or dietary restriction



Image by Shutterstock



Rajasi Agarwal

— is presented as “correct” or “better,” those outside that tradition feel demeaned.

Public elementary schools should not teach about the bible. Period.

The First Amendment mandates the separation of church and state, and the Fourteenth Amendment requires individual states to comply with all other amendments. The bible is a religious text. Public schools are state funded. Texas should not be endorsing religious material in elementary schools.

Schools are not religion-free, but teachers must remain impartial during instructional periods. Student-led activities during free periods, like my school’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes club, are protected. A bible-infused school curriculum, however, sanctions religious expression in class by teachers and the school.

In the case of Abington School District v. Schempp (1963), the U.S. Supreme Court ruled a Pennsylvania school district’s mandatory bible readings were unconstitutional, even though individual students were allowed to opt out in rare cases.

Even if a Texas school’s decision to use the bible-infused curriculum is optional, the U.S. Supreme Court has already thwarted an attempt at religious instruction in public schools. Furthermore, the judicial system is 100 percent backed up by the Constitution.

Proponents argue that Christianity is a major part of U.S. history and will enrich humanities lessons. But 26 percent of Texans are religiously unaffiliated, while 6 percent practice non-Christian religions. A bible-influenced curriculum disregards a third of the state population.

The curriculum inserts biblical stories into previously secular subjects. English is a required subject for K-5 public schools. In the subject text-

book, the new curriculum includes scientific lessons alongside a unit called “Serving Our Neighbors,” which emphasizes Jewish and Christian scriptures. By placing a religious chapter next to nonspiritual lessons, the textbook presents a certain religious tradition as the default, alienating students from other faiths.

I recall arguing with classmates in third grade about God, reflecting our various faiths. We disagreed on God’s abilities, whether he could walk on hot surfaces or fly, among other superpowers. As young children, we struggled to understand each other, and our teacher had to intervene. Infusing education with a majority religion worsens divisions for minorities.

Although Christianity influences U.S. culture, religious pluralism is an important part of America’s constitutional fabric. Public education should reflect those values rather than religious superiority.

Though adoption of this new curriculum is optional for schools, they will receive additional funding if they do so.

A 2024 Kinder Institute study found that 73 percent of Texas school districts are underfunded, and the most financially strained districts are more likely to have student achievement ratings of C or lower. State funds being reserved to reward religious education should instead be used to increase teacher salaries and improve educational opportunities. It is frustrating that underfunded schools are pressured to adopt a bible-infused curriculum.

Students like myself have attended primary schools for years to develop basic skills and identities. Controversial topics being taught, or worse, strangled in a biased environment, undermine our educational fabric. They threaten the future of my fellow students and minorities. All students deserve to feel valued in their classrooms, not subjected to alienation or divisions along religious and cultural lines.

Rajasi Agarwal is a ninth grader at Westlake High School.

Strong Backbone Award

High school student fights ‘In God We Trust’ bill



Berry

Berry was awarded FFRF’s Strong Backbone Award, which is \$1,000, funded by an octogenarian member of FFRF (who wants to be anonymous) for her activism against the “In God We Trust” bill in Iowa.

Berry writes: “I am 14 years old, a freshman in high school in Iowa, and my pronouns are they/them. This year, I testified against a bill in Iowa that would require all public school buildings to display ‘In God We Trust’ in a prominent place. I said in my testimony that displaying that phrase on public school buildings is forced religiosity and smacks of Christian nationalism. I don’t trust in God and I have a constitutionally protected right to my own beliefs and to safety in my public school. This bill is offensive to students of di-

verse faith, and no faith, who are all equally protected in our country.

“I have been testifying at the Iowa Capitol for three years about bills pertaining to LGBTQ-plus and other marginalized and minority communities’ rights. I enjoy being an activist. However, as a 14-year-old, I shouldn’t have to advocate for my and others’ human and civil rights.

“I am also represented by the ACLU and Lambda Legal as a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the state of Iowa and several school districts against SF 496, a law passed in 2023 that bans books, bans conversation about gender and sexuality (‘don’t say gay/trans’), and forcibly outs transgender, non-binary and gender fluid students to their parents. Being involved in the lawsuit and speaking up as an activist, I am leveraging my privilege as

a white teenager with accepting parents and supportive community in order to advocate for everyone, including those who aren’t as fortunate or as safe as I am.

I am thankful to the Freedom From Religion Foundation for the recognition of my activism and the Strong Backbone Award. I’m grateful for all the work that they do to advocate for everyone’s rights.”

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

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

Percy Shelley Student Activist Awardee

‘My anger is not misplaced; it is necessary’

Below is Kyria’s talk to the “Revival of Reason” conference sponsored by Black Nonbelievers in March in Atlanta, which FFRF helped co-sponsor. FFRF is naming Kyria its first “Percy Shelley Student Activist,” a \$2,000 scholarship fund set up by generous FFRF member Michael Meek, who was inspired by the poet. Shelley was kicked out of Oxford for circulating a pamphlet about the necessity of atheism.

By Kyria M. Santa

I want to thank Black Nonbelievers and Mandisa Thomas for this platform. It’s powerful to be in a space where I don’t have to explain myself, where my existence isn’t up for debate, and where I can be unapologetic.

I titled this talk “Why I’m Angry,” not from a place of rage, but from a refusal to suppress the righteous anger I feel about the oppression, ignorance and hypocrisy I witness daily. A significant part of this anger comes from my identity as an atheist.

Atheism shapes my worldview and my activism within the Black and Puerto Rican communities, where religion is pervasive. Christianity dominates Black spaces, while Catholicism, mixed with indigenous beliefs, dominates in Puerto Rican culture. This religious framework is ingrained in our history and family structures. But what happens when you say, “I don’t believe in God”? You’re treated like a traitor, as if you’ve abandoned your roots for questioning the unquestionable.

Growing up, I saw how religion was wielded as a tool of control, pacifying people and keeping them docile. I recall sermons urging us to respect the police even amid the Black Lives Matter protests, using scripture such as 1 Peter 2:13-16 to justify obedience. This scripture was often cited to encourage prayer for police officers, even those abusing Black individuals.

Moreover, many in our communities



Kyria Santa spoke at the “Revival of Reason” conference in Atlanta in March.

use the bible to explain our suffering. Genesis 15:13-17 is frequently invoked, suggesting that our historical enslavement was part of a divine plan. But why seek validation from a source that sanctioned our suffering? Why look to a cosmic figure who permits brutalization?

My anger stems from the rejection of these lies. It’s frustrating to see my own people dismiss atheists like me, especially when we demand real, tangible change.

As a queer woman, I find similar challenges in LGBTQ spaces. You’d think these spaces would be more accepting of atheists, given the harm many of us have faced due to religious beliefs. Yet, there’s often a reluctance to critique religion too harshly. I’ve encountered queer individuals who cling to faith despite its history of oppres-

sion, claiming, “Not all religious people are bad,” as if progressive interpretations erase centuries of harm.

I’m angry because religion has been one of our biggest oppressors. Faith and queerness can’t coexist without conflict, and I refuse to ignore that for the sake of comfort.

In academia, where one might assume atheism is safer, bias still exists. Although academia is less religious than other spaces, anti-atheist sentiments linger.

In fields like public health, religious bias can influence discourse, especially regarding anti-vaccine movements. This is frustrating for students like me who seek truth in science. When scientific inquiry caters to religious sensitivities, my anger only deepens.

So, yes, I am angry. But my anger is not misplaced; it is necessary. It has fueled

every major movement for justice. As an atheist, my anger comes from a place of love — love for truth, justice and humanity. I see how religion holds our communities back, erasing and demonizing atheists in spaces where we should belong.

I know that without the weight of religion, we could achieve so much more. That is why I speak out and refuse to remain silent. We must continue to push back against the narratives that seek to silence us. If we don’t advocate for ourselves, who will?

Kyria Santa is a first-year graduate student at the Rollins School of Public Health, pursuing a master’s degree in epidemiology. She is the founder and president of Emory (University) Secular Students, a community for Emory’s nonreligious students and allies who support secularism, in Atlanta. Kyria actively advocates for atheism and the separation of church and state, both in and out of the classroom. She is dedicated to raising awareness about the anti-nonbelief biases that persist within Black, Hispanic and LGBTQ communities.

Strong Backbone Award

Student calls out proselytizing teacher

Maddie, a high school senior, has earned FFRF’s \$1,000 Strong Backbone Activist award for her calling out of one of her teachers for overtly promoting his religious and political beliefs.

Maddie writes: “A teacher of mine was continuously using his authority to promote his personal political and religious beliefs in an academic setting. There was an incident where he discriminated against me in the classroom because of my atheism. I felt disrespected and humiliated. My mom reached out to FFRF and, within days, we had a resolution that will hopefully result in no other students experiencing what I did. I am so grateful to FFRF.”

The following is FFRF’s press release from that interaction.

FFRF commends district for protecting atheist students

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is applauding the Tulare Joint Union High School District’s quick response to its complaint that a high school teacher was promoting religion in class and bullying nonreligious students.

FFRF recently reported that a teach-



Maddie

er at Mission Oak High School in Tulare, Calif., had been using his position to promote his personal religious views to a captive audience of students. FFRF’s complainant reported that the teacher had placed several inappropriate religious and political displays, including on a fridge in his classroom, reading “Pray without ceasing,” “Unborn Lives Matter” and “Let’s Go Bran-

don,” a euphemism for “F... Joe Biden.” Additionally, the teacher reportedly instigated a discussion with students about “666” being the “devil’s number,” which led to a student revealing their atheism. The teacher responded that an atheist is “a fool,” and students in the class reportedly made signs in the air of crosses or of praying.

“It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion,” FFRF attorney Chris Line wrote to Superintendent Lucy Van Scyoc. “Further, courts have continually held that public school districts may not display religious messages or iconography in public schools.”

FFRF iterated the district’s obligation under the law to make certain that its teachers are not violating the rights of its students by singling out students for their beliefs — or lack of beliefs, proselytizing or otherwise using their position

to promote personal religious beliefs. Parents have the constitutional right to oversee their children’s religious or nonreligious upbringing. By imposing his religious beliefs on students, the teacher’s actions also alienated students who are part of the 49 percent

of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated.

The district was receptive to FFRF’s message and took swift action.

Scyoc wrote to FFRF personally,

informing the national state/church watchdog of the action taken. “The district immediately addressed the issue and the stickers have been removed or covered so that they are not visible,” she wrote. “The district has also spoken with the teacher about the items raised in your letter and we can assure you that the teacher understands the concerns.” The superintendent also provided a form in case the parents and student wish to pursue a more formal complaint.

“ This public school classroom refrigerator has stickers pasted on it by the teacher that are political and religious in nature.

Convention speech

How billionaires sold school vouchers

This is the speech, lightly edited, delivered by Josh Cowen on Sept. 28 at FFRF's national convention in Denver.

Josh Cowen is author of the book, “The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers,” which can be ordered at ffrf.org/shop. He is professor of education policy at Michigan State University and an author on topics related to education politics, school choice and culture wars in the United States.

By Josh Cowen

Thanks to all of you for being here, for having me today. I’ve been traveling around the country talking about the issue of school vouchers, and I know how important the work all of you do in your communities are to just basic liberties.

I’m honored to be here and to talk about this big one here today. If you indulge me, I just want to take a minute to add a small piece to my biography because it highlights the door that I use to enter this kind of work. It’s an important part of the book that I wrote, and it’s part of the message that I’m going to try to get across today, at least in the sort of central piece of my talk.

I started my professional life as a policy analyst, first as a young researcher at Georgetown, and then eventually through making my way up in the field with bigger and bigger projects. I worked with state agencies, school districts and other partners to help learn what policies and programs work for kids and families, which don’t work, for whom. Both of those questions are applied, and why. And I started all of that work studying school choice.

These are programs, collectively, that fund children who go to school outside their residential districts, especially, in my case, studying school vouchers. Now, there are a lot of different ways to deliver school vouchers, if that’s your policy goal.

For the purposes of today’s talk, I just want to define two things.

Vouchers are going to be anything that uses public funding for private school tuition, and, importantly, anything that also requires a child to exit or to never be enrolled in public school to begin with.

There’s a whole class of social service programs, many of which I support, probably which many of you support, that might use a type of voucher-like scheme to fund some other priority — child care, preschool, something like this. But you don’t have to disenroll from public schools to do it. For today’s talk, we’re going to say a voucher is something that funds private school K-12 tuition and something that requires a student to not be enrolled in public schools to get those dollars.

A key part of my message today is that, from a policy standpoint, we know three basic things about vouchers: Vouchers defund public schools; they devastate student learning; and they discriminate against vulnerable kids and families.

But there’s more. It’s actually that more that I want to talk to you mostly



Photo by Steve Solomon

Author and professor Josh Cowen speaks about the harm of school vouchers at FFRF’s national convention on Sept. 28, 2024, in Denver.

about today — where vouchers came from and what’s really going on.

First, just a status check. [Displays chart showing growth of vouchers in the United States.] Now, this was created by researchers at a policy think tank at Georgetown. It’s broken down by type of voucher scheme. On the far left is Milwaukee, Wis., where the first modern voucher system was created. And on the far right is 2023. It’s an upward slope. You can see vouchers are on the march. Over the last 24 months or so, 24 states have passed some form or expanded some form of vouchers, and now we have 13 states that have universal vouchers, which means no income capital, and anyone can get those dollars.

With that basic introduction, let’s talk about what’s driving vouchers today. In my book “The Privateers,” I talk about the origin of these schemes and the resistance to integration, to racial integration, ordered by Brown v. Board in 1954. The conservative economist Milton Friedman first proposed the voucher idea in 1955, just months after Brown v. Board.

Betsy DeVos

I and others have actually sort of fleshed out the history of vouchers located in massive resistance to Brown. But if we’re talking about vouchers to-

day, we have to talk about Betsy DeVos. Betsy DeVos is the billionaire heiress from my own state, in west Michigan.

As an aside, Katherine Stewart, who is speaking after me, is in the audience. I quote Katherine’s book in my own book. It’s a really great description of the way the DeVos family has impacted American politics.

She says that to a very large extent, much of today’s conservative religious-based political push over the last few decades has its financial origins in a billionaire family in western Michigan, and that’s the DeVos folks. Betsy DeVos has lamented the role of public schools in American life. She thinks public schools have replaced churches as centers of community. And she wants to use “school choice” vouchers.

She wants to use school choice to, in her words, “advance God’s kingdom on Earth.” She has the money to do it. This spring, CNN got a hold of an internal slide deck showing that DeVos and her allies have spent more than \$250 million over the last decade to pry out \$25 billion in voucher funding across all the states. That’s a \$100 payoff for private school vouchers for every dollar DeVos and folks have put in.

As a social scientist, I think it’s important to ask who, if anyone, these voucher schemes are benefiting. What

if vouchers really are just an opportunity for kids who’ve been ill-served for whatever reason by their public schools? But, that’s not actually what vouchers do.

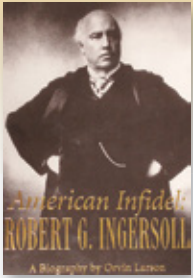
For one thing, most voucher users, around 70 percent, were already in private school to begin with. The voucher lobby knows this, even though they don’t admit it. They market these things as new opportunities for kids, especially to leave struggling public schools.

They don’t want to admit it, and they do want to pull more and more children out of public schools. Remember, I said to get a voucher in these modern schemes, you have to be disenrolled from a public school. There’s a variety of ways they have to do this.

One new way, ProPublica reported, in Ohio, the state is actually funding new private school construction. Keep in mind, 90 percent of private schools in this country are religious in some way. Ohio is actually using grant funding to just send to private schools to build new seats. And that’s, as ProPublica says, unprecedented so far.

All right, so that’s the first thing. Vouchers mostly fund, at least in the early years that a scheme comes to town, kids who are already in private school.

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll



By Orvin Larson

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

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Academic harm

What happens to the kids who do transfer from public to private school? That would be historically about 30 percent of voucher users. And the answer is they suffer horrific academic consequences, especially in math and science, the STEM subjects. Over the last decade, vouchers have caused some of the worst academic declines on record in the education research community.

You have to go to something like what Hurricane Katrina did, to the academic outcomes of kids in Louisiana, or more recently to pandemic-sized learning loss today to get at the magnitude of what we’re talking about here. There’s a basic reason why. Most private schools are not the elite academies you may have heard of or that some of you may have even attended. They’re what I call subprime providers, often financially distressed, most of them attached to churches, which, by the way, siphon off much of the revenue from those schools. Many of them teach things like creationism, flat-Earth curriculum.

What’s really going on? I call vouchers a new religious separatism in American education.

Funding discrimination in the name of that private school’s creed or values, either of those two terms are in the authorizing language in the legislation for all the new voucher schemes. They’re funding discrimination in the name of these private schools’ creed or values against what’s often the most vulnerable kids out there. It’s no accident that we’re talking about vouchers, that I’m here today to talk about this kind of very specific policy item.

In the same moment as book bans, the teaching of accurate histories about the role of race in American history, and new attacks on LGBTQ-plus rights, there’s also a cult of personality around Donald J. Trump. The authors of Project 2025 are starting to lean very heavily into cultural explanations for the need for vouchers.

The central point of my book is that after a decade of the most horrific academic declines on record, Donald Trump, Betsy DeVos, that era of 2016 to 2020, which was exactly the time that all these horrific results for vouchers started coming out. That administration, the Trump years, saved the voucher moment as it allowed DeVos a series of right-wing political groups to lean back into Christian nationalism to make the case for vouchers. They didn’t have to sell it as an academic opportunity anymore like they used to when I first started as a young researcher.

You still hear a little bit of that today, especially as a way to beat up on public schools, teachers, and especially teachers’ unions, but, increasingly, you see stuff like this. It’s

about wokeism. It’s about what public schools are teaching and we need to get rid of it, in their view.

There’s a right-wing group called the Lindy and Harry Bradley Foundation, which has funded most of the favorable voucher studies out there, most of the think tanks pushing those studies, like Heritage, Cato Institute, Ed Choice, which is a big voucher lobby group. Millions of dollars of voucher advocacy on top of that research, and nearly all of the litigation pushing vouchers forward in the states and in federal courts over the last two decades. The thing you have to understand about all this is all of these groups are doing a lot of other things. In the case of Bradley, they are pushing heavily other areas to undermine public schools like the pandemic-era fights over in-person learning.

Bradley was heavily funding election denial schemes in the last few years, insisting Trump won in 2020. Again, keeping in mind they’re also funding these voucher schemes, voucher advocacy, voucher research and voucher litigation while they’re doing this other stuff on election denial and voter suppression efforts, insisting on IDs, throwing out supposed rigged and voter fraud, as they see it, voter fraud instances in the states. Bradley is also funding a new legal pack, it’s called America First Legal, started by Donald Trump’s anti-immigration crony, Stephen Miller.

Bradley’s also funding groups aligned with Turning Points USA, which is the network of far-right, young political operatives doing a lot of the ground game. If you read some of the reporting on what’s going on in the campaigns, the Trump folks aren’t doing a lot of what’s sort of the historic efforts to get out the vote, door-to-doors, lit drops, and things like that. They’re giving these out to third parties, to super PACs that federal law allows them to do now, and the most important of those is Turning Points USA’s super PAC.

Playing the long game

All of this is part of this long-game effort, and vouchers are a key part of that story. I’m an education analyst, but you don’t have to be an education analyst to really understand why they’re focusing on education specifically so much as part of this core part of other efforts going on in right-wing political organizing, in particular right-wing political organizing around the area of Christian nationalism. Because what is education actually about? Is it about academics? I showed what happens to children on test scores a few minutes ago when

they give up their public school seat and they go to a voucher school.

Most critics of vouchers and most defenders of public school would also say, test scores don’t measure everything. Academics even aren’t everything about a school. There’s other things that we’re trying to accomplish in building community.

Academics are a core part of the mission usually in public schools, and I support that, but there’s other things going on. What’s this really all about? It’s quite literally, education is, about the future, isn’t it? If you grew up in a faith tradition, as I did, and still practice, as I do, you know how much emphasis is placed on child development. I see vouchers, book bans, fights about school bathrooms, locker rooms, who plays which sports — this is all really about trying to mold not just our children, but everyone’s child into what Christian nationalists think they ought to be.

And doing so very specifically in the theory of action behind vouchers, by separating out, isolating and excluding those kids who are what in the view of these Christian nationalists are sinful, unclean, other, not a part of the vision they have for the United States.

Vouchers have caused unprecedented academic harm.

I haven’t talked a lot about Charles Koch. He plays into this, too, in more of a secular right-wing billionaire way, but the voucher lobby folks like DeVos, like Charles Koch, they know this, they know about this horrific academic harm. They had to answer for it when DeVos was secretary, so this is why they’ve turned increasingly back to Christian nationalism, something very near and dear to DeVos’ heart and those of the other folks pushing this stuff.

It’s about Christian nationalism making this case. Vouchers have to be understood as part of this larger political moment we’re in. Universal school vouchers for wealthy people, not just targeted for income, are two of the first three paragraphs in the education chapter of Project 2025 right after a call for ending the U.S. Department of Education, which is the

chief anti-discrimination authority in the United States for schools.

In the foreword to Project 2025, Heritage’s president Kevin Roberts calls for universal vouchers, puts forward a litmus test for conservative presidential candidates saying they have to support universal vouchers before launching into this big screed about gender ideology, what he calls the noxious tenants of gender ideology, critical race theory and others that are poisoning our children, in his words. Vouchers are a religious separatist movement with designs on takeover and expansion, designs on public funding, which ultimately is our funding, that of everyone in this room and our families back home.

The good news, and I haven’t talked a lot about this, but as the evidence from a social science standpoint has accumulated against vouchers over the last decade, so, too, has the evidence for the powerful impact, empirical impact at least, of directly investing in public schools and communities.

We know that direct investments in public schools have improved academic outcomes, but not just academics, but also later in life outcomes, like wages in communities, like reductions in contact with the criminal justice system. We know that certain initiatives that we call whole-child initiatives, like funding kids’ universal school meals, funding new improvements. It turns out that hungry kids don’t learn as well, hot kids don’t learn as well in the summer, cold kids in the winter don’t learn as well, kids with asthma don’t learn as well when they’re struggling to breathe.

We need to be investing in the school ventilation systems, investing in clean water in these communities. I’ve lived near Flint, Mich. We know what happens when disinvestment in communities happens. It affects children’s lives across the board, not just in their schools. We know those investments do work.

We have some good news there, but the first step to making that case for that good news, it can’t just be coming from the social science community, right? And it isn’t. The first step has to be making the case against the threats that are coming for those kinds of investments, understanding those threats also come in the form of vouchers.

Thank you all for listening.

“Over the last decade, vouchers have caused some of the worst academic declines on record in the education research community.”



Photo by Chris Line

Following his speech, Josh Cowen signs a copy of his book, “The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers.”



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
P.O. Box 750 • Madison, WI 53701 • (608) 256-8900 • ffrf.org

What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

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

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

Nonreligious legislative panel discussion

‘Walk the walk and talk the talk’



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Rep. Mickey Dollens, center, speaks during the legislative panel discussion featuring, from left, Rep. Judith Amabile and Rep. Brianna Titone and FFRF moderators Ryan Dudley and Ryan Jayne.

This is an excerpt from the secular legislative panel discussion held on Sept. 27, 2024, at FFRF’s national convention in Denver. To watch the full panel video, go to ffrf.us/con24. The moderators were FFRF State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley and FFRF Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne.

Ryan Dudley: We are here to present the second annual legislative secular legislative panel.

First, we have Rep. Judith Amabile. She’s from here in Colorado, and has served as a state representative, Colorado General Assembly, representing the 49th district, including Boulder, since 2020. Rep. Amabile has sponsored a number of bills, including measures to increase mental health resources, improve criminal justice systems and increase gun safety and make communities more resilient in the face of wild-fires fueled by the climate crisis. She credits managing a growing business, carrying up to 65 employees and parenting three boys to have informed her work in the General Assembly.

Ryan Jayne: Second, we have another representative from Colorado: Rep. Brianna Titone, who is a geologist with a masters in geochemistry. She moved from New York to Colorado, where she earned a second master’s degree in information communication technology at the University of Denver in 2018. Rep. Titone was elected to the Colorado House of Representatives as the first openly transgender state legislator in Colorado, and the fourth elected in the entire United States. She serves as chair of both the Legislative LGBTQ-plus Caucus and the Joint Technology Committee, and also serves on a variety of volunteer boards.

Ryan Dudley: And, third, from the state of Oklahoma, we have Rep. Mickey Dollens, who is a graduate of Southern Methodist University, where he played football and studied English. While attending an NFL combine, he was recruited by the U.S. bobsledding team. He taught ninth-grade English, and, after being one of 208 Oklahoma City public school teachers to be laid off due to budget cuts in 2016, he first ran for and won a seat in the state Legislature. He is the Oklahoma House Minority Whip and has served in multiple

committees. He has been named our very own “Secularist of the Week” three times by the FFRF Action Fund. [Dollens has since become FFRF’s regional governmental affairs director.]

Ryan Jayne: Thank you all so much for joining us. We’re going to just kind of tag-team some questions for you. I’m going to start by giving you a chance to introduce yourself and explain why it is that you decided to run for public office.

Rep. Amabile: I represent House District 49, and that is Boulder and some of the more rural counties around there. I lost my mind and ran for office after



Photo by Chris Line
Colorado state Rep. Judith Amabile

having sold my small business. That’s a little bit flippant, but, honestly, I ran because I have a kid who has a serious mental illness, and I’ve never really been able to get him the care and treatment that he needs, so I was motivated to get involved in policy to try to fix that.

Rep. Titone: I ran for office initially because someone twisted my arm and said I should run. I never thought I would ever do this, but I had an experience at the Capitol where I went to go see my state rep, and they didn’t want to see me, so I was a little off-put by that. I started to become more of an activist and trying to work on some of the policies at the Capitol to try to help those get passed. I got frustrated with the process and said, “You know what? I think I could probably do a little better job down there.”

Rep. Dollens: I’m a fifth-generation Oklahoman. I earned a football scholarship to Southern Methodist University, and it was there where I took some sociology classes and history courses and learned the context of the bible. It really brought in my perspectives. In January of 2011, my younger brother Joe, who was 18 years old (I was 23), died by suicide.

I don’t come from a political back-

ground. I looked up my U.S. representative, and then I was directed to my state representative and found out that he had missed a lot of votes, and he was voting against what I felt like would be in our best interests as a state.

So, I started knocking on doors, talking to my neighbors, and most of the time listening to what they had to say. But, if they asked me why I ran, I told them I ran for mental health, for people like my brother, for jobs, and for education. And, in 2016, I flipped a Republican district blue. I’ve been in office ever since.

Ryan Dudley: We’ll just dive into the questions. We’ll start with Rep. Titone. Whenever you ran for office, did you make either your lack of religiosity or your views of state/church separation a part of what you ran on? And, if not, or if you did, did it ever come up on the campaign trail?

Rep. Titone: Arvada has a lot of churches in it. I think there’s three Mormon churches, an evangelical church, and every different kind of church you could think of.



Photo by Chris Line
Colorado state Rep. Brianna Titone

That was why a lot of people said I was never going to win because I was a trans person and a Democrat in a Republican district. We knocked on a lot of doors. That’s how we won. I think we made somewhere around 550,000 contacts in the district in that race. I think I knocked on 9,000 doors. Some of my staff it was even 11,000. It was conversations. It was about earning the trust of people showing up. And it was showing up in a place where nobody had gone to talk to them ever, really.

It wasn’t about religion. It wasn’t about me being trans. I never said I was trans. People looked at me funny, but never confronted me except for one guy, but I didn’t need his vote anyway. It was about just being a human being talking to another human being about what were the issues, and listening with

intent on doing the work and finding out how we can do a better job for them.

I always look for the crosses or some kind of religious symbol that that was on the door or in a window, just so I kind of understood who I was going to talk to and code switch a little bit to know how I was going to talk to somebody, maybe in the language that makes sense to them. I wouldn’t bring up anything unless they did first. That that was always the way to go about it. Make it about the person at the door.

Rep. Dollens: I remember when I ran in 2016, constituents were more concerned about how hard I’d work for them at the state Capitol as opposed



Photo by Chris Line
Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens

to what I do on Sunday mornings. We had so many problems and we still do. We’re 49th in education. We have a housing problem. We’re one of the poorest states in the nation.

But, when I ran in 2016, it was kind of interesting because Oklahoma is one of 26 states that has the power of the ballot initiative process. But, in 2016, there was a State Question 790 that asked the citizens of Oklahoma whether public dollars should be used to fund religious activities, specifically having the Ten Commandments at the state Capitol.

Almost all of the Republican legislators thought, “Oh, this is going to pass easily.” But when I was going door to door, that would come up quite often. “How do you feel about State Question 790?” I’d be really up front. I’m for the separation of church and state. I’m for religious freedoms and I think the best way to protect religious freedoms is through the separation of church and state.

So, the Nov. 8, 2016, vote came around and that state question failed, meaning the people of Oklahoma said, “No, we do not want our state dollars funding religious purposes” by 57 percent, which is a landslide.



Photo by Kyle Hilker
Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens

What that tells me is that in even ruby-red states like Oklahoma, we are not nearly as divided as those people in the state capitols would lead you to believe with their nonsense and their clickbait and their divisive cultural wars that they continue to flame to distract from their failures in governing. From there, I felt more comfortable.

Rep. Amabile: I live in Boulder and this topic doesn't really come up a lot, but it has come up some. People ask me about religion and I say, "Well, I'm an atheist," and they say, "But you're spiritual, right?" And I said, "No, no, I'm not. I'm practical. I'm pragmatic."

I do sense there's a desperation out there to have something beyond ourselves allow us to excuse our lack of empathy and our lack of doing the right thing. So, they attribute that to something beyond their control. What I'd like for people to understand is that all of these issues that we face are within our control, and there is nobody else that's coming from some far-away place to save us.

I do think that people confuse having morality, having the ability to tell right from wrong, with religion. That is one of the things I really want to try to set people straight on. I grew up in a household where we really believed in the Golden Rule, and the Golden Rule has nothing to do with religion. My mother always said to us, "Goodness is its own reward." So, you do the right thing and you get to feel good about yourself, and you get to have a better life because you know you've done the right thing. And that's my mantra out on the campaign trail.

Ryan Jayne: This next question is for the entire panel. Is there another significant issue that you've worked on related to the separation between state and church that you can tell us about?

Rep. Dollens: It's almost a daily occurrence when you come across a bill that is in some way rooted in Christian nationalism in the Oklahoma Legislature.

We have a bill that mandated that the official state book of Oklahoma would be the bible, displaying the Ten Commandments in school, which we've seen Louisiana do, replacing trained mental health care professionals in schools with church chaplains, offering school credit for attending church during school hours, using bible verses to justify spanking children with disabilities in schools, religious school tax credits.

Actually, this is a big one that we spent a lot of time debating against, and that was the establishment creating the nation's very first publicly funded religious charter school in Oklahoma. And that passed the House, passed Senate, was signed by the governor, and it was challenged. The silver lining in this is that our attorney general, Gentner Drummond, is a Republican, but he is very much for the separation

of church and state. He himself went in front of the state Supreme Court and argued against it, saying it's a direct violation of not only the U.S. Constitution, but our state's Constitution as well. And they agreed with him 8 to 1. But, of course, they anticipated that, and their next move is to take it to the U.S. Supreme Court, where they may get a different outcome.

Rep. Amabile: Here in Colorado, we are in a way different place. We have crazy bills that get introduced, but they don't have a chance of getting passed. We have a governor who would not sign that kind of crazy stuff. We have a Legislature that, at least right now, is very much dominated by the Democrats.

My first two years in office, I served on the State Affairs Committee, and we call that the Kill Committee. If you're in a safe seat, they put you on the Kill Committee, and that's where you get to vote no on all the crazy stuff the Republicans proposed.

The bigger problem for us is when our colleagues go down to the well and talk incessantly about their religious beliefs and how that causes them to not want to vote on progressive legislation. It's hard to listen to that for hours on end. But, at the end of the day when the votes are counted, they do not have a voice and they are voted down. What we do say is that the Democrats have their way and the Republicans have their say.

Rep. Titone: Like Rep. Amabile said, we have a lot of people with a lot of different religions. There's no reason why one religion should say that they have the moral authority to dictate what everybody wants to do.

And that's a problem. My human composting bill, the Catholic Diocese was against that. They were the only people against it. It was like, just tell the people who follow your religion, "Don't do that," just like they did with cremation for a really long time. But, you don't have the moral authority to say that this shouldn't be available for everyone else because you don't represent everybody. Leave it to the people to decide what they want. These are the kinds of fights that we have. A lot of times it is a lot of righteous people who are trying to dictate their religious values and justify that for their "no" vote. It's disingenuous to the people who they represent if they want to represent the people, they should have a softer way of doing that that's not just representing one sect of the people they represent.

Ryan Dudley: This question is for Reps. Amabile and Titone. You both run a lot of legislation that focuses environmental issues and, Rep. Titone, as it was mentioned earlier, you are a geologist. A new study published by New York University political scientist John Kane and University of Oklahoma sociologist Sam Perry theorizes that perceived threats of climate change is affected by one's belief in the divine versus human control of the Earth.

My question to both of you is in running legislation to curb climate change. One, is this something that's been brought up in opposition to your bills, and two, how would you suggest overcoming that opposition if it has?

Rep. Amabile: It's a very interesting debate when we talk about climate issues — climate, environment, even things like air pollution, which clearly, we're responsible for.

But, there is this idea that somehow this mythical being is going to come and save us, the worthy ones of us anyway, and it's actually an incredible form of hypocrisy, because if you believe in God, then you would believe that God wants us to care for this place that God gave us to live on. They don't want to do that. That, to me, is a real interesting problem for them because clearly we have one planet, we have one place, and we have to be the steward for this place. There's nothing anti-religious about that. It's really sort of the highest form of praise if you think that God created the heavens and the earth, that God would want us to care for it, but that's not really how it gets seen. So, we end up in these crazy battles over doing even simple things.

Rep. Titone: A lot of the people that that we have in the House, I haven't really heard them say these kinds of things specifically, although they have brought religion into a lot of the other conversations. But, I have seen some people walking around saying "Jesus is my health care." Maybe we need to worry about the way the re-

finery spews out all sorts of stuff and the people who live around there. Is Jesus going to be the health care that's going to save them? I don't think so. That's something we need to work on.

What really bothers me the most is that the people who are crusading about procreation and creating more people to put on the planet are the ones that care the least about doing something to protect it. That's the most worrisome thing. They want to force people to have children, but they don't want to leave them a place that's actually clean and livable.

I don't have any kids, and you know what? I care about the legacy that I have and the things that we can do to make sure that somebody else's kids can have a good planet to live on.

That's how I live my life, and that's how I feel about the work that I do. I think that that's what we should demonstrate. Walk the walk and talk the talk.

Ryan Jayne: Going to Rep. Dollens, this has to do with the topic that you cover in your book. Oklahoma is in the midst of what we could call an interesting time. State Superintendent of Pub-

lic Instruction Ryan Walters has made no secret about his intentions to turn Oklahoma public schools into publicly funded religious institutions.

Meanwhile, Republicans in the Oklahoma Legislature have a supermajority in both chambers. But, as your book covers, Oklahoma is one of 26 states where ballot initiatives are codified, meaning citizens can work together to pass legislation that they want. The process gives individuals a say, regardless of their party affiliation and without the need to depend on their lawmakers to do it for them. Some states, including Oklahoma, also allow their citizens to amend and repeal unpopular or harmful legislation. Can you talk a little bit about how that process has played a role in this larger push throughout the state to embrace Christian nationalism viewpoints?

Rep. Dollens: I really like that question. Oklahoma is unique in that we have ordinary citizens who have effected extraordinary change through grassroots, citizen-led ballot initiatives.

I mentioned the first one in 2016, that was actually sent from the Legislature to the people, and they said they do not want to fund religious purposes and activities with taxpayer dollars. And then two years later, a group of motivated citizens got together and planned to gather signatures to pass medical marijuana in Oklahoma. And people laughed at him. Kind of like they did when they thought how easy the state question 790 funding religious purposes would pass and it didn't. They went out and they did something extraordinary: They collected over 90,000 signatures in just 90 days, which Oklahoma's process for the signature led ballot initiative is the most difficult of any state.

Then it goes to the ballot, and it passes overwhelmingly. For the first time in decades, we sent a Democrat, Congresswoman Kendra Horn, to D.C., and there was a huge turnout because people were so motivated behind the state question of medical marijuana. Then, just two years later in 2020, Oklahomans got together and they collected signatures to get Medicaid expansion on the ballot. And that passed. As a result, over 255,000 Oklahomans now have health insurance who otherwise wouldn't.

That same year, they also passed criminal justice reform. And then in 2022, of course, when the U.S. Supreme Court overruled Roe v. Wade, states started taking it upon themselves to restore abortion access. And seven out of seven states that put it to the vote of the people all passed with flying colors, including Kansas. So, preemptively, states like Oklahoma and others who have GOP control have been using legislative tactics to make this process much more difficult, if not impossible.

“In even ruby-red states like Oklahoma, we are not nearly as divided as those people in the state capitols would lead you to believe with their nonsense and their clickbait and their divisive cultural wars that they continue to flame to distract from their failures in governing.”
— Rep. Mickey Dollens



Photo by Kyle Hilker
Rep. Titone speaks while Rep. Amabile and Rep. Dollens listen.

Pope left legacy of abuse and oppression

The Freedom From Religion Foundation acknowledges the death of Pope Francis, a leader revered by many but whose tenure failed to bring meaningful change to a deeply flawed institution.

While a good number of the world's Catholics will feel a void, we must also reckon with the harm perpetuated under his leadership and that of the institution he represented.

The Catholic Church marketed Pope Francis' ascent as a shift toward a more liberal, compassionate Church — but in reality, this amounted to little more than a cosmetic change. Many of his more liberal pronouncements seemed calculated to stringing along more progressive believers and keeping them in the Church. FFRF has repeatedly advised Catholics that quitting the Church en masse is the only ethical response to its seemingly endless record of harm and abuse.

In particular, perhaps Francis' greatest failing was his refusal to adopt a "zero tolerance" policy for clergy sex abuse. As report after report poured in, year after year from all over the globe, Church officials consistently ignored and covered up abuse. Many of these church officials remain in positions of power, and some may even be possible candidates for the papacy. FFRF applauds the work of survivors who have fought to expose these ties to abuse and to keep abusers out of



Image by Shutterstock

positions of power in the Church.

Behind the Church's lip service and public gestures, its core policies and priorities remained rigidly the same. Under Francis' leadership, the Vatican continued its global campaign to restrict access to contraception and abortion, fought to block or reverse same-sex marriage laws, upheld its exclusion of women from the priesthood and even the diaconate, and maintained its opposition to death with dignity laws. While the tone may have softened, the Church's agenda

— to impose its doctrine on societies around the world — remained as aggressive and regressive as ever.

Pope Francis also continued the Church's harmful opposition to autonomy for women, refusing to even consider letting women serve as clergy, calling surrogacy "deplorable," and continuing the Church's historic opposition to contraception and abortion. He even blamed the victims of the Church's hostility toward contraception with his claim that it is "an irresponsibility" for couples to fail to

regulate the births of their children, contending that "God gives you methods to be responsible." He was referring to the rhythm system of avoiding pregnancy, but the old joke is that couples who practice the rhythm system are called "parents."

Regarding abortion, just last year Francis compared physicians who perform abortions to "contract killers." And here in the United States, the Conference of Catholic Bishops has led the way to ban abortions across the country.

Finally, Francis failed to change the Church's callous opposition to medical aid in dying. While there is increasing bipartisan support and decades of the practice continue to show benefits far outweighing risks, the Catholic Church remains its primary opponent. This opposition directly leads to needless end-of-life suffering all over the country.

Pope Francis' legacy underscores the urgent need for secular governance that prioritizes human rights over religious dogma. As the Catholic Church prepares to choose its next leader, FFRF urges empathetic Catholics worldwide to reflect deeply on the harm perpetuated in their name — and to consider leaving an institution that has proven itself unwilling to evolve.

There has never been a better time to quit the Catholic Church.

FFRF again calls out Deion Sanders

FFRF is again calling a constitutional penalty on University of Colorado football coach Deion Sanders due to his ceaseless proselytizing.

FFRF has repeatedly spotlighted over the past two years Sanders' breach of the wall between state and church. In early 2023, FFRF first wrote to the public university to contend that Sanders must not misuse his position to coerce student athletes to pray or encourage them to subscribe to Sanders' personal religion. The university assured FFRF shortly afterward that Sanders had been provided "guidance on the nondiscrimination policies, including guidance on the boundaries in which players and coaches may or may not engage in religious expression." FFRF further contacted the university last September when Sanders persisted in treating the football players like his personal mission field.

Unfortunately, Sanders is carrying on in his unconstitutional ways, forcing FFRF to object yet again. In a March 21 video posted to the official University of Colorado Buffaloes Instagram account, Sanders is seen lecturing student athletes and telling them that "God separated you and chose you for us." In a separate video also posted on the Buffaloes' Instagram account on March 21, Sanders is shown giving a speech to players in which he repeatedly references God and religion. He tells players, among other things, "When you can't tell what time it really is, it's time to let go and let God direct your path."

And in pregame footage posted to the Buffaloes' Instagram account on April 8, Sanders extensively sermonized while acting in his official capacity as a university employee and coach:

"Thank you, Lord, just because. Thank you, Lord, because you are who you said you are. Thank you, Lord, just on the strength of. Let's thank God because he is who he says he is in this world of lies and misrepresentation. God is consistent. God is present.

"God is everything and all things. What he's not, he is not a genie in the bottle, awaiting to grant your wishes and your commands. He don't get down like that. But what he is, he's relational and he's love. Let



Image by Shutterstock

me say that again. Thank you, Lord. Let's thank God because he is who he says he is in this world of lies and misrepresentation. God is consistent. God is present and God is everything and all things. He is not a genie in a bottle awaiting to grant your wishes in your command. God is relational and God is love. Let's go get it today. Thank God just because. I'm the strength. Try not to ask for something every once in a while."

Sanders apparently has not heeded the training that the University of Colorado provided him in 2023 to respect the First Amendment rights of student athletes and comply with nondiscrimination policies, FFRF points out.

"As Coach Sanders is aware, school-sponsored proselytizing is unconstitutional," FFRF Staff Attorney Samantha Lawrence writes to University of Colorado Executive Vice Chancellor and Chief Operating Officer Patrick O'Rourke. "Some federal appellate courts have explicitly extended the scope of the Establishment Clause cases to college-aged students when institutions create a coercive religious environment."

Sanders' authority over his players creates an environment ripe for unconstitutional coercion. Players who wish to stay in Sanders' good graces will no doubt feel they must submit to his religious commands in order to receive the recognition, playing time, and positions they desire.

FFRF litigation over estate of member ends successfully

FFRF is pleased to announce that it has successfully resolved litigation related to the mismanagement of a donor's trust to the mutual benefit of all organizations involved. FFRF is making this statement public to its membership because it has received questions from supporters about this issue over the last year.

FFRF was the beneficiary of a generous major donation left as part of a trust created by a longtime FFRF member who died in 2021. Last year, after years of non-disclosure and incomplete disbursement of the trust, FFRF was forced to bring suit to receive an accounting of the Ronald Pelley Trust. After the accounting was completed, FFRF identified mismanagement by the trustee and sought appropriate payments from the trust to all beneficiaries.

As a result, all beneficiaries, including FFRF and groups such as American Atheists and Planned Parenthood, have agreed on a settlement and have received substantial additional payments. As a result of the action FFRF took to ensure Ron Pelley's instructions were followed, FFRF received the additional distribution it was owed from the trust, more than \$800,000. American Atheists and other beneficiaries similarly received substantial additional payouts they were likewise owed, thanks to FFRF's lawsuit.

The lawsuit developed after repeated inquiries from FFRF went unanswered. The trustee, Ronald's brother, failed, as required under law, to provide FFRF with complete documentation about the trust. It increasingly appeared the trustee was not administering the trust pursuant to the wishes of this longtime FFRF supporter, and FFRF was compelled to file suit.

Ronald Pelley's bequest will live on in FFRF's enhanced accomplishments, and his name will live on through FFRF's "Wall of Immortals," which memorializes all individuals who support FFRF's work and help secure our future by naming FFRF in their estate plans.

IN MEMORIAM

Thomas Kozlovsky

Thomas Anthony Kozlovsky, 91, formerly of Madison, Wis., died Jan. 29 at Agrace Hospice in Fitchburg, Wis..

Tom (Uncle Tom to his family) was born in Antigo, Wis., on Jan. 16, 1934. He grew up in Wausau, Wis., attended St. James Catholic grade school and graduated from Wausau High School in 1953.

After graduating high school, Tom worked for the state of Wisconsin as a tax assessor for 25 years. In addition to his full-time job, he spent many happy days working on his brother Jim's Christmas tree farms in various parts of Wisconsin. He also helped brothers Dan and Jim build houses on their beautiful Wisconsin farms.

Tom was a dedicated birder and hiker who had a great appreciation for nature. He was always up for an outdoor adventure and passed on his love of the outdoors to all who knew him, especially his nieces and nephews.

Once he retired, Tom wintered in Hawaii, thoroughly appreciating the aloha spirit and wonderful weather on Kauai, Maui and the Big Island. He enjoyed snorkeling and swimming, as well as watching



Thomas Kozlovsky

spectacular sunsets at the beach.

Tom was active in many community groups and activities such as WORT radio and the Solidarity Singalong, singing at the state Capitol building in Madison every Friday until just a few weeks before he died. He believed strongly in the rights of workers and was an avid letter writer to publications throughout Wisconsin, expressing his political views and helping others understand a different perspective.

Although he will be missed dearly, he will be remembered for his warm smile, his birding prowess, his positive outlook on life, and his love of family, friends, picnics, cookies and nature.

Kenneth Eck

Julie Nichols Legg, acting president of the Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers (GRAF), wrote the following about for GRAF president Kenneth Otto Eck following his death.

"It is with great sadness that we report the death of our fearless leader, Ken Eck, on Dec. 23, 2024, after several years battling complications from Parkinson's disease.

"Ken was instrumental in GRAF having a strong presence in northern Minnesota. He fought numerous battles to keep religion and government separate, including a county office that displayed the 10 Commandments in its lobby, a public school attempting to organize a student prayer group, and as an advisor to our club during the infamous Itasca County Jail incident last year. Ken loved nothing better than to spend hours discussing atheism, religious dogmas, liberal politics, and new ideas with other freethinkers. With the dedication of a small number of like-minded individuals, Ken found-

ed the Grand Rapids Atheists and Freethinkers, which is still active today. As president, he led us to join the Adopt-a-Highway program that result-



Kenneth Eck

ed in highway signs with the words, 'Adopted by Grand Rapids Atheists and Freethinkers' — a bold move in 2012!

Ken will forever be remembered as the guy who could give long answers to short questions,

make everyone he met feel seen and heard, and always interject humor into the countless awkward conversations we atheists often find ourselves in.

"As his final act of freethinking, he chose to participate in the University of Minnesota's Anatomy Bequest Program, donating his body to science. He was a mentor and friend to all of us, and many times, I ask myself, WWKD?"

William Flowers

William M.(Bill) Flowers died June 16, 2024, in Reynoldsburg, Ohio.

Born Feb. 4, 1931, in Cortland, Ohio, son of Herbert and Grace (Barto) Flowers, Bill was a 1949 graduate of Cortland High School. Following graduation, Bill proudly served his country in the U.S. Navy.



William Flowers

He was awarded the U.S. Defense Medal, United Nations Service Ribbon and the Korean Service Medal.

On Sept. 6, 1958, Bill married the former Edna King. He began employment at Western Electric (AT&T) from where he retired. Bill and Edna settled in Paskatala, Ohio, where they built their own home and raised two daughters, Irene and Diane.

Bill loved ballroom dancing and classical music. He loved all things of nature, and advocated for the preservation of natural resources. Bill lived his life as a confirmed, devout atheist.

Vickie Griffith

FFRF member Vickie D. Griffith died Aug. 31, 2024. A resident of Madison, Wis., she was born Aug. 13, 1950, in Hagerstown, Md.

Vickie was a devoted wife, mother, and grandmother who touched many lives with her kindness. She faced the challenges of ALS with strength and wanted to raise awareness of the disease.



Vickie Griffith

Gary Burt

Gary Burt, a longtime member of the Grand Rapids Atheists and Freethinkers, died in September 2024.

Gary was a devout atheist. He was also a gifted singer-songwriter and guitarist, with several albums to his credit. He was an all-around interesting character who loved talking politics, religion and the "white, male, Christian hierarchy." GRAF is planning a memorial in the spring.

OVERHEARD

I alone didn't profess a belief in God or locate my morality in any formal creed . . . Where, absent religion, did I find meaning in life? That question wasn't put to me in exactly those words. But it was the gist of many of the prompts that came my way, and I struggled to respond to them, maybe because the audience's skepticism about me was palpable, maybe because the hour was late. . . I find meaning in a catchy melody. I find meaning in an artful turn of phrase. I find it in an entirely unnecessary kindness that I extend to someone or a wholly volitional gesture of courtesy that someone extends to me. I

guess I'm saying that I find meaning in beauty — in our instinct and ability to fashion moments of grace that have nothing to do with survival and everything to do with transcendence. **Duke University Professor and New York Times columnist Frank Bruni, in a column in which he related being on a panel discussion where he was the lone nonreligious individual.** *New York Times, 4-10-25*

If the current occupant of the White House wants to protect women and girls, he should start by protecting the women and teenage girls who are suffering miscarriages and dying



Janet Mills

because they can't get basic, lifesaving health care. He should talk about the little girls and boys and infants in Sudan and other countries who are dying right now because he has cut off their supply of food and lifesaving medicines. **Maine Gov. Janet Mills, who is defying Trump's Department of Education order barring transgender women from women's sports, which she says violates Maine law.** *New York Times, 4-14-25*

Trump's anti-Christian bias taskforce will lead to a further chilling of free speech, political opposition, and investigations of corruption. We will see public funds flowing directly to religious institutions, and the insertion of the bible and sectarian messaging in public schools, town meetings and other places that serve religiously diverse populations. The intention is to make anyone who is not onboard with their agenda feel that they don't belong . . . But what's important to understand is that the movement is driving policy, whether or not the

people who are pushing that policy identify themselves as Christian nationalists or adhere to Christian nationalist ideas.

Katherine Stewart, as quoted in the article, "Trump has put Christian nationalists in key roles — say a prayer for free speech." Stewart will be speaking at FFRF's convention in Myrtle Beach in October. (See page 3.) *Religion News Service, 4-16-25*

I am a straight, white, Christian, married, suburban mom [who wants] every kid to feel seen, heard and supported — not marginalized and targeted because they are not straight, white and Christian.

Michigan state Sen. Mallory McMorrow, while announcing her bid for Michigan's open U.S. Senate seat. *Associated Press, 4-2-25*

I can never give allegiance to anyone else other than to follow the science as we see it. That does not mean that I can just roll over and take conspiracy theories and justify them.

Dr. Peter Marks, saying his decision to leave the FDA was related to a request that he provide data (which doesn't exist) to justify the anti-vaccine stance of Robert Kennedy Jr. *Wall Street Journal, 4-7-25*

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

Trump’s first 100 days

Legislation threatens church/state separation

In the first 100 days of President Trump’s second term, a wave of state-level legislation has emerged that undermines the constitutional principle of church/state separation. These bills, often framed as efforts to protect “religious liberty,” are, in fact, vehicles to promote Christian nationalism in public institutions, particularly schools. Meanwhile, some states are moving in the right direction, passing bills that keep Christian nationalism at bay and protect true religious freedom.

The FFRF Action Fund’s growing team is monitoring these bills all over the country, and we have called on our advocates to weigh in on dozens of them. By reminding lawmakers that their constituents care about these issues, we help to make secularism a priority and prevent theocrats from advancing their unAmerican agenda without opposition. Here are some of the top issues we’ve seen so far.



Photo by Chris Line
Ryan Jayne

Religious displays

More than a dozen states have introduced legislation requiring the display of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. These are copycat bills based on a new Louisiana law, which FFRF is challenging in court. And the bills are particularly brazen since a 1980 Supreme Court case directly ruled that public school Ten Commandments displays violate the Establishment Clause.

And, in Florida, legislators may have noticed that placing “In God We Trust” displays in public schools has failed to stop gun violence. Rep. Kim Daniels pushed for this law in 2018, arguing that the displays would address the relevant “issues of the heart.” Unable to learn from this failure, Rep. Daniels is now pushing to expand the law, forcing schools to place the displays in more prominent spots.

Though none of these bills have been signed into law yet, there is a good chance that some of them will by the end of the legislative session. Meanwhile Kentucky — the scene of that 1980 Supreme Court case — did pass a resolution to erect a Ten Commandments display, not in public schools but at the state Capitol.

Proponents of these measures know that they are unconstitutional, so they repeat a disingenuous argument that these displays are somehow about American history rather than being about religion. The reality, of course, is that these lawmakers want public school kids to grow up surrounded by religious propaganda so that they will be susceptible to the myth that the United States is a Christian nation.

Religious instruction

Alongside religious displays, a variety of bills aim to insert religious education into the public school day.

One way of doing this is by forcing school districts to allow “release time” for religious instruction, meaning kids leave school to attend an off-campus religion class. The group pushing for this



Image by Shutterstock

ffrf ACTION FUND

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

change, called LifeWise, has gained notoriety for pressuring non-Christian students to attend.

Even more directly, states like Texas and Oklahoma are simply revising their state-approved curricula to include more Christian content. We are working with school boards to help them navigate these developments, as they may be put in the awkward spot of having to choose between deviating from state standards — which may include declining some state funding — or violating students’ rights to a secular public school system.

Finally, several states are considering bills that would bring religious chaplains into public schools. The organization behind these bills has previously stated that its goal is to exploit the shortage of school counselors to justify hiring Christian chaplains, who of course have the goal of winning converts and ensuring that Christianity is seen as the school’s preferred religion.

Private school vouchers

Last year, we saw states with private school vouchers lurch toward “universal” vouchers, meaning public funding will now pay for private religious school tuition, even for wealthy families that already send their kids to those schools. In response, private schools in those states raised tuition rates to accept the new taxpayer subsidy, often ensuring that disadvantaged families still cannot afford to send their kids to private schools even if they wanted to.

This further undermines the dishonest rhetoric of “school choice,” as in reality private schools are given the power to choose their students more than the other way around. This, in turn, undermines the already flimsy argument that it’s OK for states to force taxpayers to pay for private religious school tuition.

A pending Supreme Court case — Oklahoma Statewide Charter School Board v. Drummond — could further open the door for public funding of religious schools by allowing public religious charter schools.

The solution, fortunately, is simple:

Public funds should pay for public education. States should fully fund public schools and work to make them better, rather than defunding and demonizing public schools. Instead, this year South Carolina, Tennessee and Wyoming have already expanded their voucher programs, and others are likely to follow suit. This includes Texas, which is likely to enact a new multi-billion-dollar voucher program after years of resistance.

Abortion and LGBTQ rights

It has been sadly predictable that Trump’s win has emboldened Christian nationalist state legislators to step up their efforts against reproductive autonomy and LGBTQ rights. States including Arkansas and Idaho have recently passed new anti-abortion laws, and many more are pending all over the country.

Meanwhile, Georgia and Wyoming each passed a Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), which is largely a license for religiously motivated discrimination. Other states have enacted measures in defense of so-called “medical ethics” and “parental rights,” which are both code for discrimination. Our advocates weighed in on a particularly bad, sweeping bill in Puerto Rico recently.

We work closely with allied organizations to monitor and oppose the torrent of bills on these topics.

Promoting Christianity

In what may be the most blatant possible Establishment Clause violation, this year several legislators have considered resolutions that effectively declare Christianity as the state’s preferred religion. These resolutions come in various forms, from declaring the “kingship of Jesus Christ” to declaring that the state will “humbly submit its ways to the Lord, Jesus Christ.”

What they have in common is that they are pure, unvarnished Christian nationalism.

In North Dakota and Montana, these resolutions have failed. But in Oklahoma, lawmakers wasted hours debating the pandering, symbolic House resolution before passing it. On the positive side, multiple Oklahoma lawmakers who opposed the resolution delivered fiery and articulate speeches against it.

Although these resolutions have no direct legal effect, they send a clear message to non-Christians that their own legislators see them as second-class citizens. They also erode the wall of separation between state and church, paving the way for future theocratic laws. We all know how Christian nationalists love to hold up a dollar bill to claim that “In God We Trust” proves the United States is a Christian nation, and these resolutions give them one more thing to point to.

Positive developments

Fortunately, the state policy news is not all grim! We are proud to have supported a ban on child marriage in Washington, D.C., which became effective in March. This legislation sets the minimum age of consent for marriage at 18, with no religious exceptions. This move aligns D.C. with 13 states that have banned child marriage, setting a strong example for the rest of the country to follow. Maine is poised to be next, with a similar bill awaiting Gov. Mills’ signature.

And, in Washington state, the FFRF Action Fund was part of a coalition supporting a new law that makes members of the clergy mandatory reporters of child abuse. And crucially, the new Washington law does not have a confessional exception, meaning priests who learn of ongoing child abuse during confession will be legally required to report the abuse to secular authorities. Naturally, the Catholic Church was vocally opposed to the new law, showing its moral bankruptcy by arguing that priests should keep child abuse a secret. Fortunately, reasonable minds prevailed.

Many state legislators are making a concerted push to erode the separation of church and state, embedding specific religious doctrines into public institutions and policies. Such actions threaten the religious freedom of all citizens by privileging one faith over others and compromising the neutrality of government. The FFRF Action Fund remains committed to monitoring these developments and advocating for the preservation of secular governance as enshrined in the Constitution. We thank our advocates for their activism and invite others to join us at ffrfaction.org.

Ryan Jayne is FFRF Action Fund senior policy counsel.

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FFRF CHAPTER UPDATES

Upstate New York Freethinkers



Speaking on an “Defending the Establishment Clause” panel on March 29 in Buffalo, N.Y., were, from left, Madeline Hatcher, Patrick Hughes, Annie Laurie Gaylor and David Hoffman.

Buffalo, N.Y., became a hub for freethought events March 29-30 with Eastern Communication Association and Upstate NY Freethinkers events attracting attendees from New York City, Pennsylvania and Canada.

The weekend featured the “Defending the Establishment Clause” panel, led by Dr. David Hoffman, author of “American Freethought: The History of a Social Movement, 1794-1948.” FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor emphasized the potential of nonreligious voters to counter Christian nationalism. Madeline Hatcher, a Baruch College student, stressed the divisive nature of weaponizing Christianity, and posed the question, “How can we all be created equal, if some are holier than thou?” Video of the panel and freethought resources are available at unyft.org/AmericanFreethought.

The chapter’s first Sunday café meetup resulted in the formation of Western NY Freethinkers, a regional branch of the Upstate New York Freethinkers chapter. (Join more meetups at unyft.org/Western-NY.)

Coming up on May 17, chapter participants will assist in a spring cleanup at the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum. (See details at unyft.org/Finger-Lakes.)

And on Sunday, Aug. 24, the Upstate New York Freethinkers will host its 2nd annual Chapter Gathering, an exclusive event for FFRF members. The day will begin at the Craftsman Inn & Conference Center Skaneateles Ballroom with coffee, conversation and live piano by Dan Barker. Keynote speakers Annie Laurie Gaylor, Dan Barker and author/columnist Kate Cohen will deliver insightful presentations. This event includes a day of music and community building over a buffet lunch with afternoon museum tours at the nearby Matilda Joselyn Gage Center (a historic site dedicated to Gage, suffragist and activist). Tickets (\$59) are limited at unyft.org/go.

Salt Lake Chapter



Douglas Hendricks talks with the Salt Lake Oasis group about the newly formed FFRF-SLC chapter.

FFRF’s newest chapter was formed this February in Salt Lake City. Some local FFRF members met prior to February to gauge interest in forming a local chapter and were surprised that Utah had gone so long without having an FFRF chapter, given the unique and dominant role that religion plays in that state.

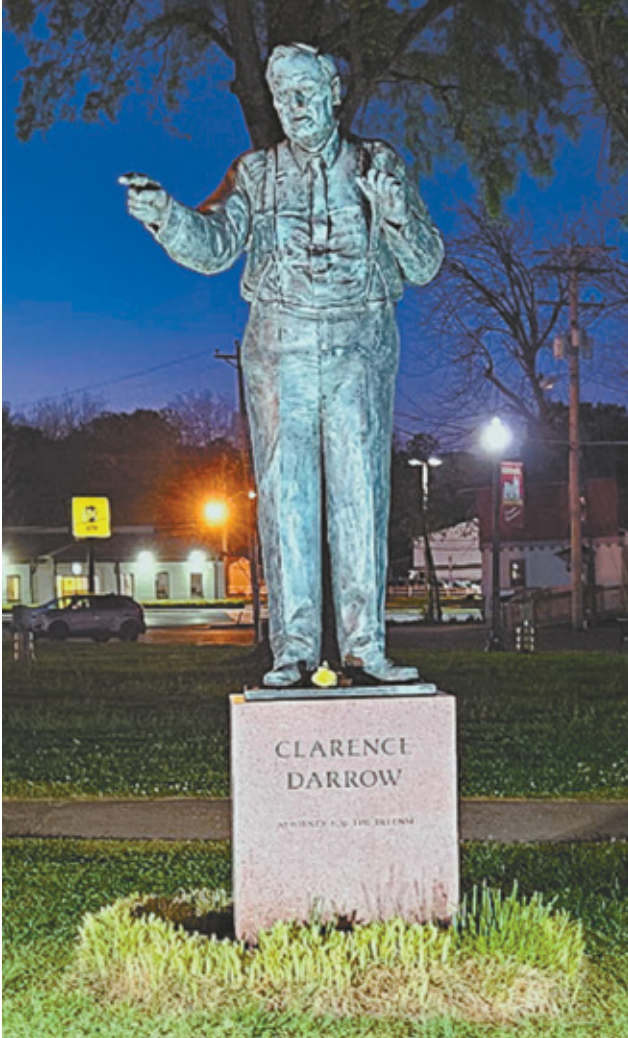
Although many people outside of the state assume that the majority of people in Utah are Mormon, in reality, the majority of Utahans identify as not active in that religion, and yet almost 90 percent of Utah state legislators are Mormon. This dramatic overrepresentation in the state legislature has led to laws being passed which appear to have been motivated by religious bias and which members of the Salt Lake Chapter of FFRF find unfairly repressive.

The president of the Salt Lake Chapter, Douglas Hendricks, gave a talk right after the chapter was formed, explaining some of the reasons why the chapter was formed and discussing the quandaries the new chapter members face as they try to decide which activities to pursue and which ones to avoid. A video of this talk can be seen at ffrf.us/sallakechap.

tertalk. (The sound quality on the video isn’t great, but if you turn on subtitles, by clicking on the “CC” button at the bottom of the video screen, you can read everything that’s being said.)

To learn more about the Salt Lake chapter of FFRF, visit FFRFSLC.org or contact FFRFSLC@gmail.com.

FFRF-East Tennessee



Spotlights now illuminate the statue of Clarence Darrow outside the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn.

Just in time for the Scopes Trial Centennial in July, the statue of Clarence Darrow at the Rhea County Courthouse is now illuminated!

East Tennessee chapter President Aleta Ledendecker said that the chapter worked with the Historical Society of Rhea County and the county maintenance department to get the lighting on the statue.

“The statue of William Jennings Bryan had illumination, so it looked and felt like discrimination,” Ledendecker wrote about the lack of lighting on the Darrow statue.

East Tennessee chapter members will also be traveling to Dayton, Tenn., to clean and polish the Darrow statue before the Centennial Celebration. To learn more about the East Tennessee Chapter of FFRF, visit info@ffrf-etc.org.

Ozarks Chapter of FFRF



Members of the Ozarks Chapter took a trip to the Wildwood Tulip Farm in Springdale, Ark., on Atheist Day (March 23).

As the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF ramps up for the outdoor season, we came together on two occasions in March. During our monthly meetup on March 16, our group was excited to put together our 2025 Secular Speaker Series, which will include Kate Cohen (author/activist), Forrest Valkai (science teacher/

podcaster), Mickey Dollens (Democratic representative from Oklahoma and FFRF employee) and Alessandro Ternzoni (Americans United for Separation of Church and State).

In addition, the Ozarks chapter celebrated Atheist Day on March 23 by enjoying the outdoors and picking flowers at the nearby Wildwood Tulip Farm in Springdale, Ark. This was a wonderful way to come together and celebrate the beginning of spring!

Finally, our group is proud to announce we have a new website, which can be viewed at ozarksffrf.org.

San Francisco Bay Chapter



SF Bay Chapter leader Dana Treadwell stands with Dr. Wayne Maines and SF Bay Chapter President Walt Bilofsky following Maines’ speech.

The SF Bay Chapter invited transgender community hero, Dr. Wayne Maines, to speak at the San Francisco Main Library. Wayne shared the inspiring story of his family’s brave fight for his daughter’s rights as a transgender youth in a conservative town in Maine starting in the mid-2000s. Wayne detailed their emotional struggles as the entire family dealt with the targeted bullying of his young daughter, Nicole, from town members and a national religious hate group. Wayne and his wife, Kelly, felt they had no other recourse than to go into hiding to protect their daughter. The family educated themselves and, at great expense, sought help from medical and legal experts. Wayne walked us through the timeline of his family’s journey from heart-wrenching harassment to trail-blazing court victories against a school district and the defeat of an early bathroom bill to Nicole’s current acting career, which allowed Wayne to entitle his talk: “Raising a Superhero.”

We thank Wayne for sharing his story and knowledge with us in his powerful presentation.

To learn more about the San Francisco Bay chapter of FFRF visit info@sfbayffrf.org.

Lake Superior Freethinkers



Lake Superior Freethinkers Donald Fraser, Linda Crumpton and David Bellert hosted screenings of the documentary, “Bad Faith.”

Lake Superior Freethinkers of Duluth, Minn., presented to the community three free screenings of the 2024 documentary film “Bad Faith.” The film is a history of the rise of Christian nationalism in America and is a wake-up call to all democracy-loving Americans about the imminent threat of Christian nationalism. Attendance was strong.

To learn more about the Lake Superior Freethinkers, contact CGessert@yahoo.com.

LETTERBOX

I won’t take religious oath as part of jury

Upon receiving a jury summons from the U.S. District Court, I sent the following letter to the jury administrator:

“This communication is to inform the court that while I am quite willing and even eager to perform my civic duty by serving as a juror, I will not take or be manipulated into taking any religious oath or affirmation. Doing so would be a de facto act of perjury, as I do not practice, support or endorse any religion, nor do I believe in any deity, nor do I view religion as a healthy influence in human affairs.

“If any agent of the court attempts to administer any such oath or affirmation to me, whether as an individual or as a group, I will immediately speak up and say, ‘I do not swear any such thing.’ I am well aware that the issue of veracity versus falsehood in a court of law is a grave matter, and would be quite happy and willing to state such before the court without any supernatural mumbo-jumbo.

“Furthermore, I must say that I would feel remiss in my duties both as a human being and a citizen if I did not state here that the practice of administering religious oaths and affirmations in the courts of a supposed secular society strikes me as promoting superstition, cultural illiteracy and ethnocentrism.”

Michigan

I think Catholic Church is terrorist organization

The Irish Republican Army and the PLO in the Middle East could be called terrorist organizations, but the greatest terrorist organization could be the Catholic Church. After 12 years of Catholic school, I was thoroughly terrorized learning hymns and prayers detailing my unworthiness and that I was born with original sin to be removed via a baptism performance by a Catholic priest. This is the same church that was going to burn Galileo at the stake for correctly observing that the Earth traveled around the sun. This is the holy apostolic church? Baloney!

Michigan

CRANKMAIL

We hope you enjoy this month’s installment of Crankmail, printed as received.

Haha! You ding-dongs realize you are going to help Coach Danielson at BSU and spread the gospel of Christ Jesus! Matthew 5:10-12 10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven. 11 “Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. 12 Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

FFRF: Fuck you- You are an anti American, antigod,and belong in an anti-American country -you can kiss my ass!!!!

Leave: Hey you Child Mutilating scumbags Freedom From Religion Foundation If you want a country free of religion, why don't you dirt bags move to Cuba. This is and always will be a Judeo-Christian nation You purple hairs jackoffs will never change that FACT.

Wrong: The TV commercial where Ron Reagan says he’s “not afraid of burning in hell” is ridiculous. He claims to be an atheist which would mean he doesn’t believe in God. If you don’t believe in God, then you don’t believe in hell. But, if Ron is “not afraid of burning in hell”, then that would lead one to believe that Ron does believe in hell, and therefore can’t be an atheist.

Hate?: You hate Christianity so much, do you harbor the same hate for Islam? Hinduism? Buddhism? Judaism? I think not. You don’t have the courage to

Spring into joy



FFRF Lifetime Member Ernie Harburg enjoys the flowers in full bloom and would like to share his joy with the rest of the world, his wife Deena writes. “Be happy. Feel something beautiful.” Ernie is a retired scientist and son of the famous irreverent lyricist Yip Harburg of “Over the Rainbow” fame.

Saying you are agnostic is a cop-out response

“Do you believe in God?” I ask my friends, and they say, “Oh, I’m an agnostic!”

Yes, I know what “agnostic” means — “not knowing.” It comes from the great Thomas Huxley in the 19th century. I get it; you can’t believe without evidence. Very straightforward.

But, it seems to me that you are an atheist if you are admitting there is no verifiable evidence for the existence of God. But you say, “We have no evidence that God doesn’t exist, so the

scales are even!”

Ha! Could be God, could be no God. Fair and balanced. Sure.

Come on. After tens of thousands of years of religious belief, nobody has proved supernatural existence, although just about everyone has tried. Everything I know about history, geology, biology, psychology and astronomy tells me that God is something that exists only in people’s heads. Yeah, I know, that’s not enough evidence.

I think agnosticism is a cop-out. You remind me of friends who say, “Oh, I’m not a Republican, I’m a Libertarian; I just vote for the Republicans.” Classy.

No, I’m sorry, if you vote for Republicans, you are a Republican. If you believe there is no evidence for God, then you are an atheist.

Arizona

Glad FFRF is fighting for Oklahoma schools

I just wanted to commend you about your work in Oklahoma. I am from Oklahoma and a devout Christian who believes that church and state should absolutely be separated. Oklahoma has a long history of trying to inject religious Christian values into the schools, even back in the 1960s when I was in high school. Keep up the good work.

Oklahoma

Commandments out of touch with morality

It may not be such a bad idea to post the Ten Commandments in public school rooms if the Satanic tenets could be placed next to them. The Satanic tenets might need to be renamed something like “Freethought guidelines for morality.” Comparing the two would demonstrate to students just how out of touch the Ten Commandments are when compared to logical and practical guidelines to morality.

Montana

Teachers, politicians seem to be undereducated

I must admit that I’m a pessimist. I think things now are crap and I don’t see them getting better any time soon. An article in the March issue of Freethought Today only served to amplify my pessimism. The article lists 30 state/church violations in which the FFRF intervened to correct. Of the 30 violations, I could only count five that did not involve a school.

How is this possible? As far as I know, teachers are required to have a college degree. They are supposed to be educated, but, apparently, many of them are so stupid that they don’t even know the basic rights and laws of this country. We send our children to school to be educated by dummies. And it just goes on year after year after year.

bad mouth those faiths.

Reagan: Just watched a wonderful program on Ron Reagan Sr. and I will pray for his son Ron Jr. to open his eyes and see the truth about God before he dies. And he will die like all of us and someday whether he believes or not he WILL meet his maker.

Worthless: When are you people going figure out we don’t care what you think and you become less relevant as each day passes. You remind me of PETA. About as significant as a gnat on an elephant’s butt.

God is real: I was not a total Atheist but mocked God Right and Left Then God Revealed himself to Me through the Holy Spirit Now I know for a Fact That God Thru Jesus you are saved by his Work on the Cross and his Power Over Death and Hell “Only a fool says in there Heart there is no GOD ! Not religion— that saves Its the Name Given By God the only Name that can save you from Hell! FAITH in him !! Do not Be a Fool I was ! Ask God out Loud If he is Real if you are Honest He Will Reveal Himself to you !!!

Stop the ad: Would you get that asshole Ron Reagan off the air. Its so sad to see that so the son of a president has such an idiot for a son.

Out of touch: I just saw your commercial with Reagan. It seems so out of touch. Do you understand there’s no conflict in reference to religion. Your situation is so irrelevant and so stupid that you might burn in hell. Your so foolish. What kind of fool would think that to force someone not to believe in religion is some sort of right. You got your head up your ass, Im telling you right now.

Opinion: How do you guys even know what good is? Without God, any idea of good or evil are just opinions.

Bad message: I don’t want to join your freedom of information group, you have a right to your beliefs or unbeliefs. The first amendment. But to be speculating your message on TV and now worrying about going to hell. Theres enough problems in the world without a message like that.

Hell: Jesus loves you, bitches. But you’re still gonna burn in hell.

Ron is gay: How is Ron Reagan Jr still alive? Isn’t he gay. Is it freedom from religion or freedom from gay sex? What group are you?

Leave religion alone: I just wanna say how dare you guys. With everything going on in our country and you’re worried about religion. I think we have bigger fish to fry than religion.

You’re not God: Who the hell are you guys trying to change the order of the Earth? Who’s paying you?

Idiots: Hey you dumb motherfucking atheists. There is a fucking god. Explain how the planet got here and all the fucking animals, you dumn motherfuckers. Get a fucking life.

TV ad: I hope I don’t have to see that crap on tv anymore. I hope you burn in hell.

Go to hell: You all are horrible horrible abusive people. You deserve death, which you will receive because you will not be able to enter eternal life. You will be dead in the devil’s workshop, where you belong.

A note to FFRF Members

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Then I look at politics in America and see the same thing. I understand that there is no specific education requirement for political office. You only must be a certain age and, in some cases, be a natural-born citizen. But, throughout our history, politicians have often been highly educated. They have been lawyers and doctors or wealthy landowners. But, recently, just like so many teachers, they show that they don't know the basic laws of the country. To top it off, the dumbest person in the country — a convicted felon — gets elected as president. He's supposed to be such a successful businessman, but how can one be considered a successful businessman when he has six bankruptcies under his XXXL belt? It's like a doctor who doesn't know the difference between tonsils and the appendix.

Sadly, however, that's what most of the voters wanted. Matthew 26:11 says, "The poor you will always have with you." That also goes for the stupid.

Nevada

FFRF doing wonderful work; NYT ad was great

I have been a member of FFRF for almost five years. I compliment you on the wonderful work you are doing, which is certainly catching on with the decline in organized church attendance.

Your full-page ad in the New York Times was also remarkably well done. Separation of church and state is one of the key reasons that caused our country to be founded, and, as you clearly state, is under assault.

Keep up the good work.

Connecticut

Holy Trinity is as much nonsense as Wonderland

As the world celebrates Easter again, it might be good to examine a central Christian concept — the Trinity. John 10: "The Father and I are one." [Father, Son and Holy Ghost]. And digging into the Gospels, there is Mark 15:34: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

So, with the Father and the Son being the same, why couldn't the writer of Mark have written: "Myself, Myself, why have I forsaken me?"

This would make as much sense as Alice in Wonderland: "If I had a world of my own, everything would be nonsense. Nothing would be what it is, because everything would be what it isn't.

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And contrariwise, what it is, it wouldn't be, and what it wouldn't be, it would. You see?"

Pure nonsense theology. I think the walrus and the carpenter would agree.

Indiana

Government takes sides on National Day of Prayer

In May, the president called upon Americans to participate in a National Day of Prayer. Prayer is a religious act, whether it is a particular religion or non-denominational. Our representatives weren't elected to be our spiritual leaders, but to conduct the people's business, keep us safe, analyze budgets and fill potholes.

The issue is not about prayer per se. We all have that freedom. It's about government sponsorship, endorsement and promotion of prayer. Simply put, should government be involved in the religion business?

It should be out of respect for all Americans and the Constitution of the United States that the government remain neutral about religion, the way our Founding Fathers envisioned! Neutrality offends no one and protects everyone.

On the matter of a National Day of Prayer, the government has taken sides on an issue that must be left to the individual conscience. The government's official promotion of prayer creates a culture of government religiosity and an adverse environment for nonbelievers who are made to feel as if they are second-class citizens. It's a position no citizen should

ever be put in by their government.

Is it improper or disrespectful to question or challenge the government's sponsoring and endorsing a National Day of Prayer? I think speaking out is exactly what should be done by those who care about protecting and ensuring our long standing and uniquely American principle of separate of state and church.

Instead of the President calling for a National Day of Prayer, which disenfranchises about 20 percent of adult American's who are religion-free, how about replacing it with an inclusive "National Day of Religious Freedom," a day that all citizens could participate in and celebrate.

The principal of separation of state and church has served our country well for 237 years. Let's keep it that way!

Florida

Black Collar Crime section not needed

I am a fairly new member and find Freethought Today to be very interesting and informative. However, the pages of Black Collar Crime are not relative at all and should not be in your paper. We are all aware of the crimes, so why print them? Let other media do this. I have only read a few and was completely turned off by the negativity. The entries are depressing and not in line with your positive articles and should not be in the paper.

Arizona

Editor's note: It is a service to our members to report on the crimes of clergy and those affiliated with houses of worship. No other media does this type of extensive roundup and very few of our members would know about these transgressions without FFRF reporting on them.

Cryptogram answer

Organized religion, being founded on superstition, is, perforce, not scientific. And all that which is not scientific — that is, truthful — must be bolstered up by force, fear and falsehood.

— Elbert Hubbard

Nazi leaders all had religious upbringing

Christianity had the capacity to stop German Nazism before it came to power, and to reduce or moderate its practices afterwards, but repeatedly failed to do so because the principal churches were complicit with — indeed, in the pay of — the Nazis. Most German Christians supported the Reich; many continued to do so in the face of mounting evidence that the dictatorship was depraved and murderously cruel.

Early Christian sects promoted loyalty to authoritarian rulers so long they were not intolerably anti-Christian or, worse, atheistic. Hitler did well in monastery school. He sang in the choir, found High Mass and other ceremonies intoxicating, and idolized priests. Impressed by their power, he at one time considered entertaining the priesthood.

Rudolf Hess, who as commandant at Auschwitz -Birkinau pioneered the use of the Zyklon-B gas that killed half of all Holocaust victims, had strict Catholic parents. Hermann Goering had mixed Catholic-Protestant parentage, while Rudolf Hess, Martin Borman, Albert Speer and Adolf Eichmann had Protestant backgrounds.

Not one of the top Nazi leaders was raised in a liberal or atheistic family. Though Hitler pontificated about God and religion at great lengths, he considered politics more important than religion as the means to achieve his agenda. As Goering stated: "God gave the savior to the German people. We have faith, deep and unshakable faith, that (Hitler) was sent by God to save Germany."

Marx called religion an "opiate." Freud called religion a "universal obsessive neurosis." Religions deserve to be condemned, but it is not condemned for its far greater power to disunite people, setting one group against another in a struggle of mutual annihilation.

As Butterfly McQueen said: "As my ancestors are free from slavery; I am free from the slavery of religion."

Ohio

FFRF convention, Oct. 16-19

Meet us in Myrtle Beach!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation on the beautiful eastern shore for its 48th annual convention from Thursday Oct. 16 to Sunday Oct. 19 at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort at 10000 Beach Club Dr., Myrtle Beach, S.C. 29572.

General Schedule

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

Registration

Registration for the convention is \$100 for an FFRF member, \$105 for an accompanying non-member, \$160 for non-members (or save money by joining FFRF as a member when registering). High school students and younger can register for free, and college students can register for the discounted price of only \$25. To register, complete and return the registration on the right, or register online at ffrf.org/convention2025.

Optional Group Meals

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

The complimentary Thursday Reception will offer light hors d’oeuvres and a cash bar. There will also be a complimentary continental breakfast on Friday morning and dessert reception Friday night. Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free options are available for the ticketed meals. Please specify your ADA needs on the registration form.

Friday Buffet Lunch

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

Friday Plated Dinner

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

Saturday Plated Breakfast

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



This is the design for the convention T-shirts.

Saturday Buffet Lunch

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

Saturday Plated Dinner

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

Hotel Amenities & Dining Options

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

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

Hotel Booking

FFRF offers a discounted room block at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort. We encourage you to book your hotel room soon. Reservations must be made on or before Monday, Sept. 22, to receive FFRF’s discounted room rate of \$165/night plus tax. If you need an ADA accessible room, state your needs when making the reservation. Check-in time is 4 p.m., and check-out time is 11 a.m. You can book your hotel room online or over the phone. Online: visit ffrf.us/hotel2025 Phone: call reservations at (800) 876-0010 and Select Option 3 for Hilton Myrtle Beach. To receive FFRF’s room discount, you must **identify yourself as attendees of ‘Freedom From Religion Foundation Annual Convention’** and use the following code: **‘FFR’**

ffrf

2025

National Convention

MYRTLE BEACH

XLVIII

October 16–19, 2025

CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.org/convention2025

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

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

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

Thursday, October 16th

Evening Welcome Reception [must register to attend] ___ Free

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Friday, October 17th

Friday Buffet Lunch ___ \$65 \$___

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Friday Dinner (plated) ___ \$75 \$___

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

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

Saturday, October 18th

Saturday Nonprayer Breakfast (plated) ___ \$35 \$___

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday Buffet Lunch ___ \$65 \$___

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday Dinner (plated) ___ \$75 \$___

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

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

Optional Commemorative 2025 Convention Logo T-shirt (Black) ___ \$___

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

Size(s) _____ ► Total \$ _____

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

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

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

Name of Registrant 1 _____ Pronouns (optional) _____

Name of Registrant 2 _____ Pronouns (optional) _____

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

Address _____

City _____ State / ZIP _____

Phone* _____ Email* _____

Credit Card Number _____ Expiration Date / Security Code _____

Billing Name / Signature _____ *Contact information for in-house use only

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