

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



The religious assault on science education

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College student essay contest winners named

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Author lives her best life (without hiking)

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FFRF's 48th annual convention



Photo by Chris Line

Hundreds of FFRF convention attendees gathered for a "No Kings" protest photo on Oct. 18, the day of thousands of rallies around the country. FFRF was an official co-sponsor of the rallies.

A joyful, urgent call for democracy

By Sara Tetzloff

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's 48th annual convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C., from Oct. 16-19 was a vibrant reminder that reason and constitutional principles have the power to move hearts as well as stir activism. From Friday's opening anthem to Saturday night's standing-room-only finale, the weekend brought together more than 500 secular activists, scholars and performers for two inspiring days

of education, laughter and solidarity.

After a late afternoon reception on Thursday, the formal program opened Friday as Dan Barker led the crowd in "Die Gedanken Sind Frei," the historic 15th-century freethought anthem. FFRF Events Manager Sadie Pattinson kept the energy high with a spirited roll call of the 43 states (plus Washington, D.C.) represented. Matthew Krevat, president of FFRF's Triangle Chapter in North Carolina, gave a short pitch on how to find FFRF chapters across the nation. Herb Silverman, president

For a look at the photo gallery from the convention, see the special section insert in this issue. Or, go to ffrf.us/con25.

emeritus of the Secular Coalition for America, gave a short South Carolina welcome, "Being an Atheist in South Carolina," blending humor with reflection on decades of activism in the

See Convention on page 2

FFRF files suit for atheists to be poll workers

The Freedom From Religion Foundation on Oct. 9 filed a lawsuit in federal court on behalf of a South Carolina citizen challenging an unconstitutional requirement that poll workers swear a mandatory religious oath.

FFRF Member Jim Reel, the plaintiff, sought to serve his community as a poll worker for the 2024 election. While Reel completed the required online training, he was not allowed to substitute a secular affirmation for a religious oath to finalize his appointment to the position.



Jim Reel

Due to his sincerely held convictions, Reel is unwilling to swear "so help me God," because he is an atheist.

The defendants are the interim executive director of the South Carolina Election Commission, the director of voter registration and elections for Greenville County, S.C., and the Greenville County Voter Registration and Elections Board.

The legal complaint charges that the defendants are coercing a statement of belief in a monotheistic deity, thereby denying nontheists or those worshipping more than one deity the right to serve as poll workers. Not only is Reel, as an atheist, barred from becoming a poll worker under this policy, but the rights of other South Carolina citizens who have no religious affiliation (16 percent of the South Carolina population), among others, are also injured. Additionally, the defendants are denying Christians who belong to sects that eschew swearing oaths to a deity, such as some Mennonites, Baptists and Quakers, the right

See Atheists on page 3

District court: FFRF victory stands in Chino Valley

A U.S. district court judge in California ruled on Oct. 13 that a historic Freedom From Religion Foundation legal victory over theocratic school board members should remain in place.

FFRF secured decisive court decisions against unconstitutional religious practices by the Chino Valley Unified School District Board, winning before a federal district court in 2016 and the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 2018. The board filed a motion to reopen the case on July 31 of this year, arguing that the injunction issued in 2016 by the U.S. District Court for the Central District of California should be lifted. The board

claimed that the U.S. Supreme Court's 2022 decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* meant that the legal basis for the injunction no longer exists.

U.S. District Judge Jesus G. Bernal was completely unpersuaded.

"Defendants argue that the court should grant relief from the order . . . because the legal basis underpinning this court's order and the 9th Circuit's opinion was overruled by the Supreme Court's decision in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*," he wrote.

The ruling sided with FFRF in multiple ways. First, it said that the three-year delay between the *Kennedy* decision

and Chino Valley's filing of this case was unjustified.

"Defendants waited over three years after *Kennedy* to file this motion," the judge stated. "Defendants provide no reason, let alone 'exceptional circumstances,' to justify this three-year delay."

Defendants shouldn't be allowed to get another bite at the apple years after losing just because they don't like that the court ruled against them.

More significantly, the ruling stated, "even if the court found that defendants brought the motion within a reasonable time, the court is not persuaded that *Kennedy* represents a 'significant change[] in

the law."

The Supreme Court distinguished coach Joe Kennedy's private prayers from its line of Establishment Clause cases. It found "prayer involving public school students to be problematically coercive"; the coach's prayers were not "publicly broadcast or recited to a captive audience" and he did not require or expect students to participate. "Nothing in *Kennedy* persuades this court that the Supreme Court intended to overrule its line of school prayer cases banning 'prayer involving public school students' that is 'problematically coercive,'" states the district court ruling.

Convention

Continued from page 1

Bible Belt for representation and secular government. He received the 2025 “Free-thinker of the Year” Award. FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker followed with their annual “Highlights of the Year,” celebrating major legal victories, FFRF’s significant scholarship program and other outreach and FFRF’s record number of over 42,000 current members. The Godless Gospel singers — Candace Gorham, Cynthia McDonald and Mandisa Thomas — joined Barker for the first of three songs, performing “It’s Only Natural.” Their soulful harmonies turned the ballroom into a celebration of joy without religion.

Defending democracy

The first major award of the weekend, the Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award (otherwise known as the “FFRF FFRF” Award), honored the Center for Reproductive Rights, with Nancy Northup, president and CEO, accepting the \$50,000 ally award on behalf of the center.

Author and investigative journalist Katherine Stewart followed with “Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy.” Drawing on her powerful new exposé, “Money, Lies and God,” Stewart connected dark money, religious lobbying and authoritarian politics, warning, “The concrete is being poured — but it hasn’t hardened yet.” She urged secular Americans to build coalitions and defend democracy at every level.

FFRF’s legal team — represented by Legal Director Patrick Elliott, Deputy Legal Director Liz Cavell, Senior Counsel Sam Grover and Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence — then reported on FFRF’s major legal advocacy, including the 10 lawsuits FFRF has filed in the past year to protect the separation of church and state. State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley and Governmental Affairs Director Mark Dann summarized FFRF’s important growing legislative advocacy.

Oklahoma state Rep. Mickey Dollens, who also serves as FFRF’s regional governmental affairs manager, subsequently introduced his F.O.R.W.A.R.D. framework, a practical guide to citizen-driven political change. His upbeat approach drew a standing ovation. Next, FFRF honored Dr. Maggie Carpenter, who is under extradition by the state of Louisiana for prescribing medication abortion to a patient there, with the Forward Award for her courage and achievements, broadcasting an exclusive interview between



Photo by Chris Line

Members of the Godless Gospel, from left, Cynthia McDonald, Candace Gorham and Mandisa Thomas perform at FFRF’s convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C., on Oct. 17.

Dr. Carpenter and Annie Laurie.

The evening featured a chance to socialize at dinner and was followed by the sharp wit of musical satirist Roy Zimmerman, who set the stage for one of the convention’s most anticipated speakers: Mary L. Trump. Receiving FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award, the psychologist and bestselling author of “Too Much and Never Enough” examined the psychology of authoritarianism and the emotional manipulation fueling Christian nationalism.

Trump’s candor and humor brought the crowd to its feet before she signed books and chatted with attendees for at least an hour during a dessert reception.

Youth, activism, ‘No Kings’

Saturday began with FFRF’s nontraditional tradition of a Non-Prayer Breakfast — including a tongue-in-cheek “Moment of Bedlam” instead of a moment of silence — and another rousing performance by the Godless Gospel of Barker’s “Let’s All Give Thanks.” (“Not to religion, not to a god, but to the people who’ve made the world a better place for me and you.”)

Then the day’s celebration of student activism began.

- Bailey Harris, a 19-year-old college student, received the \$5,000 Diane & Stephen Uhl Memorial Out of God’s Closet Award for her fun children’s books on science. “We are the universe made conscious,” she told the audience.

- Eli Frost, an 18-year-old college student and winner of the \$5,000 Beverly & Richard Hermesen Award, shared how he persuaded his Minnesota school district to move graduation out of a mega-church. “Walking that stage in a secular space,” he said, “was one of the best moments of my life.”

- Essayists and top winners in one of FFRF’s five essay competitions for students — Jaianah Hightower, Gabrielle Williams and Mekah’E LeClair — read powerful and poignant essays on the dangers of white Christian nationalism and the resilience of marginalized communities.

Rafida Bonya Ahmed presented the Avijit Roy Courage Award, memorializing her husband, who was killed for his atheism by Islamists in 2015, to Mubarak Bala, president of the Humanists of Nigeria, who joined virtually from Germany. Having endured five years of imprisonment for “blasphemy,” Bala spoke movingly on the right to criticize.

Writer Chrissy Stroop, honored as Free-thought Heroine, followed with “Emptying Pews, Evangelicals and the Fight for American Democracy.”

Secular governance

After lunch, the Godless Gospel returned to open the afternoon session with a joyful rendition of “Life Is Good,” followed by FFRF’s Third Annual Secular Legislative Panel. Moderated by Ryan Dudley and state Rep. Mickey Dollens, the panel featured Kansas state Rep. Heather Meyer, Minnesota state Rep. Andy Smith and Vermont state Rep. Monique Priestley. Each nonreligious state legislator shared stories of resisting religious extremism in statehouses and the importance of transparency, science and inclusion in policymaking.

New York Times columnist Jamelle Bouie then received the Clarence Darow Award for his clear-eyed writings on democracy and secular governance. The bronze award is a miniature of the statue FFRF erected in front of the Scopes Trial courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., and fitting-

ly, it was handed to him in person by the sculptor Zenos Frudakis. In his spellbinding address, Bouie traced how Christian nationalism shapes political identity and voter behavior.

“I found myself in recent months really going back to the founding vision, not because it’s perfect, not because it’s not without flaw, but because it still stands for something significant and still stands for something meaningful, and the Declaration in particular stands for something significant and stands for something meaningful.”

Harvard political scientist Steven Levitsky, co-author of “How Democracies Die,” closed the afternoon with a sober yet hopeful talk, “The Great Abdication: America’s Descent into Authoritarianism.” He warned that the United States is not immune to authoritarianism but praised civic organizations like FFRF as essential guardrails. “Democracy survives,” he said, “when citizens organize to defend it.”

The group ended the afternoon session with an impromptu “No Kings” photo-op on the day of the “No Kings” rallies around the country.

Celebration and laughter

Saturday evening opened with appreciation. Annie Laurie Gaylor thanked the staff, volunteers, captioner Norma Miller and the AV crew led by Bruce Johnson, before the ever-popular “Clean Money” drawing — featuring vintage U.S. bills printed before “In God We Trust” was added.

Comedian, actor and SiriusXM host John Fugelsang closed the convention with his trademark fusion of humor, history and social commentary. Quoting from his new bestseller “Separate Church and Hate,” Fugelsang took aim at hypocrisy within Christian nationalism.

The ballroom rose in a standing ovation as Fugelsang ended with a benediction fit for a secular congregation: “Whether you pray to God or pray to Google or pray to your morning coffee, we are all being called right now, not to convert each other, we are called to protect each other.”

Over two days, FFRF’s 48th annual convention showcased the full spectrum of secular activism — from young science authors and global human-rights defenders to investigative journalists and comedians with a conscience. The message was clear: The fight for state/church separation is inseparable from the fight for democracy itself.

Attendees left Myrtle Beach energized, inspired and ready to carry the free-thought flame forward — proof that reason, empathy and a good sense of humor are the true pillars of a free society.

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.w

Click on “Update your contact information.”

Go down to “Deliver Freethought Today by” and click on either “Newspaper by mail” or “Both PDF and paper copy.”

Click “Submit.”

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5th Circuit to reconsider La. Commandments ruling

The full 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed Oct. 7 to reconsider a prior ruling by a three-judge panel that had held “plainly unconstitutional” a Louisiana law requiring Ten Commandments displays in public-school classrooms.

The grant of rehearing en banc vacates the court’s previous decision in *Rev. Roake v. Brumley*, issued in June by a unanimous three-judge panel. In its ruling then, the court of appeals held that Louisiana’s HB 71 is unconstitutional under longstanding Supreme Court precedent, *Stone v. Graham*, and explained that “indiscriminate-

ly” displaying the Ten Commandments in all public-school classrooms across the state would cause an “irreparable” deprivation of the plaintiffs’ rights under the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

The state and school board defendants subsequently petitioned for rehearing en banc, a procedural mechanism that authorizes a full court of appeals to reconsider rulings issued by three-judge panels. With the grant of the petition, the case will be reheard by all judges currently sitting on the 5th Circuit.

Represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the ACLU, ACLU of Louisiana, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and with Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel, the plaintiffs in *Rev. Roake v. Brumley* are a multifaith group of nine Louisiana families with children in public schools.

The organizations representing the plaintiffs issued the following statement:

“The panel’s unanimous ruling last June was well reasoned and correctly followed binding Supreme Court precedent.

We believe there is no reason to revisit it. Nevertheless, we look forward to presenting our clients’ case to the entire court of appeals, and we remain confident that the constitutional values and principles at the heart of the First Amendment, which guarantee religious freedom for all students and families, will prevail in the end. We emphasize that the district court’s preliminary injunction order in the *Roake* case — where the court found that this law is facially unconstitutional — is not disturbed by the 5th Circuit’s decision to rehear the appeal.”

Atheists

Continued from page 1

to serve as poll workers.

The South Carolina Election Commission’s official policy, as implemented, violates the rights of the plaintiff and countless others under the First Amendment and Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution, which bars religious tests for public office, FFRF contends in the complaint filed on Wednesday before the U.S. District Court for the District of South Carolina.

In early 2024, Reel phoned the Greenville County voter registration and elections office to ask whether a secular affirmation was available for poll workers in lieu of the religious oath. The office responded that the oath is dictated by statute and that a secular affirmation without “so help me God” would not be accepted.

FFRF sent a letter to the South Carolina Election Commission on Nov.

22 of last year regarding the religious oath required by the statute, noting that Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution prohibits the government from requiring any kind of religious test for public office. The director at the time of the commission responded, in part, that “the County Boards must require it to be signed before trained candidates are appointed poll workers.”

The legal complaint requests a permanent injunction (a) prohibiting the defendants from requiring citizens who wish to serve as poll workers to swear “so help me God,” and (b) ordering the defendants to provide a secular affirmation that allows citizens to become poll workers without swearing “so help me God.” Reel, a veteran, is also requesting a declaratory judgment that the defendants have violated, and are continuing to violate, the Constitution by requiring all poll worker candidates to swear “so help me God” without the option of a secular affirmation.

Court: No Commandments in Arkansas school district

A federal court on Oct. 17 issued a temporary restraining order blocking Lakeside School District No. 9 from displaying the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms. This marks the third time the court has blocked school districts from implementing Arkansas’ Act 573, the law requiring schools to post a government-chosen version of the Ten Commandments.

The court previously stopped four Northwest Arkansas school districts from complying with Act 573 by posting Ten Commandments displays. The court later enjoined the Conway School District, requiring it to remove Ten Commandments displays that it had posted despite the earlier order.

The order, issued by U.S. District Judge Timothy L. Brooks, follows a supplemental complaint filed by the plaintiffs in *Stinson v. Fayetteville School District No. 1* — represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the ACLU of Arkansas, ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP — to add Lakeside School District and new plaintiffs to

the ongoing litigation.

The court issued the temporary restraining order less than 24 hours after plaintiffs requested it. The court’s swift action requires Lakeside to remove all Ten Commandments displays from classrooms and libraries immediately, reaffirming that Act 573 and its enforcement violate the First Amendment’s guarantees of religious freedom and church-state separation.

“This order is yet another reminder that public schools cannot impose religion on students,” said John Williams, legal director of the ACLU of Arkansas. “Even after repeated rulings, the state continues to look the other way and some school districts continue to violate students’ rights. We’re proud to stand with Arkansas families defending their right to a public education free from government-sponsored religion and will continue to do so.”

“This decision should make it abundantly clear to all Arkansas public schools that pushing bible edicts on a captive audience of students will not be tolerated,” said Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of FFRF.

THEY SAID WHAT?

We are on the side of God. We will defeat the forces of darkness and evil.

Stephen Miller, White House deputy chief of staff, during the Charlie Kirk memorial service.

The Atlantic, 9-22-25

Mocking prayer is rejecting the very foundation of moral society itself and the bedrock that the United States was founded upon.

Rabbi Steven Burg, who heads the Orthodox Jewish educational organization Aish, after many people mocked the conservative “thoughts and prayers” response to the deadly shooting at Annunciation Catholic School in Minneapolis.

Religion News Service, 9-23-25

[The clergy abuse crisis is] mostly homosexual issues, not pedophilia.

Quincy (Mass.) Mayor Thomas Koch, in an interview on the radio show “Night-side with Dan Rea.”

WBZ New Radio 1030, 9-24-25

It’s not a political war, it’s not a culture war, it’s a spiritual war.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, following the assassination of Charlie Kirk.

Religion News Service, 9-25-25

Who here knows Jesus? Praise God. Let me just say if you did not raise your hand right now, one way you can honor Charlie is to seek out someone here in this audience who did raise their hand. Ask them all of your hard questions. Seek the truth, search the bible and then do what Erika Kirk recommended when she first addressed the nation, find a bible-believing church and start attending.

You’ll be glad you did.

Montana Gov. Greg Gianforte at a Turning Point USA rally honoring Charlie Kirk at Montana State University.

Montana Free Press, 10-7-25



Chip Roy

The truth is the Marxist, radicals and Islamists the Democratic Party promoted this weekend, they cannot handle the truth. The truth is that there is a king and that king is Jesus. And the president has been willing to say it, and Charlie Kirk was willing to say it, and he got killed for it.

Rep. Chip Roy, disparaging the No Kings protests that were held around the country on Oct. 18.

Democracy Docket, 10-20-25

The institution of slavery is not inherently evil. It is not inherently evil to own another human being. It is very important that every Christian affirm what I just said.

Christian nationalist Joshua Haymes, who co-hosts a podcast with Brooks Potteiger, pastor of the far-right Pilgrim Hill Reformed Fellowship, of which Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth is a member.

Friendly Atheist, 10-24-25

You know, there’s no reason to be good. I wanna be good because you wanna prove to God you’re good so you go to that next step, right?

President Trump, speaking to a reporter about his presidential prayer initiative.

Yahoo, 10-7-25

Religious statues outside station blocked by court

A Norfolk Superior Court on Oct. 14 granted a preliminary injunction blocking the planned installation of two large statues of Catholic saints outside the entrance of the new public safety headquarters in Quincy, Mass.

The ruling ensures that the statues of St. Michael and St. Florian will not be installed while the case proceeds. The court also denied the city of Quincy’s motion to dismiss the lawsuit.

The lawsuit was brought in May by a multifaith group of Quincy residents, who argue that the plan violates the separation of church and state, as codified in the Massachusetts Constitution. The plaintiffs are represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and Cloherty & Steinberg LLP.

In its ruling, the court emphasized that a “core function of the new public safety building is to facilitate and promote public access to law enforcement,” and that “victims and witnesses entering such a building often must overcome emotional and psychological hurdles, and intimidation to report crimes and seek police assistance” including “the question of whether the police will treat their claims with the gravity warranted and treat them equally as any other in-

dividual, regardless of religious beliefs.” As a result, it concluded “the complaint raises colorable concerns that members of the community not adherent to Catholicism or Christian teaching who pass beneath the two statues to report a crime may reasonably question whether they will be treated equally.”

The lawsuit argues that the placement on government property of the proposed religious statues violates Article 3 of the Massachusetts Declaration of Rights by imposing religious imagery and symbols upon all who work in, visit or pass by the public safety building; by conveying the message that Quincy is a Catholic community and that non-Catholics do not belong and are less valued; and by excessively entangling the city with matters of religion.

“My Christian faith is at the core of my life — and the city’s plan to install religious statues at the entrance to a government building goes against that faith,” says Conevery Bolton Valencius, one of the plaintiffs in this case. “As residents of Quincy, we should not have to walk under such looming religious imagery to seek help from public safety officers or city services. I go to church because it is my choice to freely practice my religion, but having to walk beneath these statues to enter a government building removes that choice.”

Across

1. Officially allowed

6. Dashboard acronym

9. The lowest female voice

13. Convex molding

14. Pitching stat

15. Deplete (2 words)

16. Lost, in Provence

17. Who is Bugs Bunny talking to?

18. Less than average tide, pl.

19. *Freethinking “The Matrix” actor Keanu ____

21. *Freethinking “Master of None” creator and star Aziz ____

23. R in #6 Across

24. Rubik’s puzzle

25. Money in Myanmar

28. Rane’s husband

30. *Comedian George ____, inspiration behind FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award

35. Common ‘pro’ follower

37. Pub arrow

39. Beauty pageant winner’s headdress

40. Beige

41. “Bravo! Bravo!”

43. Med. sch. entry requirement

44. “Planted” customer

46. Caffeine-containing nut tree

47. ____ ____ good example

48. Stadiums

50. Priestly vestments

52. Ctrl+Alt+ ____

53. Warm-hearted

55. Make a choice

57. *Muralist Diego ____: religion is a “form of collective neurosis”

60. *Supreme Court’s Stone vs. ____ decision: no Ten Commandments in classrooms

63. Not domesticated

64. Campbell’s container

66. Waterwheel

68. Lack of muscle tension

69. Genetic info carrier, acr.

70. Whale’s lunch

71. Well, in Tuscany

72. Word between dogs

73. Kaa of “The Jungle Book”

Down

1. Chop

2. ____ and anon

3. *Writer ____ Vidal: monotheism is the “greatest disaster ever to befall the human race”

4. Rot-resistant wood

5. Slat on a window shutter

6. *Agnostic Diane Keaton’s 1981 movie

7. Not amateur

8. China’s special administrative region

9. Between ports

10. Shakespeare’s king

11. South American indigenous people

12. Activities, as in military

15. Oust

20. Avoid, as in taxes

22. Peacock network

24. Auto contents

25. *The First Amendment’s freedom of the ____

26. Fancy boat

27. Courtyards

29. *Atheist “Jumanji” actor ____ Black

31. Part of a wheel, pl.

32. Like a corset

33. Extremely angry

34. Birth-related

36. Old, in Scotland

38. Like certain Sarah

42. Small drum

45. Probable

49. Michael “ ____” Jordan

51. Uses a paddle

54. Mother-of-pearl

56. Every rose has it

57. Network of nerves

58. Ryder Cup club

59. Weather predicting device

60. Annoying biter

61. *Agnostic composer Giuseppe Verdi’s “La donna È mobile,” e.g.

62. *Freethinking politician and Presidential Medal of Freedom laureate Harvey ____

63. Like certain Four

65. CA’s Santa ____ winds

67. Sierra Nevada, e.g.

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12	
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71						72				73				

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

OVERHEARD

Charlie Kirk did not deserve to be assassinated. But I am overwhelmed seeing the flags of the United States of America at half-staff, calling this nation to honor and venerate a man who was an unapologetic racist and spent all of his life sowing seeds of division and hate into this land. . . .How you die does not redeem how you lived.

Rev. Howard-John Wesley, of Alexandria, Va., in a sermon in the aftermath of Kirk’s killing that has amassed tens of thousands of views online.
Associated Press, 9-24-25

This is the most upsetting use of my scholarship that has ever happened in my career. It’s upsetting because this is lethally dangerous to LGBTQ+ kids.

Clifford Rosky, a University of Utah professor of constitutional law and civil rights, who has worked to ban anti-LGBTQ+ conversion therapy practices. However, the Alliance Defending Freedom, a Christian legal advocacy organization, nonetheless cited his research on sexual orientation and LGBTQ+ rights to bolster its petition in front of the Supreme Court. Rosky says ADF “profoundly” misrepresented his research on the topic.
Religion News Service, 10-7-25

What Cardinal Dolan may not have known is that many of Mr. Kirk’s words were marked by racist, homophobic, transphobic, and anti-immigrant rhetoric, by violent pro-gun advocacy, and by the promotion of Christian nationalism. These prejudicial words do not reflect the qualities of a saint. [It is] giving undue sanction to words and actions that hurt the very people Jesus calls us to love.

The Sisters of Charity of New York, in a statement rebuffing comments made about Charlie Kirk by Cardinal Dolan, who said “this guy is a mod-

ern-day St. Paul” and a “hero.”
Religion News Service, 9-28-25

As jurists have long known, and as the people of Hawaii who ratified our state Constitution over the years understood, the promise of religious pluralism and secular government depends on a durable wall separating church and state. Without it, religion, government and civil society suffer.

Hawaii Supreme Court Justice Todd Eddins, in his 40-page concurrence to a case where it was held that the state constitution’s provision against establishment of religion prevents the state from enforcing a deed restriction requiring property to be used “for Church purposes only.”
The Friendly Atheist, 9-22-25

Religion, whatever else it may be, is one dimension of that challenge. What students need — in Texas and everywhere else — is not a government-issued Decalogue but a civic education sturdy enough to meet that challenge.

Kwame Anthony Appiah, professor of philosophy and law at New York University, in his op-ed, “Students in Texas need something, but it’s not the Ten Commandments.”
New York Times, 10-4-25

The court has also regularly permitted private individuals to force their religious views onto others in the public sphere. In so doing, it has chipped away at the Establishment Clause in favor of an expansive vision of the Free Exercise Clause. . . . As it stands, the court’s far-right majority espouses the accommodationist view for both clauses, meaning that the “wall between church and state” may soon be less a wall than a welcome mat.

Hayley Durudogan and Sydney Bryant, in their article, “How the Supreme Court is dismantling the separation of church and state.”
AmericanProgress.org, 10-6-25

Freethought Today Cryptogram

X KSQP KXZZOLOQPXDPO FNBR, OHBOCP XQ KOJLOO,

AOPMOOQ COSCGO MRS AOGXOWO XQ LOGXJXSQ ZLSF

PRSYO MRS AOGXOWO XQ DYPLSGSJV, FDJXB SL PRO

YNCOLQDPNLDG.

—DQKV LSSQOV

A cryptogram is a substitution puzzle in which one letter stands for another. If U equals T, it will equal T throughout the puzzle.

Example:
UOG RLQTM HYVBF DVP SLACN VWGY UOG KJEZ XVI.
THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG.
This month’s clue: N => D. Answer is on page 21.

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

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.

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FFRF FOREVER!

IN THE NEWS

Ryan Walters resigns as Okla. superintendent

Republican state school Superintendent Ryan Walters has resigned his elected post to become the chief executive officer of an organization that he has used taxpayer money to promote.

Walters said he will lead the Teacher Freedom Alliance, a new professional organization that touts itself as “an alternative to union membership” for teachers. It is a part of a far-right anti-labor union think tank.

Walters once compared teachers’ unions to terrorist organizations. He has touted the Teacher Freedom Alliance on both social media and through multiple news releases on his official state letterhead.

FFRF has demanded for two years that he step down — and was the first organization to do so. In March, Walters sued FFRF for sending letters to school districts objecting to unconstitutional religious activity — a lawsuit even a President Trump-appointed federal judge swiftly dismissed as meritless.

Walters’ agenda for Oklahoma public schools has drawn national attention to a state that consistently ranks poorly for its education system. He has ordered public schools to teach from the bible, honor Charlie Kirk with a moment of silence and show students a video of him praying for President Trump.

Ohio Republican lawmakers want public school teachers and college professors to talk about the positive influence of Christianity on American history without fear of losing their jobs or being reprimanded.

House Bill 486, also known as the “Charlie Kirk American Heritage Act,” would permit public school teachers and college professors to teach students about the influence of Christianity on history and culture. No other religion is included in the bill.

Gary Daniels, chief lobbyist for the American Civil Liberties Union of Ohio, said the First Amendment already allows instructors to teach about the impact of religion on historical figures and events, and this bill goes too far.

“The First Amendment requires government to be neutral with regard to religion,” Daniels said. “But what [House Bill] 486 does is it certainly wants government schools to take one side of this issue, and that is the positive aspects of religion and specifically Christianity.”

State Rep. Gary Click said the bill doesn’t prohibit teachers from instructing on the negative impact of religion.

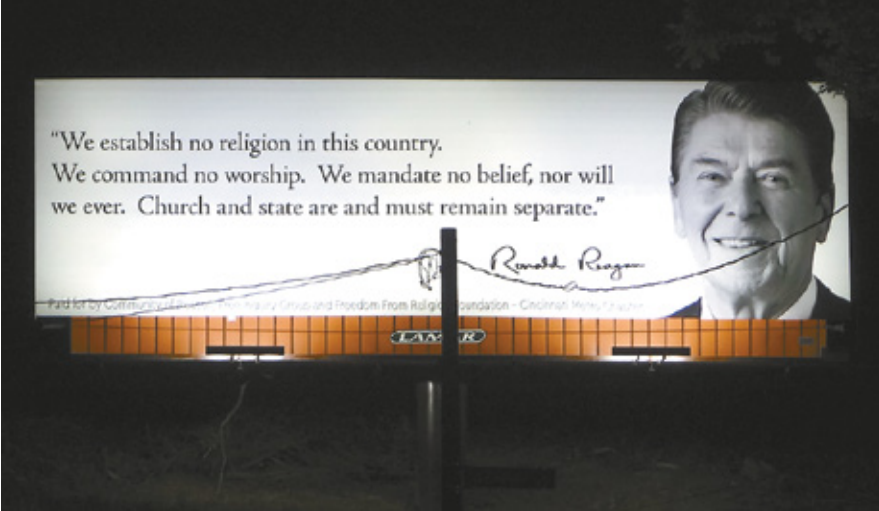
“Yes, of course, I think those aspects should be taught, but if they are going to be taught honestly, they would be taught as deviations from Christianity,” Click said.

Court: Colo. Catholic schools can’t discriminate

Preschoolers with LGBTQ parents or who identify as LGBTQ can’t be shut out of religious preschools that are part of Colorado’s state-funded preschool program, a federal appeals court ruled Oct. 7.

The decision, which upholds a key part of a lower court decision, represents a major win for the state and a defeat for

An important reminder



Three Cincinnati secular humanist groups, including the Freedom From Religion Foundation Cincinnati Metro Chapter, worked together to install a large billboard featuring President Reagan at the base of Price Hill.

The billboard (14 feet x 48 feet) remained up throughout August and into September, showing Reagan with a statement he delivered to a Jewish congregation in Valley Stream, N.Y., in October 1984: “We establish no religion in this country. We command no worship. We mandate no belief, nor will we ever. Church and state are and must remain separate.”

The three participating local organizations who equally shared the costs for the billboard are the Community of Reason, the Free Inquiry Group and the FFRF Cincinnati Metro Chapter, which initiated the project.

the two Denver-area Catholic preschools at the center of the case.

The decision provides the latest answer to a question being asked in several cases percolating in state and federal courts: Can private religious schools that accept public education dollars refuse to enroll certain kids based on religious principles?

Along with the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals, a Maine federal district court and a Utah state court are among those who have said no. It’s possible the U.S. Supreme Court could eventually weigh in, though it’s not clear which case will advance to the high court.

In its 54-page ruling, the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals wrote that it found no proof that the Colorado Department of Early Childhood took actions that “evidence religious hostility” as the two Catholic preschools claimed.

The state’s universal preschool program “went to great effort to be welcoming and inclusive of faith-based preschools’ participation,” the decision said.

The three-judge panel also found that the Early Childhood Department, which runs the preschool program, had applied its nondiscrimination policy in a neutral way to both religious and non-religious preschools.

The policy bars preschools from discriminating based on a variety of factors, including sexual orientation and gender identity. State officials cited the policy in denying the Catholic preschools a waiver that would have allowed them to keep LGBTQ children or children from LGBTQ families from enrolling.

Moroccan court upholds sentence for blasphemy

A Moroccan court on Oct. 8 upheld a 30-month prison sentence for feminist Ibtissame Lachgar over blasphemy charges. Lachgar was arrested in August after sparking an uproar for posting online a picture of herself wearing a T-shirt with the word “Allah” in Arabic followed by “is lesbian.”

The 50-year-old clinical psychologist known for her rights activism in Moroc-

co was initially sentenced in September to 30 months in prison and fined 50,000 dirhams (\$5,500).

Lachgar’s lawyers had previously requested her release on medical grounds, saying she needed to receive treatment for cancer. Lachgar needed “critical surgery on her left arm”, the lawyers said in August, adding that her doctors “warned of amputation if the surgery is not carried out.”

The prosecution requested the conviction be upheld and the sentence increased, saying Lachgar’s post was a threat to public order and the “spiritual well-being of Moroccans.”

FFRF has asked its members to contact the U.S. Embassy in Morocco at ffrf.quorum.us/campaign/140044 to help free her.

Christian schools get 76% of voucher money in Ga.

Georgia’s new program to subsidize private education has helped more than 8,000 children move from public schools with low test score averages to educational organizations predominantly affiliated with Christian churches, data from the Georgia Education Savings Authority shows.

About \$5.4 million of the \$7.1 million distributed by the state authority at the start of the fall school semester went to 286 private schools serving 85 counties and nine cities, according to an investigation by The Current GA and Georgia Recorder.

The remaining cash — \$1.7 million — went to 153 companies, including giant retailer Amazon, that sell school supplies such as computers, tablets and books, records show.

As many as 8,600 private students make up the first cohort receiving the Georgia Promise Scholarship, the program approved in spring 2024 by the Republican-led Legislature and Gov. Brian Kemp. Eligible children must live in areas served by the lowest-performing 25 percent of the state’s public schools.

Under the program’s guidelines, families receive \$6,500 per year for each child to pay for the switch to a private

school or homeschool or other educational supports. Parents receive the money through an online state portal, where they then allocate the dollars to an approved private school or to a company to purchase educational materials or services.

Wash.: Clergy exempt from reporting abuse confessions

Washington state has dropped its efforts to require clergy to report child abuse or neglect when the information is revealed during the rite of confession, but left other provisions intact, designating priests and bishops as mandatory reporters.

The settlement means Catholic priests are not required to report information learned during confession.

Earlier this year, Gov. Bob Ferguson signed SB 5375 into law. The church filed a lawsuit, saying the law violated constitutional rights to religious freedom. In July, a federal court blocked the law before it could take effect weeks later.

Tim Law of the Catholic Accountability Project fought to require reporting of suspected or known instances of child abuse or neglect.

“It astounds me that a child might mention something horrible happening to them to a priest in that confessional setting and the priest has no obligation to report in that situation,” Law said. “That’s what’s disturbing in that the church would prioritize their privilege over protection of a child.”

A third of Americans think Trump is part of God’s plan

Up to one-third of Americans believe Donald Trump’s election was ordained by God, two polls suggest.

A poll by the Public Religion Research Institute found that 25 percent of Americans believed that God ordained Trump to be the winner of the 2024 election, with 60 percent of white evangelical Protestants holding that view, and 45 percent of Hispanic Protestants.

A poll by Pew Research Center came up with similar results, showing that 4 percent believed God chose Trump because God believes in his policies, while another 32 percent think Trump’s election is part of God’s plan, although God may not necessarily agree with his program. Nearly half, 49 percent, said God doesn’t get involved in elections, while 14 percent said they don’t believe in God.

Uruguay passes a law allowing euthanasia

Uruguay’s senate passed a law decriminalizing euthanasia on Oct. 15, putting the South American nation among a handful of countries where seriously ill patients can legally obtain help to end their lives.

It makes Uruguay the first country in predominantly Catholic Latin America to allow euthanasia via legislation. Colombia and Ecuador have decriminalized the practice through Supreme Court decisions.

The law, which moved forward in fits and starts over the last five years, cleared its final hurdle as 20 out of 31 senators voted in favor. All that’s left is for the government to implement the regulations.

FFRF VICTORIES

Arkansas

FFRF received a report concerning disciplinary action related to students in Parkers Chapel School District in Little Rock exercising their freedom of conscience. Students had been reprimanded by district teachers for choosing not to stand during the Pledge of Allegiance. As a result of this constitutional violation, FFRF's parent-complainant reported that their child had been singled out in school and received threats from fellow students due to their refusal to participate in the exercise.

"Students have a constitutional right not to be forced to participate in the Pledge of Allegiance," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. "Students may not be singled out, rebuked, told they must stand, or otherwise penalized for following their freedom of conscience."

FFRF received a response from the district's legal representative, Phillip M. Brick Jr. from the Bequette Billingsley Kees law firm. Brick confirmed that the issue regarding teachers disciplining students for not standing during the pledge had been resolved. "One of the individuals identified as having allegedly disciplined a student is a substitute teacher," Brick wrote. "The district has instructed its staff, including this substitute teacher, that they cannot discipline a student who chooses not to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance."

Arkansas

FFRF successfully encouraged the Brookland Public Schools in Arkansas system to remove displays containing bible verses and explicitly Christian language from two schools.

A parent reported that Brookland Middle School and Brookland Junior High School were displaying religious messages around the schools, including in hallways. Some of the messages invited students to contribute prayers and encourage religious participation. Messages included bible verses and encouraging students to "remember Jesus," and that "God is looking out for [students] and will provide all [they] need." FFRF's parent-complainant also stated that teachers have invited students to participate in church services, and the messaging makes them feel uneasy and worried about the potential influence it would have on their children.

"The bible quotes and religious messages displayed in Brookland Public Schools needlessly marginalize any students and families, such as our complainant and their children, who do not subscribe to Christianity," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Rebecca Worsham of the Mixon & Worsham PLC responded on behalf of the district, confirming FFRF's claims. The district removed such displays, and principals have been directed to monitor compliance to ensure that postings don't happen again. "In addition, the district will provide administrators and staff with updated guidance reinforcing constitutional requirements of religious neutrality in public schools," Worsham wrote. "This guidance will make clear that district personnel may not promote religion, invite students to religious activities or otherwise give the appearance of school endorsement of religious practice."



California

The Monrovia Unified School District in California have informed football coaches at Monrovia High School that leading student-athletes in prayer is a violation of students' rights.

A district parent reported that the high school football coaches were regularly leading student-athletes in prayer on the field prior to football games for at least several years. FFRF's complainant-parent stated that the prayers were making their child "uncomfortable," but they did not dissent or sit the prayers out for fear of retaliation from the coaches.

"When coaches lead the team in prayer, students, such as our complainant's child, will no doubt feel that participating in that prayer is essential to pleasing the coaches and being viewed as a team player," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Paula Hart Rodas.

FFRF's letter did its job, as Rodas responded to confirm that the administration of Monrovia High School had been notified of the letter and was directed to investigate the matter. "The administration was given instruction to direct all football coaching staff to cease and desist any coach-led prayers or prayer-like activity that could be assumed to be of religious character," Rodas wrote. "By the close of the investigation, all football coaches had been given the directive that coach-led prayer is not permissible at any time."

California

FFRF was happy to learn that the New Haven Unified School District in Union City, Calif., was willing to take action to stop an employee from including religious text in their email signature.

FFRF learned that the district's substitute placement clerk sent an email with a religious signature to a substitute teacher applicant. The email signature quotes Hebrews 6:19, which reads "We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure, which enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf."

"When a district employee includes biblical scripture in their official email signature, it sends the message to all recipients that the district prefers religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

District Superintendent John Thompson agreed with FFRF, and was thankful

Georgia

A math and science teacher took down Christian displays in their classroom after FFRF informed the district of the First Amendment violation they created.

A parent reported that a teacher at Bremen Academy had biblical scripture and religious iconography on display in their classroom in view of students. The complainant observed the display during a recent open-house event. The items on display included a framed Latin cross with the biblical quote "I can do ALL things through CHRIST who strengthens ME" Philippians 4:13, written across it and a second Latin cross with the words "Faith," "Hope," "Believe," Love," "Trust," and "Grace" written on it.

"I'm happy for my child to learn about all religions from a historical perspective, but this seems to be about the teacher making a religious statement. Additionally, this teacher's subject areas are math and science," the complainant reported. Because this teacher does not teach history or a related topic, it appeared that there was no academic reason as to why they would display the religious writings or symbols in the classroom.

"Here, by displaying biblical scripture and Latin crosses in [their] classroom in full view of students, [the teacher], and thus the district, signals clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district's legal representative.

FFRF received confirmation from District Legal Representative Cory O. Kirby that the letter had been received. "The superintendent and school administration have met with the teacher, and [they] removed the scripture and cross from [their] classroom," Kirby wrote. "A discussion of the First Amendment as it relates to the Establishment and Free Exercise of Clause was had with the educator, as well."

Michigan

Owosso Public Schools in Owosso, Mich., was reminded by FFRF that students were not to be exposed to proselytizing messages from churches while at school.

A concerned Owosso Public School parent informed FFRF that they discovered fliers for Grace Pointe Wesleyan Church that were placed on the front table at Bryant Elementary School encouraging students to go to service and youth group on Sundays. The complainant additionally reported that donations to Bryant Elementary from a church last year included religious materials tucked inside.

It appeared that the district maintained a policy by which any organization could distribute materials to students, subject only to the superintendent's approval. Per Owosso Public Schools Permission to Distribute form, "Permission to distribute information to Owosso Public Schools must be granted by the superintendent."

"It's concerning that the district's current policy does not lay out any neutral guidelines or generally applicable rules that organizations must follow," FFRF Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow Charlotte R. Gude wrote to Superintendent Steve Brooks. "Instead, it appears that which outside materials are approved for distri-

bution is left up to the personal opinion of a single administrator.”

Thankfully, Brooks responded to FFRF’s complaints to ensure that the district would no longer disregard the First Amendment.

Brooks investigated the situation and confirmed that he did not approve the fliers through the central office, and had not received a request for them. “As soon as we became aware, staff immediately removed the flyers and conducted a sweep of the building to ensure no additional flyers or posters were present,” Brooks wrote. “None were found. The building administrator also reminded staff that only district-approved flyers may be distributed.” Brooks concluded by stating that it was unclear who had printed the fliers.

Ohio

FFRF made sure that Bellefontaine, Ohio, state property is not used to advance one religious group’s beliefs upon all other residents.

FFRF was informed by a resident that a “Jesus Saves” sign had been posted on an electrical pole in Bellefontaine.

“This religious display sends an exclusionary message that needlessly marginalizes Bellefontaine residents and other Ohioans and travelers who are non-Christians, including the nearly 30 percent of the population who are not religious,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote.

While FFRF never received an official response from the city, four days after FFRF sent its letter, the complainant emailed back with good news, informing that the correction had taken place. “The sign has come down,” the complainant wrote, adding that he appreciated FFRF’s work.

Ohio

In West Portsmouth, Ohio, FFRF put a stop to the Washington-Nile Local School District Board of Education’s longstanding practice of opening board meetings with a prayer delivered by sitting board-members.

A district community member reported that the Washington-Nile Board of Education had been opening meetings with prayer. A review of available minutes from the board’s 2024 meetings revealed that each meeting had been beginning with a prayer led by a board member.

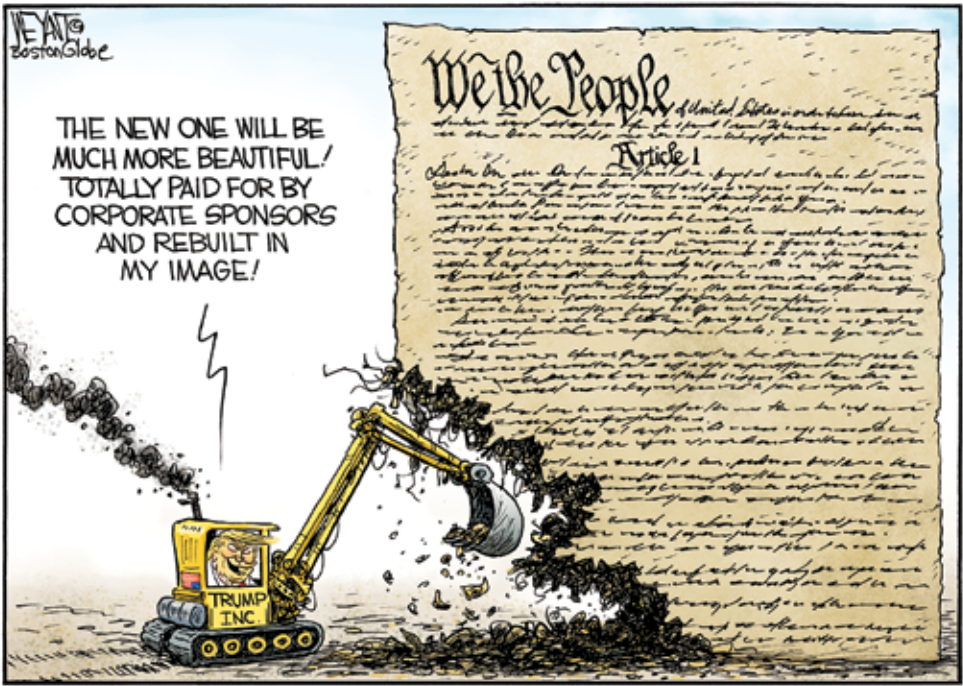
“It is coercive, insensitive and intimidating to force nonreligious and non-Christian citizens to choose between making a public showing of their nonbelief by refusing to participate in the prayer or else display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their school board members clearly do,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the board’s president.

In response to FFRF’s letter, District Superintendent Christopher N. Rapp addressed the situation to confirm that action had been taken. “The Washington-Nile Local Board of Education no longer opens with prayer,” he wrote.

Pennsylvania

The Corry Area School District in Pennsylvania agreed to make sure that a religious club taking place at a district school was completely student run and would not allow the participation of outside adults, thanks to FFRF’s vigilance.

A district community member informed FFRF that outside adults were allowed to enter Corry schools to lead



meetings of Impact Campus Fellowship, a Christian club. FFRF learned that the club was meeting on Thursdays during the lunch period, and no other groups were meeting in this manner.

“Schools cannot constitutionally allow religious organizations to treat schools as a recruiting ground for their religious mission,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote. “The district’s practice of allowing outside religious representatives unique access to its students demonstrates unconstitutional favoritism not only for religion over non-religion, but in this case Christianity over all other faiths.”

After FFRF’s letter, the district did take action, conducting an investigation of the situation. Jennifer E. Gornall of KnoxLaw confirmed that the club was student initiated, and it did not appear that an outside adult was regularly attending meetings. Regardless, the district did take steps to ensure that clubs would be monitored to ensure constitutional compliance. “Moving forward, the district will ensure that all activities of the club (and any other non-school-sponsored clubs) are led by the student members of the group only and that the meetings and activities will not be directed, conducted, controlled or even regularly attended by individuals from outside the district,” Gornall wrote.

Tennessee

The Cumberland County Schools system in Crossville, Tenn., has stopped using an elementary school’s social media account to promote the views of the school’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) club.

A community member reported that Homestead Elementary School had been preferentially promoting the FCA on the official Facebook account. Posts went beyond announcements about FCA events and veered into promoting the religious ideas and viewpoints espoused by FCA, such as thanking adults for coming to talk to FCA about “finishing out the year strong in the Lord” and “being a light.” Posts additionally praised individual students for attending and speaking at the club.

“If the school claims to maintain a neutral policy of providing information on all clubs and their meetings, then the school cannot constitutionally give FCA preferential treatment by over-promoting the FCA’s events and specifically promoting its religious viewpoints and messaging,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

The district reached out to legal counsel to seek guidance on how to correct the violation. The attorney then spoke with Lawrence directly and agreed that the school should not

have been promoting the FCA on social media. He spoke with the district and confirmed that the district would no longer be promoting religious clubs on social media.

Texas

FFRF made sure that the Huntsville Independent School District in Texas was respecting students’ freedom of conscience by not sponsoring prayer events and keeping students from being forced to pray at extracurricular clubs.

A parent reported that Estella Stewart Elementary (ESE) hosted an official prayer event on Aug. 5. The complainant additionally stated that ESE’s robotics club sponsors force students to pray, and has forced their child to pray twice.

“To respect the First Amendment rights of students within the District, ESE staff should be counseled to refrain from discussing religion with students,” former FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote. “That includes ceasing prayer and proselytizing during school hours, during a school activity, on school property, by school staff.”

The district reached out to legal representative Briah Gray from the Walsh Gallegos law firm in order to clarify the situation.

Gray confirmed that the prayer event was sponsored by the host church, Elkins Baptist Church, and the event was only held in the school’s cafeteria so attendees could be provided with air conditioning. Gray additionally stated that students were not required to or demanded to participate in the robotics club prayer. Regardless, Gray concluded by confirming that action had been taken to protect students’ rights going forward, as “the district has amended its practices and policies, as well as incorporated training to ensure staff do not engage in prayer or other religious activities during club meetings.”

Texas

The Royse City Independent School District was reminded that any religious groups run through the school cannot be led by adults, in order to protect students’ First Amendment right to be free from religious coercion at public schools.

A local parent informed FFRF that a “Men of Honor” group was planning on holding meetings led by adults at Bobby Summers Middle School in September 2025. An email sent to parents from the school listed the group’s first mission as being “to call young men to a new standard that is Christ-likeness.” The parent-complainant also reported that

there was a “Girls 4 God” group at the same school that was seemingly run by adults based on photos of meetings on school social media that showed adults speaking to a group of students.

“Any religious student clubs, such as Men of Honor or Girls 4 God, must be bona fide student clubs that are student-led and student-organized,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Charlotte R. Gude wrote. “Outside adults cannot regularly attend Men of Honor or Girls 4 God activities and any school staff in attendance may only participate in a supervisory capacity.”

The district reached out to the Abernathy Roeder Boyd Hullett law firm for guidance on the issue. In response to FFRF’s letter, Lucas Henry clarified that both clubs are student led and were only hosting guest speakers in compliance with district policy. However, the district did take note of the concerns and promised that these clubs would not tread over the line into a constitutional violation.

West Virginia

After hearing from FFRF, Golden Corral put a stop to a practice that favored religion over nonreligion by offering free meals to religious preachers.

FFRF learned that the Golden Corral in Beckley, W.Va., offered financial advantage to some customers solely on the basis of their religion, in the form of a free meal to “preachers of all denominations” every Sunday from March to April of 2025.

“Golden Corral’s restrictive promotional practice favors religious customers, and denies customers who do not proselytize, as well as nonbelievers, the right to ‘full and equal’ enjoyment of Golden Corral,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote.

Though Golden Corral never offered an official response to FFRF, FFRF learned from WV News, a local news organization, that the promotion had been suspended as of Aug. 4. The announcement came from franchise owner Eddie Torrico via Facebook, and he did not indicate if the offer would be resumed in the future.

Wisconsin

FFRF reminded the Oak Creek-Franklin Joint School District that religious events taking place at school districts must be student-led and free from staff participation to ensure students are safe from coercive religious practices by employees.

A district parent reported that East Middle School’s Sept. 17 announcements included an advertisement for a See You at the Pole event on Sept. 24, stating: “[An adult] will lead prayer at the flagpole from 8-8:20 a.m. All students and staff are welcome to join. ... We hope to see you there!”

“A public school district promoting and leading a religious event on school property alienates nonreligious students, teachers, and parents, such as the family who contacted us, whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school staff,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote.

After getting FFRF’s letter, District Superintendent Daniel Thielen reached out to FFRF via email to clarify the situation at hand. “As we have students who participate in this yearly, reminders have gone out to all district staff that they are not to be involved and this is a strictly student-led event,” he wrote. “A separate reminder from the principal at Oak Crest East Middle School especially emphasized this as well.”

The religious assault on science education

This is an edited version of the speech given by Richard Katskee at the Scopes Trial Centennial celebration in Chattanooga, Tenn., on July 19. He was introduced by comedian and convention emcee Leighann Lord. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.org/scopescon.

Leighann Lord: Our next speaker talks the talk and walks the walk. Richard Katskee is an assistant clinical professor of law and director of Duke’s Appellate Litigation Clinic. Previously, he was the legal director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, where he was managing cutting-edge cases under the First Amendment’s Establishment, Free Exercise and Free Speech clauses. And, most notably, he taught First Amendment law at American University Washington College of Law and professional and political ethics at Harvard’s John F. Kennedy School of Government and Harvard College. So, he’s teaching and doing.

Please welcome Richard Katskee.

By Richard Katskee

John Scopes was charged with the crime of teaching evolution — actually, it was the crime of teaching anything about where humans come from other than what it says in the book of Genesis. He was convicted of the crime of teaching evolution and fined \$100. That is \$1,837 today on a teacher’s salary.

The Tennessee Supreme Court overturned the sentence on a technicality but upheld the conviction. So, no teaching of evolution became the law of the land and evolution was written right out of the science textbooks for decades.

I want to talk about the religiously based hostility to evolutionary theory and to give you a slice of that.

“Evolution Exposed” is a modern textbook by a creationist group called Answers in Genesis, and it’s pretty typical of creationist materials. Here’s how Answers in Genesis explains what is wrong with evolution:

“The great threat to society is moral relativism. The social concept of relative morality is based on evolutionary doctrine. If man is a product of random cosmic accidents, then man should be able to decide what is right and wrong, (if right and wrong even exist in humanist philosophy). The problem is that there is no basis for deciding what point of view is right or wrong. The bible provides absolute truth and authority for making moral decisions.”

Absolute truth. The bible isn’t allegory. It isn’t a guide to spiritual truths, it’s a history textbook. It’s a science textbook. It’s true, literally in every detail. No room for interpretation, no need for critical thinking. You just obey.

On this view, though, it turns out that there’s a problem. If the bible isn’t literally true in every detail, then it’s all a big lie. Its moral code is just made up. So, if evolution is true, the bible must be false, God doesn’t exist and, therefore, there is no right or wrong. It’s God or Darwin. You can’t have both.

Fundamentalism rises

That’s Christian fundamentalism, which was an innovation of the 1880s. Give us clear, easy answers to hard questions about how we should live when life is confusing. Now, in our nation’s history, rises in Christian fundamentalism have come as a backlash in periods of rapid social change.

During the 1880s, what we had going



Richard Katskee speaks about the Kitzmiller v. Dover Supreme Court case in which he was co-counsel.

on was the Industrial Revolution, the rural to urban movement, leftover displacements from the Civil War that had turned into these broad demographic shifts.

Fundamentalism was an entirely new theology. The idea of reading the bible for yourself went back to the Reformation, to Martin Luther. But, biblical literalism — don’t analyze, just obey — that was new.

Now, after the 1880s, things settled down a bit and Christian fundamentalism a kind of waned. It didn’t disappear, but it was less common until the 1920s, when soldiers were returning from World War I. After being exposed to new ideas in different ways while living in Europe, society had to absorb them. Women were protesting and finally getting the vote.

So, the fundamentalist backlash produced the monkey laws, outlawing the teaching of evolution as a threat to religion and therefore to society itself.

In the 1950s, we had the Cold War, Korean War, desegregation of the armed forces, Brown v. Board of Education, murder of Emmett Till — so much going on. Meanwhile, still no teaching of evolution. It was not in the textbooks. Then, in 1957, the Soviets launched Sputnik. The godless communists were suddenly ahead of us in science. So, the federal government sent researchers out to universities across the country asking, “How do we regain our place as the global leader in science?”

The answer they kept getting was: Teach evolution because it is the foundation of the life sciences. It wasn’t until 1968, in a case called Epperson v. Arkansas, brought by a 24-year-old high school biology teacher in Little Rock, that the U.S. Supreme Court held that states can’t bar the teaching of evolution because the Constitution forbids government to tailor teaching and learning to the tenets of a religion.

Then, in 1968, we had the civil rights movement, counterculture, Vietnam, just

about to be the Summer of Love — turbulent times that gave fundamentalism a boost. But, after Epperson, religiously motivated opponents of evolution responded with what they called either creation science or scientific creationism.

Henry Morris was an engineer who had this idea that we can find hard evidence in the natural world to prove a literal interpretation of the bible that God specially created the universe and all living things. Special creation — that is a

technical term that means designed and made things complete in their full final form.

One of Morris’s proofs was flood geology. The Earth isn’t 4.5 billion years old. It’s just 5,000 to 10,000. Now, Morris’s idea was this: We can’t teach religion in the public schools, but creation science, it’s science. It’s right there in the name. So, we can teach that.

He and his followers went around the country convincing state legislatures to enact balanced treatment laws. Can’t outlaw the teaching of evolution. Don’t require it, God forbid. But if you do teach it, you’ve got to give equal time to this new scientific alternative. In 1987, however, in a case called Edwards v. Aguillard, the U.S. Supreme Court struck down these balanced treatment laws.

The court recognized that creation science is a religious view and not science, and the public schools aren’t allowed to teach religion. Now, what’s a good creationist to do? How do you evolve? Out of creation science’s ashes rose intelligent design. Which brings me to one of the cases I did.

Kitzmiller v. Dover

You’ve heard about the Kitzmiller case. I was on the legal team for that case — Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District in 2005. Dover is a little town in central Pennsylvania. It has one high school. In the summer of 2004, they needed new biology books. What they had were outdated because scientists are constantly

learning new things, so the books have to change.

The teachers asked for Miller and Levine’s “Biology,” which, at the time, was used by 30 percent of high schoolers at both public and private high schools across the country. The Dover School Board, though, didn’t like these books because, as board member and chair of the curriculum committee William Buckingham put it, the book “was laced with Darwinism.”

The board decided that students should be taught creationism and wouldn’t purchase a biology book that didn’t do that. At a public board meeting, Buckingham defended the refusal to buy these books by saying: “It’s inexcusable to teach from a book that says man descended from apes and monkeys. I challenge you to trace your roots to the monkey you came from. This country wasn’t founded on Muslim beliefs or evolution. It was founded on Christianity. And our kids should be taught as such.”

He added: “Two thousand years ago someone died on the cross. Can’t someone take a stand for him?” And, that, of course, is what they did.

The board decided to buy a book called “Of Pandas and People,” which was the intelligent design textbook. The science teachers balked. A bunch of parents were up in arms. Then, the school received an anonymous donation of 60 copies of “Pandas” and put them in the science classrooms.

So, we sued on behalf of 11 parents with kids in the Dover schools. There were Protestants, Catholics, a Buddhist, nonbelievers, teachers, a nurse, a receptionist, a couple of folks who ran local businesses, a couple who taught their vacation bible school at their church. Just ordinary folks who cared about their kids, their community and their religious freedom.

Now, it was fall of 2005, and just days before we filed suit, National Geographic hit the newsstands with this cover story headline: “Was Darwin wrong?” What was the [magazine’s] answer? “No. The evidence for evolution is overwhelming.” The article explained that evolution is a theory. Then, it said, “If you don’t understand what scientists mean by a theory and you don’t know much about evolution, you might be inclined to think that it is just a theory.” That was language that the school board used.

But, when scientists say theory, they don’t mean “I have a hunch” or “I have a theory that oatmeal cookies are more healthy than chocolate chip.” A scientific theory is an extremely well-tested ex-



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planation that unifies a broad range of observations. So, the article explains, relativity is a theory, gravity is a theory, heliocentrism, which is the principle that the Earth orbits around the sun and not the other way around, that's the theory, too.

Intelligent design?

What about intelligent design? Well, it is the view that some biological systems or organisms are so amazingly complicated that we just don't believe they could have evolved gradually through natural selection. The idea dates back to the Rev. William Paley in 1802. Suppose, he said, you find a watch lying in the field, and if you take it apart and you remove any of those little bits and bobs, the darn thing just stops working. So, he said, you infer that it was designed and built by an intelligent agent. Same thing, he said, when you look at the human heart or the human eye — designed and built by an intelligent agent, somebody with a plan and a blueprint. This was Paley's theological argument for the existence of God. The problem with calling that theological argument science is that science limits itself to natural explanations for natural phenomena.

The scientific method requires us to seek explanations that can be tested, repeated, falsified. If we can't observe something (see, feel, hear, smell, taste it), as scientists, we can't study it. It's an untestable idea. An untestable idea may be true or it may be false, but science can't tell us one way or the other.

By contrast, intelligent design, according to the National Academy of Sciences, makes a claim of supernatural intervention. That's not science because it's not testable by the methods of science. Intelligent design uses lots of scientific-sounding jargon, but in the end, it invokes a supernatural cause. Supernatural — out, above or outside the natural world. The divine. Science can't invoke God to explain things because that requires a leap of faith, which is the province of religion.

This could, in fact, be true. Science can't shed any light on it one way or the other. So, the question in the Kitzmiller case was: Is intelligent design science or is it religion?

To show that it's religion, we started with the book "Of Pandas." Here's how "Pandas" defines intelligent design: "Intelligent design means that various forms of life began abruptly through an intelligent agency, with their distinctive features already intact — fish with fins and scales, birds with feathers, beaks and wings, etc."

Special creation, that term I gave you before.

"Pandas" was first published in 1989. It used this same definition, but we knew



Photo by Chris Line

Richard Katskee holds up a timepiece while describing the intelligent design argument for the existence of God.

that the manuscript had been under development for a long time, so we got the old drafts from the publisher, a group called the Foundation for Thought and Ethics, which is a Christian apologetics group in Dallas.

We found out that, in earlier drafts, this definition had been a bit different. "Creation means that various forms of life began abruptly through the agency of an intelligent creator." We went through and had an expert count the uses of "creationism" and "intelligent design." We found that pattern of substitution repeated more than 100 times.

So, the names change, but the story is always the same because this is ultimately a fight about names, labels and control of language to get creationism into the public schools without getting into legal trouble. The local newspapers in Dover ran hundreds of articles and editorials and letters to the editor, reporting and talking about how the school board was pushing creationism at its public board meetings.

The school board insisted that those were all made up. William Buckingham, that board member, said those were false. "I never said any of those." So, at trial, one of my co-counsels questioned Buckingham about it.

Let me summarize what he said: "I never talked about creationism. No other board member talked about creationism. Nobody ever used the word 'creationism,' not in public board meetings or to reporters, or even in private conversations. Didn't happen."

The testimony went on for a long time. Then my co-counsel asked, "Well, what about those newspapers articles quoting you?"

"I didn't read them. Never saw them. Nobody told me about them."

We then played a video clip from the local Fox News affiliate which showed Buckingham on his way into the school for one of those board meetings.

"The book that was presented to me for biology was laced with Darwinism from the beginning to the end."

Reporter: "William Buckingham is head of the curriculum committee for the Dover School District. He's also a board member. He strongly believes creationism needs to be taught in the classroom."

Buckingham: "My opinion is that it's OK to teach Darwin, but you have to balance it with something else, such as creationism."

So, my colleague asked him, "That was you speaking, wasn't it?" "Well, what happened was I was walking from my car

to the building, and here's this lady and here's a cameraman, and I had on my mind all the newspaper articles saying we were talking about creationism, and I had it in my mind to make sure, make double sure, nobody talks about creationism. We're talking intelligent design. I had it on my mind, and I was like a deer in the headlights of the car, and I misspoke, pure and simple. I made a human mistake."

What about those 60 copies of "Pandas" that were anonymously donated to the school district? Well, it turns out that Buckingham, had stood up in his church on a Sunday morning, held up a copy of "Pandas" and told people that they needed to contribute to buy those books because we have to save these kids for Jesus. So, Buckingham collected the money, wrote a check, gave it to the school board president, a guy named Alan Bonsell, to give to his dad. It says at the bottom of the check in the memo area: "For 'Of Pandas' books." So, Donald Bond bought the books and made that anonymous donation, but everybody knew what was going on.

Here's a letter to the editor by a guy named Michael Freed, who's a community member who supported the intelligent design policy and it's one of many things we pointed to in the trial.

"I applaud the Dover Area School Board in backing intelligent design. Seems people want to take God out of everything. It's high time to put God back in our lives and inform others of what he has to offer. Try God. If you don't like him, Satan will gladly take you back."

Now, Freed is sure that his religious beliefs are right and that anybody who doesn't share them is going to hell. I want you to compare that to the testimony of one of the 11 parents I represented. Her name is Cindy Smith. Cindy and her husband run an appliance repair business in Dover. Their then 7-year-old son Griffin loved science.

Here's what she said: "Well, as a parent, you want to be proactive in your child's education. I mean, obviously, I'm not an educator. I have no big degrees. I want to be proactive, but I depend on the school district to provide the fundamentals. I consider evolution to be a fundamental of science. And, in my mind, intelligent designer is a synonym for creator, and that takes a leap of faith for me. I think it's my privilege to guide my child in matters of faith, not a science teacher, not an administrator, and not the Dover Area School Board."

The incredible judge in the case was

appointed by George W. Bush and was a one-time Republican candidate for Congress. When it was announced that he would be the judge, the intelligent design crowd responded by really crowing because he's one of their good old boys. They had him in the tank.

But, it turns out that in an absolutely magisterial 139-page opinion, Judge Jones applied the law. He ruled that intelligent design is not science, but religion, so it can't be taught in the public schools. He explained: "The citizens of the Dover area were poorly served by the members of the board who voted for the intelligent design policy. It is ironic that several of these individuals, who so staunchly and proudly touted their religious convictions in public, would time and again lie to cover their tracks and disguise the real purpose behind the ID policy."

Two Supreme Court cases

After Kitzmiller, the law was clear that that is unconstitutional. But, today, the U.S. Supreme Court has changed the meaning of the First Amendment in two recent cases, so, everything is kind of up for grabs.

One of them is Kennedy v. Bremerton School District, which you might remember from a couple of years ago. It's the case about the public school football coach who had the prayers on the 50-yard-line with the students and the school district was trying to stop him. I represented the school district in the Supreme Court case. The Kennedy decision did two things. First, the Supreme Court said all those legal tests that we've had in place for, depending on how you count, 50 or 75 years or maybe 200, forget all those pesky tests and the conclusions that they lead to — no prayer in public schools, no teaching of religious doctrine in public schools — instead, look to history and tradition to decide what's constitutional.

So, presumably, what this means is that if the court can find somebody, some time, some place, who did something religious in the public schools, that means it is constitutionally permissible for all of us all the time now.

The second thing that the Kennedy decision did was that the court held that this public school football coach, who had for eight years delivered homilies — little sermons and prayers — to the kids on the 50-yard-line right after the game, and now was having audible prayers, taking a knee, but being surrounded by the team and saying prayers on the field at the same time and the same place, that that was personal, private religious conduct that the coach has a constitution free exercise right to.

So, what does that mean now for the personal private conduct of teaching about evolution in science class, but holding a bible and saying "truth, right here."

Finally, the Mahmoud v. Taylor case that the Supreme Court just decided a few weeks ago having to do with the LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum in Montgomery County (Md.) schools. The Supreme Court held that the parents who were bringing a religious challenge to some storybooks have a constitutional right to opt their kids out of things in the public school curriculum that threaten their religious beliefs. So, if there are enough parents who want to opt out of something that they don't like, it becomes impractical to teach the subject because you have to do something with all the rest of the kids. That's just too bad for the rest of us.

Now, make no mistake, there are plenty of parents who see evolution as a threat. So, this is where the fight is going to be now. And, hang on, because it's going to be a bumpy ride.

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2025 college student essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 10 winners and 11 honorable mentions of the 2025 Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$19,650 in award money to this year’s college contest winners.

Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) wrote on the topic of “Why the only afterlife that should concern us is leaving our descendants and planet a secure and pleasant future.”

This contest is named for Kenneth L. Proulx, one of FFRF’s most generous benefactors, who died in 2019. The cupola at Freethought Hall, FFRF’s office in Madison, Wis., is called the “Above Us Only Sky Kenneth L. Proulx Cupola,” or “Ken’s Cupola” for short.

The \$1,000 prize for sixth place in the ongoing college competition is generously endowed by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold. Madison, who is 89, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living bequest, what he calls a “pre-quest.”

Essay contest winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below.

FIRST PLACE
Vera Ngene, 23, Wake Technical Community College, \$3,500.



SECOND PLACE
Corryn Guarino, 19, University of South Florida, \$3,000.

THIRD PLACE
Bryce Springfield, 23, University of Massachusetts Amherst, \$2,500.

FOURTH PLACE
Elliot Graham, 21, California Polytechnic State University, \$2,000.

FIFTH PLACE
Samantha Lopez, 19, Oregon Institute of Technology, \$1,500.

SIXTH PLACE (MR. MADISON ARNOLD AWARD)
Dipshika Rai, 19, Northern Kentucky University, \$1,000.

SEVENTH PLACE
Naila Buckner, 23, Columbia College Chicago, \$750.

EIGHTH PLACE
Lucas Papp, 19, University of Georgia, \$500.

NINTH PLACE
Renata Hubbs, 18, University of Georgia, \$400.

TENTH PLACE
Kevin Garcia, 21, Texas State University, \$300.

HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)
Jailyn Agard, 19, Ramapo College of New Jersey.
Gabriella Badami, 20, Savannah College of Art & Design.
Abigail Baltz, 20, Belmont University.
Bianca Brown, 19, Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University.

Sabrina Canales, 21, University of Texas at Austin.
Riley Coe, 18, University of New Mexico.
Emma Girtten, 20, Auburn University.
Eli Lipsom, 19, Assumption University.
Logan Longenecker, 19, Sam Houston State University.
Godwins Makoule, 22, The College of New Jersey.
Natalie Mendoza, 20, Arizona State University.

FFRF thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF’s other student essays competitions. We also would like to thank our volunteer and staff judges, including: Adela Abilawon, Paul Baker, Dan Barker, Jon Galehouse, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Richard Grimes, Tim Hatcher, Linda Josheff, Tori Mizerak, Chris O’Connell, Brain Gillaspie, Ricki Grunberg, Katya Maes, Kurt Mohnsam, Brooks Rimes, PJ Slinger and Karen Lee Weidig.

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

FIRST PLACE

A case against religious fatalism

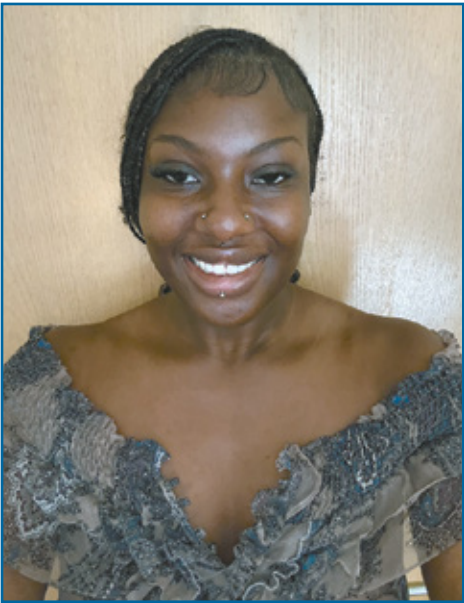
FFRF awarded Vera \$3,500.

By Vera Ngene

The pipe burst while we slept. We woke to the cold shock of sloshy carpets, the water already rising in brown pools around our beds. For weeks afterward, deafening, whistle-shaped industrial fans battered our eardrums day and night, their shrill whine echoing through the bare bones of our home as workers tore out the ruined floors.

My mother’s only response was to gather us for prayer each night, her threadbare robe pooling around her on the damp subfloor. “God won’t give us more than we can handle,” she insisted, while I watched our landlord ignore our calls and the mold spread like a warning. No amount of praying fixed the leak — but after weeks of my mom’s threats, the landlord caved. They moved us to another unit and tacked on another \$200 to the rent — because when has a landlord ever missed a chance to cash in? Those nights of kneeling on concrete, with the fans’ relentless howl drowning out our voices, taught me this: Faith didn’t move the landlord — my mother’s rage did. Prayer didn’t dry our floors, but her willingness to fight forced a solution. In the end, the only divine intervention was my mom’s fury — and even that came with a late fee.

What happened in my flooded townhome wasn’t just bad luck — it was part of a pattern. Across crises like climate change, inequality and public health, belief in divine intervention actively prevents progress. For example, 32 percent of white evangelicals believe God will intervene before climate change becomes unmanageable, a mindset that fuels opposition to emissions reg-



Vera Ngene

ulations. Meanwhile, rising sea levels displace humankind’s most vulnerable, who lack the privilege of waiting for miracles. I refuse to accept this. If prayer fixed pipes, my walls wouldn’t have grown mold. If heaven guaranteed justice, Miami wouldn’t need billion-dollar seawalls. The same false comfort that left us sleeping next to industrial fans lets politicians prioritize oil profits over humankind’s survival.

The same theology that justified our landlord’s neglect enables global inequality. Prosperity gospel preachers like Joel Osteen (\$100 million net worth) sell poverty as “sin” and wealth as “blessings” — while 75 percent of their congregants earn under \$50k/year. In India, caste systems blame Dalits’ suffering on “karma,” denying them clean water and health care. My flood taught me this truth: Suffering isn’t divine — it’s designed. When my mother tithed 10 percent of her paycheck to a megachurch while our walls sprouted mold,

I saw how faith monetizes despair. Real justice won’t come from prayer circles. It comes from landlord-tenant laws — tools that protect humankind without requiring miracles.

Nowhere is religion’s harm clearer than in public health. Uganda’s Catholic bishops called condoms “murder” during the AIDS crisis, triggering a 27 percent death spike. In America, faith-healing sects let children die of treatable diabetes.

Like our landlord ignoring the burst pipe, these are choices, not “God’s will.” I choose science because it works: Vaccines eradicated smallpox. Climate models predict disasters humankind can still prevent. No angel will descend with a mop or a cure. We have the tools. What we lack is the collective will to prioritize humankind over piety.

Let the faithful keep their eyes on heaven. Mine are fixed on the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change’s 2030 deadline, on rent caps, on ERs

stocked with vaccines. The only “afterlife” I trust is the one humankind builds here — in flood-proof apartments, in clinics where doctors outnumber preachers. My flooded home was a warning: We drown not by divine neglect, but by human inaction.

God didn’t fix our pipes. Humankind did. And that’s enough.

Vera, 23, attends Wake Technical Community College, where she plans to be a certified public accountant (CPA).

She writes: “As a first-generation college student from a low-income household, I’ve learned to balance resilience with practicality—whether navigating financial aid forms or advocating for my family’s housing rights after our home flooded. My passion for accounting stems from this lived experience: I’ve seen how numbers can empower or exploit, and I’m determined to use my degree to promote financial literacy in underserved communities. My goal is simple — to turn systemic barriers into balance sheets.”

“No angel will descend with a mop or a cure. We have the tools. What we lack is the collective will to prioritize humankind over piety.”

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

SECOND PLACE

Look around, not up

FFRF awarded Corryn \$3,000.

By Corryn Guarino

I wondered how so many people could walk past someone curled up on a sidewalk and feel nothing. I wondered why churches, some of the wealthiest institutions in the world, sit locked and empty at night while people sleep just outside their doors? How do you look into the eyes of a starving child, a homeless mother, a city filled with tents, and still whisper, “This is all part of the plan”? You don’t. You look away.

When people say, “God has a plan,” they often mean, “This isn’t my problem to solve.” They create comforting lies to explain the chaos because the truth is too hard to face: There is no plan. There is no reason. There is only us. And the hard truth is, we created this mess. Not some god, not some higher purpose, just people driven by power, greed and the desperate need for control.

You see this mindset echo in every quiet corner, every cold bench, every dark alleyway, where human beings, invisible to a world in a hurry, lie still

as life continues without them. In the United States alone, over half a million people experience homelessness on any given night. Rather than recognizing this as a systemic failure of housing, health care and economic policy, many religious narratives turn suffering into a spiritual lesson or moral punishment. People justify inaction by saying, “They’ll find peace in the next life,” or “God helps those who help themselves,” as if the lack of shelter is a test of faith, not a cry for basic human dignity.

“ We don’t need to chase an afterlife to find meaning. We can build it here through action, connection and justice.

Religious charities and faith-based shelters often mean well but can reinforce the same problem. They offer help with conditions attached, like prayers, sermons

and repentance, while failing to advocate for the long-term solutions that would end homelessness: affordable housing, mental health support and universal access to health care. Religion provides a bandage when what we need is surgery.

A belief in a high power not only influences laws, but also political priorities, and allocating public resources. While religious institutions receive



Corryn Guarino

billions in tax exemptions, shelters remain underfunded, and thousands of people are left sleeping on the streets. Too often, policy decisions are shaped by personal faith rather than by the urgent, tangible needs of those struggling to survive. Perhaps, most dangerously, the idea that valid reward or punishment lies beyond this life diminishes the urgency to address suffering in the present. When hardship is framed as temporary or spiritually redemptive, it becomes easier to look away. But there is nothing redemptive

about a person freezing on a sidewalk. That is not divine; it is a moral failure.

I don’t need the promise of heaven to care about people. I don’t need the fear of hell to act with empathy. I believe in doing good because it’s the right thing, not because someone keeps the score from above. We don’t need to chase an afterlife to find meaning. We can build it here through action, connection and justice. We don’t need prayers. We need policies. We don’t need sermons. We need services. Homelessness is not a spiritual failure, it’s a social and political one. And, until we stop handing off our responsibility to imagined heavens, we will continue to fail the people right before us. Religion turns our curiosity to the sky when focus is needed on the ground.

Corryn, 19, attends the University of South Florida, where she is planning to get a degree in arts and sciences.

Corryn writes: “My ultimate goal is to become a physician, where I can meaningfully impact individual lives while contributing to the broader medical community. I hope to one day establish a nonprofit organization supporting dementia patients and their caregivers. I aim to offer educational resources, advocacy and emotional support services to help families navigate this arduous journey with compassion and dignity.”

THIRD PLACE

Building heaven on Earth with our actions

FFRF awarded Bryce \$2,500.

By Bryce Springfield

In our time of need, the homeless shelter gave us a blanket and a bible. As the volunteers murmured, “God has a plan; your reward will come in heaven,” I thanked them. But I knew an afterlife promise wasn’t going to keep my family warm. Certainly, it would not overturn the deeper systemic oppressions plaguing today’s societies.

I grew up low-income and perennially homeless; no prayer ever paid the rent. Disabled and battling mental illness, I still fought to become the first in my family to attend Princeton. But, it was the hardship that taught me deeper wisdom than the university alone: We must help each other here and now instead of waiting for paradise to come to us. Now, I channel that philosophy into labor organizing and democratic economic models — because, if we want a better world, we have to create it.



Bryce Springfield

Religion often claims the moral high ground, promising that faith is the only way to a just society, but history suggests other theories. It was under the banner of saving souls that colonizers looted resources and left systemic oppression and racialized suffering in their wake. Enslaved people in the Americas were told to mind their manners and wait for heaven’s freedom — a cruel theology used to keep them in chains.

Even today, an obsession with the afterlife warps our priorities. Pious rhetoric replaces real political change, and, in fact, countries with higher religiosity suffer greater income inequality as a result of individuals making (ineffective) voluntary sacrifices instead of socially planned redistribution. Politicians invoke God to justify austerity and expect churches to pick up the slack; this is while 76 percent of reli-

gious donations fund congregational operations, directly benefiting neither the poor nor the general population. We know empirically that such private charity, however well-intentioned, cannot build hospitals, schools or housing at the necessary scale.

I’ve seen this mindset hurt people. Megachurch pastors preach about the heavenly rewards of “sowing the seed” while driving luxury cars, even as poor congregants give their last dollars. The devout but poor mother believes that she should simply be grateful for what God had given her.

This complacency isn’t limited to economics, either. Religion is often invoked to justify sexism, homophobia, racism and ableism — inequalities that cause real suffering among women, gay and trans folks, Palestinians, Muslim Indians, Arab and Jewish Americans, emo teenagers in Iraq, agnostic and atheistic children and “cursed” disabled siblings. Despite my baptism, I became an atheist because the real experience of and learning from global oppressions left me no alternative.

When I did my homework in the back of a hot car in lieu of a home, I couldn’t just wait for heaven; I needed help from people here on Earth, and I needed to help others facing analogous or worse circumstances.

In my darkest moments, it was hu-

man kindness, along with my own resolve, that had given me peace. I don’t begrudge anyone hope, but I know hope alone won’t change the world. We must take intentional action as workers, activists, scientists, organizers and revolutionaries who cannot wait for a fairer life.

If we truly wish to realize the stories of forgiveness, service and liberation from mainstream retellings of Christ, Muhammad, Gautama and others, we must demonstrate so in our actions.

From this philosophy, we can discover that we have the agency to fight injustices here and now. Instead of praying for an end to inequality, I organize for better work places, work for solidarity and help migrants lead in establishing the confidence and resources they need. I put my faith in us as humans and our capacity to unite and create a beautiful world for the next generation. No heaven could ever be as glorious as that.

Bryce, 23, attends the University of Massachusetts Amherst with plans to major in economics. Bryce writes: “My research focuses on revolutionary and social movement organizing, and labor economics and workers’ self-management. Beyond my academic work, I am deeply involved in political organizing, as well as advocacy within the first-generation, low-income (FGLI) community and organizing Rubik’s cube competitions.”

“ I don’t begrudge anyone hope, but I know hope alone won’t change the world. We must take intentional action as workers, activists, scientists, organizers and revolutionaries who cannot wait for a fairer life.

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By Orvin Larson

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FOURTH PLACE

The waiting room

FFRF awarded Elliot \$2,000.

By Elliot Graham

From a young age, I was taught that this world was just a temporary test, and that the real reward (or punishment) awaited us after death. Heaven was the ultimate goal. Earth was the waiting room. Something about this outlook never felt right, and, as I grew up, it became increasingly apparent that this worldview had devastating implications.

When we frame our lives around the belief that our time here is merely a test, a stop on the way to something better, then what reason do we have to invest in a planet we’re told doesn’t really matter? Why fight injustice here if perfect, divine justice awaits elsewhere? Belief in an afterlife, while comforting to some, becomes an excuse to dodge responsibility for the issues we face here and now. It allows us to look away, to disengage, to delay meaningful action in favor of passive hope. But this is the only world — the only life — that we are certain of, and no one is coming to save us. If we don’t act, no one will. And the consequences will be ours to live with.

“Belief in an afterlife, while comforting to some, becomes an excuse to dodge responsibility for the issues we face here and now..”

This mindset is truly everywhere: In the face of climate change, a crisis that endangers ecosystems, communities and future generations alike, many still cling to the idea that our planet’s fate is out of our hands. How people approach climate issues is often deeply tied to their religious views: In a 2010 study by Pew Research, roughly 41 percent of surveyed Americans indicated that they believe Jesus Christ will return by the year 2050. Another study found that 56 percent of Americans “agree or mostly agree that God is in control of all Earthly events.”

These beliefs that God will soon return to restore the planet, or that the divine plan should not be intervened with, are inherently irresponsible as they foster complacency in addressing urgent environmental crises. When people place belief in a higher power to clean up the damage, they’re incredibly less likely to support transitions to renewable energy, or reforms to hold industries accountable and reduce emissions. In societies where religion holds sway, this passive worldview can snowball outward, influencing entire communities and governments until the window for effective action has slipped through our fingers.



Elliot Graham

The same can be said about inequality. Religious teachings too often emphasize suffering as virtuous, or frame being “better off” as a sign of blessings and divine favor. If hardship serves a spiritual purpose, why alleviate it? Likewise, if success is viewed as a blessing, what incentive remains for the affluent to challenge the systems that benefit them or extend support to those less fortunate?

This feeds into a dangerous moral logic that allows people to tolerate, or even justify, poverty and economic exploitation. With the interpretation of

salvation as a personal, otherworldly pursuit, it becomes easy to neglect the collective good we could, and should, be building here.

Whether it’s climate denial framed as divine will, resistance to legitimate science based on religious doctrine, or fatalistic attitudes toward human suffering, these beliefs often stand in the way of practical solutions. They encourage patience where action is needed and faith where science offers real answers.

My rejection of religion and belief in an afterlife isn’t born from resentment or disillusionment, but from the genuine conviction that this life is enough. It’s real. It’s tangible, full of love, intricacy, and challenges that call for us to meaningfully engage with our shared home and fellow humans.

Earth is not a waiting room. It is not a rehearsal for eternity, but the stage on which our only real story unfolds.

Elliot, 21, attends California Polytechnic State University with plans to major in philosophy. Elliot writes: “I am deeply interested in exploring questions surrounding free will and moral responsibility. My academic journey is driven by a desire to understand how human agency, ethics, history and religion intersect, and I plan to pursue graduate studies in philosophy to further develop my research in this area. Outside of the classroom, I have a passion for book collecting and archival work.”

FIFTH PLACE

One world, one chance

FFRF awarded Samantha \$1,500.

By Samantha Lopez

You’ll never know when it happens. One moment, you’re here breathing, thinking, being, and the next, nothing. There’s no encore. No curtain call. Just the end. I don’t believe in heaven or hell, reincarnation or karma. There’s no higher power or eternal justice. Once you’re gone, that’s it. There’s no going back to fix what you regret. No watching over the world from above. Just . . . nothing.

Growing up, I was surrounded by two kinds of people. Those who genuinely tried to live “good” and “moral” lives because of their belief in the “afterlife,” and those who used the “afterlife” as a crutch and excuse for their actions. And that belief, no matter how it manifests, comes with consequences.

While these groups seem vastly different, they both shared the same core message: This world is a pit stop before the “real” life begins — a truly unsettling value to live by.

As I got older, I began to see how the “afterlife” wasn’t just a comfort for some, but a dangerous idea that had consequences for everyone. Belief in an “afterlife” breeds apathy. It encourages people to focus on personal salvation instead of human progress. The more I learned about the world around me, the more obvious this became. One issue in particular revealed the full cost of this mindset: climate change.

Climate change is the most urgent, collective crisis humanity has ever



Samantha Lopez

faced. It is not an abstract concept, and it’s not in some far, distant future. It’s happening now.

Melting glaciers, rising sea levels, collapsing ecosystems, millions displaced by “natural” disaster; these are consequences we’re already facing. And, yet, so many people, especially in highly religious communities, don’t care. Why? Not necessarily out of cruelty or ignorance, but because of a deeply rooted belief that Earth is temporary. Because to them, Earth isn’t the final home. It’s a test, a temporary place before eternity.

Why should we save a planet that’s just a stepping stone? Why panic about rising sea levels if we’re leaving this world anyway? Why invest in green technology if the end times are near and nothing really matters except faith?

I’ve heard people in my own life say,

“God will take care of it,” or “It’s God’s plan.” That kind of fatalism isn’t harmless — it’s a form of negligence. It shifts responsibility away from human hands and places it in some unknown idea. That’s not faith; that’s surrender.

And what’s worse, some religious leaders actively oppose solutions to climate change because those solutions disrupt the status quo. They claim dominion over nature, “God gave humans the Earth to rule,” and they mock environmental concerns as distractions from moral purity or spiritual truth. This isn’t an isolated belief; it’s become mainstream in far too many places. And it’s costing us time we don’t have.

When you don’t believe in an afterlife, the stakes change. This world is the only one. There’s no second chances, no redos. That’s not a depressing thought, it’s a liberating one. It means the planet does matter. It means our actions do count. It means our descendants are the only future we can guarantee. Isn’t that enough?

I reject religion because it asks us to follow blindly in the unprovable instead of working with what we know. And what we know is that Earth is hurting. We have the tools to heal it: science, policy and collaboration. We can’t do that if we’re waiting for God to save us.

You’ll never know when you die. But you can know that you lived in a

way that helped others. Not because of heaven, not because of hell, but because this is all we’ve got.

Samantha, 19, attends the Oregon Institute of Technology, where she is planning to major in software engineering and applied mathematics. Samantha writes: “I am passionate about writing and reading, always eager to explore new stories and express my own through the written word. One of my life goals is to travel the world, experience new cultures and broaden my mind. I’ve been an active member of TEAM Dixon, where I’ve had the rewarding experience of helping and working with special-needs children.”

“When you don’t believe in an afterlife, the stakes change. . . It means the planet does matter. It means our actions do count.”

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SIXTH PLACE (Mr. Madison Arnold award)

‘There is no heaven’: Why I reject the afterlife

FFRF awarded Dipshika \$1,000.

By Dipshika Rai

Initially, I regarded religion as generally harmless — providing solace to some, rejected as irrelevant by others and occasionally beautiful in ritual ceremonies and artifacts. As time has gone on, however, I’ve grown to see one of its fundamental concepts — the belief in an afterlife — not as harmless, but rather as a significant obstacle to human advancement, particularly in our need to respond to climate change.

The idea of eternal living after death is alluring and dangerous. Seductive, in that it provides solace in the confrontation with the inevitability of death. Perilous, in that it occasions a frame of mind that departs from the tangible, limited world we experience. I no longer believe in an afterlife, and I have come to regard it as a problem that transcends personal belief. It has grave moral and political implications. The world is in serious danger, and one of the reasons for our inadequate response is the ongoing perception among large numbers of persons that this world is not the ultimate reality.

I’ve heard it too many times from the religious: “This world is temporary,” “We’re just passing through,” “Our real home is in heaven.” These are not harmless clichés — they are expressions of disengagement from earthly accountability.



Dipshika Rai

If you believe this world is just a test, why make sacrifices to preserve the one world we can be sure exists? Why decarbonize, reduce consumption or question economic models based on extraction and rapid returns if the world is a backdrop to a cosmic drama?

This particular mindset influences policy making. Certain legislators, motivated by Christian theology, actively embrace environmental decline as a marker of the “end times.” Others express opposition to action, led by a theological perspective that asserts God — rather than humans — dictates the fate of the Earth. Even religious moderates, who

might personally recycle or have electric cars, habitually neglect to confront the essential contradiction — that their belief in a godly fate weakens the feeling of urgency to rescue the here and now.

Rejecting religious beliefs — particularly the idea of an afterlife — empowers us to address the climate crisis with clear heads. We are not guardians of some other creation; we are inhabitants of the single ecosystem that has always existed for us. This realization adds the gravity of our responsibilities but also increases the nobility of our actions. It drives us to face the bitter reality that if we ruin this planet, there will be no messiah to save us.

Spiritual leaders frequently make the case that their religion encourages environmental stewardship. Even if their intentions are honorable, however, their argument generally places godly service over human welfare. My opinion is that we require a balance, a new secular reverence founded on the laws of science and not scripture. We should regard the Earth as not a godly gift but rather as a peculiar, vulnerable anomaly in an otherwise inhospitable universe.

We need ethics that are founded on our shared lives, not our purported eternal destinies. Climate change is not a test

of faith. It is a test of our willingness to preserve life here and now. The myth of the afterlife only distracts our priorities, delays our response and rationalizes inaction. We can no longer afford that luxury. There is no Planet B. There is no heaven. There is just this world, and what we choose to do with it.

Dipshika, 19, attends Northern Kentucky University, with plans to major in neuroscience. Dipshika writes: “I arrived in the United States as a 3-year-old refugee, with nothing but the arms of my family and the strength we discovered within one another. We survived paycheck to paycheck, figuring out how to endure the challenges of a foreign country with little more than limitless determination. My parents refused to give up. From them, I learned the values that have shaped me: persistence, determination and individuality. As I grew older, these principles evolved into more than lessons; they became lived realities. Whether my triumphs in badminton, dance, and academic distinction, or my involvement in community service through volunteer work, I always found myself being directed by the values that my parents exemplified. I was fulfilled in spearheading youth organizations, assisting in feeding people with food insecurity, and coordinating a park beautification project.”

“Climate change is not a test of faith. It is a test of our willingness to preserve life here and now.”

SEVENTH PLACE

Understanding the agnostic antinatalist

FFRF awarded Naila \$750.

By Naila Buckner

One of my favorite musical artists, Nina Simone, grew up in a pre-civil rights America. Though she was more fortunate than many at the time, she was thoroughly aware of the destruction of her community. Disturbed by the role religion played in the subjugation of her people, she stated, “The people that built their heaven on your land are telling you yours is in the sky.”

I was born to two young, Christian, Black parents. They paid their tithes faithfully, even when they couldn’t afford bills or groceries. At one point, they were so embedded in their faith that they told me slavery occurred in order to bring Africans to Christ. For years, I have been deconstructing those ideas and thinking about Simone’s words.

In the United States, Christianity is primarily used to convince the working class that earthly life is inconsequential.

As we plead for better living conditions, unchecked capitalists pervert the bible’s encouragement of hard work. The majority of us desire a moral life. We want to earn our keep while contributing to our communities. Immoral corporations exploit the good will of people, who believe that their earthly lives pale in comparison to the afterlife.

The belief in an afterlife, especially in this context, creates cognitive dissonance between humans and the consequences of our behavior. As a nonreligious spiritual person, my uncertainty in an afterlife keeps me in check. The life I’m living is the only life I know I have, so I make decisions based on the life I want on Earth. If we believe we have another life lined up, we forget the sanctity of the one we already have. There is less incentive to protect the environment, challenge oppressive systems, or otherwise prepare for future generations. All futures lead to one afterlife, in a reality separate from the one we leave to the living.

Furthermore, by grounding ourselves



Naila Buckner

in our earthly lives, we increase our awareness of shared responsibility. The Christian idea of the afterlife is extremely individualistic at its core. By doing good in our own lives, we get our own positive afterlife. However, our lives on Earth are

shared. We are born into a world prepared for us by elders, in accordance with their dominant beliefs. Currently, the majority of the world, especially in the United States, believe that there is an afterlife that supersedes earthly life.

This belief has created unsustainable social, environmental and political conditions. Most members of my generation avoid religion now and are reluctant to build families on such unfavorable foundations. Though many of us are spiritual, we are also deeply rooted in concern with the future beyond our lives. By being grounded in present life, we hold ourselves accountable for the future and make choices that ensure the longevity of humanity on Earth.

Naila, 23, attends Columbia College Chicago, where she plans to major in creative writing. Naila writes: “I am an aspiring author and grant writer. As a creative writer, I spotlight underrepresented groups and their issues. My lived experience drives my artistry, guiding my explorations of elusive, invaluable perspectives.”

Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist

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EIGHTH PLACE

Justice can’t wait for the afterlife

FFRF awarded Lucas \$500.

By Lucas Papp

Growing up in a Catholic family, I often heard that life on Earth is like a brief trial run before eternity in heaven. This perspective that “what happens while we are here doesn’t matter very much” was meant to be a comforting idea, but always rubbed me the wrong way, especially as I started to turn away from religion and believe that we only have one chance at life.

To me, this indifference, which is very common in people I’ve met who believe in an afterlife, feels like a waste of the precious little time we have on Earth when we could all be making a difference for ourselves and the people who come after us. If this is just a short stop on the way to eternity, what motivation do we have to better the world we live in?

Personally, I reject religion because I don’t think a god is necessary to explain how things came to be the way they are now, and there is no evidence to convince me that there is a being that created everything and requires worship. I reject belief in an afterlife because I think the default position should be to assume that only what we know for sure is guaranteed, and I want to make sure that I make the most of the life I have without taking for granted that I’ll continue existing in an afterlife with no evidence



Lucas Papp

of its existence. A belief in an unprovable afterlife often discourages progress and growth in society and holds us back from resolving critical concerns like social justice and human rights issues.

The idea of an afterlife where everything is set right and justice is done is enticing, but incredibly dangerous to the fight for human rights and justice in our world. The common Christian conception, for instance, is that souls are directed to either heaven or hell for eternity, bringing about ultimate justice. The simplicity of this solution can make the struggles for justice on Earth seem less critical, as, if ultimate justice is perceived as inevitable, we don’t feel the re-

sponsibility to fight for it as fiercely now.

The idea of the afterlife can also be used to subdue people in underprivileged situations, by making them content with a promise of a great reward in the afterlife as compensation for enduring their suffering. I’ve seen this often in real life, as people offer thoughts and prayers when people are hurt or human rights are not being respected, but don’t take any other action, expecting the divine to handle justice. It has occurred too often in history where belief in otherworldly solutions has often suppressed action against human rights abuses. During the era of slavery in the United States, for example, some slave masters used religion as a form of social control, promoting biblical interpretations that reinforced subordination and encouraged the hope of freedom and reward in the afterlife.

The only afterlife that should truly concern us is the one we create — the legacy of a secure and pleasant future for our descendants and our planet. This is a far more meaningful and real form of immortality than any unprovable afterlife. When we concentrate our collective efforts on solving the problems of the

“The idea of the afterlife can be used to subdue people in underprivileged situations, by making them content with a promise of a great reward in the afterlife as compensation for enduring their suffering.”

world we live in now, particularly in the issues of social justice and human rights, the potential for human flourishing is amazing.

Carl Sagan, reflecting on what he called the “Pale Blue Dot” image of Earth from nearly 4 billion miles away, put it well, saying that, “In our obscurity — in all this vastness — there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves. It is up to us.” If we do not take responsibility for what happens in this world, no one else will. We can’t keep waiting for a better world after death, we need to build it here and now.

Lucas, 19, attends the University of Georgia, where he plans to major in international business and finance. Lucas writes: “My goal for my career is to travel the world and work in the music business in some capacity, something I’m truly passionate about. I’ve been an atheist since around ninth grade when I started learning about evolution in class and also came across a debate on YouTube that made me begin to question what I actually believed. I come from a religious family, one side Brazilian and the other side Italian, so therefore very Catholic and not accepting of my worldview.”

NINTH PLACE

How belief in an afterlife impedes real aid

FFRF awarded Renata \$400.

By Renata Hubbs

Every summer, my Instagram feed is flooded with post after post of smiling teens in “Jesus loves you” shirts giving out bible verses to poor African children. It’s a familiar scene from Christian mission trips: Privileged teenagers flying out to impoverished areas, posing for a few pictures, and calling it “service.” These teens come back from their missions a little more tan and a little more religious while the communities they visited remain in the same cycle of poverty with a handful of new bibles. The truth is, short-term mission trips are not designed to serve the communities they claim to help. They are made solely as an invite to the heavenly afterlife.

Humanity has held on to religion since the Stone Age because it promises a reward for the sufferings of life. Each religion has its own specific requirements to claim the reward. Hindus believe one must rid oneself of bad karma, Buddhists believe one must follow the Eightfold Path and Muslims hope that obeying Allah will get them salvation.

However, Christianity weaponizes

“The truth is, short-term mission trips are not designed to serve the communities they claim to help. They are made solely as an invite to the heavenly afterlife.”

this promise differently. Compared to other religions that mainly emphasize self-improvement, Christianity provides a loophole — salvation through faith alone. This establishes a uniquely selfish form of evangelism that prioritizes the saving of souls over the saving of lives. Jesus teaches in Mathews 28, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” The Western church’s interpretation of this command has materialized in the form of mission trips.

In the bible, disciples dedicated years to mission trips with the goal of spreading the word of Christ. In the 19th century, lack of technology and limited travel opportunities forced missionaries to dedicate months to their trips. Although their conversion efforts were rewarded with mixed success, aid and infrastructure established by these long-term missionaries continue to benefit the areas they visited.

Now, modern technology allows for fast and accessible travel. Instead of spending months or years dedicated to service, Christians can check that box in only a few weeks. The leading goal of short-term mission trips has shifted focus from the communities they are attempting to help to the



Renata Hubbs

spiritual connection of the missionaries themselves. Christians sign up for these trips in the hopes of becoming closer to their faith. The service is simply a nice bonus. However, while the volunteers are reconnecting with their spirituality, the communities are left to the same systems of exploitation that have kept them impoverished. Although they provide short term aid to areas in need, mission trips are rooted in a disturbingly willful ignorance that results in the perpetuation of a cycle of dependence and disempowerment. Western volunteers bring in ideas and begin projects that locals are unable to complete on their own, creating an unhealthy reliance on the

church.

Mission trips thrive on the dangerous message that spiritual salvation trumps material suffering. Maintaining the idea that suffering in this life is temporary creates a false importance of preparing for the afterlife rather than looking at the issues of the living world.

Poverty is not God’s plan and impoverished communities will not be saved with a bible verse. The condition of these communities is a result of human greed, exploitation and the continued indifference of the very people claiming to help. When we deem the salvation of souls more important than the salvation of lives, we become complicit in the very systems that perpetuate suffering and inequality. The false promise of a perfect heaven does not justify the cost of waiting for it. People deserve help in this life, not the next.

Renata, 18, attends the University of Georgia, with plans to major in biochemistry. Renata writes: “I grew up in Canada and currently live in Georgia. My parents are both Russian immigrants and I speak Russian with them at home. I have visited many national parks both in the United States and Canada, and spend my summers traveling internationally. I have also participated in a large number of Model United Nations conferences, where I received two awards for Best Position Paper. In the future, I hope to receive a Ph.D. and go into research in the biochemistry field.”

TENTH PLACE

Why I won't make it to heaven

FFRF awarded Kevin \$300.

By Kevin Garcia

If I were still Christian, I would believe I was going to hell. In kindergarten, my teacher sat us down during Christmas to talk about the birth of Jesus, and how important it was to be good. She said if you were naughty in life, you would go to hell, and if you were nice, you'd go to heaven.

When I went home, I asked my mom if gay people go to hell, because I was worried I might've been gay. She said yes, gay people do go to hell. Hell loomed over me like a dark cloud, and that fear stuck with me.

When I was 16, I asked a friend if I would go to hell for being gay. She said I would go to heaven, despite my "sexuality." As I matured, I realized how malleable and ultimately arbitrary the concept of an afterlife is. It was molded to fit cultural biases. It taught me why the concept of an afterlife is so harmful. It's a tool to control, a blanket of false comfort and security, a false promise for us to ignore the injustices in the world we can change today.

Religion had an iron grip on my family, particularly over my mom. She was a refugee from the Salvadoran civil



Kevin Garcia

war. Her faith led her to find comfort in prayer and the protection of the cross. She would pray to God that nothing of the kind would happen again in her life. The thought of me being gay would bring her to tears. I hated to break it to her, but I'm not going to see her in heaven. I reject the concept of an afterlife because of this harmful mindset. Not only does the afterlife lead people to ignore problems, but in the case of queer people, it exacerbates them.

The belief in an afterlife has been wea-

ponized to subjugate queer people across the globe. Doctrines rooted in promises of heaven and threats of hell declare queer identities as sinful. This centuries-old moral scripture is the reason queer people remain marginalized. Families disown their children, workplaces discriminate and society shuns us. Interpretations in Islam, Judaism and Christianity declare that we are sinners, and that we will go to hell, damning us not only in the afterlife but in life itself. As long as society asserts the afterlife as an unquestionable reality, queer people will continue to face oppression, with their very existence declared unworthy of salvation. How can we be equal when we accuse and threaten each other with an afterlife of eternal torment?

I left Christianity because I came to see its teachings as methods of coping and control. This afterlife — this utopia in the sky — is a rose-tinted lens enforced by those who don't want to see death for what it really is.

Belief in the afterlife serves as a shal-

“Belief in the afterlife serves as a shallow crutch for people to lean on, removing the impact of death, lulling people into accepting suffering and inequality as a normal part of their lives.”

low crutch for people to lean on, removing the impact of death, lulling people into accepting suffering and inequality as a normal part of their lives. This dogma offers false promises. It suggests that all unresolved issues will find closure in the afterlife, taking away from our ability to address and resolve issues here and now.

Freeing ourselves from the shackles of the afterlife can let us make an equal society, not bound by archaic moral doctrines. If I were still Christian, I might think I was going to hell. Now, I realize hell isn't an afterlife, it's the torment we allow here on Earth.

Kevin, 21, attends Texas State University, with plans to major in business. Kevin writes: “I am a first-generation Salvadoran American, a gay man and an atheist. I'm pursuing a bachelor's degree in business, with the plan to launch a business that champions inclusivity, protect the rights of nonbelievers and never discriminate based on religion. On campus, I'm involved in student organizations that focus on LGBTQ+ rights and free speech, where I collaborate with others to push for a more secular culture.”

College essay contest honorable mentions

Jailyn Agard



As humans continue to drill for oil, pollute the air with unseen gases, and poison the oceans with garbage, Christianity blames it on the end times, once again denying human responsibility for the environmental changes we have witnessed in years past.

Jailyn, 19, attends Ramapo College of New Jersey, with plans to major in neuroscience.

Abigail Baltz



Rather than fixating on the question of the afterlife, we must turn our attention to the one certainty we share — our Earth — because its survival is not a matter of belief, but of action.

Abigail, 20, attends Belmont University, with plans to major in psychology.

Riley Coe



We should only focus on the afterlife that has been proven to exist after our deaths — the world we leave behind for our descendants and fellow humans.

Riley, 18, attends the University of New Mexico, where she plans to major in nursing.

Logan Longenecker



Climate change kills, even if it's slow going. To have such obstinacy toward believing in a higher power when the world is dying is an insult to the sanctity of human life.

Logan, 19, attends Sam Houston State University, where he plans to major in psychology.

Gabriella Badami



The idea that God, or any other higher power one believes in, will ultimately care for the world after we are gone is, at best, overly optimistic. In reality, humanity is the sole force

capable of improving our planet and society.

Gabriella, 20, attends Savannah College of Art & Design, with plans to major in jewelry and minor in eyewear design.

Bianca Brown



It's shocking to see how people can describe their "heaven" or afterlife as a classless, moneyless, raceless place and then be against the idea of those concepts being here on Earth.

Bianca, 19, attends Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University, with plans to major in chemical engineering.

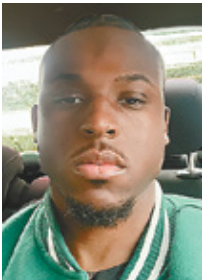
Emma Girten



The afterlife is not some fictional paradise, it's the legacy and health of the world we leave behind for our future generations. Don't believe in eternal salvation, believe in yourself.

Emma, 20, attends Auburn University with plans to major in pre-veterinary science.

Godwins Makoule



Belief in an afterlife doesn't just breed inaction but rather justifies it.

Godwins, 22, attends The College of New Jersey, with plans to major in biology.

Natalie Mendoza



Religious imaginations of the afterlife are unappealing and devoid of the reasons I would want to live forever. I have no desire for a mindless, dull existence in which I am a part of some

greater entity rather than a unique individual.

Natalie, 20, attends Arizona State University with plans to major in biomedical engineering.

Eli Lipson

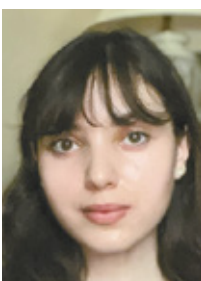


I believe religious ideologies do nothing but promote dissent, perpetuate false beliefs, and inflate one groups' self-importance over another. Science is the leader that I choose

to follow.

Eli, 19, attends Assumption University with plans to major in health sciences.

Sabrina Canales



The concepts of heaven and hell have long seemed like the threats of consequence and promise of reward made by parents of young children to impose good behavior: hypothetical and somewhat lazy.

Sabrina, 21, attends University of Texas at Austin where she plans to major in architecture.



Students earn cash awards through SSA

FFRF, with the financial backing of the individual donors, has collaborated with the Secular Student Alliance to select, announce and distribute these student awards. (As per SSA policy to help protect the students' identities, only the students' first names are used.)

This year's Al Luneman Student Activist Award winners are Dustin, Ava and Rafael, who each received \$1,000.

This year's Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Award winners are Sariyah and Donte, who each received \$1,000. The Cliff Richards scholarships are specifically for freethinking students going to HBCUs.

FFRF has a variety of scholarships available to give directly for exceptional student activism, as well. If you know of any student who is actively helping to uphold state/church separation or fighting for the rights of nonbelievers, please use the form at ffrf.us/nominate.

For more information about this year's scholarships and student recipients, go to: secularstudents.org/scholarships/2025-recipients

Al Luneman Student Activist Awards

Dustin

Lincoln Memorial University



Dustin is a student at Lincoln Memorial University Duncan School of Law, pursuing a Juris Doctor degree with an expected graduation in 2028. With academic interests in constitutional, employment, Title IX and civil law, Dustin plans to practice in Tennessee and beyond, focusing on supporting survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, sex trafficking and other forms of abuse. Dustin also hopes to contribute to law review work on Establishment Clause issues and legal strategies for holding institutions accountable for systemic failures.

Identifying as nonreligious, Dustin's experiences as a student complainant deepened their appreciation for secular advocacy in protecting religious liberty. They have seen how state-sponsored religion erodes civil rights for women, LGBTQ+ people, nonreligious individuals and other marginalized communities. These experiences reinforced their belief that free exercise of religion is a constitutional protection — not a tool for government actors to impose beliefs on others — and strongly influenced their decision to pursue a career in law.

Since 2017, Dustin has been active in addressing Establishment Clause violations in public schools and government offices across Tennessee and neighboring states. They have collaborated with the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the ACLU, American Atheists, and the American Humanist Association to push for accountability and uphold constitutional protections.

Their advocacy also extends into broader social justice work. Dustin has volunteered with the Avalon Center Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault Program and contributed to national prevention programs such as End Violence Against Women International and the Zero Abuse Project. Through these efforts, they have amplified marginalized voices and worked

to dismantle harmful institutional practices. Guided by resilience, secular values, and a commitment to justice, Dustin is determined to use their legal career to defend civil rights and advance a more secular, humanistic future.

Ava

Manalapan (N.J.) High School



Ava is a high school student at Manalapan High School in New Jersey, graduating in 2026. She plans to study psychology and neuroscience, aiming for a career at the intersection of science and empathy through clinical work, research, or community-based mental health support. Her long-term goal is to reduce stigma around mental illness and expand equitable access to care through evidence-based practice.

Identifying as agnostic and culturally Jewish, Ava was raised with both Jewish and Catholic traditions in a cultural, rather than religious, way. These experiences reinforced her belief in church-state separation, respect for diverse beliefs, and a secular worldview grounded in equality, consent, and individual autonomy. Her commitment to mental health advocacy further strengthens her focus on reason and compassion.

Ava founded and leads the Secular Student Activists club, organizing meetings and awareness efforts on secularism, science education, mental health, and church-state separation. She also contributes to intersectional activism through the Empower and Help Club, where she writes for Teen Ventures Magazine, mentors peers, and advocates for inclusive, stigma-free mental health support and LGBTQ+ inclusion.

This year, Ava plans to expand her club's programming with events, collaborations, and guest speakers, while continuing to publish on secular values and mental health. She hopes to remain engaged in secular and humanist organizations in college and contribute to civic efforts like voter registration. Facing financial challenges as part of a single-income household, Ava values this scholarship as vital support to continue her education and activism while building a future rooted in reason, compassion, and justice.

Rafael

Western Illinois University



Rafael is a student at Western Illinois University pursuing a Bachelor of Science in Physics, graduating in July 2026. He previously earned an Associate of Science from Moraine Valley Community College and a Bachelor of Arts in Mathematical Sciences from the University of Illinois Springfield. His academic goals include earning a PhD in physics and a master's in engineering, with plans for a career as a researcher and instructor at a government institution while serving as a commissioned officer in the U.S. military. Long term, he hopes to run for school board and local office to defend secular values and protect students' First Amendment rights.

Rafael identifies as agnostic, a conviction he embraced at nineteen after questioning his Roman Catholic upbringing. Influenced by authors such as Carl Sagan and Dan Brown, he began a process of deconstruction that led to living authentically without religion. He now openly identifies as a nonreligious and gay soldier in the U.S. Army National Guard, recognizing the importance of visibility in traditionally Christian-normative environments. Though he has faced hostility and misunderstanding, he responds with resilience and stands firm against bigotry, filing official complaints when necessary.

As a first-generation Mexican American and gay man, Rafael understands the tensions that arise when religious traditions dominate cultural expectations. He often serves as an informal ambassador for the secular and queer experience within his family and community, striving to bridge divides with diplomacy and humility. These intersecting identities strengthen his commitment to inclusivity and education.

Rafael has been deeply engaged in secular activism, co-founding an SSA chapter at the University of Illinois Springfield and organizing discussions on queer and nonreligious identities. At Western Illinois University, he revitalized the SSA chapter, represented the school at Secular Spring Break, and served as treasurer of Unity, WIU's oldest LGBTQ+ organization. Looking ahead, he plans to secure official recognition for WIU SSA, expand programming with events like Graveyard of the Gods and a Winter Solstice celebration, and grow student participation in national projects. His activism and academic pursuits reflect a dedication to critical inquiry, community building, and the defense of secular values.

FFRF thanks FFRF Member Al Luneman for making possible these scholarships.

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Cliff Richards Memorial Student Activist Awards

Sariyah

North Carolina A&T State University



Sariyah is a student at North Carolina A&T State University, graduating in May 2026, and a leader in a new generation of creative professionals. She is preparing for a career in experiential marketing, a path forged by her entrepreneurial experience as a campus hairstylist and her work in digital brand strategy. Her long-term aspiration is to run her own business, creating opportunities for others while continuing to travel and mentor.

Sariyah identifies as agnostic. From an early age, she questioned Christianity, the most common religion in her community, and resisted pressure to participate in church. She recalls avoiding sleepovers that required attending church services the next day and laughing off teasing from peers who labeled her an atheist. At her HBCU, she has sometimes struggled to find like-minded individuals, but she remains grounded in her authenticity and secular outlook. She defines her beliefs by independence and reason, not by adherence to doctrine.

As a Black woman who does not conform to religious expectations, Sariyah uses her experiences of feeling isolated to strengthen her commitment to authenticity. She rejects pressure to meet cultural expectations, instead focusing on living true to herself and building meaningful communities. This commitment is reflected in her campus leadership. As senior class treasurer in the Student Government Association, she helps coordinate large-scale events that bring together students. As marketing director for Aggies Abroad, she promoted study abroad opportunities that expose students to new cultures and perspectives. Travel has been important in shaping her worldview, showing her that life is broader than any single religious framework.

Sariyah hopes to connect more closely with the Secular Student Alliance to learn how to bring secular activism to her campus without jeopardizing career opportunities. She values SSA's mission of building community for students who feel isolated in religious environments. A scholarship would relieve financial strain and allow her to finish college with more time for study, leadership, and activism.

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Donte

Clark Atlanta University



Donte is a freshman at Clark Atlanta University pursuing a dual degree in physics and robotics engineering with a concentration in robotic systems. His fascination with circuits began in childhood and grew into a passion in high school through robotics club leadership, a summer program in embedded systems, and an internship at Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab where he co-created a fall detection device. These experiences cemented his career goal of building reliable systems that serve communities, particularly the Black community, while mentoring younger students from similar backgrounds.

An atheist since childhood, Donte came to secularism by choice and persistence. Free from pressure to conform to religion, he embraced self-determination and the belief that effort—not faith—builds the future. For him, secularism provides freedom from external expectations and a foundation for stability through education and community.

His identity as an African American and LGBTQ+ student in spaces where religion often dominates has strengthened his resolve for critical questioning and independent thought. Rather than discouragement, this tension has solidified his commitment to integrity and authenticity. His activism has included challenging Christian remarks from administrators, speaking out against stereotypes in class, and supporting classmates facing bias or exclusion. These experiences taught him that activism often begins with small, everyday acts of courage.

Now in college, Donte plans to create forums that welcome dialogue between secular and religious students while continuing to center equity and inclusion. As an independent minor with little family support, he has faced financial hardship, sometimes with semester gaps as high as \$7,000. Despite painful rejection from relatives, he remains determined to build a future through perseverance and education. Receiving this scholarship eases financial strain and allows him to focus on his studies and his goal of becoming a robotics engineer.

FFRF acknowledges the estate of Cliff Richards for these scholarships for HBCU students.

Author lives her best life (without hiking)



FFRF Lifetime Member Alyssa Jarrett shows off one of her books.

Name: Alyssa Jarrett.
Where I live: The San Francisco Bay area.
Where I was born: Fresno, Calif.
Family: One younger brother who is my book cover designer and also a freethinker.
Education: B.A. in literature from UC Santa Cruz and M.A. in mass communication and journalism from Fresno State.

Occupation: Romance author and tech marketer.
How I got where I am today: I credit my parents for teaching me to read at an early age, my teachers for encouraging me to write, and my mentors for supporting me

MEET A MEMBER

CRANKMAIL

Here is our latest installment of correspondence FFRF has received that doesn't quite make our Hall of Fame (if we had a Hall of Fame). Printed as received.

Get a life: Don't you guys have anything better to do than hinder the distribution of the saving power of God?? Shame on you!

Atheism church: Thick arrogant morons, atheism is your belief so it must not have a place in government, this is your church. WHO do you think you are , only you can be in government?

Don't be hateful!: Stop spreading Hate and letting Satan run your life! God is good not bad! Stop your hatefulness

Kids need punishment: NO child is born educated and they have the base attitude of me, you think talking and removing privileges is discipline, what do you do when the child says I don't care, or no when asked, you can talk til blue in the face , kids are not worldly, think only of themselves, this is why they need a smack, the parent is the teacher, guider and base for values, so a smack reinforces the parents PLACE and shows the child they are cared about, look at society and tell me your way is better.

Thank you!: I'm from Ohio. A parent called you and you used your influence to bully the school system that's full of Christian people. So now we will be outside the gates of every sporting event evangelizing to every single person who walks in and outside of that stadium to pray on the field. Jesus will be spoken to more people at Lake County High School than ever would have been without you. So, thanks a lot!

No atheists: We are not an atheist nation . Keep atheism out of our schools . The FFRF is attempting to take away children's right to freedom of speech

Follow Jesus, not Darwin: Jesus is the truth and he is alive today . Darwin is a liar , a con man , snake oil salesman , finch molester and the son of the devil

Not atheist nation: Hopefully anti - theist does not mean anti freedom of religion because God gives us freedom of religion under the constitution . We are not an atheist nation , we are a secular nation .

No donation: I wouldn't give you 1/1000th of a penny if I had it. God bless you I hope you repent. - Corey H.

Atheism isn't reality: LOL YOU SAY WHAT IS UNACCEPTABLE BUT YOU FAIL TO SEE WHAT ATHEISM HAS ACCEPPEPTED IN THIS WORLD WHICH IS EVERYTHING THE BIBLE WARNED US ABOUT AND TAUGHT TO US ABOUT THE PHILOSOPHICAL CHARACTERTS OF MANKIND AND WHY THINGS ARE NOT IN HARMONY ACCORDING TO THE HIGHEST GUIDLINE FOR MAN TO NAVIGATE IN THIS EXPERIENCE OF EXISTENCE IN ORDER TO EVOLVE OUR AWARENESS OF THE REALITY OF EXISTENCE AND LIFE AND THERE FORE THE SEARCH FOR TRUTH TO EVOLVE OUR AWARENESS OF REALITY

Church of Satan: "The "Freedom From Religion" is the church of satan and the church of satan is considered a religion and is a tax-deductible religious church, though I would not call it a church, of course.

Get saved: Atheism clearly creates mental and emotional illness/narcissism. It's a destructive religion indeed. Too bad you don't see the on-coming truck about to hit you, by that I mean judgement. I hope you come out of that false religion of atheism and get saved by The Blood Of Christ so you can have everlasting and eternal life.

You better watch out!: You people clearly have nothing better to do with your time than bother a school district in our tiny town in Oklahoma. What sheltered, and miserable lives you must lead. It would be shame if your lives took a sudden turn and you no longer had time to focus on this meaningless project.

throughout my career.

Where I'm headed: I'm publishing the last novel in my Glam Fam rom-com series in 2026 and then starting a sexy mystery series next.

Person in history I admire and why: One fellow Bay Area atheist I would die to meet would be Davey Havok from my favorite band, AFL.

A quotation I like: "All we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given to us." — Gandalf in The Lord of the Rings.

Things I like: Reading a romance novel with a cup of tea and my cats, going to the spa, and listening to pop-punk music.

Things I smite: One of my favorite tweets by writer Todd Dillard summed it up: "I don't know who needs to hear this, but living your life to the fullest does not have to involve hiking."

My doubts about religion started: At 9 years old, I learned that Santa wasn't real and started to wonder if Jesus wasn't, either.

Before I die, I'd like to: Make the New York Times bestseller list and have my books adapted into films.

Ways I promote freethought: Writing romance with secular characters, being loud and proud about my own atheism, and serving as a Lifetime member of FFRF.

Atheists are hostile: 99% of the Christians I know are kind people who keep their religious beliefs to themselves. 99% of the atheists I know are hostile, intolerant, and bigoted. But most importantly, they are RELIGIOUS zealots who can't wait to tell you how horrible you are for choosing a different religion. Funny.... they rarely go after Judaism, Islam, Hindu, or pretty much any other religion besides Christianity.

It's a religion: The bottom line is that Atheism is a religion, end of story. I can't wait for the announcement that ffrf is denouncing atheism

Read your Bible!: PICK UP A CHRISTIAN BIBLE AND READ IT !

Who will you serve?: FYI. Jesus came to save the world from all evil. It is FREE WILL to choose! Someone or 20 football players that chose to accept this FREE WILL OF RELIGION, is not between a friend or organization or any other entity group or cliques. It is between that person and the only Jesus who came to earth and chose to take our place on the cross we so deserve for our on transgressions and sins. So you need to step back and see just exactly what you are trying to keep as freedom and choice. Jesus is good and loves even those of you who are so desperately trying to separate Him from. JESUS DIED FOR YOU AS WELL AND YOU WILL STAND BEFORE HIM WHEN YOU TAKE YOUR LAST BREATH HERE AND BEGIN TO ENTER ETERNITY. YOU HAVE THE CHOICE TO CHOOSE TO BE WITH THE FATHER OR TO ENTER HELL AS A INTRUDER. IT WAS BUILT FOR THE DEVIL AND HIS FOLLOWERS. so choose this day whom you will serve

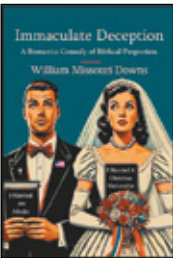
Hypocrites: I can imagine a bunch of you atheists all screaming 'oh god' 'oh' god' while the tour bus is out of control and they all go plunging over the mountain cliff in a big ball of flames.. you're a bunch a hypocrites

FREETHOUGHT BOOKS

The following books are written by FFRF members on the topics of religion or freethinking. FFRF does not do book reviews. These books are not offered through ffrf.org/shop.

Immaculate Deception: A Romantic Comedy of Biblical Proportions
By William Downs

When a fire-and-brimstone presidential candidate declares the Rapture is just weeks away, America loses its collective mind in a blaze of holy hysteria. Enter Dr. Helen Hand, a razor-sharp freethinker from Los Angeles who's forced to infiltrate a bible-thumping college in Kansas. Her goals? Enlighten young minds and thwart the End Times, but she falls in love.



A Discussion of Humankind's Best and Worst Concepts: Reason, Belief, Faith Religion and Science
By Kenneth Stueben

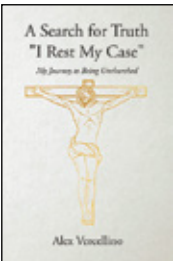
This book covers how each of us comes to believe what makes up our store of knowledge — what's real or true and what's not and why the difference is critically important to humankind. It progresses from mythological creation myths, superstitions, to "New Age" beliefs, to a summary of the countless gods of the past and then examines some of the religions that are common today.

Other topics include why people are increasingly abandoning religions, the separation of church and state, and whether the world would be better without religion.



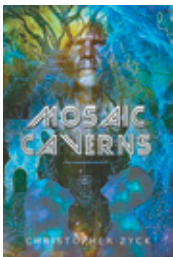
A Search for Truth: My Journey to Being Unchurched
By Alex Vercellino

The author's mission is to help people who don't embrace Christianity to better understand why they made the decision to be unchurched and feel good about it. It's a must read for anyone seeking the truth about Christianity. Proceeds from the sale of the book are being donated to food banks.



Mosaic Caverns
By Christopher Zyck

Mosaic Caverns is the first book in the Vi-varium Chronicles that features adventure, an intriguing archeological quest, and strong social and political conflict, where the intersection between myth and social realities is intelligently examined. The writing is infused with strong social and political commentaries that examine the link between social upheaval and myth.



Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist
By Dan Barker
How Dan "threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there."
— 392 pages / PB
\$15 Item #FB145
Published by FFRF

The book cover for 'Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist' by Dan Barker features a yellow background with a small photo of Dan Barker.

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

ffrf FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?
Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists. FFRF has more than 42,000 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.

Action Fund offers hope in legislative report

By Ryan Dudley

Hundreds of freethinkers, advocates and activists explored the beach for FFRF’s 48th annual convention. When convention attendees weren’t soaking up the autumn sun, they were treated to a schedule jam-packed with educational sessions and expert speakers. The FFRF Action Fund took to the stage to deliver a legislative report and the ever-popular Secular Legislator Panel.

Legislative report

In only its third year, the FFRF Action Fund had plenty of updates to share, leaving attendees with calls to action and hope for the future. We reported on a year of remarkable legislative engagement and advocacy, tracking over 600 new bills in 2025. The Action Fund opposed a majority of these bills and was happy to report that 88 percent ultimately failed to pass.

Since January, Action Fund advocates have sent approximately 87,000 emails and made more than 2,500 phone calls to elected officials across the country. These numbers shine a light on the passion the Action Fund’s advocates have for upholding the constitutional principle of secular government.

The Action Fund presentation also emphasized the significant increase in written testimony submissions. This substantial rise from previous years highlights the organization’s proactive engagement in shaping policy and promoting secular, evidence-based legislation. All testimony is accessible on the Action Fund’s website, FFRFAction.org.

Even with a difficult political landscape, the Action Fund touted several significant victories. We partnered with Unchained at Last to help Maine, Missouri and Oregon eliminate child marriage, raising their minimum marriage age to 18 without exception. Additionally, through collaboration with Compassion & Choices, the Action Fund safeguarded bodily autonomy against antiquated religious dogma by making Delaware the 11th state to legalize medical aid in dying, upholding individuals’ rights to end their lives on their own terms, with dignity.

Not all victories involve the passage of new legislation. In 2025, many of the Action Fund’s achievements stemmed from its success in thwarting detrimental bills. The Action Fund successfully helped stop Christian nationalist legislation across the country. For instance, the Action Fund reported on the crucial role we played in Oklahoma, halting several theocratic initiatives. In Alabama, we noted the collaborative work with various partners to prevent the enactment of five damaging public school bills. Similarly, in South Carolina, despite numerous regressive proposals, only one ultimately made it into law — a shameful resurrection of the state’s unpopular private school voucher program that was previously deemed unconstitutional by the state’s top court.

Finally, we highlighted the work of the newly revamped Rapid Response team. Showcasing the speedy work of FFRF attorney Chris Line in his new role as rapid response counsel, attendees saw how the team called out theocratic efforts in real time to increase our engagement with the public and elected officials alike. In particular, through its “Theocrat and Secularist of the Week” awards, the team publicly celebrated lawmakers and advocates who cham-



Photo by Chris Line

The FFRF Action Fund, featuring FFRF State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley, left, and FFRF Regional Governmental Affairs Manager Mickey Dollens, right, held a secular legislator panel during the 2025 convention with Vermont state Rep. Monique Priestley, Kansas state Rep. Heather Meyer and Minnesota state Rep. Andy Smith.

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.

pioned secular values while calling out those who promoted Christian nationalism in government. The awardees are listed on the Action Fund website.

Secular legislator panel

This year’s convention featured the third annual Secular Legislator Panel, a highly anticipated event that brought together influential freethinkers to discuss critical issues at the intersection of secularism and policy.

This year’s panel featured three openly nonreligious or humanist state legislators: Kansas Rep. Heather Meyer, Minnesota Rep. Andy Smith and Vermont Rep. Monique Priestley. Each legislator offered attendees a unique opportunity to gain insight into the challenges they face in their respective legislatures.

Smith was invited to describe his personal evolution, from being raised in a conservative evangelical household to becoming a progressive advocate and champion of reproductive freedom and secular government. As the owner of a bookstore and a self-described cinephile, he dug deep to note similarities between today’s current political climate and cinema. Smith left the audience with a call for more freethinkers to run for office and not be intimidated by the process.

Meyer, the first openly bisexual legislator in Kansas, shared her journey

from her Kansas upbringing to her decision to run for office. She discussed the difficulties of upholding state-church separation in a staunchly conservative state and offered honest reflections on her experiences as a nonreligious lawmaker. Meyer also outlined her concerns about the primary dangers that Christian nationalism poses to vulnerable populations and what freethinkers can do to make their voices heard.

Priestley, a former tech entrepreneur and community leader, shared her journey to becoming a state legislator. She explained how her secular values inform her policymaking in Vermont, enabling her to prioritize inclusion, innovation and equity, even in areas with strong traditional religious influence. Priestley offered insightful reflections on the dangers posed at the cross-section of an authoritarian government, freethinking advocacy, and surveillance technology. Through her work with a nonprofit she founded and other grassroots initiatives, she confronts religious extremism in civic life, emphasizing the importance of fostering open and welcoming environments for everyone.

Each of the legislators on this year’s panel offered a candid view into life as a secular elected official in such a challenging political environment. But panelists left convention attendees with calls to action and a message of hope: We can make a difference, but we must not sit silently on the sidelines. Legislators encouraged the attendees to call or email their elected officials, testify at committee hearings, or even run for office; whatever it takes, we must ensure that we can turn our advocacy into action.

What’s up next?

Discussions about the current political climate inevitably elicit feelings of despair and anger, but the Action Fund made a point of leaving convention attendees with a hopeful message. Toward that goal, the Action Fund unveiled two new pieces of legislation to the attendees in the room: the KPOP Act and the CHARM Act.

The bill we’re calling the KPOP Act (Keep Proselytizing Out of Public Schools) seeks to codify longstanding Supreme Court Establishment Clause precedent into state law. To safeguard against the court’s ongoing dismantling of Establishment Clause precedent, it is vital that we enshrine protections into state law. This ensures that public school students remain free from coerced prayer, free from distracting and divisive religious displays, and free from feeling ostracized or inferior because of their beliefs while receiving a public education.

The CHARM Act is a simple bill that repeals harmful exemptions. In most states — approximately 40 — parents have a religious exemption from laws requiring them to seek appropriate medical care for a sick or injured child. These exemptions can effectively shield parents from legal consequences, even in cases where a child dies or suffers serious harm as a result of medical neglect. The CHARM Act aims to close a significant loophole: current exemptions effectively shield parents from legal consequences, even when a child suffers serious harm or death due to medical neglect. By enacting this legislation, all children, regardless of their parents’ religious beliefs, will have an equal right to life-saving medical care.

Conclusion

The Action Fund’s presentation highlighted progress despite rising religious extremism and political polarization. The KPOP and CHARM Acts further emphasize the Action Fund’s commitment to protecting children, defending freedoms, and keeping religion out of government. The wins from the past year serve as reminders that we are fighting the good fight. The Action Fund will continue to inspire our advocates to stand up for secular values and to remain strong in the face of an adverse political climate. We are on the right side of history.

Ryan Dudley is FFRF’s state policy manager.

Unabashed Atheist Mug

Sunfire red, glazed ceramic handcrafted mug with Unabashed Atheist medallion. American-made, 14 fl. oz.

\$35 each

\$60 for two

Prices include shipping.

Item #MU03

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

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CHAPTER UPDATES

Upstate New York Freethinkers



Upstate New York Freethinkers members joined Capital District Humanist Society’s presence at Capital Region Pride-themed “CommUNITY.”



Upstate New York Freethinkers members participated in the Rochester (N.Y.) Pride-themed “Rainbow Revolution.”

Upstate New York Freethinkers stands in solidarity with FFRF to champion pride, diversity, inclusion and the separation of church and state. In New York, recent progress advocated by our chapter, like the constitutionally approved 2024 Equal Rights Amendment, now provides legal recourse from discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. However, even with these advancements, national challenges persist, as movements attempt to

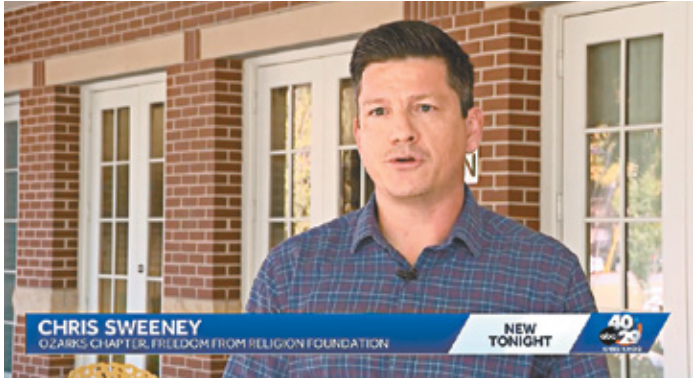
use “religious freedom” laws to permit discrimination, ban gender-affirming care, and censor LGBTQIA+ content in schools — all rooted in religiously motivated opposition. Upstate New York Freethinkers participants joined local leading humanist groups by being actively present at both Capital Region Pride and Rochester Humanist Pride events, connecting with the community and advocating for our shared values. Our chapter’s initiative is also di-

recting a \$1,000 grant from FFRF to The Pride Center of the Capital Region, directly supporting LGBTQ+ programs, including weekly support groups, mental health services and advocacy. These efforts reflect our commitment to human rights and fostering an inclusive society grounded in reason. Explore unyft.org for ways to contribute, or contact us directly at info@unyft.org or (585) 454-9921.

Ozarks Chapter of FFRF



Alessandro Terenzoni of American United speaks to Ozarks FFRF members in Bentonville, Ark., on Oct. 12th.



Ozarks chapter President Chris Sweeney gets interviewed by the local ABC affiliate.

The Ozarks Chapter of FFRF wrapped up a successful 2025 Secular Speaker Series on Oct. 11–12 by hosting Alessandro Terenzoni, VP of public policy for Americans United for Separation of Church & State, who met with inspired audiences in Fort Smith and Bentonville. Alessandro’s visit came on the heels of the University of Arkansas’ decision to post the Ten Commandments, and this helped stir a bit of media buzz. Ozarks Chapter President Chris Sweeney was interviewed by multiple news outlets and spoke about the perils of posting the Ten Commandments. For more information on the chapter, and to join, contact Sweeney at OzarksFFRF@gmail.com or go to ozarksffrf.org.

San Francisco Bay Chapter of FFRF

The San Francisco Bay Chapter leveraged the momentum of No Kings Day to reach out to an estimated 6,000 attendees at the Democracy Fair in Palo Alto, Calif. Our “Keep religion out of government” message stood out among more than two dozen social justice, protest, environmental and community group booths, and attracted a lot of interest. A good number of FFRF members were happy to see us there, and we recruited some new ones. For more information on the chapter, and how to join, contact chapter President Walt Bilofsky at info@sfbayffrf.org.



Katrina Galway of the San Francisco Bay chapter speaks with several people interested in what the chapter has to offer at the Democracy Fair in Palo Alto, Calif., on Oct. 18.

Find out more about all of FFRF’s chapters at ffrf.org/outreach/ffrf-chapters.

LETTERBOX

Are these proselytizers ignorant or defiant?

The unfortunate events at the Jenkins County school in Georgia, where a first-grade teacher led her students in prayer every day before they went to the cafeteria for lunch, got me thinking about why it is that people feel they have the right to do something like this — to inflict prayer without permission and without a right under law. I wondered if the majority of these cases happen because of arrogance or defiance (an I-can-do-this-if-I-want-to attitude), as opposed to ignorance of the law, an unawareness that there are rules about these things. Sadly, I believe it is the latter — that people who are of a proselytizing nature never stop to think that maybe they have no right to do this, or that someone else may have a different view.

I am so grateful that we have the FFRF to step in when these people step over the line.

Florida

Why do we still celebrate Columbus Day?

Why do we continue to celebrate Columbus Day? Why do we honor a man who brought death and misery to so many human beings?

When Christopher Columbus arrived in the New World, he found a culturally rich and diverse people. He would write in his journal: “They are the best people . . . they are very simple and honest . . . they do not hear arms. They will make fine servants . . . with 50 men we could subjugate them all.”

True to his word, in 1495, he rounded up 1,500 island men, women and children and enslaved them. He would later ship over 500 of the most valuable slaves to Spain. According to historians, only about 300 survived the crossing, and the ones that did were auctioned off like cattle upon their arrival.

Columbus’ arrival and what would follow with the Conquistadors and later with hordes of Catholic missionaries proved to be a disaster for the native inhabitants and their civilization.

Should a man responsible for the plundering of a culture be celebrated? Should we honor a man who enslaved and exploited other human beings and who helped internationalize the slave trade with a special day in October each year?

Asking freedom-loving Americans to celebrate this holiday is bad enough. Asking Indigenous people to celebrate Columbus Day is like asking the Jews to celebrate the Holocaust.

Florida

Skeptical of Erika Kirk’s forgiveness of shooter

At Charlie Kirk’s well-attended memorial service, his widow Erika said she forgives the disturbed young man who killed her husband. She’ll have to forgive me if I’m skeptical of that. It’s a standard Christian thing to say, but since it runs counter to our natural feelings, it’s near impossible to live up to. We just fool ourselves.

I’m more certain that she, and MAGA,

A subtle message?



Linda Hollingsworth of Virginia sent us this photo of her vehicle’s license plates. She writes: “I often pick up my grandson from his Christian preschool. So far, no comments have been made on his transport.”

will never forgive liberals. After the murder, she fumed that “they” had killed her husband, and since their war on liberals preceded his death, it’s no puzzle who she meant. Thinly veiled calls for violent retribution immediately abounded on social media, and, with her in the leadership position she preaches women should not have, their crusade continues, with allies like Steve Bannon and Lisa Loomer gleefully counting “scalps.”

Figurative, for now.

Pennsylvania

I can abide the pledge’s original wording

I recently had this letter published in the Charleston Post and Courier:

An Aug. 31 letter to the editor suggested that people should recite the Pledge of Allegiance more often at public meetings because we all support it. That’s not quite true. I can, however, support the original pledge.

In 1954, when I was 12 years old, the words “under God” were added to the pledge during the shameful McCarthy era to distinguish the United States from the “godless” communists.

We atheists do not support the modified pledge. When I am at a meeting where people recite the pledge, I substitute the words “under the Constitution,” or sometimes “under Canada.”

South Carolina

We need to stand up and rejoin the world

Every time FFRF has a victory over the pew fodder and pulpit jockeys, it brings a smile to my face. It also gives a little more hope that the bible heads are weakening.

The Scopes Centennial celebration

was a fine remembrance. A more important thing to remember is to support science teachers who are afraid even to mention Darwin.

I have a friend who is from Germany and had worked here for five years. He sent both of his children back to Germany because the science and biology courses here had no mention of Darwin or evolution.

He left, as he told me, because he couldn’t stand the stupidity in the United States. I suggested he join the FFRF. He has.

We must rejoin the world. We must return the unibrow knuckle-draggers back to the hollers and trailer parks. We must do this before we become the joke of the world.

Kentucky

Hypothesis proved correct about raising children

My kids were an experiment. I had said this half-facetiously the handful of times when parenting became the topic, usually eliciting puzzled looks in return. I had four children (and now have seven grandchildren, to boot).

My purpose with them was to prove children could be reared to be moral/ethical humans, useful and productive to society, without the infusion of any type of religion or dogma. Of course, I was being half-serious: My wife and I had much more in mind for them. And, I’m happy and grateful to say, we got it, too.

Early on, my wife and I agreed that indoctrinating them with the Roman Catholicism both of us were subjected to in our youth (or any other sort of religion) was grossly unfair, stealing from them their intellectual independence and setting them up for a lot of unneeded psychological problems. Furthermore, we would be conditioning them to accept in-

formation simply on authority, without a very needed sense of healthy skepticism.

I cannot prove to anyone that they matured into adults with the qualities mentioned here, but you’ll have to take my word for it.

My two daughters are both elementary educators with undergraduate and graduate degrees, who have been teaching America’s youth in public schools for two decades now. My youngest son, with both undergraduate and graduate degrees, is a geneticist, running the labs for a firm that does genetic testing for diseases. My oldest son earned both an undergraduate and juris doctorate and now is director of legal services for a regional headquarters of a major banking firm.

My wife and I are extremely proud of them. I believe their accomplishments and career paths speak highly of their character and quality as individuals. Now, many years later, I believe I have proven my hypothesis that religion is not necessary to foster good people beneficial to society.

Virginia

How does one justify God’s command to Abraham?

I’ve lost count of all the Christian believers, and especially the preachers on TV, who fervently praise Abraham for his complete willingness (in Gen 22: 9-12) to sacrifice his own son Isaac.

Often, they go on to claim that such “unquestioning obedience to Divine Commands from God” is perhaps the most noble virtue that a true believer can possess.

I’m not the only one who sees the danger in this, if only because of the evasive responses I’ve garnered from believers themselves (one being a pastor) to this rather straightforward question: “Would you kill me (or our mutual friend or one of your own loved ones) if God commanded you to do so?”

In every case, there’s either stunned silence or a sarcastic joke to dismiss the matter entirely. But, I really want to know, for example, how pastors would advise their parishioners to answer a question like this. I thought maybe readers of Freethought Today might have ideas on this — or, better yet, maybe there are former pastors now with FFRF who could share what they might have done before leaving the fold.

Otherwise, freethinkers like me will just have to settle for whatever DeepSeek or other AI apps provide — which I find as evasive and inconclusive as what believers themselves have to say.

Arizona

Rabbi on Fox was a font of misinformation

In the wake of the shooting death of Charlie Kirk, I tuned into Fox News in an apparent attempt to raise my blood pressure. Of course, Kirk was celebrated as a “person of faith” by various hosts and guests, including a bearded ultra-Orthodox rabbi who praised Kirk as a man who did not hate anyone (except apparently trans people, Democrats and secularists). The rabbi also stated that Abraham also never hated anyone. I emphatically agree, since Abraham was clearly a mythological figure.

Brooklyn

Editor’s note: FFRF members are keenly interested in what defines an atheist or agnostic, as we have received a preponderance of follow-up letters regarding the definitions and meanings of the words. The following letters are all related to the discussion.

‘Lack of evidence is not evidence of lack’

In the September issue, a letter-writer responded to my letter (from the August issue) about agnosticism, and it showed he did not understand my position. First, I did not claim that there was no such thing as atheism, not even close. What I said was that pure atheism (a denial of God’s existence) is a matter of faith (not fact), just as religion is a matter of faith, because the existence of God cannot be proven or disproven.

My main point is summed up by the scientific aphorism, “lack of evidence is not evidence of lack”; that is, a lack of evidence that God exists is not evidence that he does not exist (just as a lack of evidence that he does not exist is not evidence that he does). In other words, a denial of God’s existence, relying on a lack of evidence, is based on faith (a “firm belief in something for which there is no proof” per Merriam-Webster), not on fact.

We do, in fact, have evidence of the nonexistence of the Tooth Fairy, Easter Bunny and Santa Claus. As children, when we find out that it is a parent who exchanges a tooth for cash or hides Easter eggs and candy or puts presents under the Christmas tree, we then have evidence that it was not the Tooth Fairy or Easter Bunny or Santa who did those things. The claims about God are not as easy to disprove.

To use the letter-writer’s example of the criminal justice system, all the things he listed as evidence are indeed evidence (“something that furnishes proof,” as defined by Merriam-Webster), but there is no such evidence that God does not exist. His argument is based on the lack of evidence. If all the evidence he lists regarding the criminal suspect were lacking, the suspect could not be convicted.

Whatever someone believed about his guilt, that belief would be simply faith (belief without proof). God’s existence is not a legal case, so there is no “burden of proof” for either side. However, whether you claim that God does or does not exist, if you cannot offer proof/evidence of your claim, you are dealing in faith, not fact, because lack of evidence is not evidence.

The quote from Matt Dillahunty does indeed sum things up nicely: “I’m not

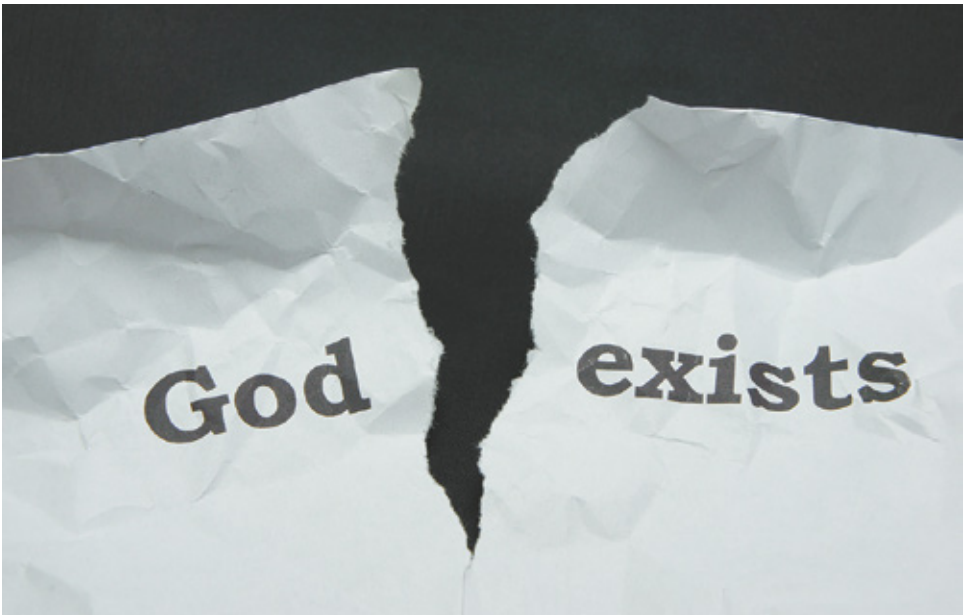


Image by Shutterstock

saying there is no God; I’m saying that there is no evidence to suggest that there is a God.” That quote is exactly the factual position taken by agnostics. The difference between a pure atheist and an agnostic atheist is that a pure atheist does say there is no God (a stance based purely on faith and thus essentially the same as a religious belief), but an agnostic atheist does not, because there is no evidence to support that position. Pure atheism is thus essentially the same as a religion, because both belief systems are entirely faith-based. It is just a matter of understanding that “lack of evidence is not evidence of lack.”

Colorado

Higher proof needed than reasonable doubt

The September edition featured a letter responding to my August letter and stated that I claimed “there is no such thing as atheism.” I never said that. I certainly think that there is such a thing as atheism (practiced by Richard Dawkins, an atheist) and agnosticism (practiced by Carl Sagan, an agnostic). Atheism claims that there are no gods. Agnosticism claims that the existence of gods is not known or cannot be proven.

The only thing I claimed was that in order to state emphatically that there are no gods (atheism), one must rely on some degree of faith since that has not been proven. In the same way, religions have failed to prove that there is a god, so they too rely on some degree of faith. While I think it highly unlikely that there is a god, I still prefer proof to faith, so I’m an agnostic.

The writer also stated that I claimed: “It takes ‘faith’ to not believe in a God.” I did not say that. I said it takes faith to believe that God does not exist since it has not been proven. Also, believing in a god is a personal position, but stating that God does not exist (some call this “strong” atheism”) makes a statement for all people, which are two very different

things.

I think the writer’s courtroom example makes a cogent argument for the evidence that can be used to support the atheist position. However, there are different versions of “proof.” The courtroom has a standard of “beyond a reasonable doubt” to win a verdict from the jury. But, there are also proofs in mathematics in which a theorem, when proven, must be true for each and every case and is logically irrefutable. When it comes to all-inclusive statements about the amorphous and variable entities we refer to as gods, I think the higher standard is appropriate. Lacking that, some degree of faith becomes a factor in atheism and religion.

Georgia

Contradictions prove there is no Christian God

There were a couple of letters that claimed it has not been proven there is no God. That is like saying it has not been proven there is no Santa. It is easy to prove there is no God. The Christian God, for example, is defined as being morally perfect, perfectly loving, perfectly good, and who created everything. Since God created everything, he created thousands of diseases for humans, thereby mass murdering billions throughout history.

A contradiction is a condition that is always false, like a three-angled square. A morally perfect mass murderer of billions is a contradiction. A perfectly loving mass murderer of billions is a contradiction. A perfectly good mass murderer of billions is a contradiction. There you have three contradictions each proving with logical certainty there is no God, as defined by Christians.

The very idea of a god and of a supernatural contains contradictions, thereby proving with logical certainty there is no God or supernatural. Gnostic atheism is fully justified.

Wisconsin

Crossword answers														
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Evidence all around us for no supernatural God

As far as the debate between atheists and agnostics, surely we can all agree that there is evidence all around us that no all-knowing, all-powerful and totally benevolent god exists.

One letter-writer seems to acknowledge that there might be evidence that gods meeting certain descriptions don’t exist, and he decides to define God, in part, as a “supernatural entity.” He thinks one is believing something for which there is no evidence if one believes that there is no world except the natural world. But, for me, it is a tautology that there is nothing that isn’t a part of the natural world. The natural world is full of all kinds of things we don’t understand, but, just by definition, there is nothing that exists apart from it.

Clearly, no atheist believes that there is evidence that no God exists if theists are allowed to define God however they want. If someone believes God exists and is the chair I am sitting on, sure, I believe God exists. But, if God is “supernatural,” I’m as confident that it doesn’t exist as I am that a circle isn’t a square or that 2 + 2 doesn’t equal 5.

Washington, D.C.

Without evidence, claims can be rejected

I was disappointed to read in the Letterbox section that a few agnostics seem to have accepted the idea that it is necessary to prove that God does not exist. To show why they would not accept that burden, let us consider a simpler problem: Prove that unicorns don’t exist. To do so, one would have to search every square yard of Earth without finding one, then do the same for any other place they might be (moon, Mars, etc.). It quickly becomes obvious that proving that a thing does NOT exist is an impossible task. There is no such thing as burden of disproof.

That leaves only burden of proof, which falls to the person who claims a thing DOES exist. If someone tells me that unicorns exist, my reply will be: “Trot one out and let’s have a look.” If he says he doesn’t have one handy, but he’s drawn pictures of them and written stories about what they do, I will just laugh.

If anything like this “God” that believers actually describe existed, it would be perfectly capable of speaking for itself, rather than speaking through intermediaries who tell conflicting stories about what they heard. Is the pope God’s representative on Earth? Some say yes, others say no. Was Jesus Christ a messiah? Some say yes, some say no. Until believers get their stories straight, and back it with credible, objective, repeatable evidence, the listener is justified in rejecting their claims.

Michigan

Cryptogram answer

I don’t differentiate much, except in degree, between people who believe in religion from those who believe in astrology, magic or the supernatural.

— Andy Rooney

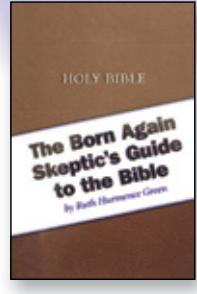
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Rethinking Jesus

The morality, the myth, and the silence

By David Falls

You’ve heard it in courtrooms, classrooms and campaign speeches: A quote from Jesus offered as moral truth. Yet, when these words become myth — repeated without scrutiny — they risk insulating us from deeper insight. His teachings are often revered as universal, compassionate and wise, unquestionable even by secular thinkers who accept him as an ethical shorthand, regardless of belief in his divinity. But reverence, especially when inherited, can blur judgment.

Familiarity breeds insulation. To understand what we’re defending — or dismissing — we must examine these teachings not as sacred truths but as moral ideas subject to reasoned critique. Only by doing so can we develop ethical systems grounded in empathy, autonomy, and human connection.

Cost of allegiance

Many of Jesus’ teachings are praised for compassion and humility, but others raise serious ethical concerns. In Matthew 10:34–36, he declares, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the Earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.” He goes on to describe families torn apart by loyalty to him — “a man against his father, a daughter against her mother.” These are not metaphors for unity, but declarations of division, where loyalty to Jesus overrides even family bonds.

In the same chapter, Jesus states, “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me.”



David Falls

This isn’t a call for empathy; it’s a demand for exclusive loyalty. Secular critics argue that such teachings prioritize obedience over autonomy and spiritual hierarchy over human connection.

The implications echo far beyond the first century. Loyalty that demands breaking natural bonds has fueled cults, sectarian movements and political ideologies throughout history. When loyalty is elevated above relationship, division is no accident — it is the system’s very design. The cost of allegiance is not merely symbolic; it can fracture communities and families in the name of purity.

Other statements are even more extreme. “If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off” (Mark 9:43) is a hyperbolic call to self-mutilation. “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:25) suggests exclusion based on status rather than behavior.

The fig tree episode in Mark 11:12–14 also raises questions. Jesus curses a tree for not bearing fruit, even though the text notes it wasn’t the season for figs. Whether symbolic or literal, the act seems arbitrary and punitive. If this story is meant to teach judgment or authenticity, it does so through destruction aimed at something innocent.

The parables, often praised as moral lessons, also contain troubling implications. The story of the 10 virgins rewards exclusion. The sheep are saved, the goats condemned, without nuance or appeal. These are not teachings that invite complexity. They sort, divide and punish.

If such ideas were attributed to any other figure, they would be scrutinized. With Jesus, they are often rationalized or ignored. These divisions, fueled by loyalty and hierarchy, prompt us to question not only the teachings themselves, but also the authority behind them. What makes a figure like Jesus a moral authority? Is it his words, or the reverence we place in them?

Moral authority

Even at the crucifixion — the moment believers call the ultimate act of sacrifice — Jesus falters. Matthew and Mark record him crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This is not the voice of serene acceptance or divine certainty; it is a cry of abandonment. If Jesus truly believed he was God’s son, destined to rise again, this complaint reveals a contradiction.

Either he doubted the truth he preached, or the sto-



Photo from Wikimedia Commons

Carl Bloch’s 1877 painting “The Sermon on the Mount.”

ry presents a figure so overwhelmed by suffering that he abandoned his own conviction. Neither scenario aligns with the image of flawless authority often portrayed in sermons and scripture.

Believers often reinterpret this cry as proof of his humanity, as if weakness itself becomes strength. But reverence does not turn collapse into clarity. If followers hold him as flawless, then his cry of abandonment cannot be excused as virtue. The figure held up as the model of faith did not transcend suffering; he broke beneath it.

This matters because moral clarity does not come from being divine; it comes from being consistent. In secular ethics, authority isn’t inherited through tradition or myth; it’s earned through empathy, accountability and coherence. Ideas are judged by their consequences: Do they support autonomy, ease suffering and respect dignity? If not, no amount of reverence can make them right. Secular humanism, for instance, builds its framework on reason, compassion and social responsibility. It rejects faith as a foundation for morality, insisting instead on principles that can be tested, debated and applied across cultures. Moral authority, in this view, is not a title but a practice.

History offers reminders that revered figures are not above critique. Gandhi’s racism, Mother Teresa’s ties to dictators, Aristotle’s misogyny — each complicates their legacy. Even Abraham Lincoln, often idealized, held views we now reject. Cultural reverence does not guarantee ethical clarity.

The point is not to condemn these figures outright, but to insist that moral authority must be earned, not assumed. When we exempt Jesus from scrutiny — treating his teachings as above critique — we abandon the very standards we apply elsewhere.

And, before we accept moral authority, we should ask whether the person behind it ever existed at all.

Jesus’ existence

The question of Jesus’ existence is often treated as settled, but the evidence is far from conclusive. The earliest references come from Paul’s letters, which say little about his life and focus instead on his divine role. The gospel accounts, written decades later, are shaped by theological agendas and supernatural claims that undermine their reliability.

Some scholars argue Jesus may not have been a historical person at all, but a figure constructed from religious hopes, borrowed myths and theological storytelling. Either way, what emerges is a myth that became moral authority, a story carried forward as ethical truth, even when detached from history.

Most secular historians accept that Jesus likely existed as a preacher crucified by Rome, but even they acknowledge that certainty is unattainable. The “historical Jesus,” if he lived, is buried beneath layers of myth, interpreta-

tion and cultural projection.

But for the purposes of ethics, existence may be secondary. If the teachings attributed to Jesus are flawed, the presence or absence of a historical figure does not redeem them. A fictional character can inspire reflection, but it should not be immune to critique.

One of the most striking features of the Jesus narrative is the absence of details about most of his life. After a brief story at age 12 — debating elders in the temple — the record goes quiet for nearly two decades. The gospels provide no insight into where he lived, what he did or how his ideas evolved. This gap has inspired speculation, with theories ranging from his quiet life in Nazareth to travels across India, Egypt or with Jewish sects like the Essenes. Yet, none of these are supported by historical evidence. From a literary perspective, the gap is more than an inconvenience, it is a narrative device.

Gaps in biography create space for projection. Myth thrives in silence, because silence cannot be contradicted. By beginning the story only when Jesus steps into public life, the gospels avoid the burden of coherence. There are no awkward years to explain, no inconsistencies to reconcile, no mundane details to weigh against the extraordinary. The story begins when useful and ends when complete.

Whether intentional or accidental, this silence invites projection. Believers imagine hidden depth; critics question the foundation. The gaps themselves protect the story from scrutiny.

Letting go

Believing that Jesus is morally superior simply because tradition says so isn’t a reasoned belief — it’s an inherited habit. And, habits, however comforting, should be questioned. If we want ethical systems grounded in empathy, autonomy and accountability, we must examine even the most familiar names.

That doesn’t mean rejecting everything associated with Jesus. It means refusing to grant moral immunity based on myth, charisma or cultural inertia. Ideas should stand or fall on their own merit. Reverence is not a substitute for clarity.

In a secular framework, meaning is earned through coherence, not inherited through belief. If we want to live ethically, we must choose truth over comfort and reason over tradition.

Reverence may feel like loyalty, but when it shields ideas from scrutiny, it becomes projection: We see what we need, not what is there.

When projection fades, all that remains is silence. The myth ends. And what we choose to hear in that silence will shape the ethics we inherit, either through inherited tradition or through reasoned critique.

David Falls writes on the intersection of philosophy, spirituality and artificial intelligence.