

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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Injunction junction

Courts block Ten Commandments laws from being enacted in 2 states

Texas school districts must comply with Aug. 20 ruling

In a victory for religious freedom and church-state separation, a federal district court issued a preliminary injunction on Aug. 20 prohibiting Texas school district defendants from implementing a state law that requires all public elementary and secondary schools to display the Ten Commandments in every classroom.

In his decision in *Rabbi Nathan v. Alamo Heights Independent School District*, U.S. District Court Judge Fred Biery held that Texas Senate Bill 10, which took effect on Sept. 1, likely violates both the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment.

Judge Biery explained: “The displays are likely to pressure the child-plaintiffs into religious observance, meditation on, veneration, and adoption of the state’s favored religious scripture, and into suppressing expression of their own religious or nonreligious background and beliefs while at school.”

Represented by the Freedom from Religion Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and, with Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel, the plaintiffs in *Rabbi Nathan v. Alamo Heights Independent*



Cartoon by Ann Telnaes (with permission from Washington Post)

School District are a group of Christian, Jewish, Hindu, Unitarian Universalist and nonreligious families, including clergy, with children in public schools.

Then, on Sept. 22, a group of 15 non-religious and multifaith Texas families filed a new lawsuit with the assistance of FFRF in federal court to stop their public school districts from displaying the Ten Commandments in classrooms pursuant to Texas law Senate Bill 10.

The new complaint comes in response to school districts that have or are about to display Ten Commandments posters, despite a federal court’s recent ruling that SB 10 is a clear violation of students’ and families’ religious freedom and the separation of church and state. The plaintiffs in *Cribbs Ringer v. Comal Independent School District* also plan to file a motion for a temporary restraining order and a preliminary injunction.

Arkansas law is ‘obviously unconstitutional’

A federal court has issued a second preliminary injunction blocking Arkansas’s Act 573, the law requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms.

The ruling Sept. 10 by U.S. District Judge Timothy Brooks extends protections to families in the Conway School District, where the district placed Ten Commandments posters in classrooms even though the court had already made clear that Act 573 is unconstitutional. FFRF is representing the plaintiffs in the case as part of a coalition.

“We welcome the court’s injunction, which further protects the rights of students,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “The judiciary is affirming the secular underpinnings of the U.S. Constitution.”

In issuing the temporary restraining order forcing removal, the court pointed to its Aug. 4 ruling in *Stinson v. Fayetteville School District No. 1* that Act 573 is “obviously unconstitutional.” On Aug. 5, the plaintiffs’ attorneys sent letters to every school superintendent in Arkansas, notifying them of the federal court’s ruling and warning districts not to implement Act 573.

Despite the court’s ruling and the letter from the plaintiffs’ attorneys, Conway School District placed Act 573 displays in all classrooms before the first day of school on Aug. 18, prompting swift le-

See Arkansas on page 3



Ibtissame “Betty” Lachgar is shown wearing the T-shirt that has landed her in a Moroccan prison for 30 months.

FFRF urges action for Moroccan activist

FFRF has sounded the alarm after a Moroccan feminist and human rights activist was outrageously sentenced to 30 months in prison for wearing a T-shirt.

Ibtissame “Betty” Lachgar, an atheist psychologist and co-founder of the *Mouvement Alternatif pour les Libertés Individuelles* (MALI), was arrested for posting a photo of herself wearing a T-shirt reading “Allah is lesbian.” She was put on trial for “insulting Islam.”

The sentence is especially alarming given Lachgar’s fragile health. She is battling cancer and requires urgent surgery. Prison conditions in Morocco are notoriously harsh, and her sup-

Act today!

Your activism could mean the difference between life and death for an innocent freethinker. FFRF has included suggested talking points through the “Take Action” button, which can be customized to your liking, to email the U.S. Embassy & Consulate in Morocco. For best results, please be succinct and polite.

Go to: ffrf.quorum.us/campaign/140044.

porters fear she could die behind bars. “This could be a death sentence for a courageous activist I have known for many years and who has spent her life

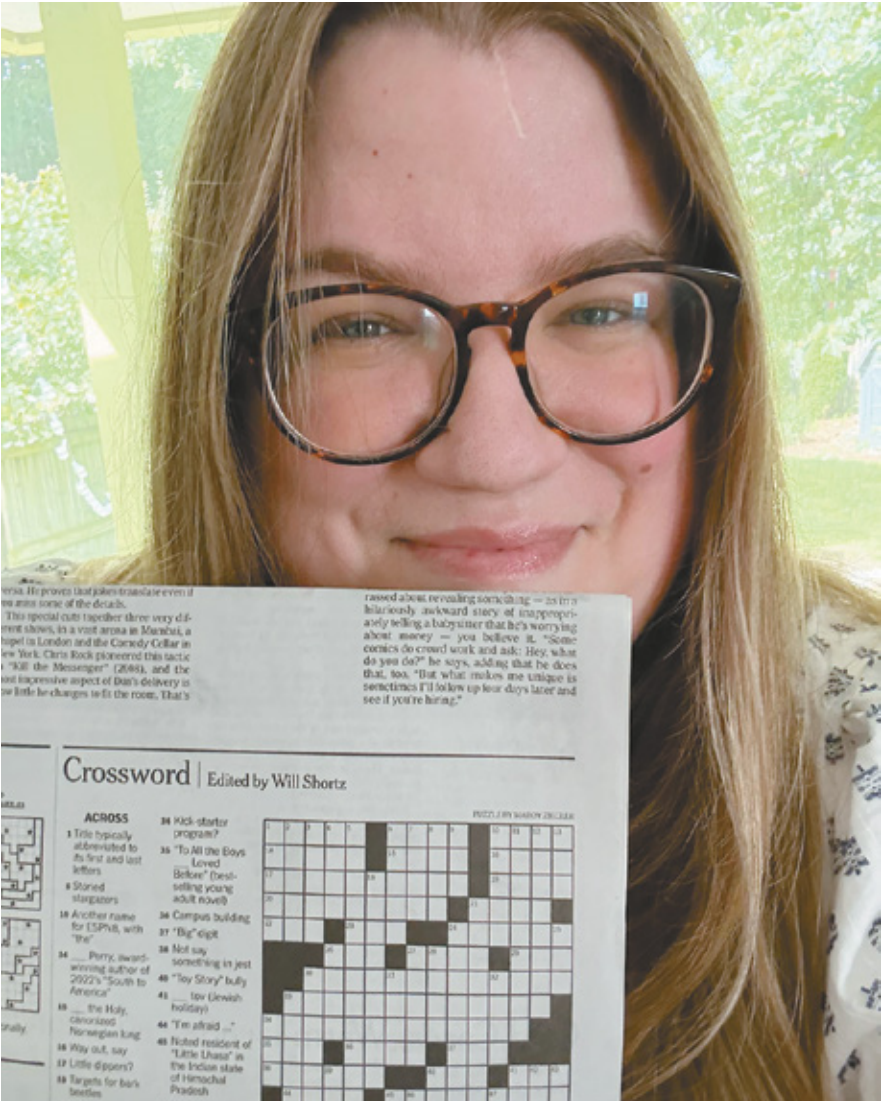
bravely defending the rights of women, LGBTQ-plus people and nonbelievers in Morocco,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “Betty’s only so-called crime is to express dissent — peacefully challenging religious dogma in a theocratic monarchy where blasphemy laws are used as weapons of repression.”

FFRF, which has asked the State Department to intervene, is calling on its allies in the United States and international community to help Betty by:

- Pressing Morocco to immediately release her and to drop blasphemy

See Activist on page 3

Maddy got this one across!



Maddy Ziegler, an attorney for FFRF, had one of her crossword puzzles published in the New York Times on Aug. 30!

She writes: “I gave constructing crosswords a try at the beginning of last year. Since I have been a puzzle solver for a long time, I had a good enough understanding of how they worked so that I was able to start making some potentially publishable puzzles pretty quickly once I figured out the constructing software. Most outlets take freelance submissions, so I started sending them to a lot of different places, including the New York Times. (This was my seventh puzzle submitted to the Times.) I submitted this one in August 2024 and heard back from an editor there in November. I got another acceptance in June, so I should have another one of these published next year!”

You can find other crosswords by Maddy here: popypuzzles.blogspot.com/p/publications

OVERHEARD

We have this really growing sense that the Trump administration is trying to promote Christianity and use Christianity as a defense for its authoritarian actions, and that flies in the face of our religious freedom tradition in the United States. **Guthrie Graves-Fitzsimmons, vice president of programs and strategy at Interfaith Alliance.**
Religion News Service, 8-20-25

These Christian-themed videos are part of a larger barrage of propaganda that clogs the social media feeds of DHS and those of its subdivision Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Log on to their Instagram, X and Facebook feeds, and it is as if someone took humdrum government recruitment ads, marinated them with unhinged 21st-century meme culture, then seasoned them with a bit of bible and Batman.

Carolina A. Miranda, columnist, in her piece, “On social media, ICE fights a holy war.”
Washington Post, 8-26-25

I never met [James] Dobson, but I hated him, and sometimes the hatred kept me up at night. I hated him the way you can hate only a man who destroyed you as a child. There are other culprits, certainly. Dobson did not hit me; my father did. But Dobson told him that he was right to hit me, that God gave him permission. That if he hit me, I would obey my parents and the Lord, and that everything would be all right because to strike a child is to love her. Or as Dobson once put it, “Corporal punishment, when used lovingly and properly, is beneficial to a child because it is in harmony with nature itself.” So I can remember the crack of a belt, and the shouting, and my own fear. One day, I decided my father did not love me, because how could he, and I cried until I felt nothing at all. Later, I pulled nails out of the walls so I could cut up my arms.

Columnist Sarah Jones, following the death of Dobson on Aug. 21, in her column, “James Dobson was my horror, and yours.”
The Intelligencer, 8-27-25

Don’t just say this is about thoughts and prayers right now. These kids were literally praying. It was the first week of school. They were in a church.

Jacob Frey, Minneapolis mayor, after the shooting during Mass in a Catholic church that killed two children and wounded 17 others.
New York Times, 8-27-25

Despots want science that has practical results. They’re afraid that basic knowledge will expose their false claims. Trump once said he wanted the generals that Hitler had. He’s certainly working on getting the science that Hitler and Stalin had.

Paul R. Josephson, an emeritus professor of history at Colby College and author of a book on totalitarian science. He was quoted in a news story examining the war on science, including historically by the Catholic Church, reporting on how experts are seeing, in Trump’s blitz against science, the warning of an autocratic tilt.
New York Times, 9-2-25



Jerry Nadler

The Constitution is clear: Separation of church and state is essential to protecting freedom for all. Our public schools must remain places of learning, not government-imposed doctrine.

U.S. Rep. Jerry Nadler, after a federal judge in Texas halted the state’s Ten Commandments law. Nadler was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” on Aug. 28.
X, 8-20-25

The notion that rights don’t come from laws and don’t come from the government, but come from the creator — that’s what the Iranian government believes. It’s a theocratic regime that bases its rule on Sharia law and targets Sunnis, Bahá’ís, Jews, Christians and other religious minorities. They do it because they believe that they understand what natural rights are from their creator. So, the statement that our rights do not come from our laws or our governments is extremely troubling.

Sen. Tim Kaine, during a Senate Foreign Relations Committee hearing.
Fox News, 9-4-25

Sometimes being on the County Commission can be a bit of a lonely place to be. I’m feeling a little lonely at the moment. I don’t support the proposition of placing this in county buildings.

Burt Saunders, chair of the Collier County (Fla.) Board, during a board meeting prior to a vote that would allow displaying the Ten Commandments on county property. Saunders cast the sole vote against the proposal. Saunders was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” on Sept. 5.
CollierCountyFl.gov, 9-1-25

Peel away the religious overlay and what you’re left with is a huge sophisticated system of interconnected businesses: welfare, health, legal, agribusiness, shipping, education. . . . Whatever the rhetoric, whatever spiritual messages were being adduced, the entity as a whole is looking very much like Roman business, Roman society as usual. The eternal truth is not theological; gods come and go, temples rise and fall, but business is always business.

Alice Roberts, in her new book “Domination: The Fall of the Roman Empire and the Rise of Christianity.”
New Scientist, 8-30-25

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wedissent.org



Theocracy watch

Christianity gets more government backing

DHS uses scripture in videos

FFRF has demanded that the Department of Homeland Security stop using religion to portray its immigration enforcement activities as divinely ordained.

FFRF has written to DHS Secretary Kristi Noem after the agency posted multiple promotional videos on its official social media accounts in July featuring bible quotes, militarized footage and artwork glorifying “manifest destiny.”

One July 7 video showed helicopters taking off as a narrator quoted Isaiah 6:8: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? . . . Here am I. Send me.” The video then played a cover of Johnny Cash’s “God’s Gonna Cut You Down.” Another DHS video on July 28 showed Border Patrol agents in tactical gear preparing for an operation as the verse Proverbs 28:1 faded onscreen: “The wicked flee when no man pursueth; but the righteous are bold as a lion.”

FFRF warns that DHS use of scripture in official communications not only violates the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause, but also dangerously suggests that immigration enforcement is morally sanctified.

HUD secretary promotes religion

FFRF is denouncing Housing and Urban Development Secretary Scott Turner’s promotion of religion during a federally sponsored National Mall event.

In a letter to Turner, the state/church watchdog criticized HUD’s “faith-based disaster recovery event” at the National Mall on Sept. 6, in which Turner prayed publicly and proclaimed “faith is back in our government.” The event prominently featured worship leader Sean Feucht, a Christian nationalist activist known for divisive rhetoric and political organizing, alongside other faith leaders.

While private religious groups often play a role in disaster response, the Constitution forbids the federal government from favoring or promoting religion.

FFRF’s letter cites longstanding Supreme Court precedent requiring government neutrality between religion and nonreligion. It also reminds HUD of the Framers’ deliberate creation of a secular Constitution, free from religious tests or references to deities, bibles or faith.



A Department of Homeland Security video shows the use of biblical quotes overlaid on images of U.S. helicopters.

White House unveils ‘America Prays’

FFRF is upbraiding the White House’s unveiling of an overtly Christian “America Prays” webpage.

The White House claims that the “America Prays” campaign is preparation for the 250th birthday of the United States. The campaign was announced along with a promise to insert more religion in public schools at a White House Religious Liberty Commission meeting held at the private Museum of the Bible.

More than 70 Christian nationalist organizations are listed on the White House website as having joined with the White House in asking Americans to join together “10 people each week to pray for one hour for America.”

The White House website includes a document compiling prayers and proclamations “throughout American history” that cherry-picks some events featuring prayer. It also lists debunked claims, such as that George Washington added “So help me God” to his presidential oath, even though the Constitution has no such mention.

‘Department of War’ quotes bible

The United States Department of War Rapid Response X account on Sept. 7 posted a clip showing military personnel completing outdoor training as the words “Be strong and of good courage. Do not be afraid, nor dismayed. For the Lord your God is with you, wherever you go” fades into the screen.

Similar videos praising the military while quoting the bible have flooded the former Department of Defense’s social media accounts over the past few weeks.

The department, renamed the Department of War, has joined other branches of the federal government in embracing a Christian nationalist tone in its official communications. Some warn the new social media strategy could indicate how Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s conservative Christian faith is revamping the military branch.

State Department pushes religion

FFRF is demanding that the State Department immediately remove unconstitutional Christian nationalist posts from its official social media accounts.

In a letter sent to Secretary of State Marco Rubio, FFRF objected to recent posts on the Department’s official X account that falsely promote Christianity as the foundation of the government of the United States and promise to eradicate policies that “demean the Christian faith.”

One post reads: “Our nation was founded on the recognition that moral virtue and a steadfast faith in God are necessary preconditions of freedom. Yet under the Biden Administration, U.S. foreign policy belittled Christianity and weaponized government against faith. That era has ended. Under @POTUS’s leadership, the State Department will eradicate practices that devalue and demean the Christian faith.”

“These statements send a dangerous and unconstitutional message that the State Department serves Christians first and reduces millions of other Americans to second-class citizens,” writes FFRF Legal Counsel Chris Line. “U.S. foreign policy should defend human rights, not elevate one religion above all others.”

Arkansas

Continued from page 1

gal action from families represented by FFRF, American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas, the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP.

“This decision is another important victory for Arkansas families and for the Constitution,” says John Williams, legal director of the ACLU of Arkansas. “The court saw through the state’s attempt to justify this unconstitutional law and reaffirmed that students have the right to attend public schools free from government-imposed religion. We are proud to stand with our clients and will continue fighting to ensure every child’s rights are protected.”

“Public schools are not Sunday

schools,” says Heather L. Weaver, senior counsel at the ACLU Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. “This ruling affirms that school districts may not flout the First Amendment by posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms.”

“All Arkansas public school districts should heed the court’s clear warning: Displaying the Ten Commandments in classrooms is ‘obviously unconstitutional,’” says Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. “Families in Conway School District, throughout Arkansas, and across the country get to decide how and when their children engage with religion — not politicians or public-school officials.”

“This latest decision underscores the duty of public schools to protect

the constitutional rights of every student,” says Jon Youngwood, global co-chair of the Litigation Department at Simpson Thacher. “By issuing a second preliminary injunction prohibiting schools in the Conway School District from displaying the Ten Commandments, the ruling reinforces a fundamental truth: the First Amendment safeguards the rights of individuals to choose whether and how they engage with religion, and that protection extends to every classroom.”

Families in other districts who encounter Ten Commandments displays in classrooms are encouraged to contact the ACLU of Arkansas at acluar-kansas.org/get-help. All public schools have a constitutional obligation to respect students’ and families’ First Amendment rights.

Activist

Continued from page 1

charges against her.

- Condemning Morocco’s criminalization of apostasy, blasphemy and same-sex relationships as violations of fundamental freedoms.

The Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain, which has led a “Free Betty” protest at the Moroccan Embassy in London, has resources, including a #Free Betty cam-

paign with social media and petitions

FFRF notes that Morocco is violating the international human rights treaties it has signed guaranteeing freedom of conscience and expression. In 2020, Congress passed a resolution with overwhelming bipartisan support calling on the State Department to prioritize the repeal of blasphemy, heresy and apostasy laws worldwide.

“True religious liberty must include the right to reject religion, the right to criticize it and the right

to live openly, whether as an atheist or advocate for LGBTQ rights, without fear of prosecution or prison,” adds FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “Blasphemy is a victimless crime — but blasphemy laws create many innocent victims.”

FFRF warns that Lachgar’s health and life now hang in the balance unless the international community acts.

For more on Betty’s activism, read Annie Laurie Gaylor’s blog post at freethoughtnow.org.

Note to members

For those of you who get the PDF version of Freethought Today, there have been a few changes to the content you can see.

Because of privacy concerns — the PDF can be easily forwarded to non-members — FFRF has stopped including in the PDF version the Black Collar Crime report, names of new Lifetime members, and the names of the Letterbox contributors.

The online version at freethoughttoday.com also follows this protocol. Only the actual print newspaper contains all of these items.

If you would like to continue reading Black Collar Crime, see the names of FFRF’s newest Lifetime members, or see the names of those who contributed to our Letterbox, you will need to change your preferences in how you receive Freethought Today.

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

- Log into your FFRF.org account.
- Click on “Update your contact information.”
- Go down to “Deliver Freethought Today by” and click on either “Newspaper by mail” or “Both PDF and paper copy.”
- Click “Submit.”

Across

1. Appear like a chick

6. Sum of 50 states, acr.

9. T on a test

13. Hawaiian goodbye

14. *Atheist ____ Reiner, known as Meathead on “All in the Family”

15. Increase in salary

16. Experts in a specific field, slangily

17. African grazer

18. Not over

19. *____ Beach, FFRF 2025 Convention location

21. *Atheist and early birth control proponent Margaret ____

23. *Atheist Bruce ____ or “The Way of the Dragon” fame

24. *Freethinking David Bowie movie “The Man Who ____ to Earth”

25. Diamond or ruby

28. Hindu dress

30. Not width

35. Military no-show

37. Rock opera version of “La Boheme”

39. Earth, in Latin

40. Network of nerves

41. Approaches

43. Like a lemon

44. Gloom and drab

46. Did like a bird

47. *Freethinking authors Robbins and Stoppard

Down

1. Baba Yaga, e.g.

2. Reunion attendee

3. Fashion designer Burch

4. Ill-bred one

5. Rushes

6. Impulse

7. *Atheist Richard Wright’s “Native ____”

8. Bullying, e.g.

9. NASA’s orange drink

10. Hitchhiker’s quest

11. Substance abuser

12. Poetic “ever”

15. Streamlet

20. Gain knowledge

22. *Robert Redford, freethinking star of “____ the President’s Men”

24. It’s about time!

25. An ____ Sloch-na, Ireland’s police service

26. Pitchers

27. Medieval song without music

29. Coral ridge

31. Egg holder

32. Subsequently a husband

33. *Mary L. ____, 2025 Emperor Has No Clothes Award nominee

34. Like Siberian winters

36. *Freethinker Norman ____, #14 Across show creator

38. Three pointer

42. Take an oath

45. Kidnapper’s demand

49. One from Laos

51. Alarm clock button

54. Crewneck alternative

56. *Pagan winter solstice celebrations

57. Kind of package

58. Passage into mine

59. “____ and shine!”

60. Bog deposit

61. The Brady kids, for short

62. Ruptured

63. Speed of tire rotation, acr.

65. VIII predecessor

67. *Atheist Charlie Parker’s instrument

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11	12
13						14				15			
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48					49		50			51		52	
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	57	58	59					60				61	62
63						64	65			66			67
68						69				70			
71						72				73			

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Freethought Today Cryptogram

AFT RJOTXGDTGA JK AFT PGEATN QAZATQ EQ

EG GJ QTGQT KJPGNTN JG AFT HFXEQAEZG

XTSEREJG.

—UJFG ZNZDQ

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.

THEY SAID WHAT?

Your daughters will be raped and your sons beheaded unless we stop Islam once and for all. We’re done turning the other cheek. Remember, David didn’t pray for Goliath. He killed them. America is a Christian Nation, so those terrorist Muslims can fuck off to any of the 57 Muslim nations. There is only one true God, and that is the God of Israel.

Valentina Gomez, who set fire to a Quran as she declared she would “end Islam” across the state. Gomez was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Sept. 5.

Friendly Atheist, 8-27-25



Joseph Lapado

Who am I as a government or anyone else, who am I as a man standing here now, to tell you what you should put in your body? Who am I to tell you what your child should put in [their] body? Your body is a gift from God. Florida Surgeon General Joseph Ladapo, while saying that the state will work to eliminate all vaccine mandates, including for school children.

NBC, 9-6-25

really at the bottom of the totem pole. President Trump, during a “Fox and Friends” interview.

Fox News, 8-19-25

To have a great nation, you have to have religion — I believe that so strongly. There has to be something after we go through all of this, and that something is God.

President Trump, after the White House posted guidelines for prayer on its website. They recommended that 1 million Americans dedicate one hour a week to praying for the country.

Washington Post, 9-8-25

There’s only so much white sand you can put in the sugar bowl before it isn’t the sugar bowl anymore.

Pastor Doug Wilson, referring in particular to Muslims, speaking at the National Conservatism Conference along with members of Congress and Trump’s cabinet. Wilson is founder of Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC).

Associated Press, 9-9-25

There’s no space for apathetic Christianity anymore. There’s no option for Christians to just sit on the sidelines anymore. The sideline’s gone. The world needs Jesus, and it’s up to us to tell them about him.

Abigail DeJarnatt, founder of Counteract USA, a Christian organization based in Arkansas, in response to the assassination of Charlie Kirk of Turning Point USA.

New York Times, 9-16-25

It is time for you to rise up because of what has happened to Charlie Kirk today. I can just envision, right now, 10,000 Charlie Kirks rising up in campuses right across America, proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ.

Dream City Church Pastor Luke Barnett, in Phoenix, where Kirk had hosted monthly “Freedom Night in America” events.

New York Times, 9-16-25

Schools not enjoined by ongoing litigation must abide by SB 10 and display the Ten Commandments. The woke radicals seeking to erase our nation’s history will be defeated. I will not back down from defending the virtues and values that built this country. Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton, who says that the school districts not listed in the recent court ruling against displaying the Ten Commandments in classrooms must adhere to the new state law that forces every classroom in the state to display the Decalogue.

ABC-8, 8-25-25

I want to try and get to heaven, if possible. I’m hearing I’m not doing well. I am

ffrf

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IN THE NEWS

How religion declines around the world

Religious identity is fading in many countries. From 2010 to 2020, the share of the population that was affiliated with any religion dropped at least 5 percentage points in 35 countries, according to a recent Pew Research Center study. It dropped considerably more in countries such as Australia (17 points), Chile (17), Uruguay (16) and the United States (13).

A new academic paper by a group of international scholars proposes that drops in religious affiliation happen in the medium and late stages of a “secular transition” process. This transition unfolds slowly, as generations are replaced by less religious ones.

Using data from the Center’s surveys in 111 countries and territories, the paper says that this process is affecting countries on every populated continent, including countries in which Christianity, Islam, Buddhism or Hinduism is the largest religion.

The authors write that religion generally declines between generations in three steps:

1. People participate in worship services less often.
2. The importance of religion declines in their personal lives.
3. Belonging to religion becomes less common.

They call this the Participation-Importance-Belonging (P-I-B) sequence. In this sequence, generations first shed aspects of religion that require more time and resources. People are slower to shed religious identity, which is not necessarily as burdensome.

In the early stage of secular transition, generations differ primarily in their religious participation. In some countries that remain highly religious today, recent surveys show that each country’s share of adults under age 40 who frequently attend religious services has dropped below the share of older adults who do so.

Texas AG: Schools should add Lord’s Prayer

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton has called on public schools statewide to allocate time for prayer and scripture reading. He specifically recommended the Lord’s Prayer in line with a new state law.

In a press release Sept. 2, Paxton announced his position amidst a court-ordered delay in the enactment of Senate Bill 11, which was scheduled to take effect in September. The law allows school boards to create policies for voluntary prayer and religious text readings during school hours.

“In Texas classrooms, we want the Word of God opened, the Ten Commandments displayed, and prayers lifted up,” Paxton stated.

He also criticized opponents of SB 11, describing them as “twisted, radical liberals” who aim to “erase truth, dismantle the solid foundation that America’s success and strength were built upon, and erode the moral fabric of our society,” asserting that the United States was “founded on the rock of Biblical Truth.”

Senate Bill 11, which is currently under a temporary injunction, permits school districts to adopt policies for voluntary prayer and scripture reading, provided parental consent is obtained for student participation. The law also designates Paxton’s office to defend schools that implement such policies and allows him to recommend best practices, including his endorsement of the

Reaching the summit



FFRF State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley and FFRF Governmental Affairs Coordinator Caitlin Berray attended the National Conference of State Legislatures Summit, a gathering of legislators, legislative staff and advocacy groups. The event this year was in Boston, where the FFRF Action Fund, FFRF’s advocacy arm, had a table to discuss issues with lawmakers and their staff.

Lord’s Prayer “as taught by Jesus Christ.”

FFRF quickly responded to Paxton’s advocacy, condemning it as a violation of constitutional boundaries. In a letter dated September 3, FFRF Legal Counsel Chris Line demanded that Paxton retract his statements, citing concerns that his remarks pressure schools to favor Christianity.

Mob burns Nigerian woman to death for blasphemy

A mob burned a woman to death in central Nigeria on Aug. 30 after accusing her of blasphemy against Islam, police said. The woman “was set ablaze” in a “mob attack” after she made comments about the Prophet Mohammed, a police spokesman said in a statement.

He said the woman was a food vendor named Amaye from northwest Nigerian Katsina state. The police condemned any act of “jungle justice” and urged members of the public to remain calm during the search for the attackers.

Sharia law operates alongside common law in 12 predominantly Muslim states in Nigeria and blasphemy is punishable by death.

Many of world’s Nones believe in God, afterlife

Around the world, many people who do not identify with any religion nevertheless hold a variety of spiritual and religious beliefs, including the belief that there is life after death, according to a Pew Research Center study.

The number of adults who are religiously unaffiliated — describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or “nothing in particular” — has climbed rapidly in the recent past. In general, religiously unaffiliated people are less likely to hold spiritual beliefs, less likely to engage in religious practices, and more likely to take a skeptical view of religion’s impact on society than are Christians, Muslims and people who identify with other religions.

But sizable percentages of religiously unaffiliated adults — often called religious “Nones” — do hold some religious or spiritual beliefs, according to Pew’s surveys of 22 countries with relatively large unaffiliated populations.

In all 22 countries, about a fifth or more of Nones believe in life after death. In seven of those countries, 50 percent or more of all Nones believe in life after death.

Many Nones also express belief in God. This includes solid majorities of Nones in South Africa (77 percent) and several countries in Latin America, such as Brazil (92 percent), Colombia (86 percent) and Chile (69 percent). Religiously unaffiliated adults in Europe and Australia are much less inclined to believe in God. Just 18 percent of Nones in Australia, 10 Percent in Sweden and 9 percent in Hungary are believers. In the United States, 45 percent of Nones say they believe in God.

Documentary alleges sex abuse in Catholic Church

A stain on Pope Francis’ legacy is explored in “Nuns vs. the Vatican,” a documentary following women whose sexual abuse allegations were long ignored by the Catholic Church, and the broader system that protects and enables predators within.

The movie centers around Gloria Branciani and Mirjam Kovac, who are among dozens allegedly victimized by Marko Rupnik, a former Jesuit priest currently awaiting canonical trial for sexual, spiritual and physical abuse.

Rupnik was excommunicated in 2020 for absolving the sins of a novice with whom he had sex. But that excommunication was lifted within the same month after Rupnik repented. One expert voice in the documentary points out that the excommunication could only have been lifted with authorization from Pope Francis.

Rupnik was also a renowned artist, painting mosaics that would hang in the Vatican.

MN judge OKs religious tests for college credit

Religious colleges that require students to sign a statement of faith cannot be excluded from a popular Minnesota program that lets high school students take college courses for credit, a federal judge has ruled, tossing a state law that she called an unconstitutional violation of religious freedom.

The ruling on Aug. 22 from U.S. District Judge Nancy Brasel was a victory for two conservative Christian colleges in the state: Crown College in St. Bonifacius and the University of Northwestern in Roseville. Those two institutions require their students to pledge to follow the school’s values and conduct rules, effectively barring from campus activities students who aren’t Christian or who are LGBTQ+.

Minnesota’s 40-year-old Postsecondary Enrollment Options program lets high schoolers earn free credits at state expense at public or private colleges of their choice, although the courses must be nonsectarian.

In 2023, broad new protections for LGBTQ+ rights were passed.

A group of parents and high schoolers who were earning college credits at the two schools, or wanted to, then sued to overturn the law, saying it violated their religious freedom to benefit from the program at schools with campus atmospheres that reflect their values.. FFRF filed a friend of the court brief in the case.

New Orleans Archdiocese to settle for \$230M

The New Orleans Archdiocese on Sept. 8 agreed to a \$230 million proposed settlement for survivors of clergy sexual abuse, attorneys for some of the survivors said Sept. 8. The agreement paves the way for a final resolution to yearslong negotiations amid a series of similar settlements from the Catholic Church.

The archdiocese had announced in May that it would pay at least \$179.2 million in response to more than 500 abuse claims, which the bloc of attorneys said it opposed because the group considered it to be lowballing the hundreds of survivors.

The archdiocese had filed for bankruptcy in May 2020 rather than handle each abuse claim separately, which survivors point out allows church leadership to avoid facing tough questions in court.

Survivors have until late October to vote on whether or not to approve the settlement. If approved by two-thirds of survivors, payments could begin disbursement by next year.

Court: Okla.’s standards can’t promote Christianity

On Sept. 15, the Oklahoma Supreme Court put on hold new K-12 social studies standards enacted by Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters and the Oklahoma State Board of Education that would unconstitutionally promote Christianity to public school students. The ruling came in the lawsuit Rev. Dr. Mitch Randall v. Ryan Walters, which was filed in July by 33 Oklahoma parents, children, public school teachers and faith leaders.

The court prohibited Walters and the state from implementing the new social studies standards. State officials are also prohibited from spending any state funds on the standards. The court ordered the state to treat the prior version of the standards, which were enacted in 2019, as remaining in effect.

The plaintiffs are represented by Americans United for Separation of Church and State and Oklahoma Appleseed Center for Law and Justice.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Arkansas

FFRF ensured that students in the Nenana City Schools system in Arkansas would not be punished for exercising their freedom of speech by choosing not to stand for the religious Pledge of Allegiance.

A parent reported that on May 2, their child was reprimanded by a seventh- and eighth-grade teacher for refusing to stand and recite the Pledge of Allegiance. FFRF was informed that the complainant’s child chose to sit quietly and respectfully. However, the teacher repeatedly told the student that they were required to stand for the pledge, but the student refused, correctly asserting that they were not required to participate. The parent stated that the teacher took the child out of the classroom and aggressively admonished them for declining to stand for the pledge, including impliedly threatening to send the student to the principal’s office. This was reportedly not the first time that a Nenana City School teacher had admonished this student over the student’s choice to respectfully abstain from participating in the pledge.

“Public schools cannot force students to recite or stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, nor may they punish students for refusing to participate,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote the district.

FFRF received an emailed response from the district, informing FFRF that the district intends to comply with applicable rules regarding the reciting of the Pledge of Allegiance, and was actively taking steps toward that end.

Colorado

The Douglas County School District RE-1 in Castle Rock, Colo., recently apologized after allowing a Christian organization to read a religious children’s book to elementary school students.

A district parent reported that on April 1, Prairie Crossing Elementary School invited the politically conservative and Christian organization, Grandparents 4 Kids, to the school to read the book “Why America Matters.” FFRF’s complainant stated that Grandparents 4 Kids is aligned with Christian nationalist organizations such as Moms for Liberty. The book in question explicitly mentions and promotes a belief in God and faith.

FFRF learned that the book reading was at least partially organized by a school board member. The complainant reported that Grandparents 4 Kids were allowed to read the story to multiple classrooms of kids during the day. Additionally, when another parent contacted District Superintendent Erin Kane, Kane stated that she will not prevent Grandparents 4 Kids from presenting similar religious material to students at district schools in the future. FFRF’s complainant explained that they are an atheist and are raising their children to be nonreligious. They stated that they were “extremely upset to learn that [Kane] is sanctioning this and that it will continue.”

“If Prairie Crossing Elementary School now claims that the Grandparents 4 Kids event was voluntary — though our complainant states parents were given no notice of the event and no opt-out option — voluntariness is not a safeguard against violating students’ First Amendment rights,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After FFRF sent the district a letter, the district’s legal counsel wrote back to

Minneapolis meetup



Photo by Suzanne Perry

FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott spoke to HumanistsMN members at the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis on Sept. 6. He talked about how faith-based groups are ramping up efforts to gain power and influence by undermining the First Amendment and outlined how religious organizations are pursuing lawsuits and lobbying for legislation aimed at injecting religion into public schools and public life.

acknowledge the concerns raised by the complainant. Deputy General Counsel Wendy Jacobs affirmed that the district has policies implemented regarding nondiscrimination related to the basis of religion and educational equity. “In the situation involving the Grandparents 4 Kids presentation on April 1, 2025, the policies were followed, but there was an inadvertent error in the vetting process (a couple of pages were missed),” Jacobs wrote. “It was not the result of a lack of appropriate policies or training, but rather a mistake that has been addressed.” FFRF assured the complainant that the district acknowledged the mistake and would work not to have it happen again.

Florida

The Hardee County (Fla.) Schools system agreed not to include prayer in graduation ceremonies thanks to FFRF’s work defending students’ First Amendment rights.

FFRF learned that Hardee Senior High School had a practice of including pre-planned, Christian prayer at its graduation ceremonies. These prayers had been documented in YouTube videos of the 2020 and 2021 graduation ceremonies and in livestreams posted by the Hardee County School District Facebook account of the 2024 and 2025 graduation ceremonies. These prayers were overtly religious and made references to a “lord” and “his son,” a “Heavenly Father,” the “Father, son, and holy spirit,” and “Jesus.”

Furthermore, the students who led the 2020 and 2024 graduation ceremony prayers also identified themselves as “student class chaplains.”

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when participating in graduation ceremonies,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the district’s superintendent asked Michael R. McKinley of the Schumaker law firm to respond regarding the situation. Thankfully, FFRF’s arguments were enough to sway the district. “I have discussed the legal contours of our high school graduation with [the superintendent], and

she has assured me that she understands your concerns and will instruct the principal of Hardee Senior High School and the class sponsors accordingly.”

Florida

FFRF worked with the Escambia County Public Schools in Pensacola, Fla., to ensure that religious guest speakers would not be allowed to promote their viewpoint to captive audiences of students.

A parent reported that on April 17, Longleaf Elementary School permitted an adult magician and evangelist from the organization Motivating Magic to perform for students during a school assembly. FFRF learned that the assembly took place on school property during the school day, and that, during the performance, the presenter gave students free tickets to a religious event billed as a “magic show” that same night at a local church where the kids would “learn about Jesus and the Christian faith.”

“A school assembly is an environment ripe for unconstitutional religious coercion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “Elementary school students cannot simply leave the assembly without risking disciplinary action, nor is it reasonable to expect students this young to recognize their constitutional rights are being violated and dissent.”

After the incident and FFRF’s letter, Superintendent Keith Leonard emailed FFRF after addressing the concern. “Our district has established protocols governing the presence of guest speakers and presentations within our schools,” Leonard wrote.

The district’s revised protocols include a requirement for guest speakers to respect the religious viewpoint of all students, and advocating for a particular religious viewpoint would not be permitted.

Florida

FFRF successfully urged the Okeechobee County (Fla.) School Board to put an end to multiple First Amendment violations.

FFRF received a report that Okeechobee High School has included a scheduled student-led prayer in gradua-

tion ceremonies since 2020. The prayers were overtly religious and the student giving the prayer often requested that all attendees, including other students, join the prayer.

Okeechobee High School also invited graduating students and members of the public to participate in a baccalaureate ceremony at the First Baptist Church of Okeechobee via an official announcement on the school’s website. There was no indication that the baccalaureate ceremony was not school sponsored. Further, the baccalaureate ceremony was the only opportunity for students and their families to view the official senior slide show.

Additionally, via the official website, the Okeechobee County School Board shared a list of summer activities — the “Summer Activity Guide” — for students which included many church-sponsored listings as well as entire sections for vacation bible school programs and church camps.

“Out of respect for students’ First Amendment rights and the community’s diversity, we ask that the board ensure Okeechobee High School cease including school-sponsored prayer at its graduation ceremonies and cease sponsoring, organizing and promoting baccalaureate ceremonies,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote. “Further, we ask that the board refrain from using its “Summer Activity Guide” to promote religious activities going forward.”

After receiving FFRF’s letter, Superintendent Dylan Tedders responded, addressing the complaints. Tedders said that, while Okeechobee High School graduations do not have scheduled prayers, they do have a scheduled opening by students elected as class delegates, which seemed to be where prayers were being delivered. Tedders wrote that he urged administration at the schools to investigate and ensure that future speeches do not infringe upon the rights of other students. Tedders also stated that the baccalaureate event was hosted by students, not staff, but the district would nonetheless end promotion of the event on their official website. Finally, Tedders confirmed that the “Summer Activity Guide” originated via an outside non-profit provider that discontinued that form of communication, which saw the district continuing the practice to ensure families had access to camps and opportunities for students over the summer. Tedders stated that the production of the document would be shifted to a different outside organization to eliminate the appearance of support from the district.

Georgia

Following intervention by FFRF, the Pike County (Ga.) Schools system has worked with bus drivers to ensure that religious worship music is not to be played on district-controlled school buses.

A district parent reported to FFRF that a district bus driver played religious music on the bus every day while picking up and dropping off students. FFRF was informed that the music is specifically Christian worship music, and per a message and video that the bus driver recently publicly posted to their Facebook account, they played worship music every morning to “set the tone” for the bus. FFRF’s parent-complainant, who is non-religious, expressed concern that their children would be confused and negatively affected by their bus driver playing religious music.

“As the district is aware, students have the First Amendment right to be free from

religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when being transported by district-controlled school buses driven by school district employees,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

FFRF received a response from the district’s legal representative Cory O. Kirby after the complaint was filed. “School district administration has met with the bus drivers to remind them of the requirements of the First Amendment as it relates to the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses,” Kirby wrote. “Every effort is made at the school level to ensure that the rights of all stakeholders are protected.”

Iowa

FFRF’s work paid off in the Newton (Iowa) Community School District after a middle school removed religious items from a classroom.

A concerned parent reported that an instructor of Iowa Jobs for America’s Graduates at Berg Middle School was using his position to promote his personal religious beliefs to students. The parent reported that the teacher displayed religious iconography in his classroom, including a Christian cross and a poster of the Last Supper. The instructor in question was listed as a staff member at Berg Middle School.

“It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for the district or its agents to display religious imagery on school property in clear view of students and other employees because it conveys government preference for religion over non-religion,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote.

FFRF’s letter was met with a response from District Superintendent Tom Messenger, who agreed with FFRF’s sentiments that the district is constitutionally required to remain secular. “Upon reviewing your letter, we reviewed the matter in accordance with district policies and procedures,” Messenger wrote. “In response to that review, we made contact with the individual and directed him to come to the school and remove items from the classroom which could be perceived by students as sponsorship of a particular religion or religion in general.” Messenger also informed FFRF that the district planned to review the Establishment Clause with relevant and other personnel to remind them of their responsibilities and to comply with them.

Nevada

Churchill County School District in Fallon, Nev., listened to FFRF and put a stop to a multiyear practice of including school-sponsored prayers at a district high school graduation.

A district alumnus reported that Churchill County High School had previously scheduled prayers as part of the graduation ceremony. FFRF found that the 2022 graduation ceremony included a prayer led by a former instructor. The prayer was overtly religious and the prayer-giver



This school marquee was spotted in Ironwood, Mich., by FFRF member and volunteer Sue Schuetz. She commented, “I guess the question is, where do we pick him up?”

requested that all attendees, including students, join them in prayer.

“School officials may not invite a former or current teacher, faculty member or clergy member to give any type of prayer, invocation, benediction or sermon at a public high school-sponsored event,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

Sharla Hales, general counsel for the district, wrote back in response to FFRF’s letter, confirming that prayers had been included in the graduation ceremonies for many years. However, as Hales had never attended the ceremonies, the practice had gone unexamined. “Superintendent Parsons and I have discussed this situation,” Hales wrote. “Although your letter was received too late to alter the graduation plans for this year, the district agrees that school-sponsored prayers should not be a part of graduation ceremonies.”

North Carolina

FFRF worked with the Columbus County (N.C.) Schools system to keep the district from infusing religion with mandatory school events.

A district parent and multiple employees have reported that East Columbus Junior/Senior High School held several assemblies featuring religious speakers. FFRF learned that at the school’s awards assembly on Feb. 5, a staff member delivered a call-and-response poem which explicitly credited God and religion for the student’s accomplishments. The audience, consisting of all students and staff, were directed to repeat portions of the poem aloud.

Additionally, on April 15, East Columbus High held an honor roll ceremony to celebrate student achievement, and that students were told they would receive ice cream later in the day as a reward for making the honor roll. During the lunch period that day, a religious organization appeared on campus and distributed religious pamphlets and small gifts to students as they entered the cafeteria. Reportedly, a district staff member was visibly involved in the distribution of these religious materials, and when students went to get their ice cream reward, they had to walk past a group distributing bibles. Students reported feeling uncomfortable, harassed and pressured into taking a bible.

“Even if students had known about the religious content of these activities, voluntariness is no excuse for violating students’ rights,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote.

FFRF received correspondence from the district’s legal representative William W. Phipps after the complaint was filed.

Phipps confirmed that the superintendent and the assistant superintendent immediately began an investigation after learning of the violations. Phipps, alongside the superintendent and assistant superintendent, met with the board addressing the incidents occurring at the school. “The superintendent also advised of the conference he held with the principal and the staff allegedly involved in these three incidents, counseling them on the mistakes, and what should have been done to avoid the same,” Phipps wrote. “He counseled them also on communication being important to avoid future instances related to the issue of separation of church and state and religious viewpoint discrimination.”

Pennsylvania

FFRF made sure that the Chartiers-Houston School District in Houston, Pa., would no longer allow for biblical references to occur at the annual graduation ceremony.

A concerned parent of a graduating senior reported that Chartiers-Houston Jr./Sr. High School included a pre-planned invocation at its graduation ceremony, and that Superintendent Gary Peiffer and the school’s principal inappropriately promoted bible verses and faith in remarks. In the principal’s speech, he referenced 1 Corinthians 13:13 before telling students that “faith” was the first of “four pillars for [their] journey ahead.” Later, Peiffer also made reference to the bible, favorably comparing Jesus to teachers. Infusing the ceremony with religion throughout made the concerned parent uncomfortable, as they are an atheist and felt that prayer and biblical references are out of place for a public high school graduation.

FFRF additionally learned that pre-planned prayers appeared to be a regular occurrence during the Chartiers-Houston High School’s graduation ceremonies. Video recordings of the 2023, 2024 and 2025 ceremonies showed that the school-sponsored events included scheduled prayers at the beginning of each ceremony, with the class secretary being tasked with delivering the prayer each year.

“It makes no difference how many students want prayer or wouldn’t be offended by prayer at their graduation ceremony; the courts have continually reaffirmed that the rights of minorities are nonetheless protected by the Constitution,” FFRF Staff Attorney Maddy Ziegler wrote to Peiffer.

Quickly after FFRF’s letter, Peiffer issued a response concerning the complaint. “As superintendent, I take responsibility for what occurred during commencement,” Peiffer wrote. “Considering the issues you expressed; I under-

stand your concerns and acknowledge that the comments made by myself and others were inappropriate for a public-school graduation.”

Peiffer additionally laid out new policies, confirming that no administrator or facility member will reference or cite biblical texts in school-sponsored activities, graduation will be structured so that only student and guest teacher speakers will have the podium to make extensive remarks and comments to the class and any songs performed as part of the ceremony will be secular in nature.

Tennessee

FFRF’s legal work has convinced the West Tennessee Public Utility District in Huntingdon, Tenn., to keep their social media account free from religious postings.

A local resident reported that on March 9, the district’s official Facebook page posted a religious photo including reference to a bible verse. The text overlaying the photo read: “You are God’s masterpiece. Ephesians 2:10.” The district apparently had also posted religious messages for Good Friday and Easter.

“The district’s social media channels should provide all residents with a sense of community and inclusion,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote to the district. “For the West Tennessee residents who subscribe to a minority religion or no religion at all, their utility district telling them they are ‘created in Christ Jesus’ and promoting Christian holidays is exclusionary.”

After filing the complaint, FFRF was informed that Michael U. King, general counsel for West Tennessee Public Utility, would be working on behalf of the district in the matter. King informed FFRF then that the district “removed the Facebook posts based on your complaint.”

West Virginia

Thanks to FFRF, the Kanawha (W.Va.) County Schools system will now keep churches out of future school-sponsored events.

A concerned Kanawha County Schools student reported that on April 17, Riverside High School hosted an egg hunt for students outdoors. FFRF learned that during the egg hunt, a table was set up by a representative of the Chesapeake Family Worship Center to solicit students to attend the church, and the representative distributed religious materials and trinkets. FFRF’s complainant reported being asked whether they attend church, and was given a flyer and then offered a ride to the church when they responded that they did not attend. Reportedly, the representative of the Worship Center distributed other religious materials, including wristbands with a bible verse inscribed on them, a card containing a variety of bible verses, and a small figurine of Jesus Christ.

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when participating in school-sponsored activities,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote. “Public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion.”

After FFRF’s letter, the district thankfully listened to reason, with FFRF receiving a formal response from Superintendent Paula A. Potter. “The incident you reference in your letter has been investigated and addressed with the administrative staff at Riverside High School,” Potter wrote. “We recognize and have told the school administration that churches should not have been at the event. All schools will be trained on the same.”

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

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

— 316 pages / PB
\$15 Item #FB18

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FFRF: RFK Jr., a menace to public health, must go

When pharmacists are afraid of losing their jobs for doing their jobs, our public health is in deep trouble.

“Health” Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. recently posted on X that the FDA’s new Covid policy, greatly curtailing who can get Covid shots, delivers “science, safety and common sense.” However, his policy is clearly neither based on science nor common sense, and it will not make people safer. It’s causing even more chaos and confusion. Kennedy’s handpicked vaccine advisory members approved the recommendation that only those 65 and older, or younger people with at least one underlying condition will be readily eligible to be vaccinated against Covid.

On Labor Day, President Trump was happy to sow further confusion by calling on pharmaceutical companies to “justify the success” of their Covid vaccines. Yet Trump had previously bragged about “Operation Warp Speed,” which, thanks to mRNA research, led to Covid vaccines that saved millions of lives.

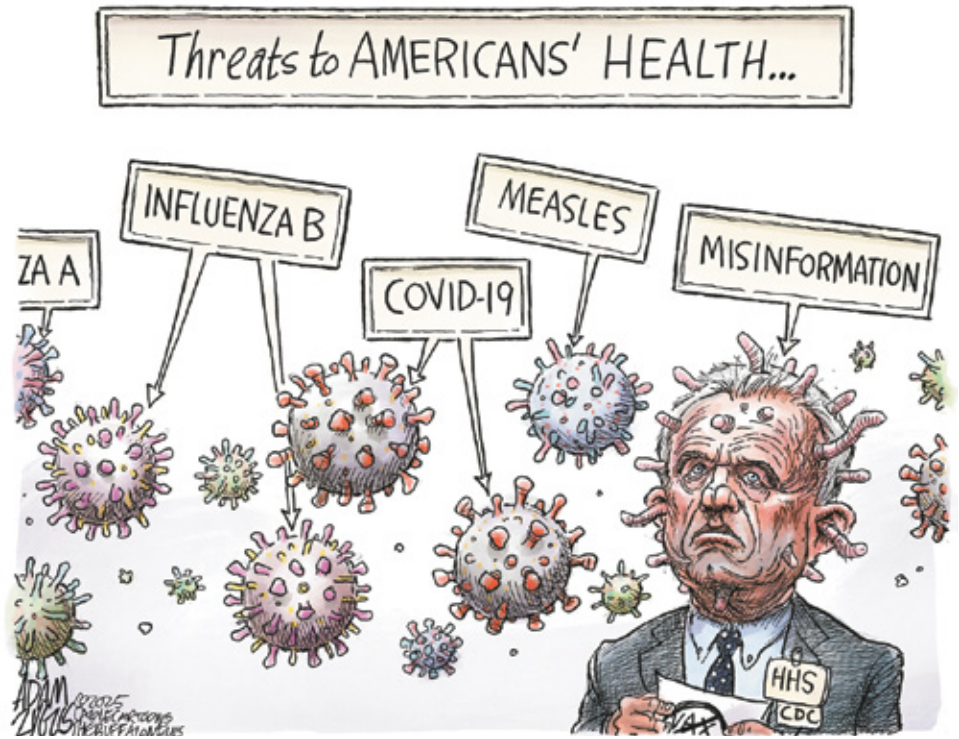
“I’m hearing from pharmacists who are fearful they might be in legal jeopardy for providing vaccines,” Michael Osterholm, a University of Minnesota epidemiologist, told the New York Times.

The recommendations were barely out before the White House fired Susan Monarez as director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Monarez was sworn in just a couple months ago and was fired, after bravely refusing to resign, for not being “aligned with” Trump’s and RFK’s agenda. At least four other CDC leaders also resigned as a result, including the agency’s deputy director and chief medical officer. This leaves the vital CDC rudderless and awaiting the appointment of a MAHA sycophant.

Kennedy laments the “malaise at the agency,” a malaise of his own making, of course. He has undermined medical science, ended support for global vaccination programs protecting millions of children, supported legislation that will cause millions of Americans to lose Medicaid, overseen mass firings gutting the CDC and canceled vitally important research on mRNA technology and cancer research.

Our nation’s public health is being imperiled by quacks, conspiracy theorists, Christian nationalists and anti-science advocates.

Sen. Bernie Sanders has called for Kennedy to resign, a demand that every responsible American and organization that cares about public health and evidence-based science must second. The Freedom From Religion Foundation concurs: Kennedy is a menace to public health and must go.



CRANKMAIL

Here is this month’s recap of some of the unhinged mail, email and voice messages received at FFRF. Printed as received.

Atheist agenda: Why would you choose to send you kids to a charter school established by a group from a Christian Church, if your against Christianity? Just send them to the public school and let them learn the atheist agenda.

Abortion: If you want to protect the mother’s rights, try protecting her right to informed consent. They don’t tell the mother that they are going to dismember their child. Why? Cause they want to make MONEY! Money that says in God we trust! I have to say that I find everything you stand for completely offensive!

Morality is needed: You’re all a bunch of worthless wastes of oxygen. This great nation (Which i have personally fought for in the United States Marine Corps) was FOUNDED on Christian values. Your bullhit movement allows children to continue to be pushed even further into your liberal, socialist ideologies. Although freedom of religion is extraordinarily important and a fundamental part of our great nation, children need to be taught the values and morals of Christianity now more than EVER. Children these days are taught and instructed that living as a trans, non binary, mentally handicapped mess is completely acceptable and it’s absolutely APPALING. You should be truly disgusted and ashamed of

yourselves, and this movement. The silent majority of America is absolutely sick and tired of being told what is and is not acceptable by people like YOU.

Accept Jesus: I just want you to know that I am a Christian and I’m not religious! These are 2 different things, and I prayed for all of you and your organization to find and accept Christ as your personal savior. Hell is a real place and I don’t want ANYONE to go there, even all of you who are deceived by the devil.

Losers: Ffrf- your way is why this country is in such dispair now.Backbiters and greed everywhere. JESUS CHRIST IS MY LORD AND SAVIOR!

Wicked woman: Annie is so ignorant and is bound to the lake of fire if she doesn’t repent and give her life to God. Amazing how people are so stupid. Our God is so loving because he gives us chance and chance to change our wicked ways. An this woman is definitely wicked.

Christian principles: Stop crying like babies about it atheists. Nobody cares you’re an atheist. Want to know why you see Christian principles in government? 1 the constitution was created with morals from the Bible. That’s just fact. 2 Roughly 60% of the US are Christians. So there you go. Stop crying. This commercial is stupid. What moral principles would a country be built on if 60% of the population were atheists? The answer is China’s principles. Do you wanna live in China?



FFRF Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann with Rep. Sarah McBride, one of the newest Congressional Freethought Caucus members.

McBride, Morrison join Freethought Caucus

FFRF applauds Rep. Sarah McBride, D-Del., and Rep. Kelly Morrison, D-Minn., for joining the Congressional Freethought Caucus.

The caucus is a vital group of lawmakers dedicated to defending separation of state and church and the rights of conscience of all Americans, including nonbelievers. It is co-chaired by Reps. Jared Huffman and Jamie Raskin.

McBride’s membership is powerful in light of the hostile attacks she has faced from Christian nationalist-aligned members of Congress.

In November 2024, Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., introduced a bill to prohibit transgender women — explicitly including McBride — from using women’s restrooms in the U.S. Capitol. Mace declared, “Sarah McBride doesn’t get a say . . . this is a biological man,” making clear that McBride was the target of the measure. McBride responded calmly and with dignity: “I’m not here to fight about bathrooms. I’m here to fight for Delawareans and to bring down costs facing families.”

In a March 2025 House Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing, Chair Rep. Keith Self introduced her as “Mr. McBride” despite objections. McBride replied with composure, “Thank you, Madame Chair.”

Clueless: Atheists are just ignorant and arrogant anyway !

Nothing is nothing, You never get something from nothing, You never get life from non-life without intelligence. Scientists are clueless on the origin of life LOL! Even if you create life in a lab then surely you still require the best and most intelligent students or top laboratory scientists

God will win: you all should just call yourselves the anti Christ foundation!! In the end God WILL WIN!! you will NOT! Tell it like it is...you would like to steal our kids minds and thoughts. NO MORE!!

Go away!: Keep your stupid beliefs in Wisconsin and stay out of ours!

Hell is real: Unless you repent from your persecution of Christians, you and everyone who works in your organization will spend eternity alone in eternal darkness. I feel sorry for you. Repent and be saved or spend eternity in the pit.

Bible: All our nations's original laws are according to the Bible. Please read the original states' constitutions as they all uplift God and the Bible. This is why satan worshippers want constitutions removed. Congress has always been opened in prayer.

UnAmerican: How about you GO FUCK YOURSELF and Die. You're nothing but unAmericans that shouldn't be allowed to live in America...! Why don't you move to Russia or China where your unAmerican ideals are acceptable.

You are idiots: Free thinking is impossible on atheism. How can you think freely without free-will? If you are a soulless chemical animal, your thoughts are 100% chemically induced delusions you cannot choose freely.

Atheism is for idiots, You people are just pathetic.

Religious freedom: Our founders said “religious freedom” not “freedom FROM religion.” Religious people are FAR better folks than those without faith.

God is the authority: God is going to take his great strength unto himself and is going to begin to rule in a 15 years, by the end of 2042, the enemies of Christ will be made his foot stool. He will defeat all christian denominations and sects in a theological battle and will bring them under one authority.

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker n.

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

FFRF awards \$30,000!

Forward Freethought scholarship winners

FFRF has awarded \$30,000 in First in the Family Humanist Forward Freethought scholarships to seven students, thanks to the generosity of FFRF benefactor Lance Bredvold. The students were selected by Black Skeptics Los Angeles (BSLA), an African American humanist/atheist-based organization.

BSLA is the first secular humanist/atheist organization to specifically address college pipelining for youth of color through its ongoing scholarship, college and K-12 youth leadership partnerships. FFRF has proudly partnered with BSLA for 12 years to provide tuition grants, gradually increasing the funding and number of scholarships.

The following are the 2025 First in the Family Forward Freethought scholarship winners.

- Marquan Adams, UCLA, \$5,000.
- Aviana Anderson, Tuskegee University, \$5,000.
- Madison Biddle, Southwest College, \$2,500.
- KeVonna Dixon, Coastal Carolina College, \$5,000.
- Bailee Morris, Georgia Gwinnett College, \$5,000.
- Bradley Newman, Morehouse College, \$2,500.
- Ariyah Suggs, University of Memphis, \$5,000.

Here are excerpts from this year’s awardees’ essays.

Marquan Adams

Knowing that humanists often advocate for the separation of church and state, and understanding how LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently targeted by religiously motivated laws such as those opposing same-sex marriage, I came to the realization that I will become the humanist to try to stop this oppression of the LGBTQ+ community.



Marquan Adams

I knew it wasn’t going to be easy, but one thing I was sure of was that in order to start this new wave of human-

ism, I had to become somebody my peers respected, even the homophobic ones. So, I started grinding academically, becoming one of the top 10 students in my class. I also began putting myself out there socially. Soon, I became a figure for the LGBTQ+ students at my campus.

I was selected out of 30 students to read my AP Research Capstone project findings during an assembly, which detailed how verbal abuse negatively impacts queer students in our city. After my speech, many students who were once against the queer community reached out to me and told me they didn’t know how devastating the effects were, and that they’d change. Even my school’s football team, known for having many homophobic individuals, reached out to the LGBTQ+ club and wanted to fundraise with us, thus building long-lasting friendships. This served as evidence that this new wave of humanism is effective, being that many of those students are strongly religious, yet they put aside their religious beliefs to help and build friendships.

Aviana Anderson

My mother, a single parent, is one of the most dedicated people I have ever met, but it was not prayer alone that has raised me and my siblings. It was her working late at night to prepare dinner and care for my paralyzed aunt, her walking to work when we couldn’t even afford gas, and her sharing what little we had with neighbors who had even less. I saw her and learned that you don’t need divine mandate to act with kindness. You just need love. You just need people who believe in each other. I identify as a freethinker and humanist not because I’m anti-religion, but because I hold faith in another kind of faith, a faith in humans, in our ability to convert pain into progress, and in the power of showing up for one another with no strings attached. Humanism is a faith that says we don’t have to wait until the afterlife to start changing this one. It’s action in the present moment, justice in the present moment, healing in the present moment.



Aviana Anderson

Madison Biddle

Growing up in South Los Angeles as the child of a single mother living with lupus, I learned early on what it means to be both vulnerable and resilient. I was raised without organized religion, and over time, I began to identify more with secular and freethinking values that prioritize empathy, critical thinking, and action over belief. My mom’s strength, despite her chronic illness, taught me that people, not divine forces, are the ones who bear the responsibility to support and uplift each other. Identifying as nonreligious allows me to



Madison Biddle

focus on real-world solutions and justice, grounded in the here and now. Secular humanism, to me, means addressing inequities through reason, compassion, and accountability not relying on religious explanations for suffering or progress. My lived experience has shown me that social change happens when people organize, educate, and build systems of support, especially in communities like mine that are too often overlooked.

I aim to create a more just and compassionate world where human lives are valued not for their conformity to a belief system, but for their inherent worth and potential.

KeVonna Dixon

I identify as nonreligious because of who I am and what I’ve endured as a Black queer woman. As someone who started their early life in foster care, it has shown me that love doesn’t always come from the places where it’s expected. I’ve been raised by holy narcissists who have labeled me as the devil or sinister. I’ve had people who I thought were friends quote bible verses at me for not believing, saying I’d go to eternal hell if not. I’ve had peers tell me I need God to fix me, but I stand on the basis that you don’t need God to teach you how to care. What you need is a heart and empathy, the simple ability to see someone struggling and to give them a shoulder.

As someone who has struggled with my identity and has not felt safe and seen for simply existing with the way I was made, I’ve learned that compassion without conditions is a powerful testimony. I’ve found that power in secular humanism. It’s an act of belief that anyone and anybody, no matter the race, sex, sexual orientation or religion, deserves protection and freedom because we are all human. And, as I walk through life, that’s what I hold dear to my heart.



KeVonna Dixon

Bailee Morris

I am secular because I believe that the transformation for the better is done by human hands and minds and not religious groups or forces beyond. Rather than relying on prayer or tradition to solve the pressing issues in my community, I’ve come to believe in action working collectively to build structures, systems and opportunities that uplift everyone, especially the most marginalized. Humanism’s insistence that all human beings should be treated with dignity no matter their race, gender or origin is central to how I understand equity. I am most concerned with addressing the inequities that exist for Black youth in terms of education, access and exposure to STEM professions. These are not merely systemic



Bailee Morris

problems, they are problems that involve human beings, and they must be solved by humans through solutions that engage compassion, justice and fairness.

Secular humanism allows me to pursue this calling with confidence: individuals need support systems, not sermons; they need access to opportunity, not pie-in-the-sky promises.

Bradley Newman

I believe empathy, logic and our shared humanity are reason enough to do the right thing. That mindset led me to challenge unjust situations, sometimes loudly and passionately, earning me the nickname “Malcolm X” within my family. My secular worldview comes not from a place of rebellion, but from a belief in people. I do not rely on a higher power to right the world’s wrongs; I believe that individuals, through small and intentional actions, can collectively create powerful change. Life as a queer Black boy raised in a conservative religious setting came with constant tension and isolation. But instead of turning inward, I chose to cultivate empathy — for others who, like me, did not quite fit the mold. That empathy has evolved into a humanist commitment to justice, equity, and inclusion for all people, regardless of race, gender, or background.



Bradley Newman

As someone who knows what it’s like to face adversity without adequate emotional support, I want to create a space where healing is accessible and stigma-free. Secular humanism empowers me to focus on evidence-based care, compassion and community-driven solutions. I do not believe that change is inevitable. I believe it is made day by day, by people who care enough to act.

Ariyah Suggs

Humanism points out hypocrisy in our structure and allows us to collaborate as a unit to find a better path. A personal major issue in this is homosexuality. The foundation of homosexuality is only displaced in the context of religion. This belief would not be held and so widespread if not for the shared belief of contextual sin among a majority. This poison is nurtured and passed down through generations all from a simple line in a mythical book. The term may not even exist if not for religion. To love another was never a crime and never something to be controlled. Love is such a feeling that needs to be labeled in the human eyes. Confining humans to misperceived pre-historic mating, which still consists of homosexuality, is ridiculous. We have advanced way too far as a species to believe such slander.



Ariyah Suggs

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Freedom depends on freethinkers

Ed Larson: The inside story of the Scopes trial

This is the (edited for space) speech given by Ed Larson at the Scopes Trial Centennial convention in Chattanooga, Tenn., on July 19. He was introduced by convention emcee Leighann Lord. (To read the full speech, go to freethoughttoday.com. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.org/scopescon. To see photos from the event, go to ffrf.us/scopespics.)

Leighann Lord: When I bring on our next speaker, in the absence of the physical presence of John Scopes or William Jennings Bryan or Clarence Darrow, the best person to have at a centennial conference celebrating the Scopes Monkey Trial, is the guy, like capital T, capital G, The Guy.

He won a Pulitzer Prize in history for his book, “Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion.” He’s also the author of “Evolution: The Remarkable History of a Scientific Theory” and coauthor of “The Essential Words and Writings of Clarence Darrow.” He holds the Hugh and Hazel Darling Chair in Law and is a professor of history at Pepperdine University.

He’s taught for 20 years at the University of Georgia, where he chaired the history department. He has served as a visiting professor at several universities, including Yale Law School, Stanford Law School and the University of Melbourne. And he recently published “American Inheritance: Liberty and Slavery and the Birth of a Nation, 1765 to 1795.”

Long story short, he literally wrote the book. And that’s why Professor Ed Larson is the winner of this conference’s Clarence Darrow Award.

By Ed Larson

I am overwhelmed. [Clarence Darrow] was my father’s hero. I’m so, so incredibly honored. I thank you so much. My gosh.

Well, 100 years is a long time in politics. Less so in science and even less so in religion. This year marks 100 years since the best-known intersection of those three forces in American culture, the so-called “Tennessee Monkey Trial” in the summer of 1925. As you all know, after civic leaders indicted John Scopes for teaching about human evolution in the town’s public high school, Dayton, Tenn., became the setting for one of the most contentious courtroom dramas in American history.

It became a flashpoint in American history that continues to inspire, unsettle and provoke. Seen narrowly, Tennessee v. Scopes is a small-town criminal prosecution brought under a new state law, making it a misdemeanor for any public school teacher — and I’m quoting the entire statute now — “to teach any theory that denies the story of divine creation of man as taught in the bible, and to teach instead that man is descended from a lower order of animals.” It was not a big, beautiful bill. It was a very short, ugly bill.

Read broadly, it represented a clash of worldviews, pitting legendary, populist orator William Jennings Bryan and an array of Christian fundamentalists against renowned secularist attorney Clarence Darrow and an honor roll of science educators in a timeless battle over science, religion and their place in American culture. It became a story of religion vs. science.

But, why Dayton, of all places? Responding to the invitation of the ACLU



Photo by Chris Line

Scopes Trial expert Ed Larson tells the story of how the trial came to be during the three-day Scopes Trial Centennial convention July 18-20 in Chattanooga, Tenn.

— which opposed the statute on free speech, not religious, grounds — town leaders in Dayton met in a drugstore which was owned by F.E. Robinson, the school board’s chairman, who decided to test that new statute in court by arranging a friendly indictment of a local science teacher named John Scopes. This group wanted publicity for their community and Scopes agreed to the scheme, and soon hundreds of reporters and thousands of onlookers descended on Dayton to witness an event that the press billed as the “trial of the century” before it even began.

The story begins

But, the story did not really begin in Dayton or with Scopes. For all intents and purposes, the story began four years earlier when Bryan, a self-proclaimed fundamentalist, launched what he called his “crusade against evolution” that sought to ban teaching about human evolution in public schools. A charismatic fixture in American politics for nearly three decades by that time, Bryan had burst on the national stage in 1896, when he won the nomination for president of both the Democratic Party and the populist People’s Party by offering a cure-all solution of bimetallism for an ongoing economic recession.

After losing the election, aside from a brief stint as secretary of state in the Wilson administration, he became a public speaker, peddling the shifting arrays of elixirs for whatever then ailed America. Anti-evolutionism simply represented his final nostrum for the nation’s woes, and it chiefly appealed to evangelical audiences. Bryan raised it in scores of addresses during the early 1920s, including one in Nashville on Jan. 24, 1925, leading directly to the introduction and then passage of the Tennessee law that spawned the Scopes Trial.

During the World War I years, states had passed laws to promote teaching patriotism, bar instruction in German or instruction about communism, to mandate flag salutes and to mandate classroom prayer. Schools and colleges across America had dismissed teachers for opposing the war.

Education restrictions accelerated in the 1920s, with state laws requiring bible readings, forbidding the employment of teachers who were deemed radicals, pacifists, communist or socialist, mandating the teaching of capitalism, and prohibiting teaching, well, in the words of one statute, “that ours is an inferior form of government.” The anti-evolution crusade simply added a push for

laws against teaching Darwinism.

Now, historians described populism as a movement offering simple solutions for real or perceived social, economic or political problems. In the 1890s, bimetallism, that is, the coinage of silver at a 16 to 1 ratio with gold, was presented as a panacea for the panic of 1893, the worst economic recession in U.S. history before the 1930s. Bryan wrote it for his first nomination for president in 1896. “You shall not crucify mankind on a cross of gold,” he told cheering delegates at the Democratic National Convention. Clarence Darrow was in the audience.

Attacks on evolution

This phrasing played on his appeal to evangelicals. In the 1920s, out of office and relying on speeches for income, Bryan ratcheted up his populist attacks on evolution, which had long been but a bit player in his addresses. A spellbinding orator, Bryan had already run through not just bimetallism, but also the direct election of senators, the federal income tax, prohibition, treaties to outlaw war, and Jim Crow laws as cure-all solutions to social problems.

He claimed credit for four different constitutional amendments. He always exaggerated his own role, but he had a role in all of them. That’s more constitutional amendments than any person other than James Madison. That would be the prohibition, female suffrage, direct election of senators and the income tax. He came close with child labor laws.

As for his racial views, he opened his memoirs by crediting success for “having been born a member of the greatest of all races, the Caucasian race.” That seems an odd claim for a

creationist to affirm that all humans descended directly and relatively recently from Adam and Eve.

Beginning in 1921, Bryan focused on evolutionary teaching as his principle populist prescription for taming the Roaring Twenties. Since leaving public office in 1915, Bryan had traveled the country, delivering up to 200 paid addresses per year from a carefully honed group of set speeches.

He was not a spontaneous speaker, but when he had a set speech that he worked out, it was a humdinger. We know what he said because he printed them all and sold them at his speeches. In a series of post-World War I lectures, beginning with “Back to God” and “In His Image” and “Rising Through the Bible and Its Enemies” and “The Menace of Darwinism,” Bryan increasingly blamed evolutionary teaching for all manner of social ills, from war and labor unrest to secularism and communism.

“Darwinism is the basis of the gigantic class struggle that is now shaking American society throughout the world,” Bryan declared in 1921. “Why? Because the brute doctrine of survival of the fittest is driving men into a life and death struggle, from which sympathy and the spirit of brotherhood is eliminated.” In 1924, delivering his “It Is Written” speech to a national convention of Seventh-Day Adventists, Bryan baldly asserted all — that’s what he said — “all the ills from which America suffers can be traced back to the teaching of evolution. It would be better to destroy every other book ever written and save just the first three verses of Genesis.”

Well, so much for the rest of the bible and the selfish gene.

This became his panacea, repeated in auditoriums, statehouses, arenas and churches across the land into the spring of 1925. The Great Commoner, as he was then known, needed only a state to administer his elixir. Tennessee, where we’re sitting now, became that state in March. From there, Bryan’s populist crusade against evolution led directly to the Scopes Trial. He then volunteered his services as attorney to prosecute Scopes, which drew in Clarence Darrow, then the nation’s most famous trial lawyer and secularist, to join the defense.

Bryan vs. Darrow

The prospect of Bryan and Darrow litigating the issues of revealed religion vs. naturalistic science and academic freedom vs. popular control over public education turned the trial into a media sensation then and the stuff of legend thereafter. It attracted hundreds of re-



Photo by Chris Line

Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ed Larson speaks with a convention attendee during his book-signing event following his speech.



Photo by Chris Line

The courtroom at the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn., is preserved as it was during the 1925 Scopes Trial.

porters and generated front-page coverage throughout the nation. It became the subject of Broadway plays, Hollywood movies and Nashville songs. Clearly, Scopes remains the best-known misdemeanor trial in American history.

For evolutionists and secularists, the trial’s highlight came when the defense called Bryan to the stand, ostensibly as an expert witness on the Lord’s purpose, but actually as a means to grill him on the bible as a source for science instruction. It took place outside, so more people could attend this key event. Actually, they thought it was going to be the closing arguments, and the judge wanted everybody to be able to hear it because only a few hundred people could fit in the courtroom, but thousands spread across the courthouse lawn to listen to this.

“You claim everything in the bible should be literally interpreted?” Darrow asked. “I believe everything in the bible should be accepted as is given there. Some of the bible is given illustrative light,” Bryan replied.

Darrow retorted, “But when you read the whale swallowed Jonah, how do you literally interpret that?” To which Bryan squirmed, “I believe in a God who can make a whale, and can make a man, and make both of them do what he pleases.”

At other times, Bryan conceded points of biblical interpretation, generally accepted by conservative Christians of his day, in line with 19th-century evangelical thought. For example, when asked by Darrow if the Genesis “days of creation” necessarily meant 24-hour days, Bryan replied, “I do not think it necessarily does.” Not satisfied, as no good trial attorney would be, Darrow shot back, “But you think it does,” leading Bryan to equivocate. “I know a great many people think so.” Darrow pressed the point, “What do you think?” Apparently, after a pause, Bryan testified, “I do not think it does, but I think it would be just as easy for the kind of God we believe in to make the Earth in six days or in six years, or in 6 million years, or in 600 million years. I do not think it is important whether we believe one or the other.”

If Bryan could interpret scripture to fit science, the defense crowed, then why can’t evolutionists and science teachers? Now, Darrow never asked Bryan about evolution. He knew that given the opportunity, Bryan would respond with well-honed answers from his speeches about adverse religious and social results of Darwinian thinking, telling students they would descend from a lower order animals. He would say, as he often did, “Well, they’ll act like monkeys.” “A survival-of-the-fittest mentality leads to war,” he would likely add. As Darrow pushed his various lines of questioning, Bryan increasingly conceded he did not know the answers.

“Did you ever discover where Cain got his wife?” Darrow asked at one point, referring to one of Adam

and Eve’s two children, both male. “No, sir. I leave the agnostics to hunt for her,” Bryan replied. The audience warmly cheered Bryan. Darrow received very little applause. “The only purpose Mr. Darrow has is to slaughter the bible,” Bryan declared near the end.

“I object to your statement,” Darrow shouted back. “I am examining your full ideas that no intelligent Christian on Earth believes.”

The judge had heard enough. Over two hours after Bryan took the stand, the judge adjourned court for the day and struck Bryan’s testimony from the record. Despite Darrow’s pleas for academic freedom and his humiliating examination of Bryan, Scopes lost the Tennessee anti-evolution case and Tennessee’s anti-evolution statute was upheld.

Formal and informal state and local restrictions against evolutionary teaching multiplied nationwide, and commercial publishers all but deleted the subject from biology textbooks for decades until

some Cold War concerns about the quality of American science education led to an infusion of federal funds for new, better science textbooks during the late 1950s, leading to the BSCS [Biological Sciences Curriculum Studies] textbooks for high school teaching of biology.

By then, the synthesis of Darwinian selectionism and modern genetics had established evolution as the core concept in biology, and in these new high school biology textbooks, authored by academic scientists.

‘Inherit the Wind’

It was the time of this change that the 1955 Broadway play and the 1960 Hollywood movie “Inherit the Wind” crystallized the modern Scopes story. In the movie version, town officials, led by a fanatical but entirely fictional fundamentalist minister, arrest Scopes in his classroom for telling his students about the Darwinian theory of human evolution, which we know he actually didn’t do. Limited to a few sets, the play, if you watch it, begins with the jailed Scopes explaining to his girlfriend, “You know why I did it? I had the book in my hand under civic biology. I opened it up and read it to my sophomore class, Chapter 17, Darwin’s “On the Origin of Species.” According to the script of the play, for doing his job, Scopes is threatened with fine and imprisonment.

Of course, the law didn’t include imprisonment as a penalty. The ensuing prosecution becomes, in “Inherit the Wind,” a virtual religious interrogation, with Bryan mercilessly grilling the defendant’s invented girlfriend, who happens to be the minister’s “pretty but not beautiful” daughter. I got to know Donna Anderson. I think she’s plenty attractive.

About Scopes’ religious doubts, nothing of the sort ever happened in the actual trial. Written during the era of blacklisted authors and actors, the playwrights inserted it to mock McCarthyites, their intended tar-

get. “Inherit the Wind’s” closing scenes put the final gloss on the Scopes myth. Bryan is debunked and anti-evolutionism discredited. In the play and movie, Bryan’s debunking culminates with his interrogation by Darrow as the defense’s surprise closing witness. It may have been a surprise in the real trial to Bryan, but it wasn’t a surprise to Darrow; he had planned for it. In “Inherit the Wind’s” reconstruction of this storied encounter, Bryan assails evolution solely on narrow biblical grounds and denounces all science as godless.

By the end of his “Inherit the Wind” testimony, Bryan is totally befuddled. “Mother!” he pleads to his wife in the courtroom. “They are laughing at me, Mother!” In the actual trial, Bryan’s people were not laughing at him. They were seething at Darrow. At the end of “Inherit the Wind,” everyone ignores Bryan when he attempts, after the trial formally adjourned, to deliver a courtroom rant against the theory of evolution, precipitating his final collapse. He is carried off the stage, incoherently delivering his never-used presidential inaugural address.

To ensure that viewers get the point, the writers of “Inherit the Wind” have Scopes ask Darrow after the jury convicts him, “Did I win or did I lose?” Darrow answers, “You won. Millions of people will say you won. They’re reading the papers tonight that you smashed a bad law, that you made it a joke.”

When Darrow hears that Bryan has died, in the “Inherit the Wind” version of the story, Darrow famously quotes from the bible. “He that troubles his own house shall inherit the wind, and the fool shall be a servant of the wise in heart.” Alone in the courtroom at the end, Darrow, in “Inherit the Wind,” picks up the defendant’s copy of “On the Origin of Species,” which is left on the table there, and the judge’s bible, which is also left there, balancing them thoughtfully as if his hands were scales. The attorney jams them in his briefcase side by side and walks off quietly. Well, not that quietly, because in the movie they have Leslie Uggams singing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” That alone is worth watching the movie for.

The message was clear. Even in Dayton, the Scopes trial ended in defeat for the anti-evolutionist and a triumph for the best in science and religion. When the actual trial concluded, however, people generally did not see it as a clear victory for the defense. To the contrary, in its immediate aftermath, every newspaper editorial that I could read about it depicted the trial as inconclusive, and predicted the anti-evolution controversy would intensify as a result.

When Bryan died unexpectedly in Dayton a week after the trial, he was lionized by millions. Crowds lined the railroad track as this train went in slow motion to Washington, D.C. They lined the track at every stop as his body was carried to Washington for burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

While fundamentalist leaders competed to carry on Bryan’s crusade against evolutionary teaching, several states and countless school districts responded to the trial by imposing restrictions on teaching evolution, especially after 1927, when the Supreme Court upheld the Tennessee state law in Scopes’s appeal. The following year, by a popular initiative that garnered nearly two-thirds of the statewide vote, Arkansas followed Tennessee in making it illegal for public schools to teach the theory or doctrine that mankind ascended or descended from a lower form of animal. An anti-evolutionist college named for Bryan soon opened in Dayton and has expanded over time. Scopes even came back to Dayton to celebrate the town’s 35th anniversary of the trial.

The years since the Scopes Trial are pockmarked with efforts at the state and local level, not only to limit the teaching of evolution in public schools, or to balance it with creationist instruction, but to advance conservative Christian values both in the public schools and through creation-friendly, Christian academies. Christian schools and home schooling, which, now, thanks to the Big Beautiful Bill we mentioned, will begin receiving federal tax support.

In addition, throughout the nation, there’s been an increased movement to allow students, as part of this teach-the-controversy approach, to have parents being able to have their students opt out, which received confirmation by the United States Supreme Court, not only as an option that schools can do, but as a constitutional mandate on public schools across the nation.

The bottom line is that anti-evolutionism did not die in Dayton, nor did evangelicalism or Christian nationalism. Bryan’s brand of religious populism survives in America, and with it, so does the legacy of the Scopes Trial. Thank you very much.

2025 BIPOC student essay contest winners

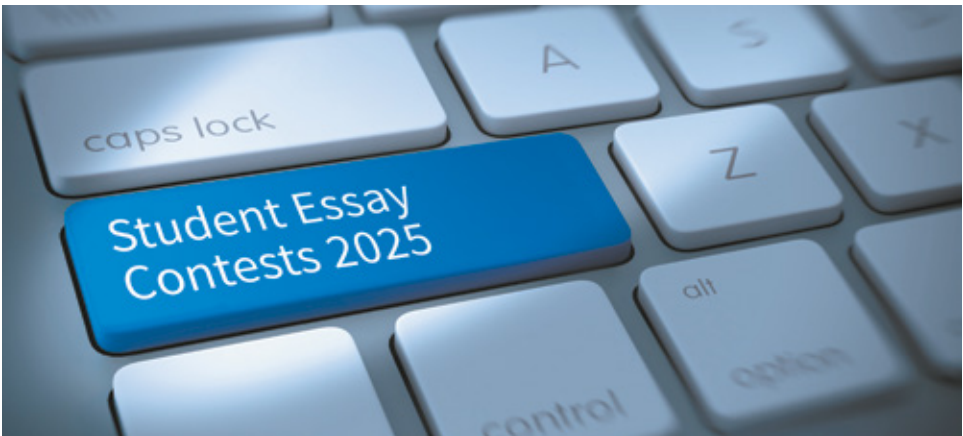
The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 13 top winners and 10 honorable mentions of the 2025 David Hudak Memorial Black, Indigenous and Persons of Color (BIPOC) Student Essay Competition.

FFRF has paid out a total of \$19,150 in award money for the contest this year.

BIPOC students were asked to write on the topic of “How white Christian nationalism endangers my rights.” They were asked to select a specific attack on civil liberties by white Christian nationalists and describe how it poses a threat and how that impacts them or others in the BIPOC community.

Winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below. (FFRF seeks to distribute essay scholarship monies to a higher number of students, so ties — such as sixth place in this contest — are not regarded in the typical tie fashion, where, in this instance, seventh place would be skipped.)

- FIRST PLACE**
Mekah’E LeClair, 20, DigiPen Institute of Technology, \$3,500.
- SECOND PLACE**
Naveyah Boykin, 20, Lincoln University, \$3,000.
- THIRD PLACE**
Gabrielle Williams, 20, Howard University, \$2,500.



- FOURTH PLACE**
Henry Olango, 21, Penn State University, \$2,000.
- FIFTH PLACE**
Jaianah Hightower, 20, Morgan State University, \$1,500.
- SIXTH PLACE (tie)**
JoJo Huntley, 20, Temple University, \$1,000.
Arianna Sukhdeo, 18, Johns Hopkins University, \$1,000.
- SEVENTH PLACE**
Aryan Singla, 18, University of Connecticut, \$750.
- EIGHTH PLACE**
Chris Previlon, 19, University of Central Florida, \$500.
- NINTH PLACE (tie)**
Alayna Champ, 19, University of South

- Carolina, \$400.
Lauren Nsele, 21, Boston University, \$400.
- TENTH PLACE (tie)**
Gabrielle Telsaint, 18, Florida International University, \$300.
Layla Vaughan, 19, University of North Carolina, \$300.
- HONORABLE MENTION (\$200 each)**
Blake Battle, 19, Georgia Southern University.
Akrit Burroughs, 18, Kennesaw State University.
Jendayi Guamerah-Oliver, 18, Xavier University.
Natalya Hagee, 18, Temple University.
Ava Heims, 19, Syracuse University.
Fiolajesurera Orelaja, 18, American

- University.
Bri’Kayla Person, 19, University of Central Oklahoma.
Jaydon Santiago, 18, UCLA.
Laiya Thorpe, 20, North Carolina A&T State University.
Donovan Tyler, 19, University of Virginia.
Miriam Zepeda Perez, 18, Northern Arizona University.

FFRF thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this (and FFRF’s other essay competitions).

FFRF would also like to thank our volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Dan Barker, David Chivers, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Susan Gould, Jeffrey La Vicka, Sammi Lawrence, Michael Luther, Katya Maes, David Malcolm, Jason Mosebach, Chris O’Connell, Andrea Osburne, Joanna Papich, Sue Schuetz, PJ Slinger, Kimberly Waldron and Karen Lee Weidig.

This contest is named for the late David Hudak, an FFRF member who left a bequest to generously fund a student essay contest.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to students of color since 2016. It has also offered essay contests open to all college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010 and one for law students since 2019.

FIRST PLACE

White supremacy and Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Mekah’E \$3,500.

By Mekah’E LeClair

For centuries, Indigenous women have been denied bodily autonomy. We have been mass raped and forcibly sterilized by white colonizers who awarded themselves jurisdiction over our bodies. This, alongside other barbaric actions performed against my people, was justified under the guise of Manifest Destiny; otherwise defined as violent, systemic oppression in the name of the Christian God.

White Christian nationalism is, to me, indistinguishable from the fundamental American ideology that bred such abhorrent institutions as the Atlantic slave trade and state-sanctioned genocide against the Indigenous population. These systems were founded in the belief that Black and Indigenous people are subhuman races, that we are incompatible with the superior European and Christian values of our oppressors.

I see this same belief reflected in the modern battle against reproductive rights. Indigenous women, who have safely practiced abortions since time immemorial, are a uniquely vulnerable group within



Mekah’E LeClair

the discourse. Indigenous women are 2.5 times more likely to be raped than women of another race. We suffer rates of sexual violence so excessive, numerous coalitions are dedicated to providing support and justice to Indigenous victims specifically. Indigenous people who reside on reservations have limited access to sexual education programs and contraceptives to begin with, further increasing the likelihood of an unwanted pregnancy.

The argument for rescinding repro-

ductive rights is reliant on the belief that abortions — and, by some interpretations, contraceptives — are forbidden within the laws of Christianity. Any educated American, however, would be quick to point out that our Constitution — within the First Amendment, no less — cites the freedom to practice any religion. Therefore, it would be entirely unconstitutional to force the American public into obeying the rules of a religion they do not subscribe to.

As an Indigenous person, this debate is personal to me because of the historical context of Christianity within my community. For generations, my people were subjected to the forced compliance of a foreign religion. Our own spiritual beliefs and practices were outlawed, deemed primitive in comparison to the faith practiced by European settlers. This is why the recent uptick in white Christian nationalism has struck a chord with me and other Black and Indigenous people. History is repeating itself, and it seems as if only minority communities like my own

are able to recognize the pattern.

It’s my belief that the greatest strategy against white Christian nationalism is to be politically active. I stay up to date with

“History is repeating itself, and it seems as if only minority communities like my own are able to recognize the pattern.”

local elections and familiarize myself with the policies of my representatives. Many politicians campaign outright on a platform of Christian nationalism, but others more subtly ingrain those

same views into their positions, which is why it’s crucial to thoroughly research the proposals of anyone running for office. Voting is imperative to making my voice heard. I express my secular beliefs with the same vigor and intensity as my Christian counterparts. Alongside my community, I have the power to remind members of this ideology that they’re not the only ones who can unite toward a cause.

Mekah’E, 20, of Washington, attends the DigiPen Institute of Technology and is majoring in digital art and animation. Mekah’E writes: “I am a member of the Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma. I’m an artist who primarily creates cartoons, but I dabble in amateur puppet-making, as well.”

SECOND PLACE

My body, their battleground

FFRF awarded Naveyah \$3,000.

By Naveyah Boykin

All right, so here’s how it really feels: I’m a young Black woman, right? And, honestly, nothing chills me more than the idea that a bunch of total strangers — mostly white dudes, usually with some Christian nationalist thing going on in the

background — think they get to make the rules about my body. Wild. Apparently, I’m not an actual person to them; I’m some kind of symbol or a prop in their political theater. Meanwhile, to me, this body is where I keep all my plans, my fears, everything that makes me, me. Why should some old politician’s interpretation of religion get to veto my choices? Nah.

The way I see it, white Christian na-

tionalism is not your average Sunday church crowd. We’re talking about a political movement, built around the idea that America is for white Christians, period. That’s the dream for them. Control who counts, who gets rights, and, yup, literally, who controls our bodies. You cannot convince me otherwise. Reproductive freedom is right at the center of this battle.

Let’s talk about what happened

after Roe v. Wade got trashed. State after state lined up to ban abortion, like it was some kind of contest. Guess who feels the pain the most? Women of color — Black women, especially. Black moms already die way more from pregnancy than white moms. The stats aren’t even close. Now, take away safe abortion, and that number only goes up. The wild part? They’re justifying all of this using their own



Naveyah Boykin

brand of Christianity, like everyone in this country signed up to live by their church’s code. Nope, that’s not how this is supposed to work.

Where I grew up, health clinics are vanishing, and, as for info? It’s basically a game of telephone; good luck figuring out what’s true. You sit around with girlfriends, and it’s like, “What happens if I get assaulted?” or “What if I’m not ready to be a mom?” I mean, can we just live? Why should a lawmaker’s bible tell me what to do?

Here’s the thing: I won’t just sit quietly and watch all this roll over us. Never been my style. I’m not religious and I’ve always felt like the church and government need a permanent breakup. So,

I talk. A lot. In class. With friends on campus. Even online when it matters. Silence? That’s just letting them win. Also, yeah, I support the folks fighting for reproductive rights and try to make sure people near me know how to vote on this stuff.

White Christian nationalism? It runs on fear and keeps people quiet. If we speak up, we mess with their whole system. Solidarity, truth — basic bravery — that’s the antidote. We have to defend the right to choose. Not in theory, in real life. Not for just ourselves, but for every single person

who’s tired of being treated like someone else’s talking point. End of the day, this stuff is so much bigger than just politics. We’re talking about our actual lives — our bodies, our futures and our damn humanity. I’m not giving up on any of that. Naveyah, 20, is from Massachusetts and is attending Lincoln University with plans to get a degree in education. Naveyah writes: “I am the first in my family to attend college. As a young Black girl who navigates between predominantly white spaces and the rich legacy of an HBCU, I have learned the value of speaking powerfully to serve others. I work as a substitute teacher, which has given me the chance to mentor and encourage students from my community.”

“Why should some old politician’s interpretation of religion get to veto my choices? Nah.”

“I believe community should be built on mutual respect, not divine hierarchy. We don’t need dogma. We need dignity.”

Gabrielle, 19, is from Pennsylvania and attends Howard University with plans to major in technology and social impact. Gabrielle writes: “I graduated high school as valedictorian, reflecting my dedication to academic excellence and leadership. On campus, I’m actively involved in the Howard Water and Environment Association, the National Society of Black Engineers (NSBE) and the Howard Anime Club. I interned at the National Security Agency, gaining hands-on experience. I was also honored with the African American Recognition Award from BigFuture, recognizing my academic achievements.”

THIRD PLACE

When nationalism wears a cross

FFRF awarded Gabrielle \$2,500.

By Gabrielle Williams

When our school held its first-ever Black History Month assembly, I felt a flicker of hope. As a Black student in a predominantly white, conservative school district, I felt isolated, a step toward understanding. But, as students were dismissed from the auditorium, I heard laughing. “What a waste of time.” “That was so dumb.” “Why do we even need that?” These weren’t careless comments. They reflected a deeper hostility toward confronting systemic inequality. What they didn’t know was that assembly was created by PACCT (People of All Cultures and Colors Together), a club I co-founded. We built PACCT to give students of color a space to share what we face every day: microaggressions, racism, isolation and the desire to be heard and understood. The assembly was our attempt to build empathy. Instead, it exposed how much of it was missing. Later that week, I watched a Black classmate being harassed in the cafeteria. His hair wasn’t done, wearing his hood to hide it. A white student kept pulling it off, laughing and mocking him. No teacher intervened. No consequences followed. That



Gabrielle Williams

silence, the failure to protect or affirm us, is how white Christian nationalism operates — not only through policies, but through culture, permission and erasure. Many of the students who mocked DEI efforts came from homes and churches steeped in Christian nationalist ideology. These communities preach “color-blindness” over equity, insist America was founded as a Christian nation and claim racism ended with the Civil Rights

Act. To them, DEI isn’t about justice, it’s a threat to their worldview. But DEI isn’t about guilt. It’s about recognition and repair. It ensures that all students are seen, heard and given equal opportunities. White Christian nationalism, rooted in myths of divine favor and American exceptionalism, resists this entirely. It tells young white Christians they are the “true” Americans and that telling the full truth about our history is unpatriotic. This isn’t abstract. When legislatures influenced by Christian nationalism ban critical race theory or cut DEI funding, they control what stories are allowed in schools like mine. They tell students our experiences are too controversial or simply irrelevant. As a nonreligious student, I find strength not in a holy book, but in honesty. White Christian nationalism is not fringe, it’s a powerful force shaping education, policy and culture in ways that endanger civil rights and silence marginalized communities. To combat white Christian nationalism, my first strategy is storytelling. That means writing essays like this, speaking at

FOURTH PLACE

How Christian nationalism endangers my rights

FFRF awarded Henry \$2,000.

By Henry Olango

When I was pulled over by police at gunpoint last summer coming home from college, I realized something I’ll never forget: Freedom in America is often conditional for people who look like me. I’m a Black student from Erie, Pa., a city once labeled one of the worst places in America for African Americans to live. Erie is no stranger to police violence, racial profiling or political regression. It’s also a place where white Christian nationalism is not just an ideology, it’s showing up at the ballot box, shaping laws and silencing voices like mine. The threat white Christian nationalism poses to voting rights is not abstract — it’s real, deliberate and purposeful. While cloaked in religious language, this move-

“As a Black, secular student, I am the embodiment of what this movement fears: someone who won’t accept a country where faith is weaponized and votes are denied.”

ment is deeply political, often working to suppress the votes of underrepresented groups under the guise of election integrity. It pushes policies that disproportionately affect Black communities, such as voter ID laws, reduced polling places in urban neighborhoods and opposition to early or mail-in voting. These aren’t just bureaucratic obstacles placed in our way, they are tools of disenfranchisement. I’ve seen the consequences of this firsthand. Erie’s recent shift toward Republican leadership, bolstered by white evangelical turnout, came with rising hostility toward DEI programs and limited access to voting under the pretense of fraud prevention. My own family, friends and neighbors — people without stable housing — find it harder and harder to have their voices heard. When our voice is silenced at the polls, we are silenced everywhere else too — in our school board, in our



Henry Olango

health care and in our community. As a nonreligious student, I reject the notion that a religion so historically entangled with white supremacy should dictate the rights of others. To push back, I help by organizing voter registration efforts in my community. I’ve volunteered with local youth programs before, so I know that civic education, especially among first-time and minority voters, can be transformative. Second, I use my voice. Whether it’s writing, speaking or simply having difficult conversations, I refuse to be quiet about

injustice because the silence enables oppression, and we have been silent too long. White Christian nationalism doesn’t just threaten my future, it threatens the very idea of democracy by trying to define who gets to participate. As a Black, secular student, I am the embodiment of what this movement fears: someone who won’t accept a country where faith is weaponized and votes are denied. I may not have grown up with power, but I’ve found strength in truth and I will keep fighting to ensure that the voices in my community are not erased. Henry, 21, is from Pennsylvania and attends Penn State University, with plans to major in mechanical engineering. Henry writes: “Ever since I was a child, my mother stressed the importance of striving for excellence in education. My mother sacrificed a lot to get me where I am today, and her hard work can only secure us so much. It is my duty to open all the doors that were closed to her. Poverty has haunted my family and the generation that came before me and I do not see a reason why it has to continue. My plan is to uplift them with my own two hands, hard work and education. I am a dreamer and my dream is to reach for the stars. But, if I miss the stars, then I’ll grab a handful of clouds.”

FIFTH PLACE

Just existing is resistance

FFRF awarded Jaianah \$1,500.

By Jaianah Hightower

I wake up in the morning and breathe. I look at myself in the mirror and wonder what today will bring. The sun rises, but peace doesn't. When I walk down the street, I carry more than a body — I carry generations of struggle, a patchwork of identities that make me a walking target: Black. Woman. Queer. Nonreligious. To whom do I pose a threat by simply existing? The answer stares back: white Christian nationalists. Among the many freedoms under siege, threats to reproductive rights cut the deepest into my life and my future. White Christian nationalism does not just oppose abortion — it seeks to control people like me under the illusion of "morality." It wraps misogyny and racism in scripture, turning faith into a weapon against my autonomy. They say it's about "life," but whose life? Certainly not mine. When Roe v. Wade was overturned, I felt the ground shift beneath me. I wasn't just watching a law fall — I was



Jaianah Hightower

watching my rights unravel. If I were to become pregnant by force, I could be denied the right to choose. My trauma would be politicized. My body would become evidence in someone else's moral crusade. And, because I'm Black, statistics show I'd be more likely to die from that pregnancy, with less access to care, less empathy and less justice. White Christian nationalism does

not just criminalize abortion; it criminalizes my survival. The danger isn't just in courtrooms or churches — it's in policies that reach into my clinic visits, my relationships, and my dreams. It's in lawmakers who speak of "God's will" while stripping away my humanity. It's in forced births, denied care and silenced voices. It's in the way they paint people like me as immoral for daring to demand control over our bodies. But, I refuse to be silent. As a non-religious person, my resistance begins in truth-telling. I speak. I write. I vote. I challenge the narrative that morality must be Christian or white. I support organizations that provide reproductive care and education, especially in communities of color. I hold conversations that others are afraid to have, even if my voice shakes. And I imagine. I imagine a country where freedom isn't condition-

“ [Christian nationalism] wraps misogyny and racism in scripture, turning faith into a weapon against my autonomy.

al, where rights aren't reserved for the few. I imagine a world where I am not a threat simply for breathing. Until then, I'll keep breathing, keep walking and keep fighting. Because just existing in America is an act of defiance. Jaianah, 20, is from Maryland and attends Morgan State University. She writes: "Books were my first escape. That love for books grew into a fascination with the world beyond America's borders, a desire to see and serve more than what I knew. By 10, I had witnessed the fragility of life when my mother faced a near-fatal childbirth. At 12, I was nearly called to deliver my sister at home. Those moments lit a fire in me. By 15, I knew I would become an OB/GYN. I'm pursuing my bachelor of science degree with full focus on medical school. My goal is clear: to provide compassionate care to women everywhere — and eventually, take that mission across the globe, blending my love for travel with my purpose to heal."

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

My rights are in jeopardy

FFRF awarded JoJo \$1,000.

By JoJo Huntley

I grew up hearing that this was the "land of the free," but lately, I've been asking: free for who? As a 20-year-old Black man attending a Predominantly White Institution (PWI), trying to make sense of a country that seems more divided by the day, I've come to realize something unsettling — white Christian nationalism isn't just a political idea. It's a threat. Not just to an abstract "freedom," but to me, my family and the people I love. Especially when it comes to my reproductive rights. You may ask, what has a young man like me to do with issues such as reproductive rights? Here's the thing: Bodily autonomy is not something that affects

“ Bodily autonomy is not something that affects only women. It's a human issue.

only women. It's a human issue. It is a struggle for equality of women, for the individual's right to live his or her life in the way he or she wants to live. In my personal world, Black women are my mother, sister, girlfriend — and we know all too well that this right is threatened daily. White Christian nationalism pushes the idea that America should be ruled by a specific, rigid interpretation of Christianity — one that often leaves no room for people who don't fit the mold. It's not about faith. It's about power. That power is being used to control bodies, especially the bodies of Black and Brown people. Look at the states passing abortion bans. Look at who gets the least access to health care, who gets punished the hardest, who's forced to carry the weight of someone else's beliefs. For people in my community, these



JoJo Huntley

aren't headlines. They're lived realities. A cousin who had to drive across three states just to get care. A friend who got scared into silence by a school system that won't even teach proper sexual education. As a nonreligious person, I won't sit

back and let white Christian nationalism rewrite the rules of freedom. I speak out in class, even when it's uncomfortable. I show up to protests, sign petitions, support secular organizations and I vote. That's how I fight. That's how I stand up — not just for women, but for choice, for freedom, for dignity. They want us to be quiet, not cause trouble, and not even dare to look for our missing color. I prefer to be loud, to be proud, and not be afraid. It means our rights aren't theirs to take. JoJo, is from New Jersey and attends Temple University. JoJo writes: "I am a student-athlete at Temple University, and I graduated from Saint Joseph High School in Metuchen, N.J. I was a part of a membership program throughout my middle school and high school years called New Brunswick Alumni Kappa League, created by local brothers of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc. They've helped me learn about the core values behind community, volunteerism and education."

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

A threat to reproductive justice, equity

FFRF awarded Arianna \$1,000.

By Arianna Sukhdeo

As someone passionate about health care and community advocacy, I've seen firsthand how reproductive health care decisions are deeply personal, complex and often urgent, especially for women and people of color. The growing influence of white Christian nationalism in American politics makes this reality more dangerous. This ideology isn't just about religion; it's about power, control and enforcing a narrow vision of

America that targets the most vulnerable among us. When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, abortion access became a matter of geography, not justice. More than 1,300 abortion restrictions have been enacted since Roe was first decided in 1973, but the fall of federal protections has drastically intensified their harm. According to the

“ When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade in 2022, abortion access became a matter of geography, not justice.

Commonwealth Fund, "as of Jan. 12, 2023, abortion is banned in 12 states with very limited exceptions and unavailable in an additional two," and 66 clinics in 15 states stopped providing abortion care in the first 100 days after Roe was overturned. These rollbacks disproportionately affect Black, Latino and Indigenous people, those who already face systemic barriers to health care and are less likely to

have the resources to travel for care. The ideology behind these restrictions is deeply rooted in Christian nationalism. From the beginning, leaders like Jerry Falwell Sr. framed abortion as a test of national morality: "Our great nation was founded by godly men upon godly principles to be a Christian nation," he proclaimed in 1981. Today, this same ideology fuels policies that aren't about preserving life, but about preserving social control. As the Religion News Service notes, "Christian nationalism isn't opposed to death. It's opposed to disorder, specifically the disruption



Arianna Sukhdeo

of established hierarchies and the traditional moral order.”

My family immigrated here for opportunity and self-determination. But, how can I feel free when lawmakers in power are forcing their religious ideology into my body and my choices? How can I envision a future as a physician who believes in equity, when some of the people I might one day care for will be forced to carry pregnancies they cannot afford — physically, emotionally or financially — because of extremist policies? I fear a future where the patients I serve, especially low-income women of color, are denied basic medical autonomy due to extremist, faith-based legislation.

I’ve realized that silence is complicated. One strategy I use to combat white Christian nationalism is education. I will speak out in classrooms, peer groups and mentorship circles, naming the movement for what it is and highlighting its harmful consequences. Secondly, I desire to actively support secular organizations and candidates who advocate for the separation of church and state and reproductive justice.

White Christian nationalism is not just a political threat, it’s a threat to human dignity, equity and justice. I refuse to let an extremist minority define freedom for me, my family or the communities I serve, and I will always

stand on the side of freedom, equity and secular democracy.

Arianna, 18, is from New York and is attending Johns Hopkins University, with plans to major in medical science/pediatrics. Arianna writes: “Growing up in a close-knit, multicultural family, I discovered my passion for health care and advocacy at an early age. As a leading board member in Columbia University’s ACCOMPLISHED Community Health Program, clinic liaison at All Med Urgent Care, peer researcher with the Urban Barcode Project and founder of the global tutoring initiative Passion with Collaboration, I am committed to uplifting others and fostering change within my community.”

SEVENTH PLACE

Christian nationalism’s threat to DEI

FFRF awarded Aryan \$750.

By Aryan Singla

As a Hindu American, I have always loved the cultural diversity of my faith — its rituals, its stories and its emphasis on unity amidst multiplicity. As a child, I reveled in presenting my heritage, like when I did my presentation on Shah Rukh Khan in fourth grade, playing Bollywood songs for a classroom full of curious peers. Yet, this pride has become more and more overshadowed by white Christian nationalism, in particular its threats to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs, which endanger the cultural inclusivity that has enabled me and my peers to thrive.

White Christian nationalism, in demanding a homogeneous, Christian-majority nation, routinely calls DEI efforts “divisive” or “anti-American.” To me, in my community, where I have organized Holi and Diwali celebrations via my school’s Asian-American Club, such assaults are personal. DEI initiatives in the workplace and schools form spaces in which my Hindu heritage — prayer at HCC Temple, guiding young Hindu kids — are respected and appreciated, not viewed as a “waste of time.”



Aryan Singla

When nationalist discourse informs policies that undermine such efforts, such as prohibiting cultural education or limiting inclusive curricula, it especially jeopardizes the recognition of minority religions. For my family, this would involve my younger cousins growing up in an environment where their cultural heritage is stigmatized, their traditions criticized, or their identities perceived as “un-American.”

This danger is personal. My grandmother, who recently moved to the United

States following my grandfather’s passing, relies on community inclusivity to be at home. Absent DEI protections, her Hindu traditions may face insidious or blatant hostility within a society predicated upon a monolithic religious narrative. For BIPOC groups, this erosion of DEI insults our right to cultural expression and equal belonging.

As a secular Hindu, grounded in cultural rather than dogmatic belief, I feel secularism is a protection against this danger. To combat white Christian nationalism, I plan to ramp up my activism in the form of community organizing, as with Interact Club, where I’ve led events donating thousands to local causes. I would host interfaith forums, using my leadership in our Asian-American Club to hold sessions where Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists and others share stories of cultural pride and confront nationalist narratives with lived experiences of pluralism. I have also learned to influence policy as a

youth member of the Town of Hamden’s Board of Ethics. I would advocate for stronger local DEI protections, drafting proposals for inclusive education, and community programs.

These strategies demonstrate my dedication to secularism and equality. These strategies guarantee that my Hindu heritage, along with other people’s varied identities, will continue to thrive in a nation that belongs to all of us.

Aryan, 18, is from Connecticut and attends the University of Connecticut, with plans to major in pediatrics. Aryan writes: “As vice president of Interact Club and my high school Class of 2025, I have organized over 14 service events, raising \$4,000 for local charities, and have accumulated over 700 hours of community service. A CIAC Scholar Athlete and Seal of Biliteracy recipient. Additionally, my work as a camp counselor and life-guard fuels my passion for pediatric medicine, inspired by personal loss and a commitment to cultural diversity rooted in my Indian heritage.”

“ When nationalist discourse informs policies that undermine such efforts, such as prohibiting cultural education or limiting inclusive curricula, it especially jeopardizes the recognition of minority religions.

EIGHTH PLACE

How attacks on DEI threaten my future

FFRF awarded Chris \$500.

By Chris Previlon

I grew up in a Christian home where I learned to love others, give back to the community and have confidence in a better future than the one I currently inhabit. However, as I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized that white Christian nationalism is about control more than faith. It uses religion as a weapon to promote a limited worldview that ignores the opinions of entire communities and excludes people who look like me. The increasing assault on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives in businesses and schools is among the most obvious instances.

DEI efforts have been crucial in determining my chances and sense of value as a young Black man. Having grown up in a home where my mother, grandmother and siblings provided for me, I have experienced social and financial hardships that many people cannot fathom. I have, none-

“ As I’ve gotten older, I’ve realized that white Christian nationalism is about control more than faith.

theless, also defied odds. I started Beyond Balloons, a balloon décor business, when I was 14 years old, and it eventually worked with well-known companies like Anthropologie and Walmart. I got accolades for business and theater leadership, designed marketing for school events, served as vice president of the student body and graduated with honors from high school. I was even the youngest cast member in a community production with over 200 people who auditioned when I made my New York City musical theater debut at the age of 19. These successes were made possible by DEI programs, which provided advice and visibility in addition to motivation.

However, DEI is portrayed as an assault on traditional values by white Christian nationalism. While these initiatives were intended to address generations of injustice, it makes erroneous assertions that they are racist or polarizing. I might not have realized that I could be a leader, a performer or a business owner and still be authentic without DEI. These programs



Chris Previlon

gave me an equal opportunity, not preferential treatment.

Students like me are denied access to mentorship, representation and a sense of belonging when schools are prohibited from talking about race or cultural identity. That harm is individual. I have witnessed firsthand how easily gifted children of color be disregarded or demoralized in the absence of a support network. I’ve experi-

enced the stillness that comes with being the only Black student in a room, and I’ve wondered if I should dress or speak differently to be taken seriously.

Even though I’m religious, I support the separation of religion and state because true faith may exist without laws. I work for justice and compassion, not conformity, because of my Christian convictions. I use my platforms in student leadership, performance and business to promote various voices, dispel false narratives and create environments where everyone is respected for who they are. I am a nonreligious public advocate.

The advancements gained by DEI are in danger of being undone by white Christian nationalism. However, I will not allow that to occur in silence. In order to support secularism, protect equity and inspire the next generation of dreamers like me, I will continue to show up and use my voice, my work and my narrative.

Chris, 19, is from Florida and attends the University of Central Florida, with plans to major in business management. Chris writes: “I was recognized at my high school graduation for my entrepreneurial success and leadership in student government, theatre and media production.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

Voice by voice, vote by vote

FFRF awarded Alayna \$400.

By Alayna Champ

I first learned the power of visibility and voice through ballet. Throughout high school, I served as an ambassador for Brown Ballerinas for Change, a nonprofit founded in 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. We use a historically exclusive art form — where Eurocentric beauty standards and a lack of diversity have long limited Black dancers — to champion social justice. Performing in brown tights and pointe shoes, mentoring young dancers of color and advocating for equity, we push for inclusion in spaces that weren’t built with us in mind. That experience taught me how art can spark change and how advocacy are deeply connected. Today, I carry that same commitment to justice into new arenas — especially voting rights, which are under increasing threat from the rise of white Christian nationalism.

This movement, which falsely insists that the United States was founded to be a white Christian nation, doesn’t just aim to erase history — it actively undermines progress. One of its most dangerous tactics is the suppression of voting rights. Through laws and policies like gerrymandering, restrictive voter ID requirements,



Alayna Champ

and targeted roll purges — often framed in religious or moral language — these efforts shrink access to the ballot box, particularly for communities of color, young people and working-class voters.

As a young Black woman, I know that my right to vote was hard-won. In my family, voting has always been seen not just as a right, but as a responsibility — a tool that ensures our voices are heard. Today, voter suppression threatens to undo that legacy, targeting Black and Brown communities through long wait times, misinformation campaigns and

systemic barriers designed to discourage participation. I refuse to be silenced.

That’s why, after hard work, I proudly became a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. — the first intercollegiate historically African American sorority. Within AKA, I engage in service, scholarship and sisterhood, with a primary focus on addressing issues that affect women and girls and promoting global service and social activism. Our sorority has always stood at the forefront of social justice, working to empower our communities and advocate for fairness and equity.

Through our international program initiatives, we equip communities with the tools, knowledge, and support to activate their voices and mobilize self-help. We provide voter education, registration, and mobilization efforts to ensure our communities use their most powerful tools of advocacy during local, state and national elections. We also sponsor public policy forums — nonpartisan spaces where people can engage in open dialogue about political challenges and the direction of our country. Our Candidate Forums cre-

ate opportunities to hear directly from those seeking public office, and our Public Servants’ Guides spotlight women of color in leadership and show others how to follow their path.

To fight back against white Christian nationalism and its attack on voting rights, I’m committed to educating voters, especially those in marginalized communities, and creating accessible, empowering spaces for civic engagement. I’ve learned that

change is built moment by moment, vote by vote, voice by voice. And I will continue to use mine.

Alayna, 19, is from Virginia and attends the University of South Carolina, with plans to major in fashion. Alayna writes: “My love for fashion was inspired by my dad, who always wanted to open a clothing store but couldn’t attend college due to financial constraints and his focus on supporting our family. I work as a sales associate at Ann Taylor and as a marketing assistant for Rita Ricks LLC, gaining valuable experience in branding and communication. I’ve been volunteering at the Housing Families First Homeless Shelter since 2019, and I stay involved in service through USC’s Service Saturdays.”

“In my family, voting has always been seen not just as a right, but as a responsibility — a tool that ensures our voices are heard.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

The cost of moralizing drug use in America

FFRF awarded Lauren \$400.

By Lauren Nsele

When I first began organizing around harm reduction and overdose prevention at Boston University, I thought I was filling in the gaps where the system had failed. But, the deeper I got into the work, the more I realized that this crisis was not just about drugs. It was about punishment. About who gets saved and who gets left behind. The more I learned about the roots of the War on Drugs, the more I started to see the fingerprints of something deeper and more dangerous: white Christian nationalism. The moral framework that has shaped how this country views addiction.

The War on Drugs didn’t start with concern for public health. It was born from racism and state power. Politicians in the ‘80s weaponized so-called “family values” and moral panic to pass laws that criminalized Black and Brown people under the guise of

“saving” them. Drug use was framed not as a symptom of systemic neglect or trauma, but as a sin. Even language was used to justify this approach: the words “clean,” “pure,” “redeemed” and “fallen” are echoed with religious overtones. Politicians like Ronald Reagan used Christian language to frame drug use as a sin and addiction as a spiritual failure, not a public health crisis. First Lady

Nancy Reagan told us to “Just Say No,” as if willpower could override structural violence. Laws were passed with the blessing of religious leaders who preached abstinence over treatment and shame over

science. The result? Generations of Black families were destroyed by incarceration. Communities were flooded with police but starved of health care. I have seen the legacy of this up close. I live in Boston, one of the epicenters of opioid misuse. I have heard stories from my community where Black people were criminalized for surviving or for being poor. Christian nationalist rhetoric justified this with talk of “cleansing” communities and “restoring order,” all



Lauren Nsele

while ignoring the root causes of addiction: poverty and systemic neglect. By conflating criminal justice with moral salvation, white Christian nationalism has built a system where civil liberties are collateral damage.

To combat Christian nationalist rhetoric around drug use, we must dismantle the false moral framework that equates substance use with sin and treats addiction as a personal failure instead of a public health issue. This ideology has fueled decades of policies that criminalize rather than care.

As a result, the nation has undermined civil liberties like the right to health care and equal protection under the law. True equality means everyone deserves access to evidence-based care, regardless of their behavior or background. As a nonreligious Black woman, I advocate for policies grounded in science, not scripture — policies that recognize substance use as a complex, biopsychosocial issue rather than a sin. Christian nationalism has ensured that, in too many parts of this country, punishment masquerades as policy. By reframing drug use through a secular, justice-based lens, we can push back against the religious moralism that has long justified the systemic denial of health care to black communities.

Lauren, 21, is from Massachusetts and attends Boston College, majoring in biology with a minor in public health. Lauren writes: “My academic and professional interests center around pharmacology and regenerative medicine, with a particular focus on community-based health initiatives. Outside the classroom, I have volunteered extensively with local health organizations, helping to raise awareness about health disparities and work as an executive staffer for the community service department in student government.”

“Christian nationalism has ensured that, in too many parts of this country, punishment masquerades as policy.”

TENTH PLACE (tie)

Faith shouldn’t silence freedom

FFRF awarded Gabrielle \$300.

By Gabrielle Telsaint

As a queer Haitian American woman raised in a religious household, I have often had to live in two worlds: one where I’m expected to hide parts of myself to maintain peace, and another

where I can begin to live authentically. White Christian nationalism threatens to make the first world permanent for me and for countless others like me.

White Christian nationalism is not just about faith. It’s about using a narrow, extremist interpretation of Christianity, centered on white, conservative, patriarchal values, to control laws and policies that affect

all of us. LGBTQ rights are one of its main targets. Across the country, this movement has pushed for laws banning gender-affirming care, restricting conversations about LGBTQ identities in schools, and even trying to roll back marriage equality. These policies are framed as protecting “religious freedom,” but what they really do is prioritize one belief system over others and strip

away basic human rights that the ones before us have fought so hard to achieve.

As someone who identifies as a lesbian, this terrifies me. The idea that politicians are working to erase LGBTQ identities from schools means that younger versions of me — queer kids growing up in immigrant or religious homes — will be left feeling isolated and ashamed of who they



Gabrielle Telsaint

are. They’ll learn silence before they ever

get the chance to learn selflove. And in BI-POC communities, where cultural and religious expectations already make coming out difficult, this erasure is even more dangerous. It fuels stigma and pushes queer youth further into hiding, which can be harmful since a statistically disproportionate amount of suicide victims or self-harm victims come from families who are not open to this lifestyle.

While I haven’t personally experienced overt homophobia from my mother, I’ve witnessed it in the attitudes of extended family members like my grandmother and aunt. Their com-

ments and beliefs made it clear that queerness was something unacceptable in their eyes. Those moments, though not directed at me, still weighed heavily. They made me question whether being honest about who I am would cost me love or connection. This is the kind of fear that white Christian nationalism thrives on. Creating environments where even the possibility of rejection is enough to keep people silent.

But silence will no longer be an option. As a nonreligious individual, I’ve learned that challenging white Christian nationalism starts with reclaiming the right to speak

and be heard. I can have honest conversations within my community about how faith and justice don’t have to be at odds. And most importantly, I can live openly — not just for myself, but for others who are still learning that it’s safe to be seen. Because there isn’t anything more healing than seeing someone just like you living openly and paving a way for you to continue.

Gabrielle, 18, is from Florida and attends Florida International University, with plans to major in pediatric medicine. Gabrielle writes: “I am a first-generation Haitian American student passionate about pursuing a career in medicine. Inspired by my younger brother, who is on the autism spectrum, I’ve volunteered in programs that support children with developmental differences and have been actively involved in disability awareness efforts.”

“As a Black student, I have personally benefited from mentorship, scholarships and academic support made possible by DEI.

“As a Black student, I have personally benefited from mentorship, scholarships and academic support made possible by DEI.

TENTH PLACE (tie)

The margins have teeth

FFRF awarded Layla \$300.

By Layla Vaughan

I am a rising sophomore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, a proud Black woman, a daughter and a student committed to helping others. I am also agnostic. I do not claim to have all the answers about spirituality, but I believe no one belief system should dominate others, especially in a country founded on freedom. My values, equality, fairness and inclusion shape my education, my career goals and my desire to become a physician assistant who serves people of all backgrounds with compassion and respect.

This is why I am deeply concerned about the rise of white Christian nationalism and its attack on civil liberties, especially its efforts to dismantle diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs. White Christian nationalism is not just a religious ideology. It is a power-based political movement that seeks to assert power and control by promoting the belief that America was founded for and should be led by white Christians. It threatens to erase the rights and visibility of those who do not fit into that narrow identity, including people like



Layla Vaughan

me and others in the BIPOC community. DEI programs aim to address centuries of systemic inequality in education, health care and the workplace. As a Black student, I have personally benefited from mentorship, scholarships and academic support made possible by DEI. These resources helped level the playing field and made me feel seen, supported and capable. In the health care field, DEI also pushes for better representation of minority providers

and aims to close racial gaps in treatment and outcomes. These efforts help correct historical and ongoing injustices.

But, in recent years, Christian nationalist lawmakers have led the push to ban DEI in schools, government agencies and hospitals. In states like Florida and Texas, DEI offices have been shut down, and diversity training has been labeled divisive. These actions are often framed as “colorblind” or “neutral,” but they silence conversations about race, gender and religious discrimination, all while pushing a narrow vision of what America should look like: white.

If these efforts continue, students like me will lose the support systems that have helped us succeed. In the medical field, future health care workers of color may be excluded, and patients from underserved communities will suffer when the providers who understand their needs are no longer there.

As an agnostic, I believe one of the best ways to fight white Christian nationalism is through education and visibility. I can

speak out, challenge injustice when I see it, and use my voice in the classroom, in volunteer spaces, and online to advocate for inclusion. I also support secular, pro-democracy organizations that work to protect the separation of church and state and ensure that all people, not just a privileged few, are represented in public life.

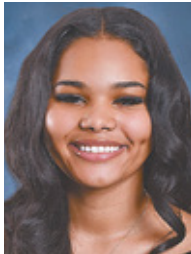
White Christian nationalism threatens not just policy, but also people. I refuse to let it erase my identity, my future or weaponize DEI. I will keep standing up for equality, justice and the freedom to be who I am.

Layla, 19, is from North Carolina and attends the University of North Carolina with plans to become a physician assistant. Lala writes: “I work part-time for the city of Raleigh, N.C., as a marketing ambassador. In my free time, I enjoy giving back to my community by volunteering at science fairs, supporting the local food bank, and regularly donating blood through The Blood Connection. I also have a passion for travel and cultural exploration, having visited Panama, Ecuador, Italy and Greece.”

2025 BIPOC essay contest honorable mentions



Blake Battle, 19, is from Georgia and attends Georgia Southern University with plans to major in biochemistry.



Natalya Hagee, 18, is from Washington, D.C., and attends Temple University.



Bri'Kayla Person, 19, of Texas, attends University of Central Oklahoma with plans to major in chemistry and forensic chemistry.



Donovan Tyler, 19, is from Maryland and attends University of Virginia with plans to major in commerce.



Akrit Burroughs, 18, of Georgia, attends Kennesaw State University, with plans to major in therapy.



Ava Heims, 19, is from Louisiana and attends Syracuse University, with plans to major in computer science.



Jaydon D. Santiago, 18, is from California and attends UCLA.



Miriam Zepeda Perez, 18, is from Arizona and attends Northern Arizona University with plans to major in engineering.



Jendayi Guamerah-Oliver, 18, from Indiana, attends Xavier University, with plans to major in mathematics.



Fiolajesurera Orelaja, 18, of Maryland, attends American University, with plans to major in international relations.



Laiya Thorpe, 20, is from Tennessee and attends North Carolina A&T State University, with plans to major in physical therapy.

To view excerpts from their essays, go to freethoughttoday.com.

CHAPTER UPDATES

Pikes Peak Chapter



The Pikes Peak Region chapter of FFRF had a strong presence at Pueblo Pride on Aug. 17.

The Pikes Peak Region chapter of FFRF had a strong presence at Pueblo Pride on Aug. 17, drawing enthusiastic interest and signing up 52 new chapter members. Visitors were greeted with a colorful booth featuring FFRF swag, including popular buttons and an eye-catching Uncle Sam poster. Nearly all of the free items were picked up, helping spark meaningful conversations throughout the day.

In addition to outreach and membership growth,

booth volunteers conducted an interactive survey asking attendees about their religious background and current beliefs. Participants placed pins on a grid to map their answers, creating a striking snapshot of the community. The majority of participants identified as nonreligious, with many noting they had left religion behind, a trend that is likely common at Pride events.

For more information on the Pikes Peak Region chapter of FFRF, visit: ffrfpikespeak.org.

South Central Wisconsin Chapter



Nick Schweitzer gave a presentation to the South Central Wisconsin Chapter on the history of court cases dealing with the teaching of evolution.

On May 17, SCWFFRF member and retired attorney Nick Schweitzer gave a presentation in Madison, Wis., on the history of state and federal court cases dealing with the teaching of evolution in public schools, and attempts by religious groups to insert creationism into public school curricula.

To learn more about the South Central Wisconsin Chapter of FFRF, contact chapter president Tom Cara at tomcara58@gmail.com.

Triangle Freethought Society



The Triangle Freethought Society co-organized a protest against the group American Renewal Project on Sept. 8. Triangle members who protested were (from left to right) Marcus Rademacher, Russ Andrews, James Kelly, Thomas Gilliam and Jeff Mays.

The Triangle Freethought Society, a chapter of FFRF serving Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, N.C., co-organized a protest against the Christian nationalist group American Renewal Project, which held a conference in Raleigh on Sept. 8. The protest was coordinated with coalition partners from the local Christians Against Christian Nationalism chapter and several area churches. More than 80 people attended, and the event received coverage from local news outlets, including the local NBC affiliate. To learn more about the Triangle Freethought Society, contact contact@trianglefreethought.org.

Metro Denver Chapter of FFRF



The Metro Denver Chapter hosted an education and information booth during PrideFest.

The Denver chapter participated for the ninth year in the Denver Pride Fest. They had an educational and informational booth which generated a lot of interest and enthusiasm. We were proud to support our allies in the LGBTQ+ community!

Ozarks Chapter of FFRF

The Ozarks Chapter of FFRF has been successful bringing the secular community together by way of their 2025 Secular Speaker Series. In addition to Kate Cohen, who spoke to the Ozarks chapter in June, they hosted Forrest Valkai, who presented to an audience of 60-plus people on July 13. On Aug. 17, FFRF's own Mickey Dollens met with a large contingent of the Ozarks chapter for a presentation followed by an afternoon BBQ and hike at a nearby state park. Our final speaker of the year is Americans United Vice President of Public Policy Alessandro Terenzoni, who will be meeting with the Ozarks Chapter on Oct. 11 and 12 in Northwest Arkansas.

For more information, visit ozarksFFRF.org, or email: ozarksFFRF@gmail.com.



On Aug. 17, FFRF's Mickey Dollens, center, met with a large contingent of the Ozarks Chapter for a presentation, followed by an afternoon BBQ and hike at a nearby state park.

Upstate New York Freethinkers



FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, front row, joined about 50 members of the Upstate New York Freethinkers on Aug. 24 for the chapter’s Second Annual Chapter Gathering.

The Upstate New York Freethinkers’ held its 2nd Annual Chapter Gathering in Fayetteville on Aug. 24. The event kicked off with coffee and live piano music from FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

Chapter leaders highlighted a year of significant growth and activism. The chapter has grown to over 250 participants from seven regions across New York and established a new Meetup group in Buffalo. The chapter’s charitable mission was showcased through its planned grant to the Pride Center of the Capital Region. Attend-

ees also learned about the chapter’s successful advocacy for the landmark Equal Rights Amendment in New York, and its ongoing support for the Medical Aid in Dying Act.

A joint presentation was provided by FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker. Gaylor opened by drawing on the legacy of freethinking feminist Matilda Joslyn Gage, whose story embodies the battle for liberty against religious overreach. Barker followed, providing an “antidote” to the dangers by recapping FFRF’s recent legal achievements.

Renowned author Kate Cohen, a Capital Region chapter participant, delivered a thought-provoking presentation based on her book, “We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (And Maybe You Should Too).”

Historian David Hoffman, author of “American Free-thought: The History of a Social Movement, 1794-1948,” introduced the keynote speakers.

To learn more, donate, join, or volunteer, visit unyft.org, email info@unyft.org or text/call 585-454-9921.

San Francisco Bay Chapter of FFRF



On Sept. 7, FFRF Regional Governmental Affairs Manager Mickey Dollens spoke to the San Francisco Bay Chapter about effective citizen lobbying.

With Christian nationalism on the rise, it’s important for elected officials to understand how religion is sneaking into public schools and how to combat it. On Sept. 7, FFRF Regional Governmental Affairs Manager Mickey Dollens gave the San Francisco Bay Chapter a preview of his upcoming presentation on effective citizen lobbying which will be heard at October’s FFRF national convention.

The FFRF Action Fund has developed a Secular Student Bill of Rights, a model law which would protect students’ freedom of conscience and strengthen state-church separation in public schools. Mickey discussed how to draw public attention to this problem and then reach out to educate elected officials about this issue.

For more information on the San Francisco Bay chapter of FFRF, contact: walt@sfbayffrf.org.

Salt Lake Chapter



University of Utah Professor Alan Rogers speaks at a Salt Lake Chapter event commemorating the centennial of the Scopes trial.

In July, the Salt Lake Chapter hosted a local commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the Scopes trial, featuring a University of Utah anthropology professor who is an expert on evolution. He talked about the evidence for and against evolution that was known in Darwin’s time and at the time of the Scopes trial, and then contrasted that with what’s known today. This event was well attended by many people from the general public who had previously been unaware of the FFRF and its work.

A few weeks later, the chapter participated in the Sunstone Symposium, an annual gathering where active Latter-day Saints (Mormons), fundamentalist Mormons, and ex-Mormons meet up to exchange ideas and talk about the latest scholarly research into Mormon doctrines and Mormon history.

During August, the chapter ran a fundraiser called “Freedom From Polygamy” to help people who are trapped in oppressive polygamy-based religious cultures in and around Utah. (There are tens of thousands of people in these groups, many of whom want to leave but can’t without help.) FFRF donated \$1,000 to use as dollar-for-dollar matching funds, and a local source supplemented that amount. Members and supporters of our Salt Lake Chapter donated \$1,250, which was then doubled using the matching funds, to make a total of \$2,500. This money was given to a local organization named Holding Our Help, which has assisted thousands of people to leave polygamous cultures.

For more info, contact chapter president Douglas Hendricks at ffrfslc@gmail.com.

Greater Sacramento Chapter



The Greater Sacramento Chapter has a new president who will lead the chapter to new visions and heights. Judy Saint has retired as president (after 13 years!) and the chapter board elected former vice president Erin Louis as its new president.

Erin is well-skilled with organizational, business, public relations and leadership abilities. Erin said that she originally joined FFRF “to make a change” and says she already has some changes in mind!



Judy Saint

The personalized California license plates “SAC FFRF” (SAC for Sacramento, of course), which were on Judy’s vehicle for many years, have been transferred to Erin’s car.

Judy writes: “My parting entreaty to the chapter board was to always hold the leadership of FFRF in well-deserved esteem. Annie Laurie and Dan’s ‘servant leadership’ style is unmatched in any other organization I know, freethought or otherwise, and worth emulating. We, as chapters, owe a lot to Annie Laurie and Dan, and, of course, to Anne Nicol Gaylor whom I was privileged to meet just once.”



Erin Louis

LETTERBOX

Religion should be kept out of health care

As a physician in hospice and palliative medicine, I see every day how religious influence in American health policy limits compassionate, evidence-based care for patients at the end of life.

Patients who wish to access medical aid in dying, or even comprehensive hospice care, are too often denied autonomy because of sectarian dogma. Religious lobbying has helped block assisted dying legislation in most states, leaving countless people to suffer needlessly. Even in hospice, many programs are affiliated with religious organizations that impose restrictive practices, including barriers to secular chaplaincy for nonbelieving patients and families.

The principle of hospice is to honor the patient's values and choices. Yet when those choices conflict with religious ideology, patients lose their voice. The result is preventable suffering at the most vulnerable moment of life.

We cannot allow theology to dictate medicine. End-of-life care should be grounded in compassion, dignity and patient self-determination — not religious doctrine. As our nation wrestles with these questions, the interference of the Trump administration in protecting only "religious liberty" has made the problem worse, privileging institutional beliefs over individual conscience.

Freedom of religion must also mean freedom from religion — especially in health care. Every person deserves access to hospice care that respects their worldview, and every state should allow competent adults the option of medical aid in dying if they choose it.

As physicians, we owe our patients relief from suffering, not obedience to dogma. It is long past time to disentangle end-of-life care from religious control and to uphold secular, patient-centered care for all.

New York

FFRF serves as bulwark against theocracy

I am writing to say thanks for all of the work that you have done to ensure that the United States remains a secular republic.

I first became aware of your organization through the New Atheism movement. In reading Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, I came to the realization of the importance of secularism. Civilization must be guided by the precepts of reason, logic and critical and empirical thinking. Theocracy is not based on any of these precepts. Instead, theocracy is based in superstition, revelation and faith. Civilizations that are based on theocracy are often mired in tribalism, barbarism and misery. It is not a coincidence that the best civilizations on Earth are the most secular. History has continuously shown that religion has impeded progress. To this day, many millions of people suffer under theocratic regimes.

Your organization serves as a bulwark against the encroaching theocracy in America. I will continue to



support FFRF as much as possible. Thanks you for all you have done and will do in the fight for secularism.

Florida

Giving haters a taste of their own medicine

I really enjoyed reading your September edition.

Some 40 years ago, I was walking in a gay rights parade in downtown Houston. We were passing a bigoted group chanting "God hates fags, God hates fags." I looked at them and replied, "There is no God." They looked stunned.

Houston

DHS tactic uses bible as recruitment tool

The Department of Homeland Security is using an ad as a recruiting tool for the military which includes Isaiah 6:8 from the bible: "Whom shall I send? . . . I said, "Here am I; send me!" But the ad omits: "Go and say to this people: 'Keep listening, but do not comprehend; keep looking but do not understand; Make the mind of this people dull, and stop their ears, and shut their eyes, so that they may not look with their eyes, and listen with their ears, and comprehend with their minds.'"

This sounds like the mission of the military is to make people dull and uninformed so President Trump's cronies can do as they please. With biblical justification! What a bad bible ploy!

Indiana

Atheism is lack of belief in existence of a god

Atheism does not mean belief that there is no god. It simply means a lack of belief in the existence of a god. A = without; theism = belief in a god.

Agnosticism means the belief that the existence of a god cannot be proven or disproven. Agnostics may or may not believe in the existence of a god. Agnostics may or may not be atheists.

Of course, most atheists also believe that there is no god. Duh.

**Jay Clem
California**

'Born-again' atheist feels relief, hope for future

Your September issue is a total winner! The student essays were outstanding; they followed logic and made total sense. It gives me hope for our future.

I am almost 80 years old. I was brought up as a Methodist and truly enjoyed the camaraderie and fun of choir, youth group, etc. As I grew older, I had doubts, but I wasn't ready to give up my beliefs for fear that something bad would happen to me.

I support a lot of what churches do, but I also see such hypocrisy. I have donated several hundreds of dollars in honor or memory of church members who I respected and cared about.

But I am a "born again" atheist and feel such relief. I cook meals for the church-supported homeless group, not to please God, but because it is a good thing to do. I have served on many boards but do not partake in the obligatory prayers. (It is Texas.) I appreciate the work you do and will continue to support FFRF!

Texas

Grateful for pleasures, such as Freethought Today

As always, I savored every part of the most recent Freethought Today. It's always a pleasure to see that periodical's presence in my mailbox!

Speaking of pleasures for which I am grateful, I am elderly and getting older by the day, but find continual pleasure in not going to meetings, not commuting to a job, not having a phone in my pocket, not being around when the climate cataclysm renders large parts of the nation and

The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible
A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.
By Ruth Hurmence Green

Published by FFRF \$15 Item #FB12

Buy it from FFRF online @ ffrf.org/shop

world uninhabitable, and maybe, most of all, not going to church!

Thanks for your great work!

**Chris Kennedy
Michigan**

FFRF's press release is spot-on regarding RFK Jr.

RFK Jr. is everything you wrote and more. [From FFRF press release: "Kennedy, a menace to public health, must go."] I say this as a virologist (Ph.D.) and one who worked in the early days of the HIV/AIDS pandemic when fear gripped the country. But, back then, the CDC was on the side of science and did much to quell rumors with facts on how the virus was spread and how to protect the general population. Thank you!

Florida

James Dobson's advice caused me years of harm

[Editor's note: Strong language is used in the following letter.]

Thanks to FFRF, I have become aware of James Dobson's death. My mother took a lot of parenting advice from that bastard. When I was growing up, my mother was very hard on me many times because of the advice she received from Dobson. I have religious trauma syndrome, primarily because of that cocksucker! Christianity hurt me very badly in many ways. I have allowed people to get away with being very abusive to me at times because of my Christian upbringing. I have even apologized to people when they are abusing me in some way because of it. Fuck James Dobson! May he rest in piss!

**Daniel Seeley
California**

Much thanks to FFRF for everything it does

Thank you for all of the work you do to promote the principle of separation of state and church and to educate the public on matters where school officials are forcing religion in schools.

I believe in religious freedom for all.

Oklahoma

MOVING?

Don't miss your next issue of Freethought Today

Please notify us of your address change promptly!
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or phone: 1-800-335-4021

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IN MEMORIAM

Bruce Beckwith was noted pediatric pathologist

FFRF member and famed pediatric pathologist Dr. J. Bruce Beckwith, 91, died Jan. 21, in Missoula, Mont. Bruce was known for helping to identify Beckwith-Wiedemann syndrome, which is partly named after him. He is also known for his role as reference pathologist for the National Wilms Tumor Study Group, a position he held from 1969 until his retirement 30 years later. He is also recognized for his research on sudden infant death syndrome, which he helped to define in the 1960s.

Beckwith was born in Spokane, Wash., and grew up in St. Ignatius, Mont. A 1954 graduate of Whitman College, he taught at the University of Washington, the University of Colorado, and Loma Linda University, among other places.

After being accepted into the University of Washington School of Medicine, he married Lorna Gourlay in September 1954, shortly after his graduation from Whitman.

During his second year, Bruce developed an interest in the field of pathology. During his final year, Bruce indicated during a conversation with Dr. Bob Aldrich, chair of pediatrics, that he had originally been interested in pathology, but was finding pediatrics to be equally interesting. What Bob told Bruce made his career decision easy. “Did you know there is a field called ‘pediatric pathology?’” Hearing those two words together gave him a path to the career he would embark upon.

The new head of pathology at Los Angeles Children’s Hospital, Dr. Daniel Stowens, had ended the tradition of employing interns from other institutions for a brief exposure to pediatric pathology, replacing them with two trainees who would spend an entire year in pediatric pathology. Bruce and his fellow intern, who would become the head of Pediatric Pathology at the University of British Columbia, had a spectacular year at LACH. During that



Bruce Beckwith

year, Bruce discovered cases in the older files that had some unique features which would later be designated the “Beckwith-Wiedermann Syndrome (BWS).

Following the year at LACH, Bruce served as resident in pathology at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital in LA from 1962-64 and two subsequent years at LACH. Bruce then obtained a position as deputy with the Los Angeles Coroner’s Office, going to funeral homes throughout the county to examine and, when necessary, perform autopsies on patients reported to that office. Because of his unusual pediatric experience, Phillip Lieberman, the person responsible for assigning cases to the deputies made a point of selecting pediatric cases for Bruce whenever possible.

This unique opportunity to investigate cases of sudden infant death from one of the most populous counties in the nation enabled his recognition of what would later be termed Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). The discovery of BWS and SIDS during his training years became his most important contributions to knowledge.

In 1966, Bruce and his family returned to Seattle Children’s Hospital, where he would serve for many years as head of anatomical pathology. During his Seattle years, Bruce wrote numerous articles and several books and became increasingly well known in his field. He was designated the pathology reviewer for a national multicenter study of Wilms’ Tumor, the most common malignant tumor of pediatric kidney.

His wife, Lorna, died due to the accidental administration of the wrong medications by a hospital nurse prior to a planned surgical procedure.

Then, in 1984, he met Nancy Browning, who had a master’s degree in wildlife biology but applied for a secretarial position in Bruce’s laboratory. Bruce would later relate that he liked her immediately and that fondness grew into a close professional relationship and ultimately a wonderful marriage.

Among numerous awards and distinctions, he served a term as president of the Society for Pediatric Pathology, was named an Honorary Fellow of the Royal College of Pathologists in England in 1988 and was the 2006 recipient of the Distinguished Pathologist Award of the U.S. and Canadian Academy of Pathology. He also received the Fred W. Stewart Award from Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center in 1994 and the American Society of Pediatric Hematology/Oncology’s Distinguished Career Award in 2005.

Historian, librarian Alan Pollard dies at 86

Alan P. Pollard, 86, of Cambridge, Mass., died May 26 after a brief illness. A resident of Cambridge for 17 years, he was the son of the late David and Rebecca Pollard of Boston.

Pollard received his A.B. degree from Harvard College, his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of California-Berkeley, and his M.L.S. degree from the University of Rhode Island.

From 1966 to 1971, he taught history at Indiana University. He was then a member of the History Department faculty at Rhode Island College (R.I.C.) from 1971 and reference librarian in R.I.C.’s Adams Library from 1979 to 1986, with his library assignment formalized in 1984 by a joint appointment as associate professor of history and library.

From 1986-91, Pollard held the

position of Slavic bibliographer at Princeton, which enabled him to combine two key areas of his expertise — Slavic scholarship and academic librarianship. In 1991, he joined the University of Michigan faculty as head of the Slavic and East European Division and librarian in the University Library, and he retired from that role in 2004, receiving the title of librarian emeritus. He was especially proud of the acquisition of a comprehensive collection of Armenian books for which he was solely responsible. At Princeton and University of Michigan, Pollard was considered a unique hire, as he came from an academic background in addition to possessing library science credentials.

Fluent in Russian and Polish and proficient in French, German and Latin, Pollard spent time in Eastern Europe, Finland and the Soviet Union.

During the course of his career, he published numerous, widely cited works of research, as well as reference works. He served two terms as chair of the Association of College and Research Libraries Slavic and East European Section and also served on the executive board of the Bibliography and Documentation Committee of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies.

After retiring, he and his wife, Sarah, relocated to Massachusetts and enjoyed helping to raise their grandchildren. He was an exceptional human being by virtue of his loving nature, extraordinary mind and sharp wit. His joke-telling, card-playing and dancing skills must also be noted.

Cyndy Kellogg, 67, was a teacher

Cynthia Lutz Kellogg, 67, died in Oyster Bay, N.Y., on June 26 after a long struggle with Alzheimer’s disease.

Cyndy, as most of her friends and family called her, was born on Aug. 14, 1957, in Woodbury, N.J., to Lorene and Edgar Lutz. She graduated cum laude from Tufts University in 1979 with a bachelor of arts degree in child study. After graduating, she worked as a teacher in early childhood education and elementary school.

She met her future husband David Kellogg at a friend’s wedding and moved to Long Island, N.Y., before marrying in 1985. Nothing gave Cyndy more pride and fulfillment than raising her three children: Scott, Julia, and Laura.

Cyndy also gave back to the community as a Girl Scout leader, volunteering at her children’s school, teaching adult literacy



Cyndy Kellogg

and as a hospital volunteer. Cyndy loved traveling, dancing, long lunches with her friends and impromptu sing-alongs with her sisters in the kitchen. She was always there for her family and friends, such as during her father’s struggle with Alzheimer’s.

She broadened her husband’s horizons with plays in New York City and adventurous trips across the globe.

Jan Stavros worked as RN

Jan Stavros, nee Behne, was born and raised in Fenton, Iowa. She was a registered nurse. She attended Kahler Nursing School in Rochester, Minn., where she met and married Tom Stavros. She worked at St. Joseph’s Hospital in St. Paul and St. Paul Ramsey (later Regions Hospital).

After living in the Twin Cities, the family first moved to Idaho, back to the Twin Cities, then Weston, Wis. In Wisconsin, Jan worked in a nursing home, Wausau Hospital and finally in a family practice doctor’s office.

After retiring, the couple moved to St. Cloud in 2000 to be near family.

Jan was always civic minded, working to help people. She volunteered at a clinic giving vaccinations to Hmong refugees, joined a women’s group whose main focus was promoting women’s education, worked at helping the local school district pass a bond referendum, volunteered for an advisory board for the Weston City Council and was on the advisory board for the St. Cloud Senior Center. She also was a member of LWVSCA for 15 years and contributed many hours with assorted responsibilities.

Jan loved the outdoors, gardening and canoeing-making, four trips canoeing through the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota. She also liked traveling to Europe and especially Greece, where she made four trips exploring both the mainland and the islands.

Crossword answers

H	A	T	C	H		U	S	A		T	R	U	E	
A	L	O	H	A		R	O	B		R	A	I	S	E
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	C	A	R	S	O	N		P	R	O	U	S	T	
R	A	D	I	O		E	V	E		O	L	I	O	S
P	R	I	S	M		C	I	A		Z	E	B	R	A
M	E	T	E			K	I	T		E	S	S	E	X

Cryptogram answer

The government of the United States is in no sense founded on the Christian religion.

— John Adams

Freethinkers fighting back in Latin America

By Dan Barker

When I climbed the huge ancient Toltec pyramid in Cholula, Mexico, last year, guess what I found at the top? A Catholic church!

Catholicism — and more recently Pentecostalism — has imposed such power in Latin America that we don’t usually think of those countries as bastions of rationalism. (The one notable exception may be Uruguay, where nearly half the population is nonreligious; I visited the Uruguayan freethinkers last year.) But the others, even those with secular governments, are in league with faith leaders.

However, strong pockets of freethought persist all over Central and South America. In 2018, leaders from secular, atheist, humanist, skeptic and rationalist organizations in Latin America came together to inaugurate the first Encuentro Latinamericano de Libre Pensamiento in Arequipa, Perú. I attended that conference, a subsequent conference in 2022 in Pereira, Colombia, and then in 2024 another in Mexico City. The fourth Encuentro will take place in Costa Rica in November of next year. The Freedom From Religion Foundation is a co-sponsor, as well as Hispanic American Freethinkers, led by FFRF Board Member David Tamayo.

On Aug. 13, I spoke to a large crowd for the Secular Humanists of Perú in the Central Tower in Lima about my preacher-to-atheist story. The Secular Humanists organization is a lively group of committed freethinkers. Its current president, Victor García-Belaunde, is a psychologist and philosopher whose grandfather, Fernando Belaúnde Terry, was president of Perú in the 1960s and 1980s. Also present was Carlos Bruce Montes de Oca, the mayor of neighboring Santiago de Surco, who was previously the first member of the national Congress to come out as gay and who twice introduced a bill to allow civil unions for same-sex couples in the country. Both bills failed, as could be expected in that extremely conservative nation, but the effort galvanized the gay rights community.

After I spoke about the work of FFRF, a panel of experts discussed El Sodalicio (the Sodalitium Christianae Vitae), a lay society of the Catholic



The Secular Humanist Society of Peru met on Aug. 13 in Lima. Pictured from left are Helmut Kessel, Victor García-Belaunde, Pedro Salinas, Carlos Bruce, Paola Ugaz, Sebastián Pastor, Dan Barker, Jose Enrique Escardó Steck, Angel Corvetto and Piero Gayozzo.



Dan celebrates his visit to the Peruvian capital city.

Church that was recently dissolved by the Vatican due to sexual and psychological abuse, brainwashing and authoritarianism by its Peruvian founder, Luis Fernando Figari, and other Sodalites. Award-winning journalist and author Pedro Salinas, a former member of El Sodalicio, and investigative reporter Paola Ugaz produced a book that exposed the cult whose evidence contributed greatly to its downfall. They were joined that evening by journalist Jose Enrique Steck, a victim of Sodalicio abuse who has created a survivor’s network for other

victims. Humanists in Peru are pushing back hard against the harms of religion in their country.

I had a great time touring Lima with some of the smart and humorous Peruvian atheists and agnostics.

After that, I flew to Paraguay, my first visit to that country, which is even more conservative than Perú. My host was Jorge Alfonso Ramírez, a well-known radio personality who is president of La Asociación Paraguaya Racionalista (APRA).

The day I arrived, I was featured on national MEGA TV’s “El Tablero” show (thanks to Jorge’s connections), where I told my freethought story and invited viewers to attend my talk for APRA at a hotel the next day. “You are very brave,” the host Kike Gamarra told me after the interview ended.

The hotel manager told us that they received many angry phone calls from Christian viewers, but also from some appreciative freethinkers. The event, which attracted about 70 people, went off without a hitch.

The following day, I appeared on the Megacadena 780 AM radio “La Esencia” show with popular host Juan Fariña for a special 25-minute video-podcast called “Mano a Mano con Dan Barker.” You can read “enlightened” reactions to that show on the station’s Facebook page (bit.ly/47ltr3j).

The Rationalists of Paraguay include doctors, scientists, computer scientists, psychologists, mathematicians, engineers, professors and activists. On Sunday, Aug. 17, Jorge and astronomer Félix Piriýú drove me out to see Ypacaraí Lake, where I picked up a few words of indigenous Guaraní, an official language (besides Spanish) of Paraguay. Ypacaraí means “blessed lake,” because Spanish missionaries had blessed and rechristened it.

The city of Ypacaraí contains, of course, a huge Catholic church.

The Paraguayan rationalists will be joining other Latin-American freethought groups at the fourth international encuentro in Costa Rica in 2026. Details, when ready, will be posted at piensalibre.lat. I am really looking forward to representing FFRF again at this important trailblazing conference.

Dan Barker is co-president of FFRF.



Enjoying an outing in the Lima area are Peruvian Humanists President Victor García-Belaunde, Lorena Rivera, Henry Llanos, Raúl Torres and Dan Barker.



On Aug. 16, Dan Barker was interviewed by Juan Fariña on the national radio-podcast “La Esencia” in Asunción, Paraguay. Watch the show at bit.ly/46w3RNM