

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



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Vol. 42 No. 6

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August 2025

## IRS: Churches free to endorse candidates

### But agency's refusal to act doesn't repeal the Johnson Amendment

The Freedom From Religion Foundation sharply condemns the IRS's stunning decision to openly abandon enforcement of the Johnson Amendment when it comes to churches, which could effectively turn them into unregulated political action committees subsidized by taxpayers.

FFRF advises that this action, while unconscionable, does not and cannot re-

peal an act of Congress. Furthermore, the IRS action technically only applies to the two litigating churches, FFRF points out. The case involves a challenge by the Sand Springs Church and First Baptist Church of Waskom in Texas. The IRS is stipulating that it will not fight the lawsuit.

In its recent court filing, the IRS admitted that it will no longer pursue legal action against churches that endorse political candidates from the pulpit to their congregants. This action stems from the baseless lawsuit brought by right-wing Christian organizations, which claim churches are being unfairly silenced.

Instead of defending its own rules, the IRS folded, asserting that "communications from a house of worship to its congregation in connection with religious services" do not violate the Johnson Amendment.

"This is not the repeal of the Johnson Amendment — this is the IRS choosing to ignore it when churches violate it," says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. "If the IRS is saying that churches and only churches are being given a pass from the Johnson Amendment, this clearly discriminates against other similarly situated 501(c)(3) tax-exempt

groups, such as FFRF."

The Johnson Amendment, enacted in 1954, prohibits all 501(c)(3) tax-exempt nonprofits — including churches — from endorsing or opposing political candidates. The obvious rationale for the federal law is that political contributions are not tax-deductible; therefore, tax-exempt organizations cannot use their tax-exempt resources for electioneering purposes. The Johnson Amendment ensures equal footing on the political battlefield and that tax-de-

See IRS on page 14

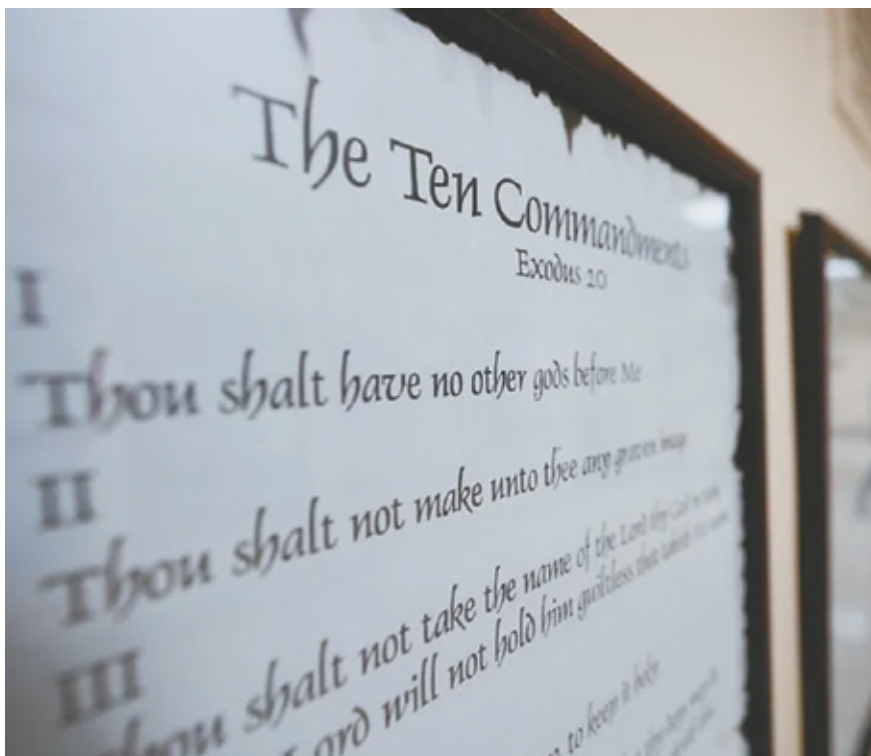


Photo from Wikimedia Commons  
A Ten Commandments poster hangs in the hallway of a school.

## FFRF, others represent Arkansas plaintiffs in Ten Commandments case

A multifaith group of seven Arkansas families with children in public schools filed suit on June 11 in federal court to block a new state law requiring all public elementary and secondary schools to "prominently" display the Ten Commandments in every classroom and library.

The plaintiffs in *Stinson v. Fayetteville School District No. 1* are represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas, the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, with Simpson Thacher Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel. (FFRF and other groups are also representing the plaintiffs who are suing

the state of Texas over its Ten Commandments law. For more on that, see page 8.)

Arkansas Act 573 of 2025 ("Act 573") requires the scriptural displays to be a minimum of 16-by-20 inches in size and hung in a "conspicuous place" in each classroom and library. The text of the Ten Commandments must be printed "in a size and typeface that is legible to a person with average vision from anywhere in the room." The law also mandates that a specific version of the Ten Commandments, associated with Protestant faiths and selected by lawmakers, be used for every display.

See Arkansas on page 8

## Inside the Young Women's Leadership Summit A life of servitude, motherhood for women

FFRF's Caitlin Berray was able to infiltrate the Young Women's Leadership Summit (thanks to a generous donation by an FFRF member), hosted by Turning Point USA, the conservative nonprofit founded and run by Charlie Kirk, a well-known Christian nationalist commentator. Here is Caitlin's take on the event.

By Caitlin Berray

I expected to be upset, even before walking into the Charlie Kirk-endorsed "Leadership Summit" for young women. But, it wasn't the constant degradation of women or the villainization of feminism from the summit's speakers that disturbed me the most. Instead, what really bothered me was the all-female crowd's eager embrace of the sermon-like remarks that urged the attendees to trade



Photo by Caitlin Berray

This poster was set up in the lobby of the Young Women's Leadership Summit in Dallas in June.

ambition for obedience, education for marriage and independence for servitude.

I attended Turning Point USA's Young Women's

Leadership Summit (YWLS) in Grapevine, Texas, a suburb of Dallas, on June 13–15, alongside about 3,000 other attendees, mostly school-aged young women and girls. Predictably, the majority of attendees were white, although there was a notable presence of women of color. Just about every girl was dressed in some rendition of a brightly colored sundress or floral prairie dress, paired with cowboy boots and voluminous hair, a look popularized by an emerging wave of young women in the conservative base. Some wore MAGA merchandise, while others touted "Make America Healthy Again" (MAHA) tote bags. Arguably, Kirk and his political advocacy organization, Turning Point USA, have played a pivotal role in drawing young women to the ultra-conservative right in droves, etching a niche within the conservative base for a concentrated, traditional

See Women on page 15



Sign up now!

FFRF’s national convention lineup is set!

The speaker lineup is now set for FFRF’s exciting annual convention later this year in Myrtle Beach, S.C. We hope to see you there!

FFRF has recently added Harvard Professor **Steven Levitsky** as a speaker and has lined up a mini-performance by the **Godless Gospel**. For the tentative convention schedule, see Page 3. FFRF’s 48th national convention runs from Oct. 16-19 at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort, 10000 Beach Club Dr., Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Levitsky is professor of Latin American Studies and government and also director of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard. He is senior fellow at the Kettering Foundation and a senior democracy fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. He is co-author (with Daniel Ziblatt) of “How Democracies Die,” which was a New York Times bestseller and “Tyranny of the Minority: Why American Democracy Reached the Breaking Point.”

Godless Gospel’s **Mandisa Thomas**, **Cynthia McDonald** and **Candace Gorham** will join FFRF Co-President **Dan Barker** for several songs.

Joining Levitsky and the Godless Gospel at the convention are these other confirmed speakers/performers:

- **Mary L. Trump**, niece of President Trump and a sharp critic of the current administration, will receive FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award, reserved for public figures who make known their dissent from religion.
- **John Fugelsang** is an actor, comedian and broadcaster and host of “Tell Me Everything” on SiriusXM. His new book is “Separate Church and Hate: A Sane Person’s Guide to Taking Back the Bible from Fundamentalists, Fascists, and Flock-Fleecing Frauds.”
- **Katherine Stewart**, last year’s “Freethought Heroine” honoree, returns to talk about her chilling tour de force, a new exposé, “Money, Lies and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy.”
- **Dr. Maggie Carpenter**, a brave abortion rights activist under prosecution by Louisiana and Texas for dispensing medication abortion pills



Steven Levitsky



Photo by Chris Line

Godless Gospel singer Cynthia McDonald strolls through the crowd at FFRF’s national convention in San Antonio in 2022. At this year’s convention in Myrtle Beach, McDonald will be joined by two other Godless Gospel singers — Mandisa Thomas and Candace Gorham — and will perform several songs with Dan Barker throughout the convention.

to patients there, will receive FFRF’s “Forward” Award.

- **Jamelle Bouie**, the distinguished New York Times columnist, will be given FFRF’s “Clarence Darrow” Award.
- **Mubarak Bala**, the Nigerian atheist and human rights activist recently released from prison in Nigeria after five years’ detention for committing “blasphemy,” will get FFRF’s “Avijit Roy Courage Award.”
- **Nancy Northup** is president of the cutting-edge Reproductive Rights Center, which is receiving FFRF’s Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism” award of \$50,000.
- Singer/songwriter **Roy Zimmerman** will perform his signature blend of heart and hilarity. His songs have been heard on HBO and Showtime, and his videos have garnered hundreds of millions of views.
- Ex-evangelical writer, speaker and advocate **Chrissy Stroop** will receive FFRF’s 2025 “Freethought Heroine” award. Stroop is a full-time writer and speaker with bylines in Foreign Policy, Playboy, The Boston Globe, Political Research Associates and other outlets.
- FFRF’s Regional State Manager **Mickey Dollens**, a seated state representative in the Oklahoma Legislature, will be speaking directly on the convention theme with his talk, “F.O.R.W.A.R.D.: Your Blueprint for Effective Citizen Lobbying.”

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

Five ticketed meals, including FFRF’s popular “NonPrayer Breakfast,” will be offered this year, more than usual, in part because — aside from two in-house restaurants — meal

choices outside the resort will be limited, unless you have a car or use Uber. A small-capacity shuttle that can be ordered ahead can take some participants to nearby restaurant strips in Myrtle Beach.

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

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

Please turn to the back page for more details, menus and the registration form. Or register online at [ffrf.org/convention2025](https://ffrf.org/convention2025).

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TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States.

Sign Up Now!

FFRF’s 2025 convention

Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Oct. 17–19, 2025

Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort

[ffrf.org/convention2025](https://ffrf.org/convention2025)



# Members create quilts for convention auction

At this year’s FFRF convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C., two beautiful quilts made by members will be up for auction.

At the convention last year in Denver, FFRF auctioned off a quilt created and donated by Diane Chait of Massachusetts. (Becky Greben of Colorado was the winner with a \$550 bid.)

This year, Diane again has donated another of her quilts for FFRF’s convention. Lynn Simons of Michigan has also provided FFRF with her donated quilt.

Here are the stories of their quilts.

## Diane Chait

I always give my quilts a name as I’m working on them. This quilt I call “Not Your Grandmother’s Quilt.” Most often people think of quilts hav-

ing pastel colors and matching tones. That certainly does not describe this quilt. The fabrics used in this quilt were designed by Kaffe Fassett. He is a celebrated artist who is best known for his colorful designs in decorative arts, such as needlepoint, fabrics, knitting, painting and ceramics. The fabrics used in this quilt are bold, patterned and striking. The quilting pattern used is called sawtooth star. As I worked on this quilt, I wasn’t sure that these fabrics would go together, or “play nicely,” as we quilters say, to make a pleasant overall quilt. Once finished, I love the bright, bold, jarring energy of the quilt. I’m not sure what my grandmother would think of this quilt.



Quilt by Diane Chait



Quilt by Lynn Simons

## Lynn Simons

When Hannah, my daughter, was getting chemotherapy, once every three weeks at the University of Michigan, she would insist I have a quilt made that she could give to a peer on the unit. So, despite homeschooling Hannah, raising the other three, trying to keep my psychotherapy business going and spending a week out of every three at U of M with Hannah, she wanted a quilt. Sometimes it was small, almost a doll quilt, but other times it was larger for a teenager. She would help pick colors and patterns and we would ship boxes of quilts to her favorite nurse, who would give them to youth on the inpatient unit. Hannah thought having bright col-

ors on the bed helped in those sterile white rooms. After Hannah died, I continued making quilts and donating them. The hospital had a policy that things such as this should go to the volunteer office and then they would distribute as they saw fit. So, instead, we used a nurse on the floor so that pediatric oncology got the quilts. When that nurse moved on, one of Hannah’s oncologists, Pete Anderson, took over.

I continue to make quilts and give them away and work very hard at being thankful to others, carrying on in Hannah’s name and doing an atheist’s good work of recognizing humanity and the needs of others and bringing sunshine.

## 2025 Convention Schedule\*

### THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16

**4-6pm** Registration opens  
*Reception and cash bar*

### FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17

**8:00 am** Registration, sales tables open  
Continental breakfast, coffee and tea

**9:00 am** Program begins  
“Die Gedanken Sind Frei”  
Dan Barker

**Welcome**  
Sadie Pattinson

**“South Carolina Welcome”**  
Herb Silverman

**FFRF Highlights of Year**  
Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor

**Chapter Welcome**

**10:00 am** Henry Zumach  
Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award  
Center for Reproductive Rights  
Nancy Northup

**10:30 am** BREAK

**10:50 am** “Money, Lies & God”  
Katherine Stewart

**11:30 am** Break, book signing

**Noon** BUFFET LUNCH (ticketed)

**1:30 pm** Ballroom, sales tables re-open

**2 pm** FFRF Legal Highlights Report

**3 pm** FFRF Legislative Highlights

**3:30 pm** Break

**4:00 pm** Forward Award  
Dr. Maggie Carpenter (remote)

**4:30 pm** Emperor Has No Clothes Award  
Mary Trump

**5:15 pm** Book signing

**6:00 pm** Cash bar opens

**6:30 pm** Dinner

**8:00 pm** Clarence Darrow Award  
Jamelle Bouie

**8:45 pm** Roy Zimmerman in Concert

**9:15 pm** Dessert reception (concludes by 10 pm)

### SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18

**8:00 am** “Nothing Fails Like Prayer” Breakfast (ticketed)

**Moment of Bedlam**

**Freethought Invocation**

**Godless Gospel quartet**  
“Let’s All Give Thanks”

**9 am** Ballroom, tables reopen

**9:30 am** Major Student Activist Awards

Bailey Harris — “Out of God’s Closet” Diane & Stephen Uhl Memorial Award

Eli Frost — Beverly and Richard Hermesen Award

**10:00 am** Student Essay Winners  
TBA

**10:30 am** Break

**10:45 am** Avijit Roy Courage Award  
Mubarek Barak (remote)

**11:15 am** Freethought Heroine Award  
Chrissy Stroop

**11:45 am** Break, book signing

**Noon** BUFFET LUNCH

**1:30 pm** Ballroom re-opens

**2:00 pm** “Godless Gospel” song  
3rd Annual Secular Legislative Panel

**3:00 pm** F.O.R.W.A.R.D.  
Rep. Mickey Dollens

**3:30 pm** Break, book signing

**4:15 pm** “How to Save our Democracy”  
Steven Levitsky  
Book signing

**6:00 pm** Cash bar opens

**6:30 pm** Dinner (ticketed)

**8:00 pm** Drawing for ‘Clean Money’

**8:30 pm** An Evening with John Fugelsang  
Book signing

### SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19

**8:00 am** Coffee, tea, pastries

**9:00 am** Business (Membership) Annual Meeting

**11ish** State Representatives Annual Meeting

**ADJOURN BY NOON**

*\*Schedule is subject to change*



Across

1. \*Atheist Ayn \_\_\_\_

5. Maintenance closet staple

8. Chicken \_\_\_\_ King

11. Bassoon cousin

12. Morally reprehensible

13. Cecum, pl.

15. \*Like freethinker Ludwig van Beethoven

16. Port in Yemen

17. Nail salon board

18. \*Atheist “Howard’s End” actress Emma \_\_\_\_

20. Cubicle furniture

21. Civil disorders

22. Armed conflict

23. \*Freethinking Pete Seeger’s song “If I Had a \_\_\_\_”

26. Hearing distance

30. Mozart’s “L’\_\_\_\_ del Cairo”

31. Stockings

34. Reminiscent of hardwood, to sommelier

35. One of Ms in MMR vaccine

37. Not divisible by two

38. \*Freethinking Leo Tolstoy’s famous heroine, pl.

39. And elsewhere

40. Like default settings

42. Government Printing Office

43. Began again

45. Types in password (2 words)

47. Chill

Down

1. Rodney, for short

2. What accomplices do

3. \*Atheist Yuval \_\_\_\_ Harari, author of “Sapiens” A Brief History of Humankind”

4. Twist out of shape

5. Middle

6. Margarines

7. \*Freethinking “Mystic River” actor Sean \_\_\_\_

8. High or low cards

9. Lie in wait

10. \*Freethinking \_\_\_\_ Alkon, a.k.a. Advice Goddess

12. Gossamer

13. Natural moth repellent

14. \*Freethinker Ralph Waldo \_\_\_\_

19. Dignified bearings

22. Is, no longer

23. \*Agnostic Matt

24. Less than 90 degrees

25. Papas’ partners

26. Odds’ partners

27. Does like a picture on a wall

28. Rain forest ruminant

29. \*Agnostic astrophysicist Neil deGrasse \_\_\_\_

32. \*1 Peter 2:13: “Submit... for the \_\_\_\_’s sake to every authority instituted among men”

33. Type of poem

36. \*Deuteronomy 20:10-17 on attacking a city: “... the women and the little ones... take as \_\_\_\_ for yourselves”

38. Bikini, e.g.

40. Coach’s locker room talk

41. First among siblings

44. Ebenezer Scrooge, e.g.

46. Popular Italian dessert

48. Rocks at mountain base

49. Same as icons

50. Title for Turkish leader

51. \*Atheist author of “The Sea, The Sea” \_\_\_\_ Murdoch

52. Crystalline hydrochloride, colloquially

53. Dashing style

54. “\_\_\_\_ a soul”

55. Campfire residue

58. “\_\_\_\_ and the City”

Groening’s TV character

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10
11					12				13	14	
15					16				17		
	18			19					20		
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	50	51				52				53	54
55						56				57	
59						60				61	
62						63				64	

Answers on page 25

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Freethought Today Cryptogram

PGM UTJD UJ BVJ BOVBQC, UTX KBD UJ MGVD

MX, QO DXM MTJ NXCZ? XGVZJWFJZ. UJ MGVD

MX XGVZJWFJZ BDEUBE. UJ XDWE YVJMJDC MTJVJ

BVJ NXCZ BDC MTBM MTJE KBVJ BPXGM GZ. QM

QZ B KXAOXVMQDN OBWZJTXXC. — JVQKB LXDN

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: K => C. Answer is on page 21.

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

Author helps those with personality disorders

Name: Randi Kreger

Where I live: Milwaukee, Wis.

Where and when I was born: August 1960, St. Louis.

Family: One Christian brother, two years younger. He was the black sheep in a family of atheists.

Education: Bachelor of Arts degree in communication arts (radio–TV–film) at the University Wisconsin–Madison.

Occupation: I am the author of a series of books about what to do if a close family member has borderline or narcissistic personality disorder. The name of the first book is “Stop Walking on Eggshells.” The other books are in a similar pattern.

There is a “Stop Walking on Eggshells” for parents, partners, a workbook, a tool-box, and the book, “The Essential Family Guide to Borderline Personality Disorder.”

I also have an online community about the topic in which religiously inserting yourself into somebody else’s situation, no matter how well meaning, is expressly prohibited. I moderate all posts, and when there’s gonna be any significant religious content, I always put in a warning beforehand.

Where I’m head-ed: Pompeii or Her-culaneum, camping, off to watch a little bit of Netflix, cleaning the cat litter box, the French countryside, Norway, and off to finish yet one last book.

A quotation I like: “A luxury, once sampled, becomes a necessity.” — Andrew Tobias.

Things I like: Cats. Walking in nature. “A Handmaid’s Tale.” “The Last of Us.” Travel. San Diego. Pumpkin pie. Christmas lights on a natural pine-smelling tree.

Things I smite: Christian nationalism. Sports on TV. Overcooked vegetables.

My doubts about religion started: I came from an atheist household, so I never believed in the first place. My grandmother was Catholic, though, and I got really weirded out when she showed me a rosary when I was in grade school.

Before I die: Other than travel, I



Randi Kreger

would love a boyfriend with a big family so I could experience that for once in my life.

Ways I promote freethought: I’m giving the royalties of all of my books to the Freedom From Religion Foundation in my trust for when I die.

I also wrote some lyrics that can be sung to the John Denver tune, “Thank God I’m a Country Boy.”

“Well, my mama was a Catholic and my daddy was a Jew,  
Right after his bar mitzvah, he decided he was through,  
And my mom got a sore behind from sitting in the pew,  
Thank God, I am an atheist.  
“When they ask my faith, I’m noncommittal,  
Cause I told the truth once and I was belittled,  
But I can see those grays in the middle,  
Thank God, I’m an atheist.”

I wrote those lyrics a long time ago. There’s an unused line that says, “and the Unitarians are too conservative for me,” but I’ve never had a good enough reason to try and figure out exactly where it goes. If somebody at FFRF has an idea of what I could do with this song if I actually finished it, let me know and I will hastily write the rest.

Person in history I admire and why: All of the unsung women who created history itself.

# IN THE NEWS

## Atheists less than 1% of federal prison population

According to the most recent data, less than 1 percent of federal prison inmates claim to be atheists.

Hemant Mehta, the “Friendly Atheist,” filed a Freedom of Information Act request with the Federal Bureau of Prisons to see the latest numbers of the federal prison population and their religious preferences.

As of May, he noted that there are just 113 atheists out of the 155,174 people incarcerated in the U.S. federal prison system, which is just 0.073 percent. That is significantly below the number of self-described atheists in the general population, which is about 5 percent. (“Nones,” those without any religious affiliation, make up about 29 percent of the general population.)

Protestants make up about 39 percent of the general population, but only account for 17.3 percent of federal prisoners. Catholics are 19 percent of the population, but 12.5 percent of federal inmates. Muslims are 1 percent of the population, but 9.6 percent of those inmates. The discrepancies arise from the fact that more than a third (35.7 percent) of federal inmates did not state their religious preference.

## Religious groups can take on N.Y. abortion rule

The Supreme Court on June 16 ordered a New York court to take a new look at whether some religious organizations should be excluded from a state regulation requiring health insurance plans to cover abortions.

The justices acted after the court unanimously ruled earlier in June that Wisconsin discriminated against a Catholic charity by forcing it to pay state unemployment taxes.

The New York case poses a similar issue because the state exempts religious employers if their purpose is to spread religious values and they primarily employ and serve people of their faith. But religious groups that serve and employ people regardless of their beliefs don’t qualify for the exemption.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany and other church groups challenged the rule.

It’s the second time the nation’s highest court has sent the case back to New York courts. Last year, the New York Court of Appeals upheld the regulation after taking into account the Supreme Court’s unanimous ruling in 2021 in favor of a Catholic foster care agency in Philadelphia that refused to work with same-sex couples because of its religious opposition to same-sex marriage.

## Abortions decriminalized for women in England, Wales

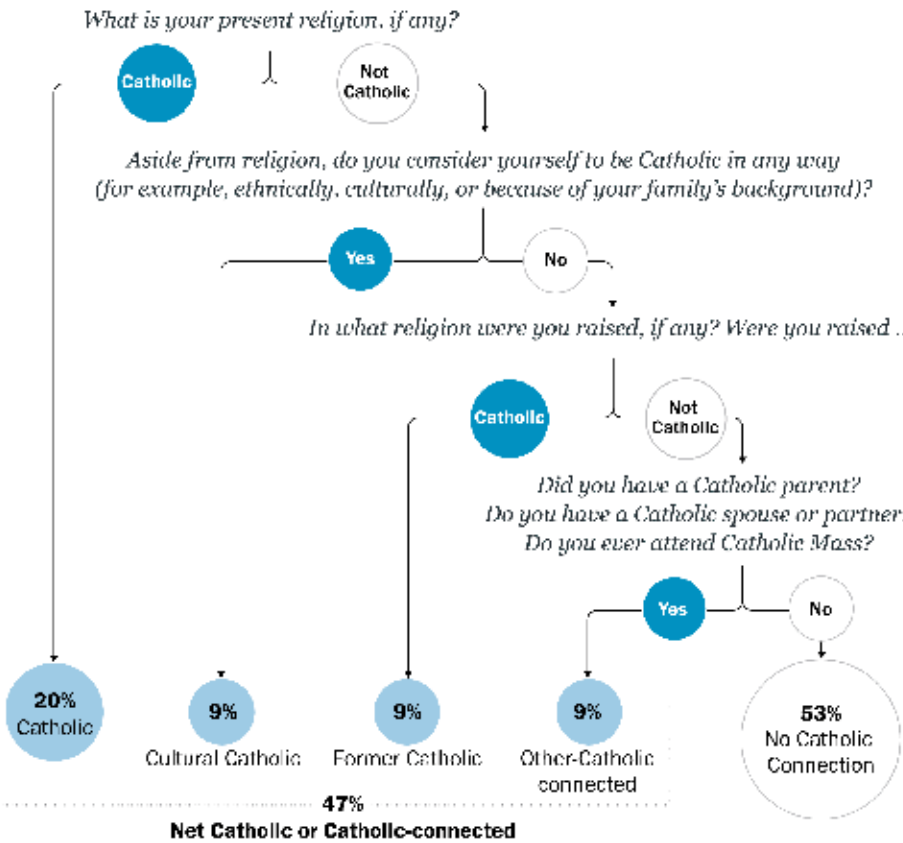
British lawmakers voted June 17 to prevent women from being prosecuted for having an abortion in England and Wales, a landmark decision that sets the country on a diverging path from the United States on an emotive social issue.

In effect, the vote will largely decriminalize terminating pregnancies that are later than 24 weeks, the current limit, although medical professionals who aid the process could still be prosecuted.

Britain’s Parliament, by a vote of 370 to 137, approved an amendment

## Nearly half of Americans have Catholic connections

% of U.S. adults who are (a) ...



## Pew: Catholicism has deep roots in U.S. life

Nearly half of U.S. adults (47 percent) say they have a personal or family relationship to Catholicism, a new Pew Research Center survey finds. The survey found that 1 in 5 U.S. adults identify as Catholic, and another 9 percent say they don’t identify with Catholicism religiously but answered yes when asked “whether ‘aside from religion’ they consider themselves Catholic in any way.”

An additional 9 percent identify as former Catholics, and another 9 percent say they have a Catholic parent or partner or that they have attended Catholic Mass.

Yet fewer than 3 in 10 adults (28 percent) of those 20 percent who identify as Catholic in the religious sense attend Mass at least weekly, and slightly less than a quarter (23 percent) attend Confession yearly.

to a bill that would change Victorian-era laws governing abortion. The vote comes at a time of intense debate over abortion in the United States, where the Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion in 2022 and threw it to the 50 states to legislate their own laws.

By contrast, surveys suggest that the vast majority of the British population — consistently around 88 percent, according to YouGov, a polling agency — say they believe that women should have the right to an abortion.

## Islam is the world’s fastest growing religion

A new Pew Research Center study measuring the evolution of the global religious population shows Muslims are the fastest-growing faith group, followed by the religiously unaffiliated (Nones). Though it remained the world’s largest religion, the Christian population declined between 2010 and 2020.

Pew’s Global Religious Landscape study, released June 9, is the second edition of a demographic report of religious groups, started in 2010.

The study focuses on Buddhists, Jews, Hindus, Christians, Muslims and the religiously unaffiliated. It also looks at “others,” which include folk and traditional religions, wiccans, Zoroastrians and more.

The world’s Muslim population increased by 347 million people over 10 years — more than all the other religions combined — primarily due to natural demographic growth.

“Muslims are having children at

a greater number than Muslims are dying,” said Conrad Hackett, a senior demographer at Pew Research Center. “Very little of the change in Muslim population size is a result of people becoming Muslim as adults or leaving Islam as adults.”

## 796 babies buried under Ireland women’s shelter

Authorities in Ireland will soon start excavating a site, formerly run by a group of Catholic nuns, believed to be the burial ground of nearly 800 babies and children. A team of investigators has initiated a forensic probe on June 16.

According to a local historian, 798 children died at the Bon Secours Mother and Baby Home between 1925 and 1961, but only two were buried in a proper cemetery. The other 796 children are believed to have been dumped in a septic tank, known as the pit, the New York Post reported.

The unmarried pregnant women were sent to Bon Secours Home to give birth. The home was run by a group of Catholic nuns who used to take care of both the children and the mothers.

After the babies were born, they were taken away from their mothers and handed over to the nuns without the consent of their families. However, the mothers were forced to stay there for a year to do unpaid work.

The tragedy at Bon Secours was uncovered in 2014, but the excavation at the site could only begin after the Irish government passed a law in 2022 allowing it to officially dig the site and search for the remains of the children.

## Buffalo parishes to pay \$80M in settlement

Parishes in the Diocese of Buffalo, N.Y., are set to pay a total of \$80 million into the diocese’s \$150 million bankruptcy settlement, with the funds due to be paid into a trust by July 15.

Of that \$150 million, the diocese will also directly pay \$30 million, with its affiliated Catholic organizations contributing \$10 million, and real estate sales covering the remainder, diocesan communications director Joe Martone told OSV News.

Martone said the diocese hopes that insurance coverage will realize an estimated additional \$150 million for claims, although the diocese is “still in negotiation with the insurers.”

The bankruptcy settlement, agreed to in principle April 22, will resolve the five-year-long proceedings, which began in 2020 to address what now amounts to “approximately 891 cases” — making for “one of the highest caseloads in the country,” Martone previously told OSV News.

## Ohio EdChoice program ruled unconstitutional

A Franklin County Common Pleas Court judge ruled Ohio’s EdChoice private school voucher program is unconstitutional, a key moment in a lawsuit in which more than half of the state’s school districts had staked legal claims opposing the program.

“In recognition that this decision may cause significant changes to school funding in Ohio and the high likelihood that the parties will immediately appeal, the judgment in this case shall be stayed,” Judge Jaiza Page wrote.

“We are pleased that the court affirmed what we have been saying all along,” said William L. Phillis, director for the Coalition for Adequacy & Equity of School Funding. “The EdChoice private school voucher program, which has been diverting hundreds of millions of much needed tax dollars from public schools to private schools, is unconstitutional.”

A Dayton Daily News investigation last year found that Ohio awarded \$993.7 million for families to send kids to private schools in a recent school year.

A Dayton Daily News analysis of Ohio Department of Education data found that, by that point, the project “largely subsidized families already sending their kids to private schools.”

## Wis. high court upends 1849 abortion law

Women in Wisconsin will continue to have access to abortion services under a new ruling from the state’s highest court that invalidates a 176-year-old state law that had banned abortions in nearly every situation. In a 4-3 ruling July 2, the liberal-controlled Wisconsin Supreme Court affirmed a lower court’s previous decision that overturned the 19th Century law.

The decision ends three years of tumult over the issue following the 2022 ruling by the U.S. Supreme Court that overturned Roe v. Wade, which had provided women nationwide with a constitutional right to abortions.

Writing for the court’s liberal majority, Supreme Court Justice Rebecca Dallet said the Wisconsin State Legislature had effectively repealed the 1849 law when it enacted additional laws regulating access to abortion.



# FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

## Alabama

The Orange Beach City Schools (OBCS) will not be promoting Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) at a district school after FFRF took issue with the constitutional violation at play.

FFRF learned that OBCS staff had been organizing and promoting a FCA club for students at Orange Beach Elementary School. Per a March 12 post on the official Orange Beach Elementary School Facebook page, the school was hosting and potentially organizing the FCA club meeting in the school’s gym. The promotional nature of the post and the fact that it appeared on an official OBCS school social media page suggested that OBCS staff, not students, were running the club.

“Religious clubs for students at elementary schools cannot authentically be student-run, and thus are unconstitutional,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Randy Wilkes.

After FFRF sent its letter, Wilkes informed FFRF via email about the correctional action the district took. “Steps have already been taken to ensure that all school-sponsored activities comply with applicable state and federal laws and Orange Beach City Schools’ policies and procedures,” Wilkes wrote. “Appropriate changes have been implemented to clarify the proper use of school communications and facilities related to non-curricular organizations.”

## California

Heywood Gardens, a senior center apartment complex in Simi Valley, Calif., partially subsidized through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has stopped including explicitly religious messages in property newsletters.

A Heywood Gardens resident reported that the building manager was leading Christian prayers at group activities. FFRF’s complainant reported that in November and December 2024, the manager sent residents newsletters that promoted prayer and her personal religious beliefs. Additionally, in the December 2024 newsletter, the manager told residents, “We will begin the holiday dinner with an opening prayer, so come late if you do not want to join in, please.”

FFRF pointed out that the fact that the building manager was instructing residents to arrive late to events if they did not want to pray indicated that she was aware that the staff-imposed prayer made residents uncomfortable and they were legally problematic.

“As you are aware, federal regulations prohibit public housing facilities receiving federal funding, like Heywood Gardens, from engaging in religious activities,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Despite FFRF having sent multiple letters to the property president from December 2024 to April 2025, no official response was delivered from management. Thankfully, FFRF’s complainant followed up on the issue in June, informing FFRF that the manager no longer references religion in her newsletters.

## California

FFRF corrected an ongoing First Amendment violation in the Saddleback Valley Unified School District in California, where a church group was taking advantage of preferential treatment of the

school’s rental space contract.

A district employee reported that Los Alisos Intermediate Schools had been giving a local church, C30C, preferential treatment regarding the church’s use of school facilities. FFRF learned that the church rented school facilities for use on Sundays, but starting in June 2024, Los Alisos had permitted the church to store a variety of worship and decoration items in student-accessible areas throughout the school, including the school’s stage, as well as staff restrooms. The church’s official rental contract reportedly did not include the church being permitted to store items throughout the school and that C30C was not paying the school additional funds to use facilities for storage. FFRF’s complainant stated that at times, the school was even allowing the church to leave items in spaces that blocked pathways for wheelchair users, creating accessibility problems for students and staff.

Additionally, the school reportedly allowed the church to begin storing its items in a storage pod on Los Alisos’ grounds, again, free of charge. The district’s official Community Services Office was informed of the preferential treatment C30C was receiving and the hazards it was causing, but the office did nothing to enforce the terms of the church’s actual rental contract or otherwise intervene. The church has also seemingly removed and damaged other items in teachers’ classrooms, including LGBTQ+ pride flags, while additionally leaving pamphlets and other literature “hidden” in classrooms, likely with hopes that students will find the materials and join the church.

“The school is allegedly permitting the church to enter the building outside of its official rental hours, store its items throughout the building and in a pod on school grounds, interfere with teacher property, and leave literature behind in classrooms,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After the district acknowledged FFRF’s letter, but did not provide any details about action, FFRF pressed for further resolution. Finally, Assistant Superintendent Robert Craven wrote back to FFRF, confirming that the district was aware of, and working to fix, the violation. “Yes, we’ve been taking concrete corrective actions and will continue to if needed,” Craven wrote.

## Colorado

The Archuleta School District in Pagosa Springs, Colo., learned not to include bible quotes on school sports attire, thanks to FFRF.

A district community member report-

ed that Pagosa Springs High School approved boys and girls basketball team sweatshirts that feature a religious quote alongside the school’s official logo. FFRF learned that while sweatshirts were donated by a third party, the school’s basketball coaches still exercised some amount of control over the design and approved the addition of scripture. Reportedly, students were able to choose to have one of several bible quotes printed on the sweatshirt with the school’s logo, or the sweatshirt could be printed without a quote.

“Students know that their coaches control their playing time and positions, directly affecting students’ opportunities for college scholarships and recruitment,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “When coaches approve religious messages on team apparel, student-athletes will likely feel that going along with the majority and getting a biblical quote on their team sweatshirt is necessary to please their coaches and be viewed as a team player.”

After receiving FFRF’s letter, district Superintendent Rick Holt took action. “I have completed my investigation and found that these sweatshirts were created and distributed by parents without school permission,” Holt wrote in an email to FFRF. “Following the investigation, the athletic director is issuing a corrective action memo to all coaches, the involved parent group, and adding a section to the parent athletic handbook to ensure that there are no future incidents.”

## Florida

FFRF saw its hard work pay off when multiple violations in the Orange County Public Schools system in Orlando, Fla., were resolved.

FFRF received a report that in May 2024, Sunrise Elementary School partnered with Genesis Church in order to promote student attendance at the church’s affiliated summer camp, “IGNITE Summer Camp.” While Genesis Church advertises IGNITE as a sports- and arts-focused camp, an official video from the camp showed attending students praying and participating in what appeared to be religious seminars as part of camp activities. Per its website, part of the camp’s purpose is to be a place “where coaches, trainers, artists and athletes of faith are able to share what they believe and how it has shaped them in various sports or art.”

Further issues arose when the complainant reported that starting the week of Dec. 2, 2024, Sunrise Elementary began broadcasting Christmas music over the school’s PA system during morning drop-off and after the final bell. Sunrise

Elementary did not play music over the PA relating to any other winter holiday or tradition, just Christmas.

“We ask that the district take action to ensure Sunrise Elementary School ceases promoting and favoring religion, and specifically Christianity,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

After FFRF’s letter, district legal representative John Palmerini spoke with school staff regarding the promotion of the religious camp on the school’s Facebook page. “Under our policy KHC, any such ad like that has to have a written disclaimer stating that the materials are not sponsored or endorsed by the School Board of Orange County, Florida,” Palmerini wrote in an email to the Sunrise Elementary principal that was later forwarded to FFRF.

## Iowa

The Le Mars Community School District in Iowa will no longer allow a Christian organization access to students after the district partnered with a local religious group to proselytize students.

FFRF learned that on May 1, a religious organization seemingly affiliated with Side by Side Ministries, was permitted by LMCS D to enter Le Mars Community Middle and High School grounds as part of a National Day of Prayer celebration. A Facebook post from the organization on May 1 stated in part, “We had the joy of partnering with Le Mars Youth Network to kick off the National Day of Prayer at Le Mars Community Middle and High Schools. We took time to connect with students and asked them how we could be praying for them. It was a meaningful morning of ministry and encouragement. Join us as we continue to lift up the next generation in prayer.”

The post was accompanied by photos of outside adults on what appeared to be school property, reportedly proselytizing students per the organization’s own post.

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

FFRF’s efforts were met with action from the district. FFRF received correspondence from Rachel R. Fritz, the district’s legal counsel. “As a result of your letter and the concerns raised, the district has taken appropriate steps to ensure that any prayer activities occurring on school grounds are entirely student-led or student initiated, in full compliance with applicable legal standards, including the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment,” Fritz wrote. Fritz further explained that group has been instructed not to facilitate or lead in any prayer or devotional activities involving students on district property.

## Kentucky

FFRF put a stop to a teacher preaching anti-LGBTQ+ messages in Carter County Schools in Grayson, Ky.

A student reported that a teacher at East Carter High school preached the bible to students during class, telling students that God would never love someone if they are gay.

“By telling students that God will nev-





er love them if they are gay, [the teacher] creates a hostile classroom environment for his LGBTQ-plus students,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote to the district.

FFRF’s letter received an emailed response from Personnel & Federal Programs Director Joshua Mabry, informing FFRF that the issue had been addressed. “The policy referenced was policy 3.13241 regarding Employee Religious Expression,” Mabry wrote. “While I cannot comment on personnel issues, I can confirm that our staff are directed to avoid promoting religion in the classroom.”

Missouri

FFRF made sure that the Chaffee R-2 School District in Missouri would not be using resources in the future to promote or recruit for a Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) club.

FFRF learned of an FCA club seemingly sponsored by Chaffee Elementary School. On March 14, Chaffee Elementary School’s official Facebook account posted photos from that morning’s meeting of the Elementary FCA club, calling it “our” club.

“The district cannot allow its schools to be used as recruiting grounds for religious organizations,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle Steinberg wrote to district Superintendent Shawn Nix. “It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion.”

Shortly after receiving FFRF’s letter, Nix looked into the school club to verify the complaint. “The gathering was not of a recognized school club, and the gathering was led by a high school student,” he wrote. “The social media post has been removed, and no further social media posts of this nature will be made.” Nix additionally affirmed that going forward, district would not facilitate, support, sponsor or expend resources on an FCA elementary student school club, nor would it advertise, recruit for or promote such for an outside club.

Nebraska

FFRF was pleased to hear that Omaha Public Libraries would not be closing on religious holidays after receiving constitutional guidance from the state/church watchdog.

FFRF learned that the Omaha Public Library system closed all branches on April 20 in observance of Easter.

“Easter is neither a federal holiday nor a Nebraska state holiday, nor even a city-observed holiday despite the library’s announcement declaring that it is a holiday observed by the city of Omaha,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to Executive Director Laura Marlane. “Easter is a day that holds significance only for people who practice Christianity. It is inappropriate and unconstitutional for public libraries to close in observance of a single religion’s holy day.”

Marlane acknowledged the error and confirmed that corrective action was taking place.

“You are absolutely right: Easter is not a federal, state, or city-designated holiday, and the decision to close our branches on that date was an oversight,” Marlane wrote. “The announcement identifying it as a ‘city-observed holiday’ was incorrect, and I take full responsibility for the error.” Marlane confirmed that the closure would not happen again and ensured that library closures going forward would be based solely on secular, government recognized holidays

Religious ‘liberty’?

FFRF’s Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann, right, and Americans United President Rachel Laser attend the first meeting of the Presidential Commission on Religious Liberty on May 2 in Washington, D.C. FFRF stated in a news release, “Despite its branding, this commission is not about protecting religious freedom — it’s about advancing religious privilege and promoting a Christian nationalist agenda.”

and operational needs, in full alignment with constitutional principles.

Ohio

The Belle Center Post Office in Belle Center, Ohio, is now free from religious material being displayed to patrons, thanks to FFRF’s legal advocacy.

A community member informed FFRF that the Belle Center Post Office in Ohio had literature from two Baptist publications, “Call to Glory” and “Baptist Bread,” on display and available for patrons to take.

“By allowing the display and distribution of religious literature on its grounds, the Belle Center Post Office is demonstrating a preference for religion over nonreligion, Christianity over all other faiths, and Baptists over all other sects,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

After FFRF’s letter, Postmaster Serina A. Leistritz directed staff to immediately remove any religious items from the post office. Leistritz forwarded FFRF the email with the instructions to her staff, and then informed FFRF that the material had been removed.

Oklahoma

FFRF stayed persistent to ensure that the Wagoner Public Schools (WPS) system in Oklahoma put a stop to unconstitutional promotion of religious events using school resources.

In January, a concerned WPS family member reported that WPS was allowing First Baptist Church of Wagoner to hang an advertising banner outside the WPS football stadium alongside several other banners. Additionally, the church was also permitted to display other advertising banners within the stadium that had been removed by the time of the report. The church had reportedly rented the stadium in the past, but it was unclear if the banners on display at the time of FFRF’s letter were related to an ongoing rental, or if it was instead a non-rental related advertisement for the church.

After FFRF’s initial letter went unanswered, FFRF learned of a new violation in May. The complainant wrote that an April 23 post on the official WPS Facebook page promoted and encouraged attendance of a baccalaureate ceremony held at a local church. The post read, “Join us as we celebrate our graduating

seniors during a special Baccalaureate service on Sunday, April 27. This meaningful tradition honors their accomplishments and offers encouragement and blessings for the road ahead. Let’s come together as a community to support the Class of 2025 and send them off with love and inspiration!”

“Public schools must remain neutral between religions, and between religion and nonreligion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After FFRF’s second letter, Superintendent Randy Harris acknowledged both complaints, and addressed them accordingly. “The two banners in the picture were both left up after the season without any ill intent and due to sickness, staff resignation, snowy weather, etc., they weren’t taken down at the same time as all other 40-50 fence banners,” Harris wrote. He apologized for the lack of action, and reported that the banners had been taken down shortly after the issue was brought to their attention. He additionally stated that the baccalaureate post should not have been posted, and that WPS had nothing to do with the service and would not post anything similar in the future.

Oregon

FFRF worked to ensure that inmates in the Inmate Veterans Associate (IVA) at the Snake River Correctional Institute (SRCI) would not be exposed to unwanted prayer by other inmates after religious chaplains attempted to intrude.

FFRF’s complainant reported that an inmate instructed another inmate to begin a recent IVA meeting with prayer, which was explicitly Christian. SRCI staff appeared to be involved, at least to some extent, in organizing and facilitating the IVA meetings. This event was noted to be a departure from the previous practice of permitting the SRCI chaplain to begin meetings with prayer. FFRF’s complainant expressed concern that IVA leadership within SCRI appeared to be looking for loopholes to begin IVA meetings with Christian prayer even if the facility’s chaplain was no longer leading them.

“While SRCI’s chaplain is no longer leading the prayers, it is still concerning that SRCI’s personnel are reportedly allowing IVA’s leaders to find new ways to insert prayer into IVA meetings, even though all IVA members are not Chris-

tians and not religious,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Shanon Vincent, a representative of the Oregon Department of Justice, informed FFRF that she had learned of the prayers led by inmates at IVA due to FFRF’s work. “[The correctional facility] has issued a directive to SRCI’s IVA, instructing the group to stop including prayers at its meeting,” Vincent wrote.

Pennsylvania

FFRF made sure that the Blacklick Valley School District in Pennsylvania would respect the First Amendment and not allow for explicitly religious assemblies to take place as school-sponsored events.

A Blacklick Valley Elementary parent reported that the school’s Nov. 11, 2024, Veterans Day assembly included school-sponsored prayer. FFRF learned that a pastor was invited to lead a Christian prayer, that the principal knew this would occur ahead of time, and that she elected to prevent non-Christian students from attending the assembly rather than ensure that the school-sponsored event was secular.

“Here, the district crossed the constitutional line by allegedly including a school-sponsored prayer at its Veterans Day assembly and excluding non-Christian children from the event,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote.

FFRF received a response from district legal representative Ronald N. Repak shortly after sending the complaint letter. “We will ensure that we adhere to the requirement to neither prohibit nor to actively engage in the participation of religion within the school setting,” Repak wrote. “In working with the administration, we will review internal procedures and ensure that there is no favoritism nor prohibition shown in relation to religion and school sponsored events.”

Texas

FFRF brought the Wylie Independent School District in Abilene, Texas, back in line with the Constitution after the district allowed multiple official expressions of religious favoritism at school sponsored events.

An employee and community member informed FFRF that the school board had been commencing monthly meetings with prayer. These invocations were scheduled at the beginning of meetings along with the roll call. For instance, an invocation was scheduled at the board’s Nov. 11, 2024, regular meeting. Despite being in public minutes, the district’s actual roll call and invocation were not livestreamed on its official YouTube page. FFRF was also informed that prayers were being delivered over the loudspeaker at district football games.

“By having prayer at official school events, the district abridges that constitutional duty and needlessly marginalizes students who are a part of the 49 percent of Generation Z who are religiously unaffiliated,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the district sought legal counsel, and, at a later date, received an email response from Superintendent Joey Light, writing, “We are going to make necessary corrections. Thank you.” While the district did not specify exactly what steps were being taken, they confirmed that changes would be made in response to concerns about official prayer at board meetings and football games.



## Arkansas

Continued from page 1

In their complaint filed in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Arkansas, the plaintiffs, who are Jewish, Unitarian Universalist and nonreligious, assert that the statute violates longstanding U.S. Supreme Court precedent and the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment. More than 40 years ago, in *Stone v. Graham*, the Supreme Court ruled that the separation of church and state bars public schools from posting the Ten Commandments in classrooms.

Following this precedent, a federal district court held last year in *Roake v. Brumley* that a Louisiana law similar to Act 573 violates parents’ and students’ First Amendment rights. In a unanimous decision, the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled June 20 that the law is unconstitutional. (For more on this, see story below.)

“As American Jews, my husband and I deeply value the ability to raise our children in our faith, without interference from the government,” says plaintiff Samantha Stinson. “By imposing a Christian-centric translation of the Ten Commandments on our children for nearly every hour of every day of their public-school education, this law will infringe on our rights as parents and create an unwelcoming and religiously coercive school environment for our children.”

Plaintiff Carol Vella agrees: “My children are among a small number of Jewish stu-



dents at their school. The classroom displays required by Act 573 will make them feel like they don’t belong simply because they don’t follow the government’s favored religion. The displays will also violate core Jewish tenets, which emphasize tolerance and inclusion and prohibit evangelizing others.”

According to the complaint, which includes claims under both the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment, Act 573’s classroom and library displays will interfere with parents’ First Amendment right to direct their children’s religious upbringing and create a religiously coercive school environment:

“Permanently posting the Ten Commandments in every classroom and library — rendering them unavoidable — unconstitutionally pressures students into religious observance, veneration, and adoption of the state’s favored religious scripture. It also sends the harmful and religiously divisive message that students who do not subscribe to the Ten Commandments — or, more precisely, to the specific version of the Ten Commandments that Act 573 requires schools to display — do not belong in their own school community and pressures them to refrain from expressing any faith practices or beliefs that are not aligned with the

state’s religious preferences.”

The plaintiffs also have filed a motion for a preliminary injunction asking the court to issue an order temporarily preventing implementation of the law, which takes effect on Aug. 5, while the lawsuit is pending.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor says, “This is a clear imposition of religious doctrine on Arkansas public school children. We will fight to uphold this nation’s foundational constitutional principles.”

“The right to decide which religious beliefs, if any, to follow belongs to families and faith communities, not the government,” says John Williams, legal director for the ACLU of Arkansas. “We will not allow Arkansas politicians to misuse our public schools to impose scripture on children.”

Heather L. Weaver, senior counsel for the ACLU, adds: “Public schools are not Sunday schools. Apparently, Arkansas lawmakers need a lesson in the First Amendment, so we’ll see them in court.”

“Our Constitution’s guarantee of church-state separation means that families — not politicians — get to decide if, when and how public-school children engage with religion,” says Rachel Laser, president of Americans United. “This law is part of the nationwide Christian nationalist scheme to win favor for one set of religious views over all others and nonreligion — in a country that promises religious freedom. Not on our watch. We’re proud to defend the religious freedom of Arkansas schoolchildren and their families.”

# Appeals court says no to Louisiana Decalogue law

In a unanimous decision, the U.S. 5th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled June 20 that a Louisiana law requiring public schools to permanently display a government-approved, Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in every classroom is unconstitutional.

The decision upholds a federal district court’s November 2024 preliminary injunction in *Rev. Roake v. Brumley*, which prevents the defendant state officials and school boards from implementing the statute.

Pointing to the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Stone v. Graham*, which overturned a similar Kentucky law, the court of appeals held that Louisiana’s H.B. 71 violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. As the court explained, *Stone* remains good law that is binding on lower courts and “under *Stone*, H.B. 71 is plainly unconstitutional.”

The court ruled that “under the statute’s minimum requirements, the [Ten Commandments] posters must be indiscriminately displayed in every public school classroom in Louisiana regardless of class subject matter,” and thus, if allowed to go up, “those displays will cause an ‘irreparable’ deprivation of [the

plaintiffs’] First Amendment rights.”

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

“We are grateful for this decision, which honors the religious diversity and religious-freedom rights of public school families across Louisiana,” said the Rev. Darcy Roake, a plaintiff in the case along with her husband, Adrian Van Young.

“We are pleased that the First Amendment rights of students and families are protected by this vital court decision,” said Patrick Elliott, legal director of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

“This is a resounding victory for the separation of church and state and public education,” said Heather L. Weaver, senior counsel for the ACLU. “With today’s ruling, the Fifth Circuit has held Louisiana accountable to a core constitutional promise: Public schools are not Sunday schools, and they must welcome all

students, regardless of faith.”

“This ruling will ensure that Louisiana families — not politicians or public-school officials — get to decide if, when and how their children engage with religion,” said Rachel Laser, president and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. “It should send a strong message to Christian Nationalists across the country that they cannot impose their beliefs on our nation’s public-school children.”

“Religious freedom — the right to choose one’s faith without pressure — is essential to American democracy,” said Alanah Odoms, executive director of the ACLU of Louisiana. “Today’s ruling ensures that the schools our plaintiffs’ children attend will stay focused on learning, without promoting a state-preferred version of Christianity.”

Jon Youngwood, co-chair of Simpson Thacher’s Litigation Department, added, “We are heartened by the Fifth Circuit’s well-reasoned and detailed opinion, which rests upon the wisdom of the First Amendment and the protections it affords regarding the separation of church and state.”

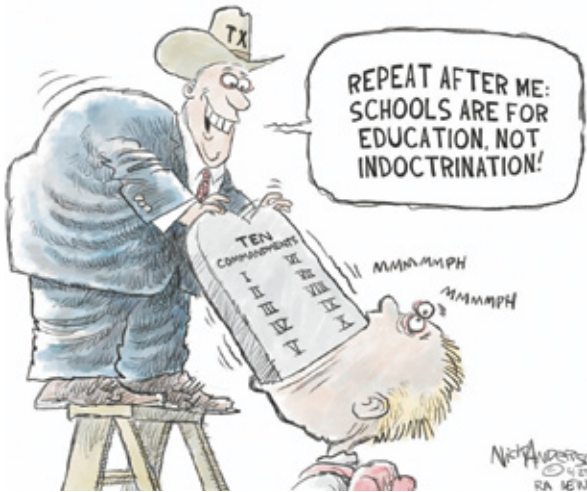
# FFRF, Texas families sue over Ten Commandments law

A group of 16 multifaith and nonreligious Texas families filed suit in federal court on July 2 to block a new state law requiring all public elementary and secondary schools to display a Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in every classroom.

The plaintiffs in *Rabbi Nathan v. Alamo Heights Independent School District* are represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, with Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel. In their complaint, filed with the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Texas, the plaintiffs, who are Jewish, Christian, Unitarian Universalist, Hindu or nonreligious, assert that SB 10 violates the First Amendment’s protections for the separation of church and state and the right to free religious exercise.

The plaintiffs also plan to file a motion for a preliminary injunction, asking the court to prevent the defendants from implementing the law pending the resolution of the litigation.

Enacted in June, SB 10 requires the scriptural postings to be a minimum of 16-by-20 inches in size and hung in a “conspicuous place” in each classroom. The commandments must be printed “in a size and typeface that is legi-



ble to a person with average vision from anywhere in the room.” The law also mandates that a specific version of the commandments, associated with Protestant faiths and selected by lawmakers, be used for every display.

“One need only read the First Commandment (‘Thou shalt have no other gods before me’) to see how this state-imposed injunction is the antithesis of the First Amendment and its protections of religious liberty,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the FFRF. “The

state of Texas has no right to dictate to children how many gods to worship, which gods to worship or whether to worship any gods at all.”

“SB 10 is catastrophically unconstitutional,” says Heather L. Weaver, senior counsel for the ACLU’s Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. “States may not require children to attend school and then abuse their access to those children by imposing scripture on them everywhere they go.”

“In a state as diverse as Texas, families from both religious and nonreligious backgrounds are coming together to challenge this unconstitutional law. Their message is clear: Our public schools are not Sunday schools,” says Adriana Piñon, legal director of the ACLU of Texas. “Politicians do not get to dictate how or whether students should practice religion. We’re bringing this lawsuit to ensure that all students, regardless of their faith or nonreligious beliefs, feel accepted and free to be themselves in Texas public schools.”

The Supreme Court has long prohibited displays of the Ten Commandments in public schools. Forty-five years ago, in *Stone v. Graham*, the court struck down a similar Kentucky law. More recently, in *Roake v. Brumley*, a federal district court reached the same conclusion regarding a similar law in Louisiana. (See story on this page.)



# FFRF condemns latest Supreme Court decisions

The U.S. Supreme Court ended its 2024-25 session with a flurry of rulings that did not sit well with the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Here’s a look at four of the most recent cases to be decided by the nation’s top court and FFRF’s reaction to them.

## Planned Parenthood and Medicaid rights

FFRF condemns the Supreme Court decision that dismisses Planned Parenthood’s lawsuit against South Carolina for removing its clinics from the list of approved Medicaid providers.

The Supreme Court decided 6-3 in *Medina v. Planned Parenthood of Southeast Atlantic* that Planned Parenthood of the Southeast Atlantic and its patients cannot sue states under the Civil Rights Act for rights arising from the Medicaid Act.

South Carolina admitted early during the eight-year litigation that Planned Parenthood of Southeast Atlantic was a qualified provider for Medicaid care, but because it provides abortion care, it was targeted and removed from the list of qualified providers. Planned Parenthood won several times, including before the Supreme Court and three times before the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Unfortunately, this time, the Supreme Court shut the door on Planned Parenthood and the millions of women who rely on state insurance to access family planning services.

South Carolina’s Christian nationalist officials have used every tool at their disposal to sabotage abortion access. Now, with the Supreme Court’s help, they’ve succeeded in denying patients their choice of provider — not based on quality of care, but based purely on religiously motivated opposition to abortion.

“The ruling is alarming not just for reproductive rights, but for government accountability,” says Liz Cavell, FFRF’s deputy legal director. “FFRF has long opposed efforts by Christian nationalist officials to impose their religious beliefs through government policy. When states strip access to qualified providers for ideological reasons, there must be a legal remedy. The court’s decision undermines both the rights of patients and the secular principles our Constitution is meant to protect.”



Image from Shutterstock

## LGBTQ inclusive curricula

FFRF is appalled at the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, which opens the door for parents to opt out of inclusive public school curricula on religious grounds.

“This is a deeply troubling outcome for public education, equality and the constitutional principle of the separation between state and church,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

The case involves a group of religious parents who objected to LGBTQ-plus characters in storybooks that were approved for use in a Maryland school district. The parents claimed that their religious beliefs require the school to exempt their children from being exposed to the inclusive stories, demanding the right to withdraw children from classes on days when stories with LGBTQ-plus themes are discussed. The lower courts rightly declined to issue a preliminary injunction that would require schools to notify the parents when the storybooks would be used and provide them a chance to opt out of instruction. The lower court noted the “threadbare” evidentiary record and affirmed that public schools are not required to tailor their curricula to individual religious preferences.

Unfortunately, the Supreme Court’s extremist majority has now reversed that sensible approach and sided with the parents.

The court held in a 6–3 decision that LGBTQ-plus inclusive materials amount-

ed to inculcation against faith and that not providing an opt-out to the plaintiffs violates their Free Exercise rights.

While the majority opinion paves a regressive path, the impassioned dissent in the judgment reaffirms that public schools exist to prepare students for life in a diverse and pluralistic society and not to shield them from it.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor authored the dissenting opinion, which was joined by Justices Elena Kagan and Ketanji Brown Jackson. The dissent reiterated that public schools are the “symbol of our democracy.” Sotomayor wrote, “They offer to children of all faiths and backgrounds an education and an opportunity to practice living in our multicultural society. That experience is critical to our nation’s civic vitality.” She warned, “Yet it will become a mere memory if children must be insulated from exposure to ideas and concepts that may conflict with their parents’ religious beliefs.”

FFRF had filed a friend-of-the-court brief before the Supreme Court to support the Montgomery County School Board. The brief emphasized that the parents had not cited a single precedent in which a neutral curriculum policy was invalidated based solely on claims of hostility to religion. Courts have consistently ruled that parents do not have a Free Exercise or Due Process right to insulate their children from ideas they find objectionable in public education.

“As our brief detailed, for nearly a century, parents claiming that mere exposure to history, science or life skills that conflict with their religion have uniformly lost on that point,” adds FFRF Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi, who helped author FFRF’s amicus brief. “But every day is a new day to favor religion over decades of well-settled legal precedent.”

## Birthright citizenship

FFRF has added its voice to the widespread condemnation of the June 27 Supreme Court ruling in which the court essentially barred lower courts from issuing nationwide injunctions to protect constitutional birthright citizenship.

The 6–3 decision means the court has diminished the impact of the federal judiciary’s checks on executive power, requiring every victim of a blatantly unconstitutional executive order to litigate to vindicate their constitutional rights.

“With the stroke of a pen,” as Justice Sonia Sotomayor writes in her dissent, joined by Justices Kagan and Jackson, “the president has made a ‘solemn mockery’ of our Constitution.”

“The court’s decision to permit the

executive to violate the Constitution with respect to anyone who has not yet sued is an existential threat to the rule of law,” warns Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson in her passionate separate dissent. “This ruling should send a chill down every American’s spine.”

The language of the 14th Amendment could not be more clear: “All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state wherein they reside.”

The Supreme Court decision saying a federal judge cannot order the president to adhere to the Constitution amalgamates more power to itself by disempowering lower courts, but also grants the office of the president nearly unfettered powers. The decision will create acute misery and inequity across the land, clogging our courts and victimizing those without the means to sue, while eroding America’s precious constitutional principle of “equal rights under law.”

## Gender-affirming care

FFRF lambastes the U.S. Supreme Court ruling upholding Tennessee’s cruel and unconstitutional ban on gender-affirming care for minors. This decision is a major blow to science-based medicine and the rights of parents and transgender youth.

In the 6–3 judgment written by Chief Justice John Roberts, the majority held in *United States v. Skrmetti* that states may prohibit gender-affirming medical care for minors without violating the 14th Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause. The extremist majority bought the state’s argument that its law does not discriminate based on sex, because it applies to all minors regardless of their sex assigned at birth — i.e., both males and females are prohibited from undergoing gender transition treatments.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor read her dissent from the bench, calling out the conservative majority for “refusing to call a spade a spade. Instead, it obfuscates a sex classification that is plain on the face of this statute, all to avoid the mere possibility that a different court could strike down SB 1, or categorical health care bans like it.” She lamented the decision’s “irrevocable damage to the Equal Protection Clause,” and its invitation for state legislatures “to engage in discrimination by hiding blatant sex classifications in plain sight.” She concludes: “It also authorizes, without second thought, untold harm to transgender children and the parents and families who love them. Because there is no constitutional justification for that result, I dissent.”

“This decision is a clear example of religious ideology permeating the law,” says FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott. “It undermines both parental rights and medical freedom, and signals a dangerous willingness by the court to allow theology to dictate constitutional rights.”

Despite the hostile narrative surrounding transgender health care that the Supreme Court is furthering in its decision, the gender-affirming-care model is safe, effective and supported by every major medical organization, including the American Medical Association, the American Psychiatric Association, the American Psychological Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry.

FFRF stands firmly with the transgender community, with parents, and with the medical professionals who follow science and ethics in providing care.

## FFRF denounces reconciliation law

FFRF is highly critical of the 2025 reconciliation bill that was signed into law by President Trump on July 4.

The legislation is a cornerstone of the Project 2025 playbook, advancing longstanding Christian nationalist goals to redirect public funds to private religious schools, punish reproductive health providers and dismantle safeguards that uphold the separation of state and church.

The bill enacts a federal tax credit for donations to scholarships for private and religious schools. It also bars Medicaid reimbursements to any health provider that offers abortion care, effectively targeting Planned Parenthood and amounting to a national backdoor abortion ban. The GOP bill cuts off critical services such as primary care, STI testing, contraception, and cancer

screenings at Planned Parenthood. It is expected to shutter one in four Planned Parenthood clinics.

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor expressed special appreciation to Rep. Jared Huffman and the Congressional Freethought Caucus for their leadership in speaking out against this dangerous bill. She also thanks the more than 5,000 FFRF Action Fund supporters who stood up to oppose it — including dozens who joined forces with Planned Parenthood Advocates of Wisconsin in our joint phone banks.

The passage of this bill shows how aggressively the Trump administration is advancing the Christian nationalist agenda — and why it’s necessary to scale up efforts to meet it head-on in the courts, in Congress, in the states and at the ballot box.



# Two Sean Carrolls explain the universe

*This is a condensed version of an article that first appeared on the Nautilus website in December 2024 and is reprinted with permission. To read the full article, go to [nautil.us](https://nautil.us).*

This is the tale of two Sean Carrolls. Nautilus brought the two scientists together for the fun reason that they share a name. Their self-guided conversation is filled with humor and camaraderie. And brilliance. The Sean Carrolls bring their perspectives from physics and evolutionary biology to bear on timeless questions about the origin of life, the possibilities of life on other planets, the tension between science and religion, the fate of Earth, and how they first got enchanted by science as kids.

**Sean B. Carroll**, the evolutionary biologist, is the former vice president for science education at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, where he championed research and the role of science as a human endeavor rich with drama and beauty. His books include “A Series of Fortunate Events” about the chance occurrences that shaped life on Earth, and “The Serengeti Rules,” which traces the invisible rules that govern ecosystems.

**Sean M. Carroll**, the physicist, is a distinguished theoretical physicist celebrated for his contributions to quantum mechanics, cosmology and the philosophy of science. He holds the position of Homewood Professor of Natural Philosophy at Johns Hopkins University. His most recent books are part of a series, “The Biggest Ideas in the Universe.”

As the two Sean Carrolls sat down together in a conference room at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute in Maryland, the first thing they had to talk about was mistaken identity.

• • •

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

It’s so good to talk to you in person. I’ll start with my little story. When I was in graduate school, still in that early stage of my scientific career, I was walking down Harvard Square by the magazines, and Time magazine was coming out with an issue with 40 scientists under age 40 who are going to change the world. Jokingly, I said to myself, “Oh, I bet I’m in there.” So, I pick it up and I’m in there! There’s my name. But I realized they made a terrible mistake. They had the wrong Sean Carroll. This guy was doing evolutionary biology, not cosmology, at all. And, that’s when I realized there was another Sean Carroll lurking out there in nature.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**



Sean M. Carroll, a previous recipient of FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award, is a theoretical physicist and author.



Image by Tasnuva Elahi

Renowned scientists Sean M. Carroll, left, and Sean B. Carroll held a self-guided interview with each other for Nautilus.

And the confusion persists. The most common is when I’m giving a talk on a campus and the poster for the talk is illustrated with your books. People bring me your books to sign and I explain the confusion and they’re like, “Will you sign it anyway?”

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

The only one that hurt was when I was invited to a ritzy conference in the hills of Tuscany at a villa. I accepted and they said, “Actually, we don’t want you. We’re looking for the other one.”

• • •

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

It’s a complicated relationship between science and religion. I have good friends in cosmology and biology who are also deep believers. Do you think they’re fooling themselves? Do you think there is really a controversy there?

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**

The evolutionary biologists I know are predominantly nonbelievers. We like science as an explanation of things, and those other explanations that we may have grown up with don’t carry much power. My dad was pro-science, but he

was also strongly a person of faith, so clearly those ideas can coexist in people and probably coexist in a significant fraction of people in the country or in the

world. They accept the findings of science, but they have strong religious faith. If you’re talking about somebody who’s a pure creationist and doesn’t want to engage with science, that’s not interest-

ing, and neither are scientists who say that science is all there is.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

Religion was never meant to be just a statement about how the world works, but there are statements about how the world works in it. Those are the ones undermined by the success of science. But, there are the other parts of religion, the social parts, the moral parts, the purpose of life, the meaning of things. Why do human beings exist? What is our purpose? Why are we even in this game to begin with? Maybe science can help us figure it out. But, I would be on the side that says we have not yet figured it out. Do you see that as a challenge we haven’t yet risen to?

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**

I think you may be shocked by who I quote here, but I’d love to know what the pope says.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

Let me hereby extend an invitation to the pope to come onto my podcast, Mindscape, or to come to Nautilus.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**

The pope has said some powerful, eloquent things about why we’re here with respect to our common home, the planet. I think these are such welcome thoughts to a scientific community that’s so concerned about the dual crises of biodiversity loss and climate change. The pope is asking questions like, “What’s the meaning of our journey here on Earth if we’re going to leave it a shambles?” Getting into that realm of meaning and purpose and accepting that billions of people are influenced by faith, and influenced by faith leaders, is where the science world has to build bridges and say, “We have a common cause. The common cause is care for our common home.”

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

I’m as atheist as they come — super-duper atheist — but I don’t think we can derive “ought from is,” as David Hume taught us, or figure out our purpose just from doing science. In “The Big Picture,” I explained that, for thousands of years, the best human minds who cared about how we should live, and why we’re here, were doing so in the context of a religious tradition. It would be weird if they didn’t say anything interesting or important. I think a lot of scientists, especially the ones who are so enthusiastically atheist, don’t want to give any credit at all to that kind of thinking, and they probably exaggerate the extent to which religious people, as you say, also really believe all this stuff.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**

I’m just as atheist as you. I don’t have a fiber of belief in my body. But, on campuses, students want to engage with us. They don’t want to hear the most orthodox view from an evolutionary biologist or cosmologist and say, “This is it. That’s all there is. This is the law.” And they don’t want somebody in a collar to step up and say, “No, you’ve got to believe this as we put it down.” When kids start getting exposure to nuance, the richness of ideas, people with complex thoughts, then the windows open, and it’s a healthier journey from there.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

One of the things I love about science is that it leads you to believe things, whether you like it or not. At some point, you can’t escape. You’ve given a pitch, for example, for the importance of randomness and contingency in evolution and history.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**

One of the things that I point out as my favorite argument for the existence of God — I think that none of them are any good — but my favorite is that the constants of nature in the universe allowed for the existence of very complex structures, such as ourselves. As a physicist, I actually do buy the argument that, provisionally, because we don’t know, because there’s only one universe that we get to study, but if those constants of nature, the mass of the electron, et cetera, were very different — in some cases just a little bit different, in some cases very different — the energy of empty space, all sorts of numbers that characterize our universe, it’s hard to imagine as much complexity, as much intricacy.

Maybe we just don’t know how to say it, but it’s easy to imagine a more barren



universe. If neutrons were lighter than protons, all the protons in the universe would decay into neutrons. There'd be no atoms, no chemistry, no life. If you think that this was chosen by a designer to allow for our existence, that actually makes a little bit of sense to me.

Where it fails is pointing out that, under theism, if you don't think of the world as perfectly natural, you don't need complex physical structures to have life, because God can make life on rocks. God can make anything be sentient and have a rich environment to live in. Only under naturalism do you need that kind of fine-tuning, that kind of very specific ability to let complexity evolve. Do you have the same or a different take about the fine-tuning of the world in which we live to allow for this kind of wonderful diversity?

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
I'm not an expert. But from a different point of view, I think these kinds of religious ideas were cooked up by humans at a time when they really didn't have a grasp of the world around them. Let's do a thought experiment. Take all those ideas off the planet. Let's start over. Based on what we know from science today, would we have these ideas? I think not. I think we're just dealing with their legacy and not dealing with their strength, their power of explanation relative to what we've learned from science.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
I completely agree. I also don't want to sweep under the rug the profoundness of the unanswered questions that we have. One of them is the development of complex structures in the universe. The universe was very simple near the Big Bang, and it will be simple in the future when we reach heat death and all the stars stop shining. There's this happy middle moment that we're in now, where things can be complicated and intricate and hierarchical.

To me, the most pressing in science is: "Why did that complexity come to be, and is it special or is it generic? Do you really need to work hard to allow for brains? Brains are hierarchies. They're these networks that are very organized. We see some of the things on the internet or the economy or the biosphere. Is that easy or is that hard? I just don't know.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
We both see science as a narrative. As storytellers, we're trying to tell you the story of life as accurately and verifiably as we can. And little by little things drop in. Animal diversity is not as hard to explain today as it was 30 years ago. How do you get giraffes and butterflies and earthworms? Well, jeez, it turns out the explanation's a little simpler as we understand cellular machinery and the rise of biological complexity on Earth.

• • •

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
You mention storytelling. We're both involved in communicating science to young people enthusiastic about science.

We learn as we do it that certain stories resonate with people. When it comes to this kind of sales pitch for making the planet a better place, preserving it, what are the things that people light up about?

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
One thing they need is hope. I think that they're surrounded by a glut of gloom and doom and dysfunction. If you can show them a path to hope, and authentic hope, meaning that there's a genuine reason to be hopeful, and that action can pay off, I think people can get enthused by that and get behind it. And that could be something like missions run by the Jet Propulsion Laboratory. Their motto, "Dare mighty things," has got to be one of the best mottoes of any organization.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
I've been on JPL committees. You don't always notice that's the motto.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
[Laughs] OK. But, you see a picture of a rover on Mars and people are excited. Maybe they see a picture of a butterfly or maybe a TikTok of a hummingbird. That lights them up. The more we can offer glimpses into what scientists do, why we do it, and the fruits of our work, we can give people an understanding that is enriching to their lives. It's not just intellectual. The more science can reach people at an emotional level is what's going to be sticky. What do you hope from your audience?

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
And drama, right? I lived in Los Angeles for a long time and made friends with screenwriters. I went to a friend of mine who is a screenwriter and said, "I read this book by David Mamet, and he said that in every scene, every character should want something." I thought that was genius, and he was like, "This is Screenwriting 101." A story is not a series of things that happened. It's a series of things that are driven to happen by goals and desires.

Which brings up another big science question I would like to someday understand: Why are there goals and desires? Why are we so interested in certain things happening in the future? The laws of physics don't seem to point us in this direction, but biology does, and I'm curious about that.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
That's a great question. Do you think that is from our awareness of our own mortality?

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
I think that a lot of it stems from the fact that we can imagine the future. The fact that we can conceptualize different possible futures is a little bit of a difference between us and other species. Other species don't have the anxieties and embarrassment that we do. We can worry about the future in ways that they can't. The flip side of that is we can have goals. We can be JPL. We can land ro-



Image from SeanBCarroll.com

Sean B. Carroll is an evolutionary biologist and author.

ers on Mars. But where did that come from? What was the first organism to have a goal, in which that vocabulary is the right way of thinking about it?

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
One of my favorite biologists, François Jacob, said, "The dream of every bacterium is to become two." That's a fundamental truth about life: Everything that life goes through is just a means of making more of itself, right?

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
So that's just hilariously anthropomorphic because the bacterium does not have a goal. The bacterium does something, but it doesn't conceptualize different future possibilities.  
**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
No, it does not. But I still like the aphorism.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
It's a good quote. I would even go back further in saying, "The purpose of life is an electron finding a place to rest." Albert Szent-Györgyi said that. It's just we're out of equilibrium. We're eating our food in fuel. We're making more entropy in the universe. That's what we're all here for. So, how much do you regret that you did not become a physicist?

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
Wow! Do I get to ask this in return? I think that one alternative path is paleontology. If somebody had taken me to a quarry at age 14, or even in college, I would've been a paleontologist because that most suits my appetites — exploration and the integration with Earth's history and processes.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
Which is weird because kids love dinosaurs. That's usually what they fall in love with.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
Yeah, I fell in love with snakes, so I kept snakes and stuff like that. That's not an

uncommon tale. It's weird, relative to the whole general public. Snake keepers are a weird bunch.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
Do you still have any?  
**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
Not now. But I still get excited even when I stroll across one on the golf course. I'm 12 years old again. That's my measure of whether I'm still me. I still got the juice. You could take away everything else, and just that surprise encounter, wherever that might be, it still sends a jolt through me. When you hear stories like that, doesn't that make you want to become a biologist?

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
No, not even the slightest bit. I'll leave the snakes to you. I did go on dinosaur digs and it is amazing. But from 10 years old to this day, my equivalent of snakes is the fundamental nature of reality. That's what I want to get at. Our theories are pretty good in physics — our theory of gravity from Einstein, general relativity, our theory of particle physics, the standard model, the Big Bang.

The new frontier is understanding how the fundamental laws of nature emerge into the macroscopic world. That's why I'm interested in the origin of complexity, the nature of goals and purposes, the evolution of entropy, and the arrow of time. These, to me, are still questions about the fundamental nature of reality, but at a practical level. They're at the level where there's a whole bunch of low-hanging fruit lying there that we don't know. The origin of life is a crucially important physics problem, as well as a crucially important geology and biology and chemistry problem, and I'm very excited about it.

**Sean Carroll, evolutionary biologist**  
Since we're talking about complexity, we're having a better conversation about it than we could have when you and I were in graduate school. And we'll have a better conversation about it 20 years from now.

**Sean Carroll, physicist**  
I'll put it on my calendar.

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

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# Emperor Has No Clothes Award

## Confirmation class made me an atheist

*This is the speech (edited for length) given by Bonnie Garmus at FFRF's national convention in Denver on Sept. 28. She was introduced by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. To read the entire speech, go to [freethoughttoday.com](https://freethoughttoday.com). To watch her speech, go to [ffrf.us/con24](https://ffrf.us/con24).*

**Annie Laurie Gaylor:** As soon as “Lessons in Chemistry” by Bonnie Garmus came out, I read a review somewhere, and knew I had to order it. I understood from the review it would be a feminist fairy tale set in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I was not disappointed, although the humor and satire was a big bonus. That was wonderful enough. But soon into reading it I realized that I’d also ordered an atheist manifesto!

Since it came out in 2022, “Lessons in Chemistry” has sold over 6 million copies worldwide and been translated into 42 languages. It’s won major awards including Author of the Year and spawned an Apple TV miniseries with Brie Larson. It was on the New York Times bestseller list for more than two years!

This novel has everything you could ever want in a novel: romance, jokes, trials and tribulations, a beloved child, a beloved dog, lots of unexpected plot twists . . . and many lessons in chemistry. For feminists, it’s balm. For us godless heathens, imagine the power of a book like this, read by millions, that makes atheism utterly charming. You will love this book if you haven’t read it.

Our Emperor Has No Clothes Award is reserved for public figures who make known their dissent from religion — who tell it like it is, about religion. Bonnie, you’ve earned this award.

By Bonnie Garmus

I’m so happy to be here today and it’s an honor to receive this award. I love this statue, by the way. I think it’ll be really controversial among my religious friends, but, oh well.

My talk today is about how my Presbyterian confirmation class turned me into an atheist at age 13. When I was 13, I began my confirmation classes at my Presbyterian church, and, as the fourth of four daughters to begin this process, I knew what to expect and I was pretty much bracing myself.

It wasn’t because, at that point, I didn’t believe in God or had misgivings about memorizing the Apostles’ Creed, but rather, because the classes met on Sunday nights and that meant I’d either be late, or completely miss, “The Wonderful World of Disney.” So much for God’s mercy.

But, as I said before, I knew what to expect and I was bracing myself. This was because I was struggling



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Bonnie Garmus, author of “Lessons in Chemistry,” speaks at FFRF’s national convention in Denver on Sept. 28, 2024.

with a nagging question that religion failed to answer. The idea of mercy.

It was 1969 and the Vietnam war was in full bloom. We happened to live near an airbase where kids shipped off and never returned. My brother-in-law was over there; my favorite cousin, who would later die from Agent Orange exposure, was over there. None of it made sense to me. And a couple of years later, we would be transferred to South America, where I would witness the kind of poverty and suffering I’ll never forget.

Least importantly, I’d prayed for a Chatty Cathy doll for three straight years. Never once did she make an appearance under the Christmas tree.

In other words, God’s mercy, in my experience, was pretty hit and miss — mostly miss. Ditto with prayer. To be honest, I’d had a lot more luck with wishbones and birthday candles. Yet, I still believed in God back then because what was the alternative? My parents were deacons in our church, both of them taught Sunday school, my mother was a tireless volunteer in the community and my sisters always attended services. But my parents were also huge readers — and I became one, too.

### Question everything

But it was because I was a voracious reader — of both fiction and nonfiction — I started encountering a lot of ideas that made me question everything. One of them was Darwin’s voyage on the HMS Beagle. I always loved reading about explorers, but when it came to Darwin, what I really loved was that he offered a different — and far more gripping — view of how the world was created.

I was very interested in his theory of evolution, especially because it did not synch up with what I was learning at church.

So, I asked my dad about it — he was an entomologist — and I remember him telling me that both the church version and Darwin’s version were both stories (not facts — stories) of how everything came to be. “So, neither is true?” I probably asked him. Knowing my dad, he would have said something like, “No, they’re both true, but you can’t believe everything you read.” My dad was way ahead of his time.

And I’m sure if I asked my mom — which I probably did — she would have said something like: “The church version is 100 percent true — God did it all — but should you ever have appendicitis, do not attempt to pray it away. That thing will kill you.” My mom was a nurse, and, like my father, had a major practicality streak. They somehow managed to balance their science sides with their spiritual sides.

I didn’t really have a science side, and it was starting to look like I didn’t have a spiritual side. I just had a curiosity side. I wanted to know things. I wanted to understand how the world actually

worked. Specifically, I wanted to understand the concept of cruelty and why every religion I encountered seemed to excuse it with the simple phrase of “it’s God’s will.” I still “believed,” but honestly, God was starting to sound pretty dicey to me.

Meanwhile, I was reading Greek myths, Indian myths, Herman Hesse and more. Pre-confirmation, I was slowly awakening to the fact that a lot of people believed a lot of different things, but no matter what people believed, it wasn’t making the world a better place. It was only excusing the bad things that had been done, usually in God’s name.

Our family knew Jews, Seventh-Day Adventists, Roman Catholics, Quakers, Mormons and Amish, and I was fascinated by Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims and especially those tribes that still practiced human sacrifice. I could not get enough of the religions that thought throwing live humans into volcanos or off cliffs made good sense. Nor did it not escape my notice that 99 percent of the ones tossed in — if not all — were young. Kids and virgins, basically. The adults did the choosing and the tossing. This was true of every religion — the adults were in charge.

### Passing along God belief

That is not surprising. Adults are always in charge, and all of them seemed to think their god was the right one. Then they passed their particular god belief on to their children and the whole thing started all over again. Even though children have, in this country, both freedom from and of religion, they pretty much inherit the ideas they’re raised on. Meaning, they don’t really have that freedom, after all, because no one mentions it or even if they do, it’s not enforced. Had I known about my own potential freedom from religion, I can tell you this much: I wouldn’t have spent a second in choir.

The other thing is, some of these religions, I learned, were a lot more serious than others. They demanded more of the participants — they were exclusive. Not just anyone could join; there were rules and rituals and requirements: what you wore, what you ate, how and when you pray — these things were all spelled out. As a kid I thought that was sort of strange, too, because wasn’t the unifying principle within each of these religions that we all find a way to love one another? Yet, we did not.

I remember when I was very young first hearing of the Holocaust and trying to figure out why anyone would hate the Jews. We had Jewish neighbors. They looked just like everybody else. They did all the same things we did. Why would anyone hate them? Just like the Vietnam War, none of it made sense to me.

In that way, I felt lucky I was raised Presbyterian because compared to kids I knew learning Hebrew or attending Mass several times a week, the Presbyterians were, with the exception of the choir master,



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Bonnie Garmus poses for a selfie with Judy Saint, president of FFRF’s Sacramento chapter.



far more laid back. In fact, if anything, the Presbyterians cut corners.

For example, in my church, it wasn't wine that represented Jesus's blood, it was Welch's grape juice. Ditto for the body of Christ. Forget the wafers; we chewed small bits of wonder bread that, by the way, I'd helped my mom cut up into tiny squares in our kitchen at home the night before. I kind of liked that about our church — we seemed more practical. Cheap, even. And, because of it, I got the general feeling that because we were less rigid, I and all the other Presbyterian kids would ride the Presbyterian bus right up until we could make our own decisions — somewhere around age 18. And then some of us would get off for good.

Anyway, getting back to my confirmation classes: We had a youth minister — a hip guy with slightly long hair who was supposed to appeal to us because he was us, except we were 13 and he was 35. And maybe because he was new at the job and trying his best to connect with us — which I give him credit for — on that first night we walked in to find him getting us "in the spirit" with that timeless hymn, "One Toke Over the Line," which, as you probably know, is a song about smoking pot. But because it had "sweet Jesus" in it, he'd determined, obviously without asking God or anyone under 20, that it actually was religious. None of us filled him in, but forevermore that would be the song that connected him to us. But probably not in the way he intended.

Anyway, the class started with a small lecture and then a quick rehash of how God had created the world in seven days. He asked if there were any questions. I did ask — about Darwin and evolution.

And he smiled and said that Darwin's ideas were theories, and there were tons of them out there, but in the end, God's version was the one true one. When I mentioned Darwin and the Beagle, it was pretty clear he thought we were talking about a man and his dog. But anyway, I pressed a little further. I wanted to know how it was possible that the world was created in seven days. And what about the Big Bang? How did all these theories fit? Who was right?

Take it on faith

Well, first of all, it was six days, he corrected me, reminding me that even God liked his weekends. And second, I remember him saying, this is where faith comes in. You believe it because God says so. You take it on faith be-



Photo by Kyle Hilker

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor presents Bonnie Garmus with the Emperor Has No Clothes Award.

cause that's what religion is: a belief in things you can't explain. You need faith in good and bad times — something like that.

And I said — and this is where I got in trouble — but isn't it our job as people to try and better understand how the universe works — you know, make discoveries? Because isn't every discovery once something we could not explain? So, if we just accept things as they are — as God's invention — aren't we being fundamentally lazy? Closed minded? Incurious? That sort of thing.

And he nodded at me thoughtfully and put on "Up, Up and Away," which, he explained, was a song about people enjoying God's handiwork from up in the sky. Then he asked if any of us had been up in a hot air balloon. No. Then he suggested we all might enjoy it. Then it was time for a break.

While eating potato chips and drinking leftover grape juice, which earlier that same day, had been Jesus's blood, a friend approached and suggested that I stop asking questions because I was making the whole thing longer and if everyone did nothing, we might get out early and be home in time to watch "The Wonderful World of Disney." She had a point.

“Because the classes met on Sunday nights . . . that meant I'd either be late, or completely miss, "The Wonderful World of Disney." So much for God's mercy.

So, after the break, I said nothing. Nevertheless, we still got home too late to watch Disney because the youth minister kept us there listening to "Godspell" and/or "Jesus Christ Superstar" while passing out the bible stories we would be revisiting in the following weeks. This would be the pattern every week. Stories and church rock operas.

Meanwhile, during the normal school week, I had two friends who

were actual "Jesus freaks," a term that was supposed to be pejorative, but my friends embraced it with zeal. I liked these friends. They wore these big crosses, and in the hallway one of them would hold up one fin-

ger to the other and say things like "One Way, His Way." One of them even took me to her evening youth study confirmation class and guess what — it was so much better than mine. It had that Baptist feel — that over-the-top enthusiasm, lots of screaming and shouting, maybe a fainter or two as people felt the spirit — or possibly the heat — move through them. I'd never seen anything like it, and I have to admit, I had a great time because not only was it entertaining, but they served excellent refreshments. Also, it was mid-week, not Sunday night — so they never missed Disney. Everyone was so happy in her confirmation class — and there was a lot of physical contact — hugging and clapping and all sort of stuff. So, when I returned to every Sunday evening to my regularly scheduled programming — my group — I did feel a little ripped off — like the Presbyterians weren't even trying. We just sat in our dull circle and discussed Saul — who committed suicide.

I'm not going to bore you with the remainder of my confirmation classes except to tell you by the end of it, I was borderline atheist — exactly the opposite of the stated intention. In fact, one of the last stories we covered was of Doubting Thomas — you know, the guy who demanded evidence of Jesus's resurrection? Finally, someone I could get behind. He seemed to be the only guy who showed any sense whatsoever. He asked for proof. And, he got in trouble for it. So did I. Because I stupidly spoke up again and

mentioned that I thought seeking evidence seemed prudent. Police do it, scientists do it. Proof is positive. Why wouldn't we want proof?

And the youth minister said he thought I'd maybe enjoy having that very discussion with the head minister, which is exactly like being sent to the principal's office, but much worse. This man was scary.

I tried to sell this separate meeting with the big guy to my parents as a good thing — you know, like an honor. They were not fooled. I spent less than 10 minutes in his office — he was a very intimidating man — and he basically said my doubt was foolish, I was embarrassing my family, and God was getting pissed — stop it.

So, I did. A week later, on Sunday, my parents gave me a gold cross and the church gave me a bible and I was successfully confirmed.

Seeds of doubt

But the seeds of doubt had sprouted. I was off to the agnostic/atheist races and I could not tell a soul. I didn't want to hurt my family — my parents were great people — and I didn't want to get sent back to the head minister. I just wanted to understand things. Like why religion kept being inserted into our government when, by law and the Constitution, that wasn't allowed. And why people used religion to cover any number of sins. And why people prayed for mercy when they showed none for others.

I also wanted to know if anyone else had doubts. I didn't know any humanists or atheists. The closest I got were what my mom called "The C&E" people — people who only showed up at Christmas and Easter, presumably for carols and the hallelujah chorus. There was literally no one to talk to about this. All I had was Doubting Thomas — and Descartes. Most of us know the Descartes expression, "*cogito ergo sum*" — "I think, therefore I am." But, the full quote actually is: "*Dubito ergo cogito ergo sum*" — "I doubt, therefore I think, therefore I am."

It started to occur to me that doubt was a good thing — even a great thing — maybe the most powerful tool we humans have in our toolbox. Doubt fuels curiosity. Doubt demands new thinking. Doubt invites imagination.

In other words, doubt spurs us on to find something in incredibly short supply these days: the truth. Doubt is only rectified one way: by asking questions.

I started to read those who weren't just doubters of religion, but rejectors. They weren't angry people; they were rationalists. They were interested in solutions; they were devoted to humanity; they were determined to make things better. In short, I liked them.

I'd find myself writing about this type of person in a book called "Lessons in Chemistry." In my book, a woman scientist named Elizabeth Zott goes on national television in 1962 and tells the shocked housewives that not only is cooking is actually chemistry, but that she doesn't believe in God.

And why? For me and for Elizabeth Zott, it came down to that one word: mercy. You can't pray for it, wish for it, light candles for it, hope for it. You had to do it. You had to give it. And that isn't religion. That is self-responsibility. If you want things to get better; make them so.

Thank you very much.



Photo by Chris Line

Bonnie Garmus speaks with convention attendees during her book-signing event following her talk.



# IRS

Continued from page 1

ductible charitable donations, intended to serve the community, are directed to charitable works rather than political campaigns.

While the rule has long been unevenly enforced, it remains a cornerstone of the legal firewall separating religion and government. Now, under the Trump Administration, the IRS has not only abandoned its duty to enforce the law, but it has also twisted its interpretation to claim that church endorsements are tantamount to “family discussions,” as the IRS motion puts it, and a matter of religious freedom.

Churches already receive favored treatment over secular nonprofits but they are not entitled to ignore the other rules and laws that apply equally to all 501(c)(3) educational nonprofits. Already, churches are automatically tax-exempt, don’t have to file annual financial disclosures (Form 990s) that all other tax-exempt groups, including FFRF, are required to file and they’re rarely audited. Now, the IRS is telling churches that they can also engage in politics from the pulpit, so long as they cloak their campaigning in religious language. The motion says such endorsements are “on matters of faith in connection with religious services, concerning electoral pol-



Image by Shutterstock

itics viewed through the lens of religious faith.”

Polls routinely reveal that a majority of Americans think religious institutions should stay out of politics. In 2022, Pew Research found that “about three-quarters of U.S. adults (77 percent) say that churches and other houses of worship should not endorse candidates for political offices. Two-thirds (67 percent) say that religious institutions should keep out of political matters rather than expressing their views on day-to-day social or political questions.”

While secular nonprofits like FFRF

must adhere to the law or risk losing their tax-exempt status, the IRS is now granting churches a religious loophole: claiming that endorsements during sermons are akin to private, faith-based discussions and thus protected. The result is blatant favoritism toward religious organizations and unequal treatment under the law.

In 2017, FFRF sued Trump and the IRS after Trump signed an executive order that falsely claimed to “get rid of the Johnson Amendment.” FFRF’s attorneys successfully persuaded the Trump administration to acknowledge in court that the president lacked the authority

to revoke a congressional statute by executive fiat. The current action by the IRS similarly cannot invalidate a law passed by Congress. FFRF successfully sued the IRS in 2012 to compel it to enforce its own regulations barring tax-exempt 501(c)(3) nonprofits from engaging in partisan political activity.

While the IRS under the Trump administration may choose not to enforce this provision, the law remains on the books — and so does the possibility of future accountability.

“The law hasn’t changed — but the will to enforce it has,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “This decision is just the latest item checked off the Project 2025 wish list — the Christian nationalist plan to reshape the U.S. government. The administration is signaling to churches that they can be involved in elections without consequences.”

FFRF remains committed to holding tax-exempt organizations accountable and is exploring all legal avenues to respond to this abdication of responsibility. In the meantime, it urges members of the public and elected officials to demand congressional oversight, press the IRS to reverse course, and support efforts to restore robust, even-handed enforcement of the Johnson Amendment. Vigilance and public pressure are essential to preserving the constitutional principle of separation between religion and government, FFRF asserts.

# OVERHEARD

To reclaim science, it may take politics. Only voting power, and a public willing to speak up for evidence over ideology, can undo the hijacking of public health. If science is to guide us again, the first step is choosing leaders who will let it.

**Epidemiologist and immunologist Michael Mina, in his column, “It’s Code Red for Vaccines,” commenting on Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.’s firing of all 17 members of the congressionally authorized expert panel that guides vaccine decisions for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Kennedy quickly appointed as replacements a number of critics of vaccines or use of mRNA for vaccination development.**

*New York Times, 6-12-25*

You may think that school vouchers reflect the basic ideological drift of the country, but for more than half a century, every single time they are put to a democratic test, the public roundly rejects them. In 2024, such initiatives were defeated in three states — Colorado, Kentucky and Nebraska — two of which also went for Trump by huge margins. This pattern is not a new one. Since 1967 — 1967! — no single state referendum in favor of

school vouchers has passed anywhere in the country. And yet, in the past few decades, 33 states and the District of Columbia have all enacted voucher programs, and just in the five years since 2019 the number of American students using vouchers has doubled.

This is not just a bad procedural look but a genuine democratic stain, made all the worse because the record of voucher programs is so abysmally bad.

**David Wallace-Wells, opinion writer, criticizing the reconciliation bill for committing to establish school voucher programs across 50 states.**

*New York Times, 6-13-25*

I believe strongly in the separation of church and state. If the Waupun [Wis.] City Council or Library Board defers to religious zealots, this lack of respect to the First Amendment of the United States can spread to our community and to other areas of the state.

**Beaver Dam, Wis., resident Angie Kirst, who spoke during a Waupun, Wis., Library Board meeting after a local pastor claimed that the Pride exhibit the library displayed during June “represents wrongdoing.”**

*Wisconsin State Journal, 6-25-25*

The secretary’s authority needs to



**Dr. Georges Benjamin, executive director of the American Public Health Association, one of many plaintiffs suing Robert F. Kennedy Jr. and Health and Human Services over limits to Covid shots, which were not recommended for pregnant women or healthy children.**

*New York Times, 7-8-25*

I should not be asking members of other faith communities to fund the religious education of Jewish students, as members of the Jewish community should not be asked to fund the religious education of other faiths. . . No citizen should be forced to fund another’s religious beliefs — this violates the very spirit of our nation.

**Rabbi Robert B. Barr, in an op-ed, “Budget bill forces taxpayers to fund religious beliefs they don’t share.” Barr was named the FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” on July 3.**

*Cincinnati Enquirer, 6-24-25*

Where are the right-wing scientists? Where are the deeply devout Christians and Muslims? The best science is produced when you’ve got a diverse array of people who have slightly different biases.

**Ella Al-Shamani, who, as a Muslim, believed in creationism and wanted to major in college in evolutionary biology to prove that it wasn’t true, but soon learned that it was. “Oh, fuck,” she said to herself as it dawned on her that her entire worldview was incorrect.**

*The Observer, 7-4-25*

What this says is that the administration has no respect for the actual science, which overwhelmingly points in the direction of a growing crisis as we continue to warm the planet through fossil-fuel burning, the consequences of which we’ve seen play out in recent weeks in the form of deadly heat domes and floods here in the U.S.

**Dr. Michael Mann, a climate scientist at the University of Pennsylvania, expressing alarm that the Energy Department, which dismissed hundreds of scientists and climate change experts, has hired three skeptics of climate change.**

*New York Times, 7-8-25*

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](https://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.”
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**The Born Again Skeptic's Guide to the Bible**

A Missouri grandmother debunks the bible as no one has debunked it since Thomas Paine.

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

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# Women

Continued from page 1

definition of femininity focused on marriage, motherhood and an RFK Jr.-led understanding of health.

I would be remiss not to mention the considerable presence that MAHA had at the event. Many speakers advertised their natural supplement lines or their toxin-free makeup and skincare brands. One speaker, a former trauma nurse, professed that the Western medical system is the “enemy of the world.” Prescription drugs were vilified, anti-vaccine rhetoric was celebrated and science was belittled. Yearning for weight loss or fretting over processed foods are emerging as pipelines for young women to adopt ultra-conservative worldviews. Podcasts covering the evils of seed oils and urging women to cook “real foods” are attracting susceptible girls to a new wave of conservatism: MAHA. One of the more popular speakers at YWLS, podcaster Alex Clarke, quipped that we should “put women back in the kitchen” because the kitchen is where the “real revolution” starts.

When the event kicked off, speakers were quick to tell the receptive audience that not only are feminism and Western society lying to them about education, careers and self-sufficiency, but that feminism is also concealing the foremost truth about femininity: Women need to be wives and mothers. There was what I can only describe as pure jubilation in the audience as Kirk, the only male speaker of the weekend, called upon women to abandon careers and education to “submit to a godly man” and raise “more children than you can afford.” To Kirk, the ultimate goal for every girl should be marriage, and every single decision should push them closer to finding a husband.

Kirk resoundingly does not support women in the workforce, at one point professing that, “Husbands should do everything he can to not force his wife into the workforce.” But Kirk not only wants women to stay out of the workforce, he also wants women to abandon education. In the Q&A sessions that Kirk led, as teenage girls lined up to ask for his wisdom on navigating school or balancing a career with motherhood, Kirk stressed that women should not attend college and that high school girls should instead prioritize marriage and children above all else. Kirk trumpeted that grades do not matter and that a true patriot should not care about them, suggesting that Christians get bad grades because they do not succumb to the “woke” teachings of the U.S. education system and the left.

If girls do attend college, their end goal should not be a degree, but rather a husband, Kirk further clarified. At one point, Kirk touted that American society should “bring back” the “Mrs. Degree,” a concept that women attended college with the intention of finding a husband, dating back to the mid-19th century. Kirk blatantly wants the reality for American women to be modeled after the 1950s, and a congregation of over 3,000 women and girls appeared to agree with him.

Speakers warned women and girls that a life filled with degrees and promotions would be empty and miserable. The summit depicted a pathetic and depressed image of the “modern Western woman,” one focused on a career, deprived of children. Feminists were described as hooked on dangerous antidepressants, their lives desolate. Kirk’s brand of traditional femininity and



Photo by Chris Line

Caitlin Berray

motherhood was juxtaposed as a way to achieve true fulfillment and happiness in an angry and divided society, leaving behind the mental health disorders born from the horrors of feminism.

Followers believe YWLS’ brand of femininity to be the solution to the mental ailments young women face because of feminism. Vulnerable young girls, struggling with eating disorders, anxiety and depression, are turning to the Charlie Kirk world because it markets itself as a way to find happiness amid societal discontent. Kirk’s wife, Erika, claimed to “release” girls from the anxieties of feminism, from the idea that they should chase a cozy corner office or a meaningless paycheck. She stressed that all the women in the crowd can, and ultimately should, rely on men, that relying on men is a path to happiness, to contentment. For a woman, a career, financial independence or self-sufficiency is only a distraction.

Of course, speakers differed in the severity of their messaging, with Kirk outright saying that women should not work, but instead serve their husbands and raise children, while others danced around the idea. All of the female speakers had successful careers; there were even a few female members of Congress who spoke, including Rep. Nancy Mace (R-S.C.). Some speakers argued that working could lead to marriage and children, while others said that a career only served as a hindrance to the true contentment that lies in motherhood. Some stressed that women can have both a career and children, just at different times, while others said that a life driven by a job and self-sufficiency would be meaningless. Still, all of these women were the lead-up to Kirk’s argument that women should only be wives and mothers.

Silent obedience, and especially the obedience characterizing the Virgin Mary, was also idolized during the gathering, framed as something for every girl in attendance to strive for. Of course, that obedience pertains to following the whims of the men in their lives. Every time this happened, I looked around, horrified, at the children filling the rows and rows of chairs; girls as young as 5 attending with their mothers and grandmothers, young mothers rocking babies in their strollers, and high schoolers hanging on every word. Closing the first night with her husband next to her, Erika Kirk professed: “I get to serve my husband. I get to submit to my husband. He

submits to the Lord.” It was straight out of the New Testament.

And, still, with all the glorification of submission and servitude, I did not hear, during the entire three-day convention, a single mention of domestic abuse or the sexual violence that women and girls face, outside of hate-fueled rhetoric about transgender women and illegal immigrants. While Kirk and other speakers described the ideal woman as one subservient to her husband, there was not a single reference to the possible violence that concept invokes. To the teenage girls and young women in the crowd, neither Kirk nor any of the female speakers gave even a brief disclaimer on what to do when your husband, boyfriend or any man is physically or sexually violent. The closest reference was when Erika Kirk made one throw-away comment about how female submission is a “beautiful” thing only in a “healthy marriage.” Instead, Charlie Kirk went on an almost laughable tirade about how men are in a “far sicker” position in society than women because of putdowns like “toxic masculinity” and men being talked down to.

This from the same man who argued with a female college student about rape statistics in May: “It is so materially insane to think that 1 in 5 American women will be raped in their life. . . meaning that they’re lying about being raped, that they’re lying about being sexually assaulted . . . like a fraternity guy and a sorority girl, aged 19, hooking up, both five drinks in at 2 a.m., and, all of a sudden, she, like, removes consent. Yeah, like that’s a murky, middle gray area.”

Any woman who is not indoctrinated into the Charlie Kirk world could tell you that the 1 in 5 statistic, if anything, is an underestimation. I would venture that even a sizable number of the women and high school-aged girls I shared a convention hall with would disagree with Kirk on this point. Perhaps that is why he did not philosophize about women lying about being victims of sexual violence.

Instead, Kirk predictably stressed the importance of purity and modesty for young women and girls, but, in a way that, once again, demeaned women. He framed the Christian value of waiting for sex until marriage as a way to improve the dating pool and to teach men “self-control,” placing the responsibility of “self-control” on young girls instead of boys. This, coupled with Kirk’s lies about sexual violence and his desire for

subservient women (women who do not “talk down to men,” or better yet, women who do not talk back), highlights the real danger created by giving men like Kirk a platform. Thousands of young women and girls looked on, starstruck, as Kirk espoused these dangerous, demeaning ideas. They cheered him on. They celebrated him.

This summit can perhaps be boiled down to Kirk’s most shocking quote of the weekend: “Young ladies need to be able to submit to a godly man.” He said that if the girls in the audience felt any internal disagreement with that, they should “just go pray about it.” Clearly, Kirk’s religious doctrine is how he explains and markets his ideas to young, impressionable girls. His warped understanding of Christianity is the basis for everything he stands for. Kirk and other speakers prepped attendees to engage in “spiritual warfare” for control of American culture, boasting that conservative women are going to save womanhood by integrating biblical values into society.

This ultra-conservative Christian base cannot be ignored. Turning Point USA promotes Christian nationalism and MAGA on high school and college campuses. It wields considerable influence, and it only grows with each passing year. This year marked the 10th anniversary of the Young Women’s Leadership Summit, and many speakers and attendees celebrated having attended 10 years ago, now bringing their own children. Women and girls are recruited into this movement through family, friends, fellow students, podcasts and social media. They learn not to recoil when Kirk calls for a “return to normal,” referring to women “serving.” Even more so, they learn to celebrate female servitude as something to strive for — something that will heal and complete you.

The twisted religious doctrine that Charlie Kirk espouses cannot go unchallenged. Women and girls need to know that there is so much more in the world for them outside of submission. They need to be able to build lives based on their own values and aspirations, separate from those imposed by men masquerading as messiahs. We must be louder, clearer and more persistent than those telling susceptible women and girls that female submission under men is ordained by God.

Young women and girls deserve better.

Caitlin Berray is FFRF’s governmental affairs coordinator.



Photo by Caitlin Berray

This handmade cross-stitch was hanging in the lobby of the Young Women’s Leadership Summit in Dallas.



# The hurtful journey of a Catholic survivor

By Dennis Coyier

For much of my life, I’ve struggled with a nagging sense of inadequacy. It’s like I’m perpetually guilty for having done something shameful, and it’s incumbent upon me to beg forgiveness. Where did this pesky devil on my shoulder come from? Wanting to leave no stone unturned, I set out on a journey to solve this mystery.

I must say up front that airing my family’s laundry isn’t rosy. Although, opening up about how I believe some curious new experiences in my early years — religion and corporal punishment in particular — may have impacted my consciousness is a step in the right direction.

Once upon a time, when I became too loud or excited for my mother, she would often temper me by barking out, “Children should be seen and not heard!”



Dennis Coyier

It’s a refrain I’ve heard countless times, and rings in my ears to this day.

Where should children be seen? From toddler to teen, and all dolled up to the nines, my dear mother’s children should and would be seen in church. She was a dedicated Catholic mom, and church attendance

was required. I and my two younger brothers, by six and eight years, were our parents’ pride and joy. We often paraded to our pew in Saint Patrick’s Catholic Church wearing our Sunday best Robert Hall outfits and matching white Hush Puppies. Stepping out of line would be painfully nipped.

My father worked most Sundays, so that lucky devil often skipped church. I didn’t get the chance to thank him, but it was his sinful indiscretions, like ducking mass and eating meat on Friday, that became cracks in the dike that begat my salvation.

A smack or a pinch to keep us neatly tucked under the shroud of my mother’s hand-me-down Catholic faith is well worth the struggle. It’s what she was taught. I think it’s sad she never knew, or never considered, that other options besides yelling and spanking to earn my obedience were available.

Nipping perceived misdeeds in the bud rescues the child from eternal torment in Satan’s Hell, or so devout Catholic mothers are groomed. Just as Jesus suffered for our sins on the cross, so that our family may spend eternity in heaven, was and remains a dominant meme.

When are children allowed to be heard? Of course, my mother’s children should never, ever be heard in church. That’s the reason the Catholic mass was hell on steroids for this restless daydreamer. Just thinking about sitting in that dungeon week after week still makes me shudder.

Starting a couple years before my brothers were born, my mother would sit me down next to her on a hard church pew and expect me to remain silent and still for as much as an hour. Being the normally rambunctious child I was, I’d bide my time looking around at all the familiar plaster statues of angels



A young Dennis Coyier, center, and his two brothers wear their Sunday best.



Image by Shutterstock

and saints and, bloody INRI looking down from his cross. With all the prayers, the kneeling, the sitting, the standing, repeated and repeated, mass after mind-numbing mass, attending church with my mother was excruciating.

About midway through the service, just after the ritual dining on the body and blood of Jesus, it was time for St. Pat’s to collect its tariff on the laity. The commotion of people reaching for billfolds and pocket change was my signal that the end time was fast approaching. It was also my chance to test what level of fury awaited me.

When my mother reached for her obligatory donation envelope tucked in her purse, I would extend my upturned hand. If she brushed me away with fire in her eyes, it was easy to guess that tears and pain would soon rain down. But if she plucked out some change and gave it to me to drop in the basket, only then could I breathe a cautious sigh of relief.

If I didn’t sit still and quietly enough for my mother, which was often the case, I could count on zero mercy coming my way. Depending on mother’s temperament, it might start with a sharp slap on my tender behind, usually as soon we were alone, but sometimes not. On a good day, it would end there.

I could sometimes deflect mother’s swats while letting out a yelp to hopefully convince her she’d connected. Sometimes I’d let her connect, hoping it would be enough to satisfy her. Sunday after Sunday, depending on how patiently I could bide my time on those unpadded pews, mom would deliver the love of God in equal measure.

Even as years trickled by and I grew too big for mom to smack without making us both look silly, or too slippery to plunge her thumb into a tender muscle, she would turn to her most lethal weapon. Wait for it . . .

We walked out to the car, and I climbed into the back seat as usual. My bittersweet mother would then reach over her seat to a cowering young man, and with her long crimson fingernails, pinch the dickens out of whatever body part she could reach, sometimes not stopping until she drew blood. The attack left painful, bruised welts that would last for days.

Slightly less troubling was when my father would jump on the corporal punishment bandwagon. Not wanting to spare the rod and spoil the child, he would whack me whenever for whatever. He might use his hand, a yardstick, a flyswatter — either end. I also felt the sting of daddy’s leather belt across my rosy bare bottom from time to time. But mother was the powder keg, especially on Sundays. Ouch!

Needing something to say to Father Grace during confession, and being the generally well-behaved youngster I was, I lied. I might have confessed lying to my mother about saying my prayers, but the rest was poppycock. Damned if I do and damned if I don’t.

I became handicapped by a deep-seated anger hiding in my inventory. It’s that chip on my shoulder mom would scold me for having whenever my frustration surfaced. It’s the chip that would ooze

from my wounds and stain the car seats. Take that!

After many years wrestling with my unsettled conscience, and more years winnowing clues, I finally hit on a diagnosis. My mystery pestilence was the cruel and inhumane punishment I received at the hands of my two closest keepers. These were people I was commanded by God to love and honor above all else.

This titanic revelation led me to ask an even bigger question: Why on Earth would my otherwise loving and adored-by-many mother and father execute extreme discipline on a child way too young to comprehend the peculiar demands of our family faith? In what world does corporal cruelty make sense? Any guesses?

Lo and behold! There in fact is a world where cruel and inhumane behavior targeting youngsters takes place everywhere and all the time, and I was born plunk in the middle of it. That parasite sapping my better nature just so happened to

be, you guessed it, the unholy Roman Catholic Church (and religion in general).

It was the Catholic virus of generational religious compulsion that infected my parents. My stricken mother and father were copycat offenders. Pain and suffering in the name of God was just another day at the office. As I matured into my junior high school years and the parental heavy handedness wore itself out, I grew increasingly skeptical of everything religious. I learned about the Dark Ages, the Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, and the murder and torture of scientists, witches and heretics, virtually everybody. I learned about the Indian schools run by churches, and the molestations of young children by priests. I became ashamed of being Christian, let alone Catholic.

Despite the many consequences, shunning by family and eternal damnation, for starters, my conscience and I set sail on a course to abandon ship. We’d swim for new horizons and seek our fortune where we each are welcomed.

I rejoice that my persistence pinpointed religion as the infection that motivated my young parents to wage Armageddon on their first-born child. I am jubilant knowing committing corporal punishment for not sitting still in church and parroting prayers did not come to them naturally. They, indeed, were victims themselves.

By my 30s and 40s, I was discovering nothing rises to the joy I find in the blooming wonders of science and nature. Count me among the fortunate few who escaped the world of superstition and lived to tell about it. So, what’s a Catholic survivor to do?

Sometime in the late 1980s, I saw a commercial on a local channel. One Dan Barker was sitting at a piano saying something about freethought that caught my attention. I don’t remember his exact words, but I’d heard enough to prompt me to contact the Freedom From Religion Foundation for additional information.

FFRF’s founder Anne Gaylor’s books, along with others by her daughter, Annie Laurie, and the latter’s partner, Dan Barker, became comforting guideposts in my narrow escape. They gave me a road map out of the quagmire. Our wonderful freethinking children are well aware they’ve been spared. They give us tremendous satisfaction knowing how much they appreciate our boldness and determination to reject our given Catholic religion. Theirs is a world we encourage them to make for themselves.

For my family today, church is whatever field or forest we find ourselves exploring on any given day. Our thoughts and prayers are informed by science, nature and true liberty of conscience. Ours is a world where we’re free to choose what to worship and whom to love. Say hallelujah!

*FFRF Lifetime Member Dennis Coyier grew up in the literal shadow of the Oscar Mayer plant in Madison, Wis., attended neighborhood public schools and served in the Navy before settling down to run a business and raise a family.*



# Ingersoll on blasphemy, free expression

By Donald B. Ardell

In 1887, a Methodist minister turned barnstorming advocate for secularism and freethought named Charles B. Reynolds was tried for blasphemy by the state of New Jersey. Reynolds was a nonbeliever in gods and any redeeming qualities of religion. His offense was circulating a pamphlet outlining his views of theology, which led to an indictment for blasphemy. In a trial nearly as famous as the famed Scopes “Monkey Trial” — featuring a clash of attorneys William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow concerning the teaching of evolution — Reynolds was brought before a Morristown jury.



Donald B. Ardell

He was defended by the famed attorney and orator extraordinaire, Robert Green Ingersoll — “The Great Agnostic.”

Ingersoll regarded this case as one of the most important that could be submitted to a jury, as it affected freedom of speech and the intellectual liberty of every citizen of New Jersey. These words were among his first to the jury in Morristown: “Now gentlemen, what is blasphemy? Of course, nobody knows what it is, unless he takes into consideration where he is. What is blasphemy in one country would be a religious exhortation in another. It is owing to where you are and who is in authority.”

The case concerned whether a citizen has the right to express honest thoughts. He asked: “Have you not the right to read, to observe, to investigate — and, when you have so read and so investigated, have you not the right to reap that field? And what is it to reap that field? It is simply to express what you have ascertained. If there is one subject in this world worthy of being discussed and understood, it is the question of intellectual liberty.”

I quote from the opening of his hour-long summation:

“He who takes it [liberty] from you is a robber. For thousands of years, people have been trying to force other people to think their way. Did they succeed? No. Will they succeed? No.

“Why? Because brute force is not an argument. You can stand with the lash over a man, or you can stand by the prison door, or beneath the gallows, or by the stake, and say to this man: ‘Recant, or the lash descends, the prison door is locked upon you, the rope is put about your neck, or the torch is given to the fagot.’ And, so, the man recants. Is he convinced? Not at all. Have you produced a new argument? Not the slightest. And yet the ignorant bigots of this world have been trying for thousands of years



FFRF received \$35,000 in donations to help restore the Robert G. Ingersoll statue in Peoria, Ill., in 2016. It was re-dedicated on Aug. 11, 2016, the anniversary of his birth.

to rule the minds of men by brute force. They have endeavored to improve the mind by torturing the flesh — to spread religion with the sword and torch. They have tried to convince their brothers by putting their feet in iron boots, by putting fathers, mothers, patriots, philosophers and philanthropists in dungeons. And what has been the result? Are we any nearer thinking alike to-day than we were then?”

Ingersoll also quoted the “great clause in the New Jersey Constitution of 1844 . . . a clause that shines . . . like a star at night: ‘No law shall be passed to restrain or abridge the liberty of speech or of the press.’” He appealed to the jury as “the judges of the law, as well as the judges of the facts,” to acquit: The statute he termed “unconstitutional, because it does abridge the liberty of speech.”

Here are a few key points made in his summation:

- “The most important thing in this world is liberty. More important than food or clothes — more important than gold or houses or lands — more important than art or science — more important

than all religions, is the liberty of humans.”

- “If civilization tends to do away with liberty, then . . . civilization is a curse. Gladly would I give up the splendors of the nineteenth century — gladly would I forget every invention that has leaped from the brain of man — gladly would I see all books ashes, all works of art destroyed, all statues broken, and all the triumphs of the world lost — gladly, joyously would I go back to the abodes and dens of savagery, if that is necessary to preserve the inestimable gem of human liberty. So would every man who has a heart and brain.”

- “How has the church in every age, when in authority, defended itself? Always by a statute against blasphemy, against argument, against free speech . . . I advocate only the doctrines that in my judgment will make this world happier and better. If I know myself, I advocate only those things that will make a man a better citizen, a better father, a kinder husband — that will make a woman a better wife, a better mother — doctrines that will fill every home with sunshine and with joy. And if I believed that anything I should say today would have any other possible tendency, I would stop. I am a believer in liberty. That is my religion — to give to every other human being every right that I claim for myself.”

- “It is hardly possible that this state has accomplished all that it is ever going to accomplish. Religions are for a day. They are the clouds. Humanity is the eternal blue. Religions are the waves of the sea. These waves depend upon the force and direction of the wind — that is to say, of passion; but humanity is the great sea. And, so, our religions change from day to day, and it is a blessed thing

that they do. Why? Because we grow, and we are getting a little more civilized every day — and any man that is not willing to let another man express his opinion, is not a civilized man, and you know it. Any man that does not give to everybody else the rights he claims for himself, is not an honest man.”

- “As long as the Church has the power to close the lips of men, so long and no longer will superstition rule this world.”

- “Blasphemy is the word the majority hisses into the ear of the few. After every argument of the Church has been answered, has been refuted, then the Church cries, ‘blasphemy!’

“Blasphemy is what an old mistake says of a newly discovered truth. Blasphemy is what a withered last year’s leaf says of this year’s bud. Blasphemy is the bulwark of religious prejudice. Blasphemy is the breastplate of the heartless. And let me say now, that the crime of blasphemy set out in this statute, is impossible. No man can blaspheme a book. No man can commit blasphemy telling his honest thoughts. No man can blaspheme God, or a Holy Ghost, or a Son of God. The Infinite cannot be blasphemed.

“What is real blasphemy?”

“To live on the unpaid labor of other men — that is blasphemy. To enslave your fellow human, to put chains upon his body — that is blasphemy. To enslave the minds of men, to put manacles upon the brain, padlocks upon the lips — that is blasphemy. To deny what you believe to be true, to admit to be true what you believe to be a lie — that is blasphemy. To strike the weak and unprotected, in order that you may gain the applause of the ignorant and superstitious mob — that is blasphemy. To persecute the intelligent few, at the command of the ignorant many — that is blasphemy. To forge chains, to build dungeons, for your honest fellow [humans] — that is blasphemy. To pollute the souls of children with the dogma of eternal pain — that is blasphemy. To violate your conscience — that is blasphemy. The jury that gives an unjust verdict, and the judge who pronounces an unjust sentence, are blasphemers. The man who bows to public opinion against his better judgment and against his honest conviction, is a blasphemer.”

- “Why should we fear our fellow humans? Why should not each human being have the right, so far as thought and its expression are concerned, of all the world? What harm can come from an honest interchange of thought?”

These comments are but a small portion of the extraordinary oration that Ingersoll performed for the jury on the last day of Reynolds’ blasphemy trial.

Here are Ingersoll’s closing remarks:

“I sincerely hope that it will never be necessary again, under the flag of the United States — that flag for which has been shed the bravest and best blood of the world — under that flag maintained by Washington, by Jefferson, by Franklin and by Lincoln — under that flag, in defense of which New Jersey poured out her best and bravest blood — I hope it will never be necessary again for a man to stand before a jury and plead for the liberty of speech.”

(Note: The jury brought in a verdict of guilty. The judge imposed a fine of \$25 and costs amounting in all to \$75, which Ingersoll paid, giving his service free.)

Donald B. Ardell is a longtime FFRF member who publishes the REAL Wellness Report. His latest book is “Freedom From Religion in 30 Days,” available at FFRF.org/shop.



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# Evangelicals are helping destroy civil rights

This column first appeared on FFRF's *FreethoughtNow.org* blog site.

By Kyle Steinberg

Jesus was an inclusive fellow. So insists He Gets Us, the organization that has spent millions of dollars on Super Bowl ad campaigns designed to modernize the perception of Christianity. The idea is to convince folks that Christianity is for everyone — no matter color, class or other dividing factors. And indeed, Galatians 3:28 reads: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”



Photo by Chris Line  
Kyle Steinberg

Like usual, however, actions speak louder than words.

The original brain-trust behind the “He Gets Us” campaign is The Servant Foundation, a conservative nonprofit backed by anonymous donors that funnels tens of millions of dollars into right-wing initiatives. Between 2018 and 2020, The Servant Foundation gave approximately \$50 million to the Alliance Defending Freedom, an organization that argues for legalized discrimination under the umbrella of Christianity and is currently “cheering DEI’s demise.”

The Servant Foundation has also donated millions to Answers in Genesis, the evangelical organization famous for building a giant model of Noah’s Ark as a museum in the middle of Kentucky. Answers in Genesis says that “DEI needs to DIE” and calls DEI a concept that is “antithetical to the bible, because it denies personal accountability, encourages partiality, and attempts to make Marxism palatable to the church.” Answers in Genesis is of the position that “not all diversity is good diversity.”

Immoral positions, to be sure, but why does this matter?

Since taking office in January, the Trump administration has engaged in attack after attack against “DEI” policies — initiatives that focus on diversity, eq-



Photo by Garry Knight

uity and — you guessed it — inclusion. From a fatal plane crash over Washington, D.C., to the battling of deadly California wildfires, President Trump has found no shortage of tragedies for which to baselessly heap blame on DEI. Some of his latest attacks have placed a bull’s eye on public schools by requiring those receiving federal funding to certify that they’re terminating DEI practices and via the ending of a decades-old desegregation order with a Louisiana federal court. But Trump isn’t acting without support — and he has it in spades from the evangelical congregation.

Public education has been at the forefront of some of this country’s most prominent battles for social justice. In the 1950s and ’60s, tensions boiled in the South as segregationists battled orders from the federal government to integrate public schools.

The Supreme Court declared in *Brown v. Board of Education* that school segregation violates the Constitution, but its ruling took time to implement. Eventually, the federal government pursued protective orders issued by federal courts to ensure integration progressed under the law. These decrees allowed courts to monitor the progress of desegregating individual school districts — if issues persisted, they could be brought before the judge, and federal power could be exercised to remedy the un-

constitutional discrimination. While their impact was isolated to each school district they covered, these protective orders were effective in remedying unconstitutional segregation in public schools, especially in the South. Yet through all the attempts to right the wrongs of school segregation, resistance continued — especially in the South, and particularly in the isolated congregations of the evangelical church.

Historians agree that most Southern evangelicals staunchly opposed integration not only as a disruption to their own way of life but as a violation of God’s design for the world. In 1961, a mob littered with white evangelical Christians attacked and brutally beat members of the Freedom Riders in Montgomery, Ala., including future member of Congress John Lewis. Just weeks later, at a meeting of the White Citizens Council in Montgomery, prominent local Pastor Henry Lyon delivered an impassioned segregationist speech insisting that “if you want to get a fight with the one that has started separation of the races, then you come face to face with your God.” Lyon wasn’t alone. White evangelical pastors across the South echoed segregationist sentiments to their congregations, justifying them through the eyes of God. Not only was segregation favored as a matter of policy, but it was also

demanding as a matter of religion. At first glance, Lyon’s words may seem outrageous and indicate a time gone by. But when one recalls the words of Answers in Genesis, an evangelical organization very much active in 2025, the ugliness of Jim Crow racism seems frighteningly present today.

We are going backward. Just 20 years after its landmark decision in *Brown v. Board*, the U.S. Supreme Court began a series of decisions that made claims of race discrimination, specifically in the schools, much more difficult. From requiring a showing of intent to bring a claim of unconstitutional segregation to barring any explicit consideration of race in enrollment decisions, the court slowly removed tools from the tool belt used to enforce Brown’s mandate. As a result, American schools were never fully integrated and, in fact, for decades have been on a path toward resegregation.

The Trump administration is dead set on removing every last tool from that tool belt, and it’s backed by the same power that fought for Jim Crow segregation nearly 75 years ago: evangelical Christians.

In the 1950s, the evangelical engine for religious racism was relatively confined to individual congregations. There was no social media, and word traveled much more slowly. Today’s evangelical congregations have shifted into powerhouse advocacy organizations funded by the millions to argue that public money should be used to fund religious schools, that a Christian web designer can deny services to same-sex couples based on her religious beliefs, and that a university professor could refuse to respect a student’s preferred pronouns based on his Christian beliefs. Now, they’re taking aim at diversity initiatives.

Make no mistake about it: Our civil rights are under attack. Evangelicals are trying to drum up support through television advertisements while destroying the last remnants of American efforts to ensure equal justice for all.

So much for inclusivity. Kyle is FFRF’s Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow.

*Kyle Steinberg joined FFRF as the Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow in September 2024.*

## CRANKMAIL

The following are missives received at FFRF from persons unknown, printed as received.

**Go away:** Mind yalls own fucking business and don't worry about what our athletes choose to wear!

**Davidson Co.:** Start by minding your own business if schools want to have religious shows they should. You have no right to keep kids from christian values each school could let kids opt out of events if wanted but you try to take away from those who doesn't mind. Idc if you believe in god or not people should have the right to choose. Your ignorance should be frowned upon.

**Religion:** Really you guys attack Christian's? Go after the thrived and murderers instead! Why do they have more rights? Stop picking on us and do something more usefull!

**Stop being stupid:** Earth is a prison for immortal souls each of you reading this as. Your entire life was stolen from you, you were memory Wiped of billions of years of memories and shoved into a humanoid body which is the lowest biological life forum in the entire universe. You're in a frail biological body and you endure heart-break pain tears and ultimately toil disease more pain than death only to have it happen over and over and over for all eternity. Deep inside of you is your entire life you're akashic record so to speak is in your soul. Earth is a hell. As evil as this planet is is the evil the entire universe is. Everything you've been taught is a mother fucking lie. Welcome to hell.

**Read the Bible:** James 4 Verse 7: Submit yourselves to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw

near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you of two minds.

**FFRF:** Your organization is pathetic. Everything you believe in is what is wrong with society. It's clear you are mental degenerates and those who have zero respect for the beauty of life. Having just discovered your hideous agendas and beliefs, I will do what I can to see that you are defeated in every way. Shame on you and your despicable members.

**Really?** Come on folks, “Christian Nationalism”? Paranoid much? Now you're using the terminology of the Leftists, who are self-loathing, America hating, Marxists by any other name.

**Fact, not fiction:** A building has a builder, a painting has a painter, you being the creation, you have a creator. You have lied and stolen that means you broke God's law, Jesus came and paid your fine. If you're an atheist, you believe nothing created everything? That absolutely makes no sense. You should be afraid of burning in hell because your days are numbered. You will die but your soul is eternal.

**Hell:** You think it's all fun and game's until you bust hell open

**You can be saved:** Repent, repent, repent O Freedom From Religion Foundation! For the Kingdom of God is within thee! Freethinking is a tactic of Satan! Repent, and be the Bow of Salvation!

**Liars!** And you are liars and liars will be put in the lake of fire.

**Abortion is wrong:** Would Atheists kill pup-pies as quickly as they would kill human babies?

**Freethought?** You really are free of thought,

that's for sure.

**Go away:** I should not expect much from the most drunkard state in the union! What a disgrace this group is!

**Satan:** good job doing Satan's biddings, he will reward you, but not in the way you would expect, turn to Jesus, it's the only way.

**Christian nation:** We are not an atheist nation . Keep atheism out of our schools .

**Evil:** Why do you feel like nails on a chalk-board demonically possessed I can hear your evil in your voice not really proving your point.

**God and hell are real:** If there is no GOD then why do you believe in hell.

**Praise God:** Yes we need Godly people every

school every day are PRAISE GOD STOP Following 7 DEVILS & His Evil SPIRITS Praise our God this aweaone

**Atheism:** “No religion” is a religion, if you pay attention to the details.

**Go to church:** Worshiping God is not a cult. If that's what you think it is, you need to visit a church and talk to a pastor. You'll see how foolish you look and get down right embarrassed. Have fun in hell

**Preach:** How is not believing a god claim. So destructive to your opinion on god. It's a commandment go door to door preach the gospel. If they reject you leave a bag of flaming poop on porch. Two Corinthians.

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION



# Money keeps mythologies' fables alive

By Barbara G. Walker

Nowadays, the more liberal sort of Christians and Jews tend to look tolerantly upon biblical improbabilities as mythological fables drawn from the nursery age of humankind, or even as obscure allegories. The original writers, however, had no such ideas. They obviously intended all their words to be taken as literal truth, directly provided by God, who couldn't lie.

Believers tend to disparage the confirmed existence of the same fables in other, older, heathen mythologies that the biblical writers plagiarized. Scholars know that the Old Testament patriarchs were mythical figures, with counterparts in Egypt, Babylon, Sumer, Greece and India, and that the ancient Middle East had literally dozens of god-begotten, virgin-born, dying-and-resurrecting messiahs and saviors.

Traditional believers try to keep this information suppressed. They would like to maintain that all the other gods were mistakes, and only Yahweh still lives — somewhere, if not in the sky anymore.

A surprising number of Christians still insist on the literal truth of biblical fables, even today when science has made it abundantly clear that there is no heaven in the sky, nor any hell underground; that the universe was not created 6,000 years ago; that there could never have been an Edenic garden or a Noah's ark or a flat Earth, as the bible claims. Green plants could not exist before the sun, nor could days and nights consisting of mornings and evenings;



Image by Shutterstock

and so on through hundreds of God's egregiously unscientific statements.

Mythology taken as literal, historical truth is neither a fairy tale nor an allegory; it is a lie. And almost the entire content of the Judeo-Christian bible is a tissue of such lies.

Why are these products of primitive ignorance still being maintained, in a civilization with knowledge that easily disproves them? The answer has always been clear: for money. Rich, powerful institutions like churches have an insatiable desire for ever more of their tax-free money, and disproof of biblical lies may threaten their endless income. Thus, churches have been traditionally hostile to almost every scientific advance of the past three centuries. Many continue, against all reason, to deny rock-solid facts of geology, paleontology, physiology, cosmology and evolution. To such people, remaining determinedly unenlightened is the definition of faith. And from their authorities' point of view, that kind of faith is required for their own continu-

ing influx of money. Hence, congregations are deliberately trained to remain aggressively ignorant.

And, what is the product that the faithful buy, with all their tithes, offerings, donations and widows' mites? Simply, hot air. Early Christians, referring to their god as the Logos (the Word), spoke more truly than they knew — because every god is made of nothing but words. Furthermore, most of the words are lies. A god like the biblical one, telling crude, unsophisticated lies, is not really very credible. Therefore, believers have come up with many excuses for him.

Putting the fear of God into their flocks, God's shepherds insist that no one can dare to judge him. God's ways are inscrutable. No mere mortal can know the mind of God; even to presume an inkling thereof is a sin. But then they turn around and claim to know exactly what God wants (always, more money) and tell the sheep exactly how God wants them to behave, along with the shearing. It seems that God's inscruta-

bility depends largely on who is doing the scrutinizing. Many people deliberately ignore all questions about the authenticity of God or his cruder mistakes, fearful of offending their more pious neighbors, or of probing too deeply into their own doubts. They prefer to call themselves agnostic (by derivation, "no knowledge") rather than atheist ("no god"). They may even attend a church for social reasons, but seek to know little or nothing of their own sect's history or theological tenets.

Sometimes, the modern agnostics feel that, in the absence of hard evidence, the existence of God can't be clearly proved or disproved. Therefore, they withhold judgment. But, this is not as rational as it sounds. Lack of evidence is proof of nothing. One cannot disprove the existence of vampires, ghosts, elves, dragons, fairies, demons or the Flying Spaghetti Monster; but that's no reason to believe in them. Gods are just as imaginary as any other allegedly supernatural being, and the burden of proof of their existence rests on the believer.

To claim anything as a truth, when it is supported only by lies, is the very negation of logic. Is it necessary, as is often claimed, to believe biblical lies in order to be a good person? Well, hardly. It has been demonstrated over and over that nonbelievers are usually generous, kind people, and the criminal population contains a greater percentage of believers.

Perhaps the defining virtue of nonbelievers may be honesty. They don't like lies. They don't want to be told lies. And they don't tell lies — which may make them somewhat more admirable than the traditional God.

*FFRF Lifetime Member Barbara G. Walker is author of 24 books. Many of her writings can be found here: [bgw.works/tub-v3.pdf](http://bgw.works/tub-v3.pdf)*

## THEY SAID WHAT?

Prayer is invalid with the presence of dog hair.

**Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, in a fatwa against walking and driving with dogs, based on his claim that dog saliva or hair renders anything it touches "unclean."**

*New York Times, 6-10-25*

I'm in the middle of things that are so much bigger than I have any business being in the middle of. But I'm there for a reason. So, I just try to remember it's not about me and that God puts his people where he needs them, where he wants them.

**Tennessee Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti, discussing the transgender health care lawsuit taken up by the U.S.**

**Supreme Court. Skrmetti's office defended Tennessee's ban on gender-affirming care for transgender youth, which the Supreme Court regrettably affirmed on a 6-3 vote. He was named FFRF Action Fund's "Theocrat of the Week" on June 20.**

*The Tennessean, 6-16-25*



**Mike Huckabee, U.S. ambassador to Israel, in an online note to President Trump.**

*X, 6-17-25*

God spared you in Butler, Pa., to be the most consequential president in a century — maybe ever. . . I believe you will hear from heaven and that voice is far more important than mine or anyone else's.

**Mike Huckabee,**

They don't know abortion is wrong, many churches. When the body starts moving in the wrong direction. . . God will raise an apostle or prophet to correct their course.

**Vance Boelter, the alleged shooter who killed Minnesota state Rep. Melissa Hortman and her husband on June 14, in a sermon he posted on YouTube.**

*Washington Post, 6-17-25*

God makes no mistakes.  
**Rachel Piland, after refusing treatment**

**for her baby in 2017, who soon after died of jaundice-related problems that were treatable. In June, Rachel and her husband Joshua were each sentenced to a minimum 20 years in prison.**

*Friendly Atheist, 6-18-25*

It is incumbent on all of us to follow God's law, and I think we would all be better off if we did.

**Texas state Rep. Candy Noble, in a discussion about mandating that the Ten Commandments be posted in every public school classroom in Texas.**

*Christian Science Monitor, 6-23-25*

There are two kinds of people in life: those who believe in God and those who think they're God. There's something beautiful, humbling and properly ordered about a man and woman who understand that there is a power greater than themselves. That everything is not in their control. And that they are the beloved child of a merciful God who hears their prayers.

**Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy, in his commencement address to the graduates in the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, which FFRF complained about.**

*Friendly Atheist, 6-27-25*

Utah is facing a tough season, and we need both divine help and practical action. I invite every Utahn, whatever your faith or belief system, to join me this Sun-

day in a unified fast and prayer for rain.

**Utah Gov. Spencer Cox, as drought conditions worsened. FFRF complained after Cox declared June 29 to be a "statewide day of prayer and fasting for rain."**

*KSL.com, 6-27-25*

[President Trump is] an enemy of God. It is necessary for all Muslims around the world to make these enemies regret their words and mistakes.

**Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi, Iran's top Shia cleric, in a fatwa placed on Trump.**

*Daily Mail, 6-30-25*

I don't know if this is an appropriate citation of the book of Matthew, but it says from the time of John the Baptist until today, the kingdom of God has been advancing at the hand of forceful men, and forceful men take hold of it.

**Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, speaking at the Road to Majority conference hosted by the Faith and Freedom Coalition.**

*MSBC, 6-30-25*

[Prayer] could be the reason the water stopped rising.

**Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, who called for a statewide day of prayer following the flooding in central Texas that killed more than 100 people on July 4-5.**

*Gov.Texas.gov, 7-6-25*

**Losing Faith in Faith: From Preacher to Atheist**

*By Dan Barker*  
How Dan "threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there."

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# The danger of public school chaplains

By Ryan Jayne

Public schools are facing an unprecedented state-level assault on secular rights. States are forcing public schools to display an officially approved version of the Ten Commandments, corrupting state standards with ahistorical religious propaganda, and siphoning public school funding to private religious schools.

With so many threats, it might be easy to forget that some state lawmakers also want to place religious chaplains in public schools, envisioning that these Christian heralds will remedy the shortage of certified counselors in public schools. As if dealing with proselytizing coaches weren't enough, students will now have to contend with school officials whose job description is to promote religion. Below, I will explore these new chaplain laws, the organization behind them, and what you can do to help ensure your local school board does not adopt a chaplain program. If you find these policy-based updates interesting, please consider signing up to receive updates from the FFRF Action Fund at [ffrfaction.org](http://ffrfaction.org).



Photo by Chris Line  
Ryan Jayne

Missouri is the newest state to adopt a public school chaplain law, joining the disgraceful ranks of Texas, Louisiana and Florida. Fortunately, the vast majority of Texas schools declined the invitation to decimate students' rights in this fashion. But among those who leaped at the opportunity to push Christianity onto a captive audience of students, damage is already being done.

## The trouble with chaplains

The organization behind these chaplain bills, the National School Chaplain Association (NSCA), is bragging about Texas chaplains using their new school positions to win converts and to push their religious views into the lives of students and staff. Here's part of an email NSCA sent earlier this year:

"Throughout the day, they become a steady presence. . . But the ministry doesn't stop at the school doors. . . They show up at homes. They walk beside families through emergencies. They help navigate next steps, provide referrals and coordinate with local churches to meet immediate needs: food, clothing, shelter and sometimes simply hope.

"This is the Ministry of Presence — and it's only possible because of you. Your generosity places chaplains in the heart of the school, but it also empowers them to be the hands and feet of Christ in the community."

According to NSCA, chaplains are a "steady presence" at the school and insert themselves into disputes ("They step into tense conversations, de-escalate conflict, and connect families to critical resources"). They initiate conversations with students, particularly when students are vulnerable (the email says they greet kids in the morning and are "watching for signs of silent struggle"). And most egregiously, the chaplains reportedly show up at people's houses to connect them with churches ("They show up at homes. They walk beside families through emergencies. They help navigate next steps, provide referrals, and coordinate with local churches."). The email's authors are plainly oblivious to students' right to a secular public school system, family rights to privacy and



Photo by Joe McSorley

Students chat with their school chaplain.

ffrf

ACTION FUND

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

to be free from unwanted proselytizing. To NSCA, Christianity is synonymous with helping students and staff, so what could possibly be wrong with promoting Christianity in public schools?

And, make no mistake, these NSCA chaplains are 100 percent Christian. The NSCA describes itself as a "Christian chaplain ministry," and its email closes with, "Thank you for helping us reach children, teachers and parents with the love of Christ." The email even quotes a New Testament verse, Matt. 25:40, that is quickly followed by Jesus promising "everlasting punishment" (Matt. 25:46). NSCA's Statement of Faith, too, includes a belief in "eternal punishment," along with a swipe at same-sex marriage.

So the chaplains spot struggling students and staff, then show up uninvited at their homes to connect them to their Christian church. What advice do these chaplains give to struggling staff or students who are non-Christian, LGBTQ, etc.? Even well-meaning Christian chaplains can alienate and traumatize nonadherents when they offer only a sectarian religious perspective, to say nothing of preachers who have no problem threatening children with everlasting punishment if they fail to convert to the "right" type of Christianity.

In fact, when the NSCA testified in favor of a chaplain bill in Georgia, the representative was asked whether schools would be obligated to allow chaplains of disfavored religions, and the NSCA responded that such chaplains were excluded by definition. That statutory language — in this case excluding satanists specifically — made its way into the final Georgia bill (which failed, fortunately). When fundraising, NSCA calls potential donors "Kingdom investors" and says they are "planting revival in the very soil the enemy tried to claim," referring to secular public schools. Just who is "the enemy"? Similarly, Missouri's chaplain law only allows chaplains who are on a preapproved list of denomina-

tions, which means the state is singling out particular sects for a privileged position and barring others — in direct contravention of the First Amendment's Establishment Clause and Missouri's Constitution.

Some legislators argue that chaplain bills are religiously neutral, but they're being disingenuous. They know the Constitution prohibits laws that advance a particular religion, or religion over non-religion, but just like attempts to put the framed Ten Commandments posters in classrooms or to inject Christian-slanted bible lessons into school curricula, the religious intent is clear and undeniable.

NSCA's parent organization, Mission Generation Inc., even has a goal to reach "the largest unreached people group inside of the schools around the world," to "influence those

in education until the saving grace of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with Him." In Mission Generation's own words, the organization works to exploit the "massive lack of school counselors throughout public schools" by filling the void with religious chaplains to "win" and "disciple" school-age children. Legislators who suggest these bills are about anything other than winning Christian converts need to be called out and corrected.

Concerned citizens must inform parents, school boards and lawmakers about the sort of organization schools invite into their schools when they adopt a chaplain program.

## Even more issues

Although Louisiana's chaplain law does not require school boards to vote on a chaplain policy, it manages to make the law even worse with a broad liability shield for chaplains: "No person shall have a cause of action against a chaplain for any action taken or statement made in adherence with the provisions for service, support and programs for students," with an exception only for conduct that is "maliciously, willfully and deliberately intended to cause harm to harass or intimidate," an almost impossibly high legal standard. Fortunately, state law cannot remove students' state or federal constitutional rights, but this language tells Louisiana chaplains that they have virtually no limitations when proselytizing public

school students.

Chaplain laws also offer only the barest safeguards against abusive clergy, typically disallowing only chaplains who are on the sex offender registry or who fail a criminal background check. Meanwhile, the laws are uniformly devoid of any requirement that chaplains be certified to provide secular services to students or staff. That is, after all, not really the point of these laws. In Texas, for instance, school counselors must have a qualifying master's degree, pass a test, and have two years of classroom teaching experience. Chaplains typically have no education requirement, no test to pass, and no past experience requirements — just a desire to talk to students about religion. The dire need of students for more qualified school counselors is merely an excuse to introduce chaplains, not a problem chaplains can actually help address (despite laughably implausible claims to the contrary from NSCA).

In short, there are myriad reasons to oppose public school chaplains and no reason for anyone other than Christian nationalists to support them. This makes a recent survey, showing a majority of Americans open to the idea, even more shocking. There is plainly a void in education and awareness that needs to be filled.

## What can be done

Those of us who understand true religious liberty and the crucial need for secular public schools need to be more vocal in sharing the facts and explaining the problems. Legislators need to be prepped by constituents with talking points and background information on NSCA and Mission Generation Inc. Legislators need to understand that these bills are an attempt to push a particular, hellfire-infused, anti-LGBTQ version of Christianity onto public school students. We need op-eds, letters to the editor, social media posts, blogs and — perhaps most importantly — personalized, genuine communication with elected officials.

In the mercifully few states that have adopted such laws, school boards need to be persuaded to protect their students by rejecting chaplains. Thus far, school boards have received solid advice to this end, and most have followed it, but hearing support from local parents, students, or voters can go a long way in persuading school board members.

For those in districts that have made the unfortunate decision to allow chaplains into schools, your eyes are needed to protect kids and staff in your district. Monitor chaplains' behavior any way you can, request public records if needed, and inform groups like the Freedom From Religion Foundation if you see anything concerning.

And, finally, please consider educating yourself more about the need for qualified, high-quality school counselors. Support secular school counselors in your community and urge your state lawmakers and school boards to support them as well. Providing school counselors with the help they desperately need would not only improve the lives of American children, but it would also remove the despicable excuse groups like NSCA use to enter public schools to proselytize other people's kids. It is far easier to stop chaplain programs before they become enacted rather than responding to the inevitable reports of the harm they have caused.

Ryan Jayne is FFRF's senior policy counsel.



# CHAPTER UPDATES

## Upstate New York Freethinkers



On May 17, the Upstate New York Freethinkers helped with clean-up of the Robert Ingersoll Birthplace Museum.

The Upstate New York Freethinkers and FFRF recently approved a \$1,000 charity grant to The Pride Center of the Capital Region. This grant directly supports vital programs empowering the LGBTQ-plus community, including weekly support groups, mental health services, and advocacy for LGBTQ-plus rights. This initiative reflects our commitment to human rights and using reason to foster a more inclusive society.

Explore our website at [unyft.org](http://unyft.org) for more insights into our activities and ways to participate. The chapter is seeking volunteers to assist with administrative and treasury duties. To learn more about open positions or how you can lend your support, please email us directly at [info@unyft.org](mailto:info@unyft.org) or call/text (585) 454-9921.

## Ozarks Chapter of FFRF

The Ozarks Chapter of FFRF came out in force in June to support Pride month! Our chapter attended the LAMBDA Pride event in Fort Smith on June 7, and then participated in the NWA Pride Festival & Parade in Fayetteville on June 28. The Ozarks Chapter also kicked off its 2025 Secular Speaker Series with author and columnist Kate Cohen at the Bentonville Public Library on June 18. Visit the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF Facebook page or visit [ozarksffrf.org](http://ozarksffrf.org) for more information.

## Greater Sacramento Chapter



Greater Sacramento Chapter Board Member Angela Garvie talks with some visitors who stopped by the chapter’s booth during the Sacramento Pride event.

Our Greater Sacramento Chapter booth at Sacramento Pride 2025 was one of the best attractions at the event, thanks to Erin Louis, our chapter’s visibility director, says chapter president Judy Saint.

“Families lined up with their kids to spin our popular spinning wheel, where they could win prizes. We never let them go away disappointed! This year some of the prizes included custom printed ballcaps, back scratchers, plantable pods, and many more high-value items. Tabling these events is a highly rewarding experience, especially under Erin Louis’ leadership. Thanks, Erin!”

For more information on the chapter, contact [sac@ffrf.org](mailto:sac@ffrf.org) or visit the website at [sac.ffrf.org](http://sac.ffrf.org).

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For more information on FFRF’s chapters program, visit [ffrf.org/outreach/ffrf-chapters](http://ffrf.org/outreach/ffrf-chapters).



# Lorraine Hansberry scholarships announced

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is excited to announce, in association with the Women’s Leadership Project (WLP), the awardees of the 2025 Lorraine Hansberry Humanist Scholarship Awards.

FFRF gave \$2,500 to help fund scholarships for nine college students this year. The honorees were chosen by the Women’s Leadership Project, which, with Young Male Scholars, conducts school and community-based peer education programming, outreach and professional development, offering invaluable life and job training skills.

The award memorializes Hansberry, the freethinking playwright who famously wrote in 1964: “Though it be a thrilling and marvelous thing to be merely young and gifted in such time, it is doubly so — doubly dynamic — to be young, gifted and Black.” Hansberry’s freethinking play, “A Raisin in the Sun” (1959), was the first drama by a Black woman produced on Broadway.

Awardees receive between \$250-\$1,000 in honor of their racial and gender justice community service, peer education and organizing engagement during their high school and college careers.

Participating students meet weekly with program coordinators and interns and are trained in sexual harassment and sexual violence prevention, LGBTQ-plus youth leadership outreach and homeless education.

For the past several years, these youths have demonstrated outstanding social justice leadership, peer education and community organizing. These multiyear college scholarships are designed to support Women’s Leadership Project and Young Male Scholars’ youth through graduation. The majority are first-in-the-family college students. Besides the Freedom From Religion Foundation, support was also provided by the Carrie and Ellie Harrington Fund.

This year’s Lorraine Hansberry Humanist scholarship award winners are:

**Kaysea Duarte** — U.S. Navy (\$1,000)  
**Mariajose Leones** — UC-Davis (\$1,000)  
**Zella Montgomery** — Santa Monica College (\$250)  
**Lizette Nsilu** — El Camino College (\$250)  
**Jasmine Onyeagoro** — Cal State-San Luis Obispo (\$1,000)  
**Brianna Simone Parnell** — Santa Monica College (\$250)  
**Ashantee Polk** — Long Beach City College (\$250)

**Kaysea Duarte**

I’m an 18-year-old graduate of King Drew Medical Magnet High School. On Aug. 19, I will begin my service in the United States Navy, where I plan to earn my bachelor’s degree in biomedicine. My goal is to attend graduate school and become a physician assistant specializing in obstetrics and gynecology. Throughout high school, I was deeply involved in the Women’s Leadership Project, starting as a freshman presenting to other freshmen an experience that was extremely out of my comfort zone, but helped me grow into the mentor and advocate that I now am. WLP taught me the importance of addressing the common struggle of being misunderstood and allowed me to be part of building a bridge toward better understanding within my community. I presented to students, teachers, staff, and even my counselor, which helped me realize that



Women’s Leadership Project scholarship winners and staff: Standing, left to right, are Lizette Nsilu, Ama Boateng, Ashantee Polk, WLP Project Director Jessica Robinson, WLP Founder Sikivu Hutchinson, Zella Montgomery, Kaysea Duarte and Mariajose Leones. In front are WLP Program Coordinator Eclasia Wesley, Brianna Simone Parnell and Jasmine Onyeagoro.

the issues people face are not just about age, race, gender or sexual orientation, but are rooted in systemic inequality. Through my time in WLP, I’ve gained the confidence to speak up and stay true to myself, no matter the circumstance.

**Mariajose Leones**

I am 18 years old and graduated from King/Drew Magnet High School this year. I will be attending the University of California, Davis this fall. I intend to declare my major as psychology and plan to become a social worker. I especially want to help those in marginalized communities and those who are not privileged. I formerly served as the vice president of WLP for the 2025 school year. In my time with WLP, I was given many opportunities, including when I got to speak to Los Angeles City Council members about our group’s #Standing4BlackGirls demands. Another notable event was when I attended a #Standing4BlackGirls rally. When our group marched, I felt empowered. This was the first time I ever truly attended a rally, and this experience allowed me to understand the importance of taking action and demanding action from our local government. Being a member of the Women’s Leadership Project helped me grow as a person, and especially as an activist and advocate. Before, I would have been too shy to speak in front of a powerful group from my local government, but I found power and my voice with WLP.

**Zella Montgomery**

I have been involved with the Women’s Leadership Project since 2022. I started working with WLP as a youth intern in 2024 and have developed with my peers a suicide prevention education curriculum for teens. I attend Santa Monica College, where I am majoring in ethnic studies and sociology. I plan on transferring to Cal State Long Beach in 2026 to pursue a B.A. and an M.F.A. My post-graduate plans are to work in education as an art instructor at the community college level. Being at Santa Monica College has allowed me to see exactly where I excel and has given me the time and space to shape my goals moving forward in my academic journey.

**Lizette Nsilu**

I am a 20-year-old who is continuing my education at El Camino College. I joined the Women’s Leadership Project during my senior year at King/Drew Magnet High School in 2023. After finishing my prerequisites, I plan to transfer to California State University Dominguez Hills to receive a bachelor’s degree in finance.

The Women’s Leadership Project has played a transformative role in both my academic path and personal development. Through the program, I’ve gained a deeper understanding of the social justice issues impacting Black women and girls in Los Angeles — issues that are too often overlooked in mainstream media. This awareness has empowered me to become an advocate, raising consciousness among those directly affected and decision-makers with the power to drive change. With WLP, I’ve participated in marches, spoken publicly outside council offices, shared the stories of victims of sexual violence, and presented demands aimed at reducing these injustices.

**Jasmine Onyeagoro**

I am 17 years old and just graduated from King/Drew Medical Magnet High School. I’ll be continuing my education at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, where I’ll be majoring in biomedical engineering. From there, I plan to earn my master’s degree, followed by a Ph.D. My goal is to become a biomedical engineer so I cannot only represent Black excellence, but proudly say that I am a Black woman engineer.

I’ve been a member of the Women’s Leadership Project for all four years of high school, and during my senior year, I had the honor of serving as president. Being part of WLP has helped me understand the challenges that women of color and members of the LGBTQ-plus community face every day. I participated in a conversation with the City Council about the unfair treatment, violence and lack of attention surrounding missing and murdered Black girls. WLP has shown me that speaking up is one of the most powerful tools we have. There are real issues that affect me and my commu-

nity, and becoming informed, vocal and confident in moments like these is how we create real change.

**Brianna Simone Parnell**

I graduated from Gardena High in 2019, but joined the WLP during my junior year. I turned 24 this year and am a student at Santa Monica College, where my major is in interior architecture. Although academically I am pursuing a career in architecture, currently I serve as a youth educator, coach, freelance artist and creative facilitator. My involvement in the Women’s Leadership Project and #Standing4BlackGirls Coalition has had a very positive impact on my life and those around me in my community. Every year, I look forward to attending or facilitating the LGBTQ-plus retreats because I leave with someone new to look up to, very inspired and informed. My experiences with WLP at events like UCLA’s Resource Fair resonate with me because those are the times when I get to connect with other organizations and students. Seeing people interact with merchandise that I’ve created for the program is super satisfying, too.

**Ashantee Polk**

I am 22 years old and a 2020 graduate of King/Drew Magnet High School. I attend Long Beach City College and plan on transferring to Cal State University Long Beach in the fall. My major is psychology, and my career goal is to become a licensed therapist. I currently work with children with developmental disabilities, and when I transfer to a four-year institution, I plan to continue that work.

I’ve been involved in WLP since my junior year at King/Drew. In my senior year of WLP, I became president of the King/Drew chapter, and about three years later, I became the #Standing 4 Black Girls Task Force coordinator. I’ve attended, participated, and even spoken at our #S4BG Murdered and Missing Rallies for the past three years. Most recently, I have stepped into my “acting bag” by helping CEO/Founder Sikivu Hutchinson and WLP Project Director Jesscia Robinson on the set of the Black Women’s showcase, “Outliers,” where I served as a production assistant.



IN MEMORIAM

Martin Afromowitz was longtime professor

FFRF Member Martin Afromowitz died on Nov. 19, 2024, due to pancreatic cancer. He will be remembered as a caring father, devoted partner and dedicated educator. He was born Aug. 27, 1945.

The following was written in Marty’s own words:

As Martin Afromowitz looked back upon his 79 years, his greatest pleasures derived from his family, especially his daughter Sarah, and his long career in research (electrical engineering) and teaching. His life was greatly enriched by his marriage to Cheryl (Black), from 1989



**Martin Afromowitz** until her death in 2003, leaving him to raise his then 9-year-old daughter. Martin was brought up in the Bronx and displayed an early interest in science. He attended the Bronx High School of Science (class of 1962), and the Columbia School of Engineering (B.S. 1965, M.S. 1966 and Ph.D. 1969). His Ph.D. thesis led directly to an appointment as a member of the technical staff at Bell Telephone Laboratories (1969–1974), where he worked on the early development of light-emitting diodes (LEDs) and semiconductor lasers. He then moved to Seattle (1974) to take a position as a research fellow in the Bioengineering Center at the University of Washington, and in 1976, became a research assistant professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering. His career progressed through the professorial ranks, and he retired in 2015 as an emeritus professor after 41 wonderful and productive years at the university. His research, mostly in semiconductor optical devices and applications to bioengineering, led to 13 patents, many journal articles, and consulting work as an expert witness on patent litigation in his field.

Marty enjoyed traveling with his partner, Debbi Conger. They took many great trips together, both domestic and abroad, including their three-month stay in a small mountain village in Tuscany (2019). Once retired, he kept himself busy fixing things around the house, usually with success. He also maintained contact with several high school and college friends, and enjoyed weekly Zoom calls with a group of University of Washington retirees.

His final wishes are that the social and political divisions in our country begin to heal, that religion is removed from politics, and that world leaders respond effectively to the global crisis of climate change.

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.

Baker, gardener Tim Duppler dies

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is saddened to report the death on May 9 of Lifetime Member Timothy John Duppler, 69, of Madison, Wis. His death was unexpected, as he was healthy and fit. Tim died at home.

“Unknown to FFRF, Tim had generously arranged to leave his full estate to our organization,” reports FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, “and we are



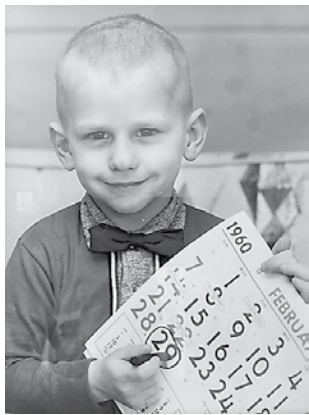
Tim Duppler

so grateful for his commitment to FFRF’s future. We extend our condolences to his family and friends, and have been touched to learn what a creative and remarkable life he led.”

Tim was born on Feb. 29, 1956, in Paoli, Wis. (See the photo of him as a youngster, which appeared in a local newspaper, pointing on a calendar to his leap year birthdate.) He played trombone and was in the marching band at Verona High School, and also played a little piano. A talented ballet dancer, he performed in “The Nutcracker” in his youth for many years in Madison productions.

He earned a degree in horticulture from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the late 1970s. As a student, he worked at a lab and also began baking at the Ovens of Brittany, then a well-known institution in Madison, where he became a master baker. He later worked fulltime as a baker at Epic Systems, a national health care software company with a large campus in Verona known for its gourmet cafeteria offerings.

At the time of his death, Tim was work-



Tim as a small child showing off his leap year birthday.



Tim Duppler sits among all his flowers and plants outside his Madison, Wis., home.

ing part-time at Batch Bakehouse. He was perpetually baking treats for friends, and on the week of his death had baked a lemon cake and pecan-raspberry bars to share.

He was also an experienced gardener, turning most of his large backyard into a cutting flower garden also filled with herbs. It also includes a large bed of rhubarb and newly planted raspberry bushes. The garden is blooming with zinnias, snapdragons, blueberries and an exotic double poppy.

After a trip many years ago to Spain, Tim discovered lisianthus, an unusual annual whose flowers resemble roses, which even today remains hard to obtain as a bedding plant because of its long cultivation time and sensitivity to growing temperatures.

Many years ago, Tim began cultivating lisianthus from seed. Last year he raised 4,000 individual lisianthus plants, which he then gifted to friends. He maintained an elaborate set-up to grow plants from seeds in his pristine basement.

Although his family was Roman Catholic, Tim, who was openly gay, “had nothing to do with religion” from a youthful age, according to his older brother Dana. Tim is survived by three other brothers and one sister. In his documents he had requested no funeral or memorial service.

FFRF Lifetime Member Jay Huemmer, a friend who provided the photographs, writes: “If there is anything written about Tim, the word ‘generous’ should be included. Tim was generous with friends, neighbors, family and as you are finding out, FFRF.”

“Grow the lisianthus, in memory of Tim,” his brother Dana urges.

Wesley Johnson was a vet and a vet

FFRF Member Wesley A. Johnson, Jr., died April 2, 2024, at the home he shared in Boulder, Colo., with his wife, Joanne (Rust) Johnson.

Wes was born June 15, 1933, and grew up in the tiny town of Hammer,



Wes Johnson

S.D., where his parents, Wesley and Mabel (Stave) Johnson were the second-generation owners of the well-managed grocery and general store where many of the town’s residents gathered. By all accounts, Wes had an adventurous boyhood, and relished growing up in Hammer with his three siblings — Margie, George and Janet — and became an excellent student, athlete and musician during his school years.

Wes earned multiple postgraduate degrees, including his Doctor of Veterinary Medicine from University of Minnesota in 1962. Wes and Joanne were married on Oct. 23, 1959, and lived in several locales — Minnesota, Iowa, North Dakota, Oklahoma and Arkansas.

His professional career spanned his veterinary practice with his entrepre-

neurial large and small animal clinics in North Dakota and Oklahoma, his veterinary service at the Oklahoma City Zoo, as a USDA veterinary medical officer for the Food Safety and Inspection Service in Arkansas and neighboring states, and, ultimately, in Washington D.C.

When many might have spent their off-work hours in recreation, Wes took on the challenge of starting a blueberry farming operation in Arkansas from a handful of seedlings, learning the process along the way and involving his family in its maintenance.

After Wes retired from veterinary practice in 1995, the couple purchased residential property in Houston. Wes successfully built two homes on their property, while learning advanced carpentry and other building skills along the way. Wes and Joanne moved in 2010 to Boulder to be near son Paul and his wife Ellen, and were thrilled to be in the right place when granddaughter Abby arrived.

Wes was a U.S. Army Veteran as a young man and was trained in Army Language School in Monterey, Calif., as a Russian language specialist during the Cold War. While stationed in Germany, he traveled to the Island of Karmøy in Norway, where his maternal grandparents were born and delighted his clan of relatives with his visit. Wes made such an

impression on his Norwegian relatives that they welcomed him with open arms when he visited again in 2007, about 50 years later, with Joanne, AnnMarie and Nancy. Travel has been a shared passion for Wes and Joanne, and they enjoyed memorable trips to England, Italy, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Greece, and Turkey, as well as many sites in the United States.

Preston Dollar Jr. was machine operator

Preston Orville Dollar Jr. died Feb. 26. He was born Oct. 6, 1950, and spent more than 30 years as a machine operator at a paper mill. He loved watching sports, going to the movies with his kids and grandkids, and taking long drives just to listen to music. He had a deep love for Southern food — especially crawfish — and never missed a chance to enjoy a good meal with the people he cared about. The Christmas season was his favorite time of year, and he cherished the memories made with his family during the holidays.



# LETTERBOX

## There is a need for Black Collar reporting

I'm a relatively new member, and I love Freethought Today. It's a truly refreshing read for me. The first time I read Black Collar Crime, my heart sank, though I read on. In a subsequent issue, a letter was published indicating the person thought it wasn't needed and it was too negative. I also noticed the editor responded in kind.

However, I think the section is great, and I especially give props to Bill Dunn, who compiles the information. FFRF isn't doing the actual reporting, nor did I notice any ad hominem attacks, but rather just the sharing of what other media have already reported. More importantly, as the editor noted, "no other media does this type of extensive roundup," and that alone makes this section needed.

To the extent that it's "negative," there's some pretty upsetting information in every issue, whether its reading about the rise in Christian nationalism and extremist government policies or the whack jobs who send you guys hate mail. I don't think Black Collar Crime somehow taints the whole newspaper.

Moreover, like the editor noted, we should never assume that everyone is aware of these crimes. I sure wasn't! The media report on criminal offenses all the time, and that in itself serves as a form of collateral consequence on top of the legal consequences that come with heinous offense. Those who are clergy (along with those associated with religious institutions) should not get a pass from the same social and media treatment that everyone else in the criminal justice systems gets.

Florida

...

To the letter writer who doesn't want to see Black Collar Crime section in Freethought Today, you are probably a very sincere and tenderhearted individual to be so offended by the news of Black Collar section. There is much on those pages to be offended by. Personally, I'm not offended, I'm horrified.

Here's an idea: Skip reading the section. Then, do something really positive and attend an FFRF event. There are few things I enjoy more than being surrounded by atheists for a few days!

Montana

...

First, let me start by thanking FFRF for everything you do to fight to uphold the separation of church and state. This is obviously a very important right for all of us, or I wouldn't be a member for as long as I have been!

I'm writing today to comment on a letter about dropping the Black Collar Crime section. That section is one of the many reasons I read Freethought Today. These are crimes that I never see reported elsewhere, and I find it informative to know when there are local crimes that I should be aware of that haven't been reported in the local news. Sadly, it also provides me with actual stats when people on the right try to accuse people like me on the left of being a pedophile.

Please keep up this very important reporting.

Ohio

### FFRF gives 'No Kings' the royal treatment



The Freedom From Religion Foundation was an official co-sponsor of the June 14 "No Kings Day of Defiance," along with our legislative arm FFRF Action Fund. The more than 2,000 events around the nation attracted an estimated 5 million protesters. Madison, Wis., had about 15,000 at its event. A small contingent of FFRF members and staff met before the Madison rally to march together. Holding the FFRF banner, also celebrating Pride Month, is FFRF Communications Director Amit Pal (at left) and FFRF Legal Assistant Matt Langer (at right). Behind them, from left, include FFRF Member Erin Cara, FFRF Litigation Legal Assistant Greta Martens, FFRF Member and Chapter Leader Tom Cara, FFRF Member Angela Woodward, FFRF Member Nick Ciganovich, FFRF Attorney Sammi Lawrence, FFRF Member Arthur Wiczorek and FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.

## It's easier to believe than to think critically

One line in a recent Crankmail struck me: "Life is so much easier when you believe." It sure is! No thinking needed. Blindly follow the/any leader.

Pennsylvania

## Letter gave me strength to take on group's prayer

I was so happy to read the letter from Bradley Sampeer, "I won't take religious oath as part of jury." I belong to a local community organization, and I'm trying to stop them from including the words "God" or "Lord" in their mealtime prayers and requiring everyone to stand up for the Pledge of Allegiance, since it includes "under God." This letter gives me strength to stand up for my rights. Thank you, Bradley and FFRF.

Pennsylvania

## Religion is at the heart of gay marriage debate

*This letter from an FFRF member ran in the Columbus Dispatch on June 4.*

Regarding the June 1 article on the increasing threats to the continued right to gay marriage, studies show that a significant amount of the opposition is based on religion. This highlights a problem with the ethical systems of some religions.

With gay marriage being legal in the United States for 10 years and over 775,000 gay marriages performed, it obviously harms no one and brings happiness to many. Yet, some religionists want to make it illegal despite the widespread unhappiness and suffering that would result.

Atheist writer Sam Harris has criticized such religious thinking: "Where

certain actions cause no suffering at all, religious dogmatists still maintain that they are evil and worthy of punishment. . . And yet, where suffering and death are found in abundance their causes are often deemed to be good. . . This inversion of priorities not only victimizes innocent people and squanders scarce resources; it completely falsifies our ethics."

The world would be much better if moral judgments were based not on dogma but on whether actions produce happiness or unhappiness (taking into account both short- and long-term consequences). As writer Robert A. Heinlein said: "Sin lies only in hurting others unnecessarily. All other 'sins' are invented nonsense."

Science shows that homosexuality is completely natural among mammals, including humans. It's harmless, as is gay marriage. To call these things sins is invented nonsense.

Ohio

## No one can know for sure that God doesn't exist

I find myself compelled to respond to George Timson's letter asserting that agnosticism is a cop-out because, after "tens of thousands of years of religious belief," no one has proven that God exists. His argument is an example of what is known as "the absence of evidence fallacy." The lack of evidence for the existence of something is not proof that it does not exist. A well-known saying among scientists to this effect is that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." As an example of the fallacy of the argument, consider how easily it can be turned around in this case. After "tens of thousands of years of religious belief," no one has proven that God doesn't exist, therefore God obviously must exist.

Declaring yourself to be an unquestioning atheist is as much a matter of faith as declaring yourself to be a Christian or Jew or Muslim or whatever. Pure atheism is a faith-based belief, without proof, that God does not exist. If you are going to base your beliefs on evidence, then you can only be an agnostic, because there is no evidence to prove that God does or does not exist. Somewhere along the way, I heard the term agnostic atheist, which I think describes my own viewpoint. I think it is unlikely that God exists, but I will not definitively say there is no God because I have no evidence to back up that statement. Until we have evidence one way or another, believing or not believing in God is merely an opinion. Only agnosticism is based on fact. We do not, and probably cannot ever, know whether or not there is a God.

Colorado

...

I would like to reply to the letter writer who said that one who calls him/herself an agnostic is giving a cop-out response.

I am an agnostic who believes in evidence, which leads to proof. Since the existence of a god has never been proven nor disproven, it takes a degree of faith to believe in a god . . . or not to believe in a god.

First, you might want to define "God" before you argue it does or does not exist. Let's just say a god is a supernatural entity whose characteristics vary depending on the believer's faith. Since it has not been proven that no gods exist, it also takes a degree of faith to believe that a god does not exist. Without proof, there must be faith. But I am not a man who relies on faith, so I am an agnostic until it is proven one way or the other.

The letter writer, whether he admits it or not, has (at least a degree of) faith to insist there is no god and relies on it for his atheist conclusion. I'm not saying the conclusion is wrong, but without conclusive proof, faith is one factor necessary to get to that conclusion.

Georgia

## Jesus' empty tomb more rhetoric than history

I often wonder why a missing body became the foundation of Christian belief. Shouldn't that lead to the real question: Did Jesus even exist at all? It seems to be a cover for the absence of a historical figure. After a lifetime, I find it less a historical account and more a carefully crafted piece of rhetoric.

Here are the contradictions in the missing body claim: If the guards were asleep, how did they know it was the disciples who stole him? If they were awake, how could they not see him rising? This narrative reinforces belief instead of documenting history.

Matthew recites that the tomb is guarded for three days to prevent body theft. But then he justifies the empty tomb, claiming priests bribed the guards: "the disciples stole him away while we were asleep." (Hearsay, not history.)

Finding no body at a guarded tomb negates any reality of Jesus. No risen body, no believers. Just that the women fled in terror and said nothing to anyone.

The bribery claim, likely a later



addition, serves as a classic narrative-control tactic — framing skeptics as dishonest while reinforcing belief as the only moral stance.

This stolen body bribe claim gave Jewish people a bad name for centuries, just so Christians could be dominant.

And the narrative gives a bad name to people who can see the obvious: No body, no Jesus. Only stories generated from Old Testament verses, thereby creating myth (to fulfill scripture).

“My god, my god, why have you forsaken me,” came from Psalm 22 as a feeling of general abandonment of the people of Israel.

Does your belief have a foundation? Or is the foundation empty, like the tomb?

Indiana

## Indoctrination leads to belief in Trump’s lies

How is it that Christian nationalists, evangelicals and the religious right can believe Trump’s persistent lies and his rejection of science, facts and reality? To understand, we must explore the correlation between these tendencies and Christian belief, especially as shaped by childhood indoctrination.

Analysis of Christian children’s literature has shown that the Genesis story of Noah’s ark is a leading Sunday school lesson. Worse than the Holocaust, God’s great flood wiped out all of humanity and all creatures on Earth, except for Noah’s family and the “two-of-every-kind” animals. While scientifically not credible, the biblical account effectively teaches children to suspend reason and believe the implausible. As well, it illustrates that God is angry, wrathful and vengeful toward those who don’t follow him.

The power of blind faith ingrained from an early age is demonstrated by the fact that Christians can see such examples as the acts of a merciful and just god.

It’s true that many religious people are not Trump supporters. However, it is important to acknowledge the close relationship between Trump’s worldview and religious beliefs. Religious indoctrination discourages questioning authority and dogma, limiting openness to different perspectives and worldviews. Christian nationalists would — in some areas, are — bringing the bible along with Trumpian perspectives into public school classrooms.

So, what can we do? We must first vigorously defend the separation of church and state as guaranteed by the First Amendment. Second, our public education system must resist the growing pressure from the religious right and steadfastly remain secular. School curriculums must prioritize

Crossword answers														
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The Action faction



Photo by Chris Line

The FFRF Action Fund team gathered outside the Wisconsin state Capitol in June when they were all in Madison at the same time. From left: State Policy Manager Ryan Dudley, Senior Policy Counsel Ryan Jayne, Director of Governmental Affairs Mark Dann, Governmental Affairs Coordinator Caitlin Berray and Regional Governmental Affairs Manager Mickey Dollens. Dudley and Jayne are based in Freethought Hall in Madison, while Dann works in Washington, D.C., Berray in Texas and Dollens in Oklahoma (where he is also a state representative).

critical thinking skills, independent thought and the questioning of evidence-free and supernatural beliefs. Because people who don’t question become easy prey to dictators.

Alaska

## Morality comes in two types: basic, cultural

In the writeup of the FFRF convention roundtable discussion, “Walk the walk and talk the talk” (May issue), Colorado state Rep. Judith Amabile observed that people often “confuse having morality, having the ability to tell right from wrong, with religion.” That’s because very few people recognize that there are actually two completely separate kinds of morality: basic and cultural.

Basic morality is about preventing the kind of interpersonal violence and dishonesty that universally destroy the trust needed for group living. Basic morality evolved with us as group living proved to provide survival advantages, which explains why the rules of basic morality are similar from tribe to tribe — all tribes need mutual trust for unity.

Cultural morality is about enforcing tribal customs of worship, sex, dress, diet and so on. The rules of cultural morality vary widely and randomly from tribe to tribe because they arose from random environmental and social influences, much like the world’s various languages.

Basic morality is the objective moral standard that allows atheists to judge good and bad. Good is behavior that maintains mutual trust. Bad is behavior that violates the rules of maintaining mutual trust, or tries to enforce one culture’s tribal customs on people who practice other cultures and customs.

Cryptogram answer

But when we are afraid, who can we turn to, if not the gods? Ourselves. We turn to ourselves anyway. We only pretend there are gods and that they care about us. It is a comforting falsehood.

— Erica Jong

Religious moral codes, such as the Ten Commandments, often scramble the two sets of rules together in an effort to make their tribal rules of cultural morality seem as intrinsic as the rules of basic morality. This often results in the dominant culture being legislated and forced onto all under their power.

Michigan

## Barker’s book refreshing to read; an eye opener

Dan Barker’s “The Good Atheist: Living a Purpose-Filled Life Without God,” was quite an eye opener, even for me, who was convinced from early childhood that all the estimated 12,000 gods invented through the ages are just that, made-up fantasy figures.

I was amazed and quite happy to learn how many well-known, accomplished and famous people were “out-of-the closet” nonbelievers! Refreshing, for sure, to read about so many, from actors and journalists to psychiatrists and philosophers. How refreshing, and how needed in a country as infested with superstition as ours, where religion has had a very negative, damaging impact on just about everything, from politics and elections to education and science, not to mention as an instrument to control women and what they can and cannot do with their own bodies.

In so many ways, the country has been held back, compared to the more progressive, nonreligious Scandinavian countries, where they are likely to laugh at you if you ask someone if he/she believes in “God”! As a matter of fact, among my friends and former classmates “over there,” from elementary school through high school and technical university, there’s not a single religious one!

California

## ‘Practical atheism’ column nailed it perfectly

What a delight to receive and begin reading the June/July issue. Article after article stood out, alternating between laughter, disbelief, anger, astonishment

and joy. What a fine product our FFRF delivers, month after month.

Anything from the late George Carlin is inevitably, howlingly amusing while simultaneously making its sobering points.

But, I was especially struck by the prescience of Annie Laurie Gaylor’s column, “We should all live ‘practical atheism.’” It is a pithy and spot-on examination of the spirit of bias that animates the new pontiff, Robert Prevost, aka Pope Leo XIV. Her quotes from him expose all the usual religious claptrap against those of us too sensible to buy into the plethora of “imaginary friends” nonsense on offer today. Gaylor’s words caused me to reflect, too, on the various pathetic tidbits of supposed generosity that Prevost’s predecessor, Francis, would stingily hand out to the various oppressed minorities, and the even more pathetic way in which those various recipients — gays, women, people of color — would latch onto his meager words of “support” for human decency and kindness toward those “sinners” of whatever stripe.

Annie Laurie, your numerous points reiterate so succinctly the stupidity and ignorance that is at the heart of religion of whatever stripe — the gist of which is, “the devil made me do it,” that old, reliable escape hatch that religionists use to avoid taking responsibility for this world and their lives.

Thank you for invoking the late, great Robert G. Ingersoll’s deep wisdom. My husband and I won the bid for the 12-volume set of the complete works of Ingersoll at the 2023 convention. It is a must read for any ardent secularist. I’m just finishing the sixth volume of the set. If his words could be regurgitated to the masses, what an impact they might have. Instead, here we are with a host of Christian nut-jobs at the helm of our government wrecking our precious and fragile democracy with that hypocrite and narcissist Donald Trump leading the way.

And, the offerings in Crankmail and “They Said What” make abundantly clear exactly what the spirit of fundamentalist Christianity is all about.

Finally, in the column “Trump a perfect tool for evangelicals,” the image of that herd of pious “faith leaders” laying-on-of-hands, praying over him was the capstone of absurdity and embarrassment.

Illinois

## Do religious reasons supersede secular ones?

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act should be repealed. The Star Tribune reported on Minneapolis allowing a Muslim call to prayer through the night. From the article, “‘The practice of religion is not constrained by the Constitution of the United States,’ said Mohamed Ibrahim, CAIR-MN’s deputy executive director.”

If the act is as Ibrahim states, that the “right to generally practice religion supersedes the city’s ordinance,” would that privilege religion over secular uses and would that be unconstitutional? If the act is not as Ibrahim states, would his inability to interpret the act indicate it is not clear and subjective?

The Minneapolis City Council passed a city code that does not protect its citizens from noise pollution. It did not determine noise pollution was not a concern, but rather chose to allow a religious use subjecting citizens to noise pollution.

Minnesota



# FFRF convention, Oct. 16-19

## A notion for the ocean!

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

### General Schedule

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

### Registration

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

### Optional Group Meals

Five ticketed meals, including FFRF’s popular “NonPrayer Breakfast,” will be offered this year, more than usual, in part because — aside from two in-house restaurants — meal choices outside the resort will be limited, unless you have a car or use Uber. A small-capacity shuttle that can be ordered ahead can take some participants to nearby restaurant strips in Myrtle Beach. The ticketed meals are: Friday lunch and dinner and Saturday breakfast, lunch and dinner. The complimentary Thursday Reception will offer light hors d’oeuvres and a cash bar. There will also be a complimentary continental breakfast on Friday morning and dessert reception Friday night. Vegetarian, vegan and gluten-free options are available for the ticketed meals. Please specify your ADA needs on the registration form.

#### Friday Buffet Lunch

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

#### Friday Plated Dinner

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

#### Saturday Plated Breakfast

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



This is the design for the convention T-shirts.

#### Saturday Buffet Lunch

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

#### Saturday Plated Dinner

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

### Hotel Amenities & Dining Options

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

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

### Hotel Booking

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

ffrf

2025

National Convention

MYRTLE BEACH

October 16–19, 2025

CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: [ffrf.org/convention2025](http://ffrf.org/convention2025)

REGISTRATION FEES

	Number Registering	Cost
Member	___	\$100 \$___
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)	___	\$105 \$___
Child (High school or under accompanying registrant)	___	Free \$___
College Student with ID	___	\$25 \$___
Non-member	___	\$160 \$___
<input type="checkbox"/> Or, I will join FFRF for \$40 (and save \$20)	___	\$140 \$___

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

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

Thursday, October 16th

Evening Welcome Reception [must register to attend] \_\_\_ Free

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Friday, October 17th

Friday Buffet Lunch \_\_\_ \$65 \$\_\_\_

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

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

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

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

Saturday, October 18th

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

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Saturday Buffet Lunch \_\_\_ \$65 \$\_\_\_

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan ☐ Gluten Free

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

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

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

Quantity

Cost

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

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

Size(s) \_\_\_\_\_ ► Total \$ \_\_\_\_\_

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

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

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

Name of Registrant 1

Pronouns (optional)

Name of Registrant 2

Pronouns (optional)

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

Address

City

State / ZIP

Phone\*

Email\*

Credit Card Number

Expiration Date / Security Code

Billing Name / Signature

\*Contact information for in-house use only

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