

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



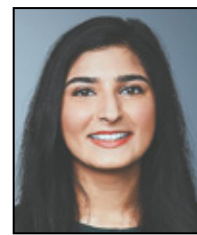
**The rise of
Christian
nationalism**

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**Unapologetically
and authentically
normal**

PAGES 16-18



**Atheist chaplains
are forging
a new path**

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Victories! FFRF turns violations into success stories

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's legal team gets thousands of requests every year to look into potential state/church violations in schools and other government agencies. FFRF takes this role seriously . . . and it shows! After FFRF determines if there is a constitutional infraction, it initially sends out a letter to the organization, asking for the problem to be rectified. Often times, this is enough to get the offending group to end the violation or alter their actions going forward.

The following write-ups are from 30 recent successful outcomes (victories!) of FFRF's initial letter contacts, organized by state and listed alphabetically.

By Greg Fletcher

California

FFRF was relieved to hear that Placer County in Auburn had not provided funding to a religious event focused on a "biblical focus" toward zoning.

A resident reported that the county was apparently involved with and sponsored an event entitled, "Making Affordable Housing Happen: A Biblical Focus from Advocacy to Zoning." FFRF learned that the country distributed a flier for

the event via official communications channels. Additionally, the flier listed "County of Placer" among other supporting organizations at the bottom of the flier, which implied that the county may have donated public funds to the event.

"It's constitutionally problematic when the county sponsors and promotes a religious event, even if the focus of the event is a topic of community concern," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the county.

FFRF received a thorough response from Supervising Deputy County Counsel Renju Jacob. Jacob detailed the investigation, which included discussions with the Public Information Office staff, who confirmed that the event had thankfully not been promoted via official information channels. Additionally, while the county was listed as a sponsor of the event, county management confirmed that it did not authorize the event organizer, Placer People of Faith Together, to list the county's name as a sponsor. "I do appreciate you bringing the concern to our office's attention," Jacob wrote. "During my discussions with management, I also stressed the importance of

See Victories on page 6



Kojo Tetteh Tetteh and Roslyn Mould show off the new billboard placed in Accra, Ghana, the first atheist billboard in Africa.

First atheist billboard in Africa!

A groundbreaking moment for the secular community in Africa has arrived with unveiling of the continent's first atheist billboard in Accra, Ghana.

Sponsored by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, in partnership with Accra Atheists, this historic installation marks a significant milestone in visibility and advocacy for African humanists, atheists, agnostics and skeptics.

The billboard is prominently displayed in the downtown business district of Osu, Accra. It affirms the presence of secular

individuals in Ghana and beyond. The initiative aims to foster awareness, encourage open dialogue about secularism and support the growing community of freethinkers in the region.

"This is a dream come true," said Roslyn Mould, co-founder and president of Accra Atheists. "This billboard represents not just visibility, but validation for those who often feel isolated in their nonbelief. Thanks to FFRF's unwavering support, we've achieved

See Billboard on page 10

Christian nationalist movement is in full swing

This column first appeared in The Contrarian on Jan. 27 and is reprinted with permission.

By Katherine Stewart

The first week of the Trump presidency made clear that we are indeed going to get a version of Project 2025. And the real-life plan, like the project, is steeped in Christian nationalism. The policy proposals coming out of the first week's actions may be incoherent and many are likely to fail; but the ideological vision is coherent and sure to leave scars. That vision is to remake America as an authoritarian state whose aims are consonant with the leaders of the Christian nationalist movement.

Some elements of the Christian nationalist agenda are showing up in smaller, less-publicized decisions. For example,



Photo by Shutterstock

Trump said he was "honored" to pardon nearly two dozen anti-abortion activists charged with using ropes, bike blocks and chains to stop patients from entering reproductive health clinics, who were found to have stolen fetal remains, and whose actions injured a nurse.

The pardon was intended as a reward to the anti-abortion movement for supporting Trump, and movement activists are celebrating it in hopes of future gains.

The even more consequential — and utterly disgraceful — pardon of the Jan. 6 criminals was also more than just a way of encouraging the formation of violent, extra-legal militias to work on Trump's behalf. It was a reward and empowerment of the segment of Christian nationalist leaders who spread the lie about the supposedly stolen election and then encouraged or led the assault on the Capitol. Indeed, some of the mob, most of whom have now been pardoned, held religious symbols and signage as they carried out their violent rampage. They and others interpret the pardons as an affirmation of their project to replace American democracy with a religious nationalist form of authoritarian government.

An effort to reward Christian nationalist leadership for their loyalty is also driving many of Trump's critical appointments. Russ Vought, a principal architect

See Movement on page 6

From poli-sci to fighting for Constitution

This article first appeared in the Winter 2024 University of Illinois Alumni Magazine and is reprinted with permission. Hirsh Joshi is FFRF's Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow.

By Hirsh Joshi

I grew up in the Chicago suburbs. I've always been interested in what different groups believe.

I was a poli-sci major. I really hadn't been thinking of law school; I was thinking more about a graduate degree in poli-sci. But then I was talking to Professor Joe Hinchliffe, and he mentioned that a lot of poli-sci students do independent studies on U.S. Supreme Court cases. I thought of something that had been in the news a lot, what everyone was calling "the gay wedding cake case." So, I wrote my independent study on Masterpiece Cakeshop Ltd. v. Colorado Civil Rights Commission. And I caught the law bug and attended the University of Missouri School of Law.

During my first year of law school (2020–21), I witnessed attacks on our electoral process, a massive attack on the Capitol and some awful behavior by lawyers — people like Jenna Ellis and Rudy Giuliani filing frivolous lawsuits to decertify an election. That was sad to see so early in my legal career.

It's easy to get discouraged, but you can either throw your hands up or be part of the solution. I tried the latter. That led me to the Mizzou Law chapter of the American Constitution Society. In my second year, I became chapter president. We were named student chapter of the year in 2022 and I was selected an ACS Next Generation Leader. My mantra was, "It's important for law students to learn not just to be good lawyers but also to be lawyers for good."

Now, I'm on the legal staff of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.



Photo by Romulo Udea

"For years, there have been people trying to bring down the wall of separation brick by brick," says Hirsh Joshi, FFRF's Patrick O'Reiley Legal Fellow.

We're a national nonprofit with 40,000 members, working to keep government and religion out of each other's business. We're best known by Ron Reagan's 30-second TV ads, in which he tells of FFRF's efforts "to keep state and church separate, just like our Founding Fathers intended." For someone with my interests, it's a dream job.

Most of my work time is spent sending cease-and-desist letters to government actors who violate that separation. My area includes several Southern states, so I'm particularly busy. I also send letters to Illinois and Missouri, which I take pride in, given my connection to those states.

Most actions start with a complaint from someone local calling attention

to a violation. It can be anything: a bible verse painted on a police station wall, a Ten Commandments poster in a courthouse hallway, a teacher who brags on Facebook about proselytizing students, a high school football coach who baptizes players after practice, or a prayer recited in a middle school graduation ceremony.

We typically begin with a letter pointing out the problem and asking the party to cure the mistake. I let them know that when they wear their government hat, they aren't allowed to demonstrate a preference for religion over nonreligion, or Christianity over all other faiths.

If they push back, I may ask them to pick a religion they don't subscribe to and imagine seeing that faith's "holy

“It's easy to get discouraged, but you can either throw your hands up or be part of the solution. I tried the latter.”

words" and images on the wall of their school or city hall. They really don't have an answer to that. Very often they just deflect.

In cases that are especially persistent and egregious, we sometimes go to litigation. When we post TikTok videos about wins, we get hundreds of expressions of support. I take a lot of pride in representing people who have been subjected to a governmental wrong.

Sometimes people respond that there's no such thing as state/church separation because those words aren't in the U.S. Constitution. I can talk about the history of the Establishment Clause and Thomas Jefferson's writings. Or I can cite Matthew 6:5-6 in the bible, in which Jesus warns against hypocritical people praying in public.

We hear from people who argue that inserting religion — usually they mean Christianity — into government affairs is a tradition. After all, they say, the word "God" is in the Pledge of Allegiance and on U.S. currency. But those examples aren't ingrained in our history. They were changes made in the 1950s in response to what was seen as "state-sponsored atheism" in communist countries. In fact, the word "God" isn't in the Constitution, and that was intentional on the part of the Founders.

About 37 percent of Americans aren't Christian. Among Gen Z, a third have no religion at all. The next phase of American history is going to require a coalition of people from all religions and no religion.

For years, there have been people trying to bring down the wall of separation, brick by brick. Lately, some are looking to take a wrecking ball to the wall and do it all in one swing. The wall has to be defended.

In some sense, what we do is like playing Whac-A-Mole: It never stops. I could work 24 hours a day. I'd just need a lot of coffee.

OVERHEARD

I am a Christian who believes in the separation of church and state. My classes the past 11 years were rarely majority Christian. . . Teaching about the prophecies of the bible is not what is best for all students.

Tyra Damm, a former public school teacher, in an op-ed, "Are vouchers, bible lessons what's best for students?"

Dallas Morning News, 12-8-24

When you get inside Christian nationalist spaces, there [are] all kinds

of militant rhetoric about manly strength, about Christian men who need to step up and take power, and assert their leadership because that is their God-ordained role. . . They want to erase the teaching of actual history to prop up a mythical understanding of what this country was founded to be to justify their radical transformation of the country.

Kristin Kobes Du Mez, historian and author of the New York Times bestseller, "Jesus and John Wayne:"

How White Evangelicals Corrupted a Faith and Fractured a Nation."

CNN, 1-12-25

This bill is about protecting children and preventing further incidents of child sex abuse — incidents that we've all heard about far too many times. Freedom of religion is about a child's freedom to practice religion free from threat of harm, abuse and a lifetime of mental and emotional anguish.



Mary Ann Dunwell

Montana state Sen. Mary Ann Dunwell in introducing a bill that would require clergy members to report all confessions relating to child abuse. Dunwell was named FFRF Action Fund's "Secularist of the Week" on Jan. 31.

The Christian Post, 1-25-25

The fetishization of the image of the Ten Commandments is, ironically, a form of idolatry, which is explicitly prohibited in those very commandments. It is a distortion of "Judeo" values to elevate to sanctity an object that is, at most, a nice temple decoration or the back-

drop for a Charlton Heston film festival.

Joshua Hammerman, in his column, "No one is rescuing the Ten Commandments from a burning synagogue."

Religion News Service, 1-15-25

Project 2025 is an all-out attack on over 60 years of civil rights protection of African American people in the U.S.

Rev. Barbara Williams-Skinner, a coordinator of Faiths United to Save Democracy and the onetime executive director of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Religion News Service, 1-30-25

The religious right's greatest success, on which all its other success has relied, has been in replacing the moderate, adaptable and tolerant theology of mainline Christianity with this idiosyncratic version of evangelicalism, advancing, as the political right has, less on Christian love than in exploiting intolerance and bigotry. The results have been disastrous, paving the way to a triumph of white Christian nationalism.

Katherine Kelaidis, in her column, "Bishop Budde went viral because she showed us what's wrong with American religion."

Religion News Service, 2-3-25

FFRF
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TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

FFRF’s 2025 student essay contests begin

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has announced its 2025 essay competitions for freethinking students — offering \$70,000 (or more) in total scholarships.

Each of these four contests has 10 top prizes: First place — \$3,500; second place — \$3,000; third place — \$2,500; fourth place — \$2,000; fifth place — \$1,500; sixth place — \$1,000; seventh place — \$750; eighth place — \$500; ninth place — \$400; and 10th place — \$300. FFRF also offers optional honorable mentions of \$200.

The contests cater to students in different age/class ranges. Students may only enter one FFRF contest annually and may not enter a contest if they have previously won an award in that particular contest.

William J. Schulz Memorial Essay Contest for College-Bound High School Seniors

High school seniors graduating this spring and attending college in the fall are asked to write on the topic of **“To do good is my religion.”**

Thomas Paine, our “forgotten Founder,” famously wrote that “to do good is my religion.” Write a first-person essay that asserts why “doing good” is not dependent on religious belief. Explain why you are not religious, and what you think morality should be based on instead of God, holy books or dogma. How would you counter common myths that atheists are immor-

al or “can’t be good without God”? If you have examples of how you’ve “done good” to help others, include in your essay.

Word limit: 350–500. Deadline: May 1. ffrf.us/senioressay2025

Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students

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

Research and write a first-person essay about how religious mindsets and belief in an unprovable “afterlife” have a negative impact on promoting human welfare and our planet. Show how this religious claim is still leading our planet astray in solving the world’s problems, such as climate change, inequality or public health. Briefly explain why you reject religion and belief in an afterlife and why it’s best to keep our focus on this world.

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

Word limit: 450–650. Deadline: June 1. ffrf.us/collegeessay2025

David Hudak Memorial Essay Contest for Freethinking Black, Indigenous and Students of Color

Black, Indigenous and Students of Color ages 17–21 (college-bound high school seniors to currently enrolled college students), may write on the topic of **“How white Christian nationalism endangers my rights.”**

Research and write a first-person essay about how white Christian nationalism poses a danger to your rights. Choose one particular attack by Christian nationalism on civil liberties — such as against DEI, voting rights, LGBTQ rights, reproductive rights, or general civil rights — and explain how white Christian nationalism poses a threat and how that threat impacts you, your family or others in the BIPOC community. Suggest one or two strategies that you as a nonreligious individual could personally do to combat white Christian nationalism and champion secularism and equality.

This contest is offered to provide support and acknowledgment for freethinking Students of Color, as a minority within a minority. The other FFRF student contests are open to all students.

Word limit: 350–500. Deadline: June 1. ffrf.us/BIPOCessay2025

Cornelius Vander Broek Essay Contest for ‘Graduate/Older’ Students

Graduate students (through age 30) and “older” undergrads (ages 25–30) are asked to write on the topic: **“State/church issues endangered by the Trump administration’s capitulation to Christian nationalism.”**

Focus on one issue related to state/church separation or secular social policy that you consider to be under threat by Christian nationalist policies in the Trump administration. Issues might include: federal vouchers for religious education at the expense of public schools; contraception and abortion rights; LGBTQ rights; vaccinations and public health; climate change mitigation, etc. Research and explain what’s at stake, show how Christian nationalism is behind this attack and include some ideas about how to combat the threat.

Word limit: 550–750. Deadline: June 1. ffrf.us/gradessay2025

Additional prompts on the topics and contest rule requirements can be found at: ffrf.org/studentessay. All eligible entrants will receive a digital year-long student membership in FFRF.

FFRF is appreciative of its members who make the effort to contact local high schools, colleges and universities to help publicize its competitions. (See the back cover of the Freethought Today wrap that may be copied or cut out and sent to your local schools or universities.)

FFRF seeks student activists for cash awards!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is on the lookout for students who have shown initiative in calling out constitutional violations of state/church separation in school or who have performed freethought activism.

FFRF offers numerous monetary awards for student activists ranging from \$1,000 to \$5,000!

There are two \$5,000 awards for very extraordinary activism, often given to student plaintiffs or students who do equivalent activism in ending serious violations or for extraordinary freethought activism. Previous winners include sisters Bailey and Elle Harris, who have each as young teens written successful books on humanism, critical

thinking and science. They were awarded the Richard & Beverly Student Activist Award and the “Out of God’s Closet” Scholarship, in memory of Diane and Stephen Uhl.

A West Coast couple for many years has underwritten the FFRF Student Activist Award of \$2,000 — for special activism. For example, in 2024, it went to Yoshimi Garcia, whose outspoken and firm response as a student member of a school board dissuaded the board from adopting a new policy to open each meeting with prayers.

This year, FFRF can offer The Thomas W. Jendrock Student Activist Award of \$1,000, preferably reserved for younger activism such as students at the middle

school or elementary school level. FFRF in the past has awarded some very young students who have been whistle-blowers about overt proselytizing encountered in public schools.

Newly funded last year is the Percy B. Shelly Student Activist Award of \$2,000 each, donated by FFRF member Michael Meek. He explains: “Shelly personified the young activist atheist. At an early age he published ‘The Necessity of Atheism’ and, for his efforts, was expelled from Oxford. His beliefs in regard to religion are reflected in many of his essays and poetic works.”

FFRF is looking for outspoken freethought activism, which perhaps could include having articles on freethought

topics published in student newspapers or other publications, or overcoming odds in forming a freethought club or similar actions.

Also available: The Al Luneman Student Activist Award, the Robert G. Ingersoll Student Activist Award (for a student activist whose activism carries on the tradition of freethought espousal and secular values embodied by Robert G. Ingersoll), and the Strong Backbone Award, offering \$1,000 or \$2,000.

If you know of anyone who you think would be a good candidate for one of these awards (or if you are a student who has done freethought or state/church separation activism), go to ffrf.us/nominate.

THEY SAID WHAT?

For those who live in a place where God has been thrown out of schools and courts, we need to bring God back. So, our voting matters, on who will bend their knee and bow their heart to God — that would be my litmus test.

Becky Tirabassi, co-pastor of Viewpoint Church in Newport Beach, Calif., whose name is being dropped as a possible new House of Representatives chaplain to replace current House Chaplain Margaret Kibben.

Religion News Service, 1-14-25

We know from Scripture, and from nature, that men are men and women are women, and men cannot become women . . . Well, it goes back to the first book — Genesis: male and female, he made them . . . We know it from our religious tradition, which I believe is the truth — I’m a bible-believing Christian and make no apology about that.

Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, after the House passed a bill banning trans people from women’s sports.

Religion News Service, 1-14-25



Abraham George, at a small rally with clergy and GOP lawmakers. George was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Jan. 24 for his ignorant remarks.

Texas Tribune, 1-15-25

If we want a great nation, we should be preparing young women to be mothers, not finding every reason for women to delay motherhood until they are established

in a career or financially independent.

There is no separation between church and state. We don’t want the government in our churches, but we should be in the government.

Republican Party of Texas Chair Abraham George, at a small rally with clergy and GOP lawmakers. George was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Jan. 24 for his ignorant remarks.

in a career or financially independent.

Scott Yenor, who appointed by Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to the board of trustees for University of West Florida.

Palm Beach Post, 1-15-25

We’re the two main teams to just publicly display our faith the most. I truly believe that Jesus was looking over both our shoulders throughout the season and put these two teams on a pedestal for a reason.

Riley Leonard, quarterback for the Notre Dame football team, which played Ohio State University for the national championship game on Jan. 20.

NBC News, 1-15-25

I would encourage any of you that are considering running for office, it is a calling to be in government. It is a calling to take on any of those mountains of education and arts and music and media. There’s all these areas we need to share God’s kingdom principles so that

we can have righteousness rule.

Drenda Keesee, a pastor recently elected as county commissioner in Knox County, Ohio, who subscribes to the Seven Mountains theology, which says God’s kingdom should be imposed by taking control of seven crucial areas of society and culture: family, religion, government, education, arts and entertainment, commerce and media. She was named the FFRF Action Fund “Theocrat of the Week” on Jan. 16.

Right Wing Watch, 1-8-25

My life was saved by God to make America great again.

President Donald Trump, during his inaugural address on Jan. 20.

Religion News Service, 1-20-25

Presidents come and presidents go. Through it all. God is still on the throne.

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries.

X, 1-26-25

Across

1. Fiasco

5. *Freethinking “Kill Bill” actress Thurman

8. After-bath powder

12. Petri dish gel

13. Epidermis plus dermis

14. Woody perennial

15. Domingo, Pavarotti and Carreras, e.g.

16. Knitter’s ball

17. Banana refuse, pl.

18. *John T. Scopes’ opponent

20. Like dental exam

21. Gives a ticket

22. India’s smallest state

23. Electrical signal amplifier

26. Dividing into two

30. Even, to a poet

31. Masters of ceremonies, colloquially

34. Month on a Jewish calendar

35. One of the Beatles

37. Like blue spirits

38. Like a hurtful remark

39. Mosaic piece

40. Wine preservative

42. *”The ____ of Reason” by freethinker Thomas Paine

43. Of greenish and orangish mix

45. Hollandaise and Béchamel,

e.g.

47. UN labor org.

48. Marriott hotel chain

50. Angry display

52. *Subject of Scopes Monkey Trial

56. Antique shop item

57. Be inclined

58. Side of a ruler

59. Goodbye, in Mexico

60. Restless desire

61. Thespian’s part

62. Campus head

63. “____ Now or Never”

64. Dog trailer

Down

1. Stuffing material

2. Shrek, e.g.

3. Common street name

4. Ford model

5. Tsar’s edict

6. Bogs down

7. *Atheist “Breathing Lessons” Pulitzer recipient ____ Tyler

8. *Freethinking E. A. Poe’s famous poem (2 words)

9. Domain

10. Quiet time

11. “NCIS” network, acr.

13. International ____ of Units

14. Thread holder

19. Comforter stuffing

22. State of matter

23. Easily irritated

24. Adjust, as laces

25. All told

26. Shaped with an ax

27. Hipbone-related

28. Slight push

29. Mirths

32. *Statesman Henry “The Great Pacifier” ____,” staunch advocate for church/state separation

33. Long time

36. *Explorer Fridtjof Nansen: “The ____ of one age is ... the literary entertainment of the next”

38. Mix-up

40. How many if by sea?

41. Mythological Tristan’s lover

44. Margarine

46. Verbalizes

48. Deflect

49. Yearns

50. Ill-mannered

51. *Freethinking Giuseppe Verdi’s “song”

52. Purse for a formal affair

53. *Irreverent “Dancing with Myself” singer Billy ____

54. Eyeball rudely

55. Versus want?

56. Rogue or rascal

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	11	
12					13				14				
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56						57				58			
59						60				61			
62						63				64			

Answers on page 25

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Note to members

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

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

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

If you would like to continue

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

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

Log into your FFRF.org account.

Click on “Update your contact information.”

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

Click “Submit.”

Freethought Today Cryptogram

BV FRN ENHF LMHN, SMBFR KNMUNH AFRNTIBHN

INKK-BVFNVFBVNJ XNAXKN BVLMXMEKN AS

FRBVOBVW TMFBAVMKKP MEAZF DMVP AS FRNBT

JNNXNHF LAVLNTVH; MF IATHE, BF BH M LAVFBVZAZH

HAZTLN AS RZDMV UBAKNVLN. —HMD RMTTBH

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: E => B. Answer is on page 25.

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

What are you missing? Check out our other offerings!

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

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

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

Freethought Now blogs
freethoughtnow.org

Freethought Radio weekly show
ffrf.org/radio

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

FFRF press releases
ffrf.org/releases

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

We Dissent monthly podcast
wedissent.org

IN THE NEWS

W.Va. sued over \$5M grant to Catholic college

The American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia filed a lawsuit Jan. 13 asking a court to stop the West Virginia Water Development Authority from giving a \$5 million grant to a Catholic college based in Steubenville.

The lawsuit was brought on behalf of the American Humanist Association against the WDA and its executive director Marie Prezioso. It claims that the WDA awarding the grant to the College of St. Joseph the Worker violates “the guarantee of freedom of religion codified in the West Virginia Constitution.”

In October, the college received a \$5 million Economic Enhancement Grant Fund from the WDA. According to the college’s grant proposal, it will use the funds to create a Weirton-based construction and real estate company for training apprentices, provide scholarships for the recruitment of West Virginia students and training facilities near Weirton, and create a branch campus in the Kanawha/Putnam County region.

The college’s proposal included using \$750,000 of that \$5 million to create the Center for the Common Good to support “life-affirming policy in West Virginia.”

Vatican may allow gay men to be priests in Italy

A provisional document published by the Italian Bishops’ Conference on Jan. 10 and approved by the Vatican opens the door for the ordination of openly gay men to the priesthood, while maintaining the normal requirement of chastity.

The Vatican department for clergy approved the document, which will be valid for three years. The document was signed by the head of the Italian bishops, Cardinal Matteo Zuppi, who is considered a close collaborator to Pope Francis.

The objective of the preparation for a candidate who is seeking to become a priest when it comes to his sexuality, the document states, “is the ability to accept as a gift, to freely choose and to live chastity in celibacy in a responsible way.”

The episcopacy in Italy, where vocations are at an all-time low, has been pushing the envelope in terms of making the Catholic Church more palatable to modern concerns by suggesting a greater role for women in the formation of priests, a commitment to combating sexual abuse and the acceptance of gay men to the priesthood.



Pope Francis awarded Pres. Medal of Freedom

Shortly before leaving office, President Biden awarded Pope Francis the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the United States’ highest civilian honor.

The award was presented to the pope during a phone call on Jan. 11. The honor was conferred upon the pope with distinction, the first time Biden has granted the award with the status.

“A loving pastor, he joyfully answers children’s questions about God. A challenging teacher, he commands us to fight for peace and protect the planet,” read the citation. “Above all, he is the People’s Pope – a light of faith, hope, and love that shines brightly across the world.”

The Presidential Medal of Freedom, a tradition that dates back to 1963, is presented to individuals “who have made exemplary contributions to the prosperity, values, or security of the United States, world peace, or other significant societal, public or private endeavors.”

In 2004, Pope John Paul II was presented the honor by President George W. Bush and in 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson posthumously awarded Pope John XXIII with the medal.

\$5B spent on Catholic sexual abuse allegations

Over two decades, Catholic dioceses, eparchies and men’s religious communities spent more than \$5 billion on allegations of sexual abuse of minors, according to a report released Jan. 15 by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate at Georgetown University.

Between 2004 and 2023, three-fourths of the \$5.025 billion reported was paid to abuse victims. Seventeen percent went to pay attorneys’ fees, 6 percent was in support for alleged abusers and 2 percent went toward other costs. On average, only 16 percent of the costs related to the allegations was borne by insurance companies.

During the 20 years of the survey, the respondents reported 16,276 credible

allegations of sexual abuse of minors by priests, deacons or religious brothers. Those allegations represent slightly less than two-thirds of total allegations that dioceses, eparchies and men’s religious communities reported receiving.

Tulsa council removes invocations at meetings

Tulsa, Okla., has gotten rid of the opening invocation at council meetings following controversy surrounding a prayer last year.

Councilors voted 8-1 on Jan. 15 to replace the opening invocation with a moment of silent prayer or personal reflection.

The rule change was proposed by Councilor Laura Bellis, who said she doesn’t want anyone to feel like their government doesn’t represent them.

“Of course, we have invocations where anyone can sign up of any faith for, but the one time they may be there, it usually is a Christian prayer, and may send the message that their government is not for them or they don’t belong,” she said.

Bellis proposed the rule change after a pagan priestess Amy McAdams dedicated the opening invocation to Medusa. Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt and state Superintendent Ryan Walters inaccurately accused McAdams of satanism in social media posts, and FFRF asked Tulsa to drop invocations.

California Rep. Friedman joins Freethought Caucus

Rep. Laura Friedman, D-Calif., has joined the Congressional Freethought Caucus. Friedman, newly elected to the House in November, is from California’s 30th District, which was previously represented by Rep. Adam Schiff, who is now a U.S. senator. Before entering Congress, Friedman was a member of the Glendale City Council, the mayor of Glendale and a member of the California State Assembly. While in the Legislature, she co-authored a reproductive freedom amendment to the state Constitution that voters overwhelmingly approved in 2022. She also believes “LGBTQ-plus rights are fundamental human rights and that we cannot have a free and equitable society until we protect the rights of all.”

The caucus now has 22 members, all Democrats. (After the recent election, two members of the caucus did not return to Congress: Rep. Dan Kildee retired and Rep. Susan Wild lost her re-

Man who burned Quran shot dead in Sweden

A man who sparked violent protests after burning the Quran was shot to death in Sweden on Jan. 29.

Salwan Momika was shot in an apartment in Stockholm, prosecutors told the BBC. Five people have been arrested in the shooting.

In 2023, unrest broke out after Momika set fire to a copy of Islam’s holy book outside Stockholm Central Mosque.

Momika, an Iraqi living in Sweden, was charged alongside one other with “agitation against an ethnic group” on four occasions in the summer of 2023.

The verdict, due to be delivered the following day, was postponed after it was “confirmed that one of the defendants had died,” Stockholm District Court said.

Apparent Nazi salute gets priest defrocked

A Michigan priest with the Anglican Catholic Church has been removed from his position for making what appears to be a Nazi salute.

Calvin Robinson, who held the title of priest-in-charge at St Paul’s Anglican Catholic church in Grand Rapids, Mich., performed the gesture at the end of a speech at the National Pro-Life Summit in Washington D.C. on Jan. 25. The priest appeared to quote Elon Musk, saying, “My heart goes out to you,” before mimicking his straight-arm motion.

According to a statement on the Anglican Catholic church’s website, Robinson’s license in the church was subsequently revoked and he will no longer serve as a priest.

“We believe that those who mimic the Nazi salute, even as a joke or an attempt to troll their opponents, trivialize the horror of the Holocaust and diminish the sacrifice of those who fought against its perpetrators,” the statement reads. “Such actions are harmful, divisive and contrary to the tenets of Christian charity.”

Texas voucher proposal clears first hurdle

A proposal to create a school voucher-like plan for Texas was moved forward by a panel of lawmakers on Jan. 28, giving voucher supporters like Gov. Greg Abbott their first major win of the legislative session.

The vote from the Texas Senate Education Committee came after an hours-long meeting filled with passionate testimony from those both for and against the idea of giving parents taxpayer funds to help subsidize the cost of private schooling.

The legislation — Senate Bill 2 — would create education savings accounts (ESAs) that allow families to use \$10,000 of state funds per student to subsidize the cost of private school tuition, plus cover other approved education expenses. The plan is a top priority for Abbott and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, who made sure it was one of the firsts bills discussed by lawmakers this session.

Right now, SB 2 would prioritize families falling under a designated income threshold and children with disabilities. As written, it would set aside 80 percent of available ESA funds for families deemed low-income, and that \$10,000 per student would increase to \$11,500 for children with disabilities.

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What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker n.

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

FFRF VICTORIES

Victories

Continued from page 1

not taking actions that would in effect be deemed a sponsorship of religion. Your concerns provided an opportunity to emphasize this point.”

California

The Hart-Ransom USD Board of Trustees in Modesto has agreed not to include a prayer before meetings by FFRF.

A district parent reported that the board had been beginning each of its meetings with a prayer led by one of the members, as well as official agendas listing an “invocation” at the beginning of meetings. The board reportedly asked attendees to participate in the prayer and that the prayers are specifically and uniformly Christian. FFRF’s complainant further explained that they are nonreligious, and the board’s opening prayer at the meeting they attended made them “extremely uncomfortable.”

“Students and parents, such as our complainant, have the right — and often reason — to participate in school board meetings,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “It is coercive, insensitive and intimidating to force nonreligious and minority faith citizens to choose between making a public showing of being non-Christian by refusing to participate in the prayer or else display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their school board members clearly do.”

After FFRF’s letter, district Superintendent Matthew Shipley responded to the concerns. “We have consulted with legal counsel regarding your concern,” Shipley wrote. “Future board meetings will no longer be opened with prayer. Thank you for bringing this matter to our attention.”

Florida

After students were given religious-themed beads by a teacher in the Pinellas County Schools system in Largo, Fla., FFRF made sure that the teacher understood her obligation to remain secular in her teaching.

A district parent reported to FFRF that a second-grade teacher at Azalea Elementary School distributed beads to her students as part of a class assignment to craft necklaces and bracelets for students to wear. The parent reported that one of the bead designs their child brought home included a Latin cross.

“The district has a duty to ensure that its teachers are not using their positions to promote their personal religious beliefs to students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

After FFRF’s letter to the district, the School Board Attorney David Koperski worked with the teacher in question to ensure that the Constitution would be respected going forward. “There was certainly no intent to promote religion of any kind or use her classroom assignments to advance her religious beliefs,” Koperski wrote. “I spoke with her about the concern, and she understood the rules regarding the promotion of religion in her capacity as a public school teacher.”



“Oh, no—the other team is praying, too.”

Florida

The Lake County Schools will not allow special exceptions for tardy students attending a religious club, thanks to FFRF.

A concerned complainant reported that Lake Minneola High School may have been granting religious student clubs with preferential treatment. FFRF learned that a student-led bible club met on campus during school hours, and that club meetings often ran late. Reportedly, some of the high school teachers had a pattern and practice of excusing students in the club from being tardy if they arrived late to class, but FFRF learned that the same teachers do not excuse students’ tardiness if they are arriving late from other clubs or activities.

“Here, it appears Lake Minneola High School is favoring the bible club by permitting its members to regularly arrive to class tardy, while enforcing tardiness policies against students who are late to class for other reasons,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

The district was represented by Shareholder W. Scott Cole, who emailed FFRF. “In response to your letter, the school administration has reminded school personnel and students that all club meetings must end on time so that students will not be late for class and that students who are tardy must be marked as such regardless of which club meeting they were attending,” Cole wrote. He additionally thanked FFRF for bringing the violation to his attention.

Georgia

FFRF wrote a letter to the Gwinnett County administrator in Lawrenceville, Ga., after the county’s staff lunch was interrupted by a prayer given by a staff member.

A county employee reported that, in December 2023, the director of the county’s parks and recreation department led county employees in prayer before a staff lunch. The prayer was Christian and delivered “in Jesus’ name.” FFRF’s complainant reported feeling “ostracized and disrespected” by the inclusion of a Christian prayer as an official part of a county function.

“A county department cannot require or encourage its staff to observe or participate in a prayer as part of a county staff event,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the county administrator. After nearly a year of FFRF’s efforts to

hear back from the county, Senior Assistant County Attorney Allison B. Cauthen finally responded to the complaint. Cauthen informed FFRF that the concern was also brought to the attention of the Gwinnett County Department of Human Resources around the same time. “The situation was addressed, and we do not expect group led prayer at any future events,” she wrote.

Georgia

FFRF took on the particularly troublesome Lanier County School District in Lakeland, Ga., after multiple school-sponsored events were used to promote Christianity.

A district parent reported that the district had a pattern and practice of holding school-sponsored prayers at a wide variety of official school events. FFRF learned that since at least 2022, Lanier County High School’s athletics program had been infused with religion, specifically Christianity. The complainant reported that Lanier County High School held prayers at official athletic events, including football and basketball games, and that student-athletes were required to participate in these prayers. The prayers were uniformly Christian and led by either the school’s principal or the head coach for the relevant sport.

Additionally, the high school reportedly scheduled and hosted Christian prayers at its annual graduation ceremonies as well as other student award and honors ceremonies. FFRF learned of the 2024 graduation ceremony including a pre-planned official prayer led by a student with references to a “Father God,” and “Jesus.”

Lastly, per the Lanier County Board of Education meeting agendas, each meeting begins with an invocation led by a board member. The board members and all attendees are expected to participate in the prayer. The prayers

were uniformly religious and typically Christian. The complainant stated that at one recent meeting, students from the district were invited to attend the meeting and were thus present for and expected to participate in the prayer.

“Here, Lanier County High School crossed the constitutional line by repeatedly scheduling official student-led Christian prayer at its graduation ceremonies,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “Moreover, Lanier County High School violated our complainant’s child’s First Amendment rights by requiring that student to choose between participating in a Christian prayer or not participating fully or at all in their own graduation ceremony.”

Brian C. Smith, an attorney from Pereira, Kirby, Kingsinger & Nguyen, contacted FFRF on behalf of the district. “Of course, the school district and the Board of Education want to include all citizens in its board meetings and allow all citizens to participate,” Smith wrote. “In the future, the board plans to discuss alternative possibilities including, inviting clergy to its meetings and a moment of silence.”

Georgia

The Gilmer County Schools Board of Education based in Ellijay will no longer feature an invocation to start board meetings after FFRF took action.

A Gilmer County Schools parent reported that the board had a pattern and practice of opening meetings with an invocation. FFRF’s complainant reported that the Nov. 11, 2024, board meeting began with an invocation delivered by a Christian pastor, and all attendees were asked to bow their heads in prayer. The board’s meeting agendas and minutes confirmed the invocation practice had been in place since at least 2022. The invocation appeared to uniformly be given by representatives of the Christian faith. Additionally, FFRF’s complainant stated that students were present at the Nov. 11 meeting as the board was recognizing and awarding certain students.

“As this situation demonstrates, students are asked to attend board meetings for a variety of reasons, including to receive recognition and awards from the board,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote. “It is coercive, embarrassing and intimidating for nonreligious or minority faith citizens to be required to make a public showing of their nonbelief or differing beliefs (by not bowing their heads or praying) or else to display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe, but which their school board members clearly do.”

FFRF received a letter from Cory O. Kirby from the Pereira, Kirby, Kingsinger & Ngyuen LLP law firm. “We have discussed this matter with the superintendent, who in turn has discussed



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it with the board of education,” Kirby wrote. “The Board of Education has agreed to begin providing a moment of silence at each board meeting.”

Georgia

FFRF fought to make sure that high school basketball players from the Whitfield County Schools system based in Dalton won’t be forced to attend an overtly religious meeting during practice time.

A district parent reported that the girls’ basketball team coach required all student athletes to participate in a Fellowship of Christian Athletes meeting. FFRF learned that on Nov. 11, 2024, the coach took the girls’ basketball players into New Hope Middle School’s cafeteria for an FCA meeting that lasted approximately 15 minutes. FFRF’s complainant explained that the surprise FCA meeting occurred during the team’s normal practice time, and that the players and their parents were not told that the final 15 minutes of practice would include a mandatory FCA meeting. Reportedly, during the meeting, adult FCA representatives spoke to the team members about religion and distributed religious materials to basketball team members.

“It is inappropriate and illegal for a public school coach to require students to attend a religious club’s meeting,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Cory O. Kirby from the Pereira, Kirby, Kingsinger & Ngyuen LLP law firm responded on behalf of the district. “The administration has discussed this matter with [the coach] at New Hope Middle School as well as all other athletic coaches and administrators in the district,” Kirby wrote. “The district is confident that all its schools make good faith efforts to fully comply with the requirements of the Constitution and protects the rights of all parties.”

Georgia

FFRF worked to keep the Colquitt County School District in Moultrie secular after discovering that a teacher was using her position to preach Christianity.

A district parent reported that a teacher at Norman Park Elementary School was regularly leading students in prayer before meals. The parent stated that during a classroom party where parents and guardians were present, the teacher led students in a prayer saying “God is great, God is good, we thank him for our daily food. By his hand, we are fed. Thank him for our daily bread. Amen.”

Additionally, the same teacher gave her students a religious assignment that discussed Jesus Christ and Christianity in a devotional, sectarian manner. A worksheet of the parent’s child included a poem with multiple references to Jesus.

“The district must immediately investigate this situation and ensure that



[the teacher] ceases leading students in prayer and teaching them religious lessons,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

FFRF received word from the district that the situation would be investigated after winter break. When FFRF followed up on the matter, Superintendent Dan Chappuis stated that the matter was “investigated . . . and it has been addressed.”

Georgia

After learning of an ongoing violation of the First Amendment in Bleckley County Schools in Cochran, FFRF took action to fight for student rights.

A district employee reported that every school morning a bus driver led a devotional and prayer over the CB radio system while students and other BCS employees were present. FFRF also learned that the devotional prayer was always exclusively Christian in nature. FFRF’s complainant explained that BCS transportation policy required all bus drivers have their CB radios turned on and audible at all times, so drivers cannot turn down their radios in order to avoid broadcasting the devotional and prayer on their respective buses.

Per BCS policy, bus drivers are not allowed to use the CB radios for personal use, but the BCS administration was permitting this driver to openly violate official policy. The complainant stated that BCS administration ignored employee and student complaints and concerns regarding the daily prayers the bus driver broadcast to all other BCS school buses.

“BCS has a legal obligation to ensure its employees are not abusing their positions to indoctrinate students and promote their personal religion,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

FFRF received a response from Superintendent Trey Belflower. In his response, Belflower confirmed that the BCS transportation director had notified the driver in question, “and told him that if he is leading devotion and having prayer over his bus radio, he must stop doing so.” Belflower additionally promised that the transportation director will monitor the bus radio system to ensure the district is compliant with current policies and regulations.

Idaho

The Weiser School District #431 in Idaho has taken steps to ensure that student assemblies will not include prayer in the future.

FFRF learned from a concerned parent that Weiser Middle School’s Nov. 11 Veterans Day Assembly in-

cluded a school-sponsored prayer. During the assembly, all students were directed to join in the prayer, which was then delivered by a guest speaker. FFRF’s complainant reported that their child felt “very uncomfortable” and felt that they “had to participate in the school prayer.”

“Weiser Middle School, and thus the district, continues to violate the First Amendment by including prayer at its official Veterans Day Assembly,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Kenneth D. Dewlen.

After FFRF’s letter, Dewlen responded to address the concern. “Thank you for the letter; I have made the necessary arrangements for this not to happen again,” he wrote in an email.

Indiana

The Metropolitan School District of Wabash County in Wabash, Ind., learned not to include prayer in mandatory staff meetings after FFRF took action to protect non-Christian district community members.

A district employee reported that Superintendent Mike Keaffaber began mandatory staff meetings with a Christian prayer, delivered by him, while acting in his official capacity. FFRF also learned that at one staff training, a Christian motivational speaker who uses religion to inspire salespeople was invited to speak to staff. FFRF’s complainant reported that the speech felt like a “preacher giving a sermon” rather than someone giving a professional presentation, as the speech included his religious beliefs all throughout the speech. Additionally, the speaker distributed a book he had written, and the superintendent encouraged staff members to read it. The book contained several religious passages relating to the speaker’s belief in God.

“Requiring employees who are nonreligious or members of minority religions to make a public showing of being non-Christian by not participating in a prayer or sermon or else display deference toward a religious sentiment in which they do not believe is coercive, embarrassing, and intimidating,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the superintendent.

After FFRF sent the letter, the district reached out to Downs, Tandy & Petruiw, PC, who responded on behalf of the district. “You requested that we refrain from including prayer or religious speakers at future staff

meetings,” M. Josh Petruiw wrote. “We have no plans to include prayer or religious speakers at future staff meetings.”

Iowa

FFRF took note when the Newton Community School District seemingly promoted prayer via a video posted on social media, and dutifully worked to ensure that the district understood its obligation to remain secular.

On Nov. 26, 2024, the Newton High School girls basketball team posted a “hype video” on its official Facebook account. While most of the video is unproblematic, the beginning of the video featured the entire team seemingly praying with the head coach present.

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

Superintendent Tom Messinger took the time to respond to the complaint after reviewing the matter. “In response to that review, we removed the video from the social media account at issue,” Messinger wrote. “We will also take steps to ensure that social media accounts held by the district for student activities are not used to post messages that could be perceived by students as sponsorship of a particular religion or religion in general.”

Messinger additionally addressed the matter with the coach involved and relevant supervisory personnel, and reviewed the Establishment Clause with the entire athletics staff and directed them to comply with restrictions on participating in prayer with students.

Kansas

The Baxter Springs Public Schools system in Kansas corrected three violations wherein a staff member was openly using religion in an attempt to proselytize other staff members and students.

A district employee informed FFRF that the Central Elementary administration plays exclusively Christian music over the school’s loudspeaker. Additionally, the school’s principal refused to adopt preferred pronouns or preferred names because he believes that students should be called by their “God-given name.” The faculty restroom was also replete with Christian scripture.

“To respect the rights of students, the district must ensure that secular music plays over the intercom, and not religious Christian music,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district. “The district must also ensure that staff are aware that intentionally misgendering students constitutes unlawful sex discrimination and can be grounds for termination.”

The district’s superintendent, David Pendergraft, emailed FFRF after receiving the letter. He laid out the three complaints, and what had been done. The district removed the scripture posted in the staff bathroom the day the district received the letter, the principal had no problem addressing the issue of the music, and he reiterated that if someone had a concern or felt uncomfortable, they were welcome to visit with him. Pendergraft also invited FFRF to contact him again should violations occur in the future.

Victories continued on page 8

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Victories

Continued from page 7

Kentucky

The Fort Campbell School system will not take students to a farm to be preached to after FFRF informed the district of the First Amendment violation taking place there.

A district parent reported that Andre Lucas Elementary School took students on a field trip to the Christian Way Farm. FFRF learned that, at the farm, students were told a story about God which implied there was hate in the children’s hearts, and that God would clean out the hate. A previous telling of the story captured on video and posted to YouTube shows a woman using a pumpkin as a metaphor to tell the story, where the woman begins by asking a group of students to be “pumpkins” during her story so they will sit still and stay quiet.

The video continued with the woman telling the audience that God has come down from heaven and sees hate in their hearts. She explained that the way to remove hate from their hearts and be able to love other people is by allowing God to live inside them. The story concluded by the woman proclaiming that “love looks like Jesus,” and the reason Jesus died on the cross was to teach the students how to love.

FFRF’s complainant stated that the informational packet the school sent home regarding the field trip did not mention the trip would include a religious presentation, and that the religious story about God cleaning out children’s hearts “scared” their child.

“Students have the First Amendment right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools, including when attending school-sponsored field trips,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

Superintendent Hugh McKinnon wrote back to FFRF after receiving the letter of complaint. “We have thoroughly reviewed the matter and have taken steps to ensure that the material presented by Christian Way Farms in the ‘story time’ segment of the trip will not be a part of any future field trip attended by our students,” McKinnon wrote. “We appreciate you bringing your concerns to our attention and we will use those concerns to ensure that all school activities, including future visits to Christian Way Farm, fully comply with all laws, and are respectful of all views.”

Kentucky

Glasgow Independent Schools learned to keep prayer off the football field after FFRF took note of an unconstitutional pre-game prayer circle.

FFRF learned that a prayer took place at midfield before a Glasgow High game. Both teams appeared to form a large circle at midfield, and a coach or other adult was photographed at the center of the circle.

“We ask that the district immediately investigate this situation and ensure that no coach, district employee or other adult is allowed to preach to students, pray with students or otherwise promote their personal religious beliefs to students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

In response to the state/church watchdog’s concerns, Superintendent Chad Muhlenkamp assured FFRF that the prayer was addressed, and he considered the matter to be resolved.



Michigan

The Charlevoix County Courthouse in Boyne City has ensured that future public-facing communications about days off will not include religious imagery, as was the case with a March display announcing closure for the Friday before Easter.

FFRF learned that the Charlevoix County Courthouse was closed on March 29, 2024, in recognition of Good Friday, a dour Christian holiday preceding Easter. The courthouse announced its closure with a poster depicting the crucifixion of Jesus with the words “This is my body which is given for you. Luke 22:29.” The text immediately below the crucifixion stated that the courthouse would be closed on Good Friday.

“It is inappropriate and divisive for the county to close its offices for a specific religion’s holiday,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the county administrator. “Instead, the county should close when there are secular reasons to do so and not because it wishes to support one religion’s observance.”

Despite not hearing back after the initial letter was sent, FFRF stayed persistent, until finally, in September, Young, Graham & Wendling, P.C.’s Bryan E. Graham replied on behalf of the courthouse. He explained that the county had changed policies around closures, stating that the employee handbook had been revised so that county employees would have an extended weekend on the Friday before Easter. “Concerning the picture of the crucifix that was posted announcing the closure on Good Friday, the employee who posted that picture (at his own initiative) has been counseled that such a photograph was not appropriate in the context of county government,” Graham wrote.

Missouri

FFRF earned a victory in the Missouri-based Mansfield R-IV School District after a religious event was held on school grounds.

A concerned community member informed FFRF that the district led students in prayer at a “See You at the Pole” event on Sept. 25, 2024. “See You at the Pole” is an explicitly Christian event and organization. After the large group prayer, teachers, students and outside priests formed small groups where they worshiped and prayed together, which were led by teachers and staff. A teacher reportedly also presented on Christianity and faith to students after small group worship. The district additionally used its official Facebook account to tout the religious event.

“Any religious events must be entirely

student-initiated and student-run,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote. “While the District cannot prohibit students from organizing or participating in a prayer event, the Supreme Court has stated that public school staff members and outside adults must refrain from participating in the religious activities of students while acting within their governmental roles.”

District Superintendent Clint Hall wrote back, informing FFRF of the solution. He wrote, “In order to address any concern about the district’s involvement in the FCA student group, I have spoken with the supervisor of FCA regarding the parameters that are appropriate for religious, non-curricular, student-initiated groups and their activities.”

New York

FFRF kept up the fight for state/church separation in Poughkeepsie when religious material was on display on city property.

A Poughkeepsie resident contacted FFRF to report that on at least one occasion in the fall of 2023, the Info Desk for the City Courts was used to display religious literature promoting Christianity. FFRF’s complainant noted that they felt their right to be free from religious coercion in government spaces was being trampled on by the display.

“As a governmental entity, you are tasked with representing the interests of all of your constituents, regardless of what their religious beliefs may or may not be,” FFRF Equal Justice Works Fellow Kat D. Grant wrote in February 2024.

Despite FFRF not receiving a response from the city, it continued to write to the city until finally, in late 2024, Poughkeepsie Mayor Yvonne D. Flowers emailed back.

“In February 2024, I noticed there were several religious material items on a table near city court and they were removed,” Flowers wrote. “The court officers and city staff were advised not to allow any religious

material to be displayed in the City Hall lobby or any place in City Hall.”

Ohio

The Ashland City School District removed an assignment promoting a teacher’s personal religious beliefs after FFRF contacted the district.

A concerned district parent reported that a teacher at Taft Intermediate assigned students homework that required them to interpret historical timelines which included religious events that are part of religious scripture, not historical facts. FFRF learned that the assignments included the Hebrews’ Exodus from Egypt, accompanied by a picture of Moses parting the Red Sea, as well as the birth of Jesus of Nazareth in Bethlehem, accompanied by a large nativity scene.

“Parents, not public school teachers, have the constitutional right to determine their children’s religious or nonreligious upbringing,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Steven Paramore.

Paramore confirmed the receipt of FFRF’s letter, writing, “We addressed this with the instructor and have amended the issue.” Paramore added that while no religious persuasion was ever intended, if further issues arose regarding the situation, the district would address the situation.

Ohio

After reports of multiple First Amendment violations from the Chesapeake Union Exempted Village Schools, FFRF got to work to ensure that all school activities would be conducted in a secular nature going forward.

A parent informed FFRF that a prayer was scheduled at Chesapeake Union Middle School’s May 2024 award ceremony. FFRF learned that a student recited a prayer to open the ceremony, while another parent informed FFRF that the Board of Education opens regular monthly meetings with a Christian prayer delivered by someone selected by the board. A parent informed FFRF that they were unaware of the prayer and felt coerced to pray during a meeting where their students received an award.

“Public school students have a constitutional right to be free from religious indoctrination in their public schools,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote. “It is well settled that public schools may not show favoritism toward or coerce belief or participation in religion.”

The district reached out to legal representative Susan L. Oppenheimer from Ricker Graydon LLP. Oppenheimer addressed both claims formally. “With respect to the student award ceremony, building administrators, including the middle school principal, will be advised that there should be no scheduled prayer in the future, in accordance with current federal case law,” she wrote. Additionally, she confirmed that board members will be advised that there should be no scheduled



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prayer to open board meetings in the future, in accordance with federal case law.

Oklahoma

FFRF put a stop to a Sapulpa Public Schools system bible study being led by an elementary school teacher.

At the end of 2023, a Freedom Elementary School parent reported that a school teacher had been abusing her position to proselytize and impose her personal religious beliefs onto students. FFRF’s complainant reported that the teacher gave their child a bible, and the same teacher led and directed a bible study at the school that included religious prayer and worship. Reportedly, the district was claiming that the bible study was “student-led.”

“The district must make certain that none of its employees are unlawfully and inappropriately indoctrinating students in religious matters by discussing their personal religious beliefs with, or preaching to students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

The district’s legal representative, John E. Priddy from Rosenstein, Fist & Ringold addressed the concerns after FFRF continued to send the district letters. Priddy apologized for the delay, assuring that the matter was addressed when the letter was received. “The district is aware of and understands the laws prohibiting a teacher from using their position to share their faith with students as well as the prohibition against distributing faith-based materials (such as bibles) at school,” Priddy wrote. Priddy closed his letter stating that staff and principals were committed to adherence to legal obligations moving forward and ensuring the district and its employees are in compliance with the law.

Oklahoma

FFRF worked to put a stop to multiple violations of students’ First Amendment rights in the Achille Public Schools district.

A district parent reported that the district implemented a policy allowing teachers to read bible verses at the beginning of their classes. FFRF learned that the policy applied to both Achille Elementary and Achille High School. The parent-complainant stated that the district informed students at the beginning of the school year that there would be “optional bible verse readings in all of their classes.” For example, the complainant’s child’s history teacher began classes by picking a bible verse for the day and asking a student to read the verse to the class, which had no bearing on the actual subjects being taught and were a blatant way to teach public school students the bible in a devotional manner.

FFRF’s complainant additionally reported that the district had a custom and practice of beginning each school day with “mandatory student-led prayer” over the schools’ intercom systems. The complainant stated the policy has been in effect, at least informally, for years. An offi-

cial agenda from the Board of Education’s Oct. 14, 2024, meeting reported that the board considered whether to “approve or not approve” a “school policy on Voluntary Private Prayer and Moment of Silence.” Reportedly, after the morning bell, a student announced “a moment of silence or prayer,” followed by the student praying over the intercom. This morning intercom prayer had been taking place in both district schools, and that students cannot skip the morning prayer since it occurs after the first period has already started, so students are “counted late” if they arrive after the prayer.

“The district must cease permitting teachers to give students bible lessons and it must ensure its schools refrain from coercing students to observe and participate in school-sponsored prayer,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Superintendent Rick Beene emailed FFRF, assuring FFRF that district schools would be in compliance with both the U.S. Constitution and the Oklahoma Constitution and laws. “We have discussed these concerns and these issues have been addressed,” Beene wrote. “Through meeting with both building principals, I have made it clear that we want to make sure that no student is coerced into doing any religious activity.”

Oregon

The Oregon Department of Corrections agreed to keep the Snake River Correctional Institute Veterans Association meetings secular, thanks to FFRF’s advice that it must adhere to the Constitution.

An inmate reported that before every Snake River Correctional Institute Veterans Association meeting, a chaplain delivered a prayer to a captive audience of inmate veterans. FFRF learned that the Incarcerated Veterans Association (IVA) is a registered nonprofit that was established by the overseeing correctional counselor for the institute’s veteran’s unit. The association had continued to be supervised and aided by the institute’s correctional officers and counselors, while also promoting religion and explicitly affiliating itself with Christianity.

“While the institution may permissibly accommodate the free exercise rights of its inmates by providing opportunities for religious worship, the institute and its employees may not organize, promote or coerce inmates to participate in religious events and activities,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Shanon Vincent, a representative of the Oregon Department of Justice, wrote to FFRF after receiving the letter. “ODOC is sensitive to the concerns raised and thanks you for the opportunity to address them,” Vincent wrote. “This will confirm that after looking into the concerns that you raised about the prayers, ODOC has elected to end the practice of permitting SRCI’s chaplain to lead short religious prayers before the IVA meetings.”

South Carolina

FFRF fought back against three First Amendment violations at the Anderson School District 3 in Iva, S.C.

A district parent reported that the board was opening meetings with a Christian prayer led by a board member. Video streams of the board’s meetings posted online indicate the prayers were being led exclusively by board members.

“The district must investigate and ensure that its schools adhere to their First Amendment obligations,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the district.

In response to FFRF’s concerns, the district reached out to legal representation

through Halligan Mahoney & Williams.

Kathryn Long Mahoney said that, after being made aware of FFRF’s concerns regarding board prayer, the board most recently opened its meeting with a moment of silence, and began evaluating practices to ensure consistency with state and federal law.

Tennessee

The Maryville City Schools in Tennessee will no longer send the school choir to perform at National Day of Prayer events after FFRF informed the district of the surrounding constitutional concerns.

FFRF learned that the Maryville High School choir performed religious songs at Blount County’s National Day of Prayer event held in May 2024. The choir, dressed in their official concert attire, performed three songs, including “Down to the River to Pray.”

“By allowing the MHS choir to perform at this National Day of Prayer event, the district displays clear favoritism for religion over nonreligion and Christianity above all other faiths,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

The district’s legal representative, Chris W. McCarthy, responded to the concerns. In an email to FFRF, McCarthy wrote, “After discussing your letter and its allegations with my client, I can confirm that we take those allegations very seriously, and steps are being taken internally to ensure we do not receive a similar letter moving forward.”

Texas

FFRF’s work in Texas ensured that students would not be coerced into prayer by outside adults or school staff at the Schertz-Cibolo-Universal City Independent School District.

FFRF learned that staff members and an outside adult at Barbara C. Jordan Intermediate School led students in prayer at a “See You at the Pole” event in September 2024.

“Staff involvement in SYATP marginalizes and excludes non-Christian students, teachers and parents whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message being promoted by the school staff,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district’s legal representative.

Legal Counsel Christine Badillo responded to FFRF’s concerns. “We understand the rights and limitations of teacher and student actions under the law,” Badillo wrote. “The administration of SCUCISD has already looked into this matter and will ensure staff at all levels have a clear understanding of the requirement that any prayer activities be ‘student led.’”

Texas

FFRF’s advocacy for state/church separation helped to keep the Van Independent School District in line with the Constitution after the district promoted a religious worship event publicly.

A community member informed FFRF that the district promoted a religious worship service using official communication channels. Through the official Facebook account, the district promoted a “Community Prayer & Praise Service.” According to the district’s post, the worship service took place at Van Junior High School.

“Government religious speech promoting Christian viewpoints marginalizes and excludes non-Christian students, teachers, and parents whose religious beliefs are inconsistent with the message be-

ing promoted by the school staff,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Hirsh M. Joshi wrote to the district.

Thanks to FFRF’s letter, the district took quick action, responding the next day.

“We have deleted the mentioned Facebook posts and will refrain from promoting religious events using our official District channels, including social media, in the future,” Superintendent Don Dunn emailed back.

Utah

FFRF’s persistence paid off in the Canyons School District after a violation that occurred in 2023 was finally confirmed to be corrected.

A district community member reported that, at a September 2023 board meeting, the board president invited a board member to say a prayer during the beginning of the meeting while board members were getting food. FFRF’s complainant reported feeling uncomfortable being subjected to a religious exercise at their public school board meeting.

“Calling upon students, parents and other board meeting attendees to pray is unconstitutional,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district.

After initially receiving a response from the district in 2023 agreeing to review the concern, FFRF requested more information about the board’s response throughout 2024. Finally, in January 2025, the district confirmed via email that the board of education no longer engaged in invocations at meetings.

West Virginia

The Green Brier County Schools system heeded FFRF’s advice and removed an outside religious group after a reported baptism ceremony took place on school grounds.

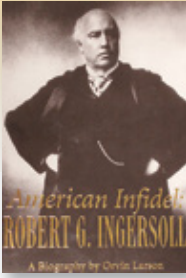
A district community member reported that there was a religious club at Greenbrier East High School that appeared to be run by outside adults and/or school staff members. FFRF’s complainant reported that the “Spartan Prayer Team” operated at the high school and that outside adults, as well as staff members, prayed and engaged in religious worship with students. Reportedly, a local pastor and several teachers even baptized students on the school’s football field as part of this religious club.

“The district may not allow outside adults to lead, organize, or regularly participate in ‘student’ religious clubs,” FFRF Staff Attorney Chris Line wrote to the district in February 2024.

After nearly a year of silence, FFRF finally heard back from Superintendent Jeff Bryant, who apologized for the silence. “It was brought to my attention near the conclusion of the 2023 school year that a baptism ceremony had taken place on school grounds in affiliation with fellowship of Christian Athletes,” Bryant wrote. Bryant confirmed that after the report came to him, he immediately investigated the incident and confirmed that a baptism ceremony was conducted on school grounds without the knowledge of Greenbrier County Schools administration.

After confirmation of the event, Bryant convened a meeting in his office with the responsible adult parties who conducted the baptism ceremony and “directed that this type of religious ceremony is a violation of policy and is not to take place on Greenbrier County School property in the future.”

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll



By Orvin Larson

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

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Movement

Continued from page 7

of Project 2025 and the president of the Center for Renewing America, has been nominated to lead the Office of Management and Budget. Vought has promoted the idea that conservative Christians are victims of persecution and has discussed possible strategies of retribution. His insurrection-friendly think tank, according to internal documents, is explicitly committed to promoting “Christian nationalism.”

Of course, equally telling is the case of Pete Hegseth, a card-carrying — or, rather, tattoo-bearing — representative of the movement. The tattoos include a crusader cross and the words “Deus Vult,” meaning “God wills it,” widely thought to be a crusader cry. The tattoos suggest a commitment to the belief, respectable within Christian nationalist circles, that the murderous crusades of the medieval era were an honorable effort, maybe worth trying again. In his books and podcast appearances, Hegseth toes every one of the movement’s party lines, including the idea that public schools are anti-Christian indoctrination camps. Hegseth’s former sister-in-law has claimed he didn’t think women should vote. Hegseth has close ties to a church that belongs to pastor Doug Wilson’s Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches (CREC), which is breathtakingly reactionary. A CREC-affiliated press published Stephen Wolfe’s book, “The Case for Christian Nationalism.”

The role of Christian nationalism in the new administration was also evident in the exchange between Trump and the bishop of Washington, Mariann Budde, at the National Cathedral. The Christian nationalist leaders behind Trump largely detest the kind of Christianity that the bishop, in their eyes, represents.

At Turning Point USA’s AmericaFest, a 20,000-person gathering of the MAGA hard core that took place in Phoenix, Ariz., in December, speakers condemned what they call “woke Christianity.” Taking aim at “the social gospel,” the “historical Jesus movement ... liberation theology and Black liberation theology,” Lucas Miles, head of Turning Point USA Faith, the sponsoring organization’s faith outreach arm, said, “We have to decide which Jesus ... is the real Jesus.” This cohort has welcomed Trump’s attack on the bishop, and indeed some have followed up with proposals to deport Budde or seize the National Ca-



Instagram

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth has a Crusader’s Cross tattoo on his chest and a “Deus vult” (“God wills it”) tattoo on his arm.

thedral from the Episcopalians and turn it over to a more biblically correct (and now politically correct, in their manner of speaking) reactionary church.

But the theocratic authoritarian impulse is also present in a deeper way, in actions that at first glance may appear to have little to do with religion. Several of Trump’s actions in his first week, for example, were transparently intended to reward his personal political friends and punish his political enemies. Are you a crypto-libertarian tech bro fired up for Trump but weirdly obsessed with the prosecution of a drug kingpin? Trump will pardon your hero. Are you a long-serving national security official who insulted Trump at some point? Trump will cancel your security clearance, and maybe even your protective security detail.

It is easy to see that this government is organized largely around satisfying the emotional needs and financial interests of one person. But we should not overlook that this kind of personal rule involves a certain vision of what purpose government fundamentally serves, and that vision is deeply rooted in Christian nationalism. For the Christian nationalist leaders whose movement brought Trump to power, the fundamental model of government is “kingship.” Many of them describe Trump as a new King Cyrus and insist that God chose him to “save” America. There is no room in this model for the “rule of law” — except where that phrase is used as a euphemism for “the iron fist.” There is also no gap between the king’s personal household and the administration of state business. The king is the law, and you are either with him or against him.

Trump’s assault on diversity initiatives and orders to eliminate anti-discrimination provisions dating from the Civil Rights era are also deeply shaped by Christian nationalism. While the administration frames these orders as an antidote to identity politics and affirmative action in favor of merit, they are very clearly intended — and are already being interpreted — as affirmative action for the “right” type of people. As in any nationalist government, the “right” type of people are those who show loyalty to the ruling party and present themselves as members of the right identity group, which in this case consists mostly of white conservative Christian males. Pete Hegseth is a pretty good example of this kind of reverse-DEI in action. Were he not a white male with the supposedly correct religious and political views, there is no conceivable way that someone with his substandard qualifications and appalling record would have been appointed the secretary of defense.

Trump’s health agenda, too, draws tremendous support from the anti-science and anti-intellectual currents that dominate the Christian nationalist movement. Pulling out of the Paris Agreement may look like a way of pandering to the fossil

fuel lobby — and it is that — but it is also a cause dear to many Christian nationalists, who believe that God has given man dominion over the Earth and who see the environmental movement as a secularizing “Green Dragon.” Trump’s confusing directives on the lifesaving research at the NIH and withdrawing from the WHO are intended to please the Make America Healthy Again crowd gathering around RFK Jr., but these moves also win the hearts of many leaders of the Christian nationalist movement, which sees those organizations as spreaders of abortion and woke medicine.

The love that Trump lavished on the fossil fuel industry this week went beyond climate denial, and it, too, is also strangely connected with his Christian nationalist base. The fossil fuel industry, notably in Texas, is intimately tied to the movement. Some of the key movement funders, such as Tim Dunn and the Wilks brothers, are energy billionaires who help fund disinformation projects and right-wing culture war initiatives. Trump’s moves in this direction are a way of rewarding one of the industries that subsidize the Christian nationalist movement, thereby providing critical support for Trumpian politics by spreading disinformation and turning out its base on MAGA’s behalf.

In the coming months and years, many of Trump’s policy proposals are likely to fail. They will fail through incompetence, or they will turn out to be unimplementable, or they will be struck down or snarled up in the courts. But there are some sure bets at this point, including tax cuts for the wealthy, the deregulation of the most anti-social elements of the tech industry and crypto con, subsidies for planet-destroying industries combined with a rollback of recent gains in the renewable energy sector, the further destruction of public education, and the promotion of a culture of distrust, paranoia and contempt for those who fail to conform. The Christian nationalist vision at the core of the enterprise will likely continue to make advances. That’s because it is easier to destroy than to create. All they need to do is destroy American democracy. They’re off to a good start.

Katherine Stewart is the award-winning author of “Money, Lies, and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy” (Bloomsbury, 2025). Her previous book, “The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism,” formed the basis of the documentary feature “God & Country,” produced by Rob Reimer.

Billboard

Continued from page 7

something historic. This moment will never be forgotten.”

Accra Atheists was founded in 2022 by Roslyn Mould and Kojo Tetteh Tetteh. It has only 20 members, many of whom have since relocated abroad. Under Roslyn’s leadership, the group has become a visible and influential voice for secularism in Ghana. Mould is also a prominent figure in the global humanist movement, serving as the first African vice president of Humanists International and holding leadership roles with various humanist and LGBTQ-plus organizations.

Renowned Nigerian human rights advocate Dr. Leo Igwe hailed the billboard as a potential “pilgrimage site” for African atheists, underscoring its significance in normalizing secular identities in a region where religious belief remains deeply ingrained in daily life and governance.



Gaylor emphasized the initiative’s importance: “We are honored to support this courageous step toward freethought visibility in Africa. Everyone deserves the right to openly express their beliefs — or lack thereof — without fear. We hope this billboard sparks important conversations and strengthens the secular movement in Ghana and beyond.”

Feedback on the billboard has been mostly positive, particularly from the international humanist community. Countries like Kenya, Nigeria and South Africa are already planning similar efforts. Locally, curiosity about the billboard has grown, with many reaching out to learn more about atheism and humanism. However, the project was not without its challenges. Roslyn noted initial concerns about whether a billboard company would accept the design

due to religious sensitivities. Fortunately, they found an open-minded advertising partner and a Christian graphic designer willing to help bring the vision to life.

The billboard seeks to achieve several goals:

- Promote atheism and humanism as valid belief systems.
- Normalize atheism in a society where it is often misinterpreted as occultism or witchcraft.
- Increase membership within the 1 percent of Ghanaians who identify as nonreligious (an estimated 352,000 people).
- Advocate for recognition of atheists by the state and government.

While local media coverage in Accra has not yet been extensive, the billboard has already garnered international attention, with articles in development in Canada, Australia, and Nigeria. Organizers are optimistic about its impact and hope to build upon this momentum to further advocate for secular rights and representation in Ghana and across Africa.

Government infused with Christian nationalism

The new Trump administration isn't hiding its embrace of Christian nationalism and the implementation of Project 2025. In fact, it's showcasing those extreme elements with the nomination (and often confirmation) of highly suspect cabinet members and department heads who support a Christian-based country.

Here's a look at many of the Trump appointments in (or, as this is published, nominated to) top positions of government.

Pete Hegseth

Hegseth, the former Fox News personality, has been confirmed as the secretary of the Department of Defense, but has no experience as a lawmaker or in defense policy and has immersed himself in a culture of right-wing Christianity and political extremism. Hegseth could weaponize the department for his Christian crusade.

Hegseth has at least two controversial tattoos raising concerns, including the Jerusalem Cross (Crusaders' Cross) on his chest, which reportedly prevented him from being part of the security detail for President Biden's inauguration, and a "Deus vult" tattoo, which translates to "God wills it."

Kristi Noem

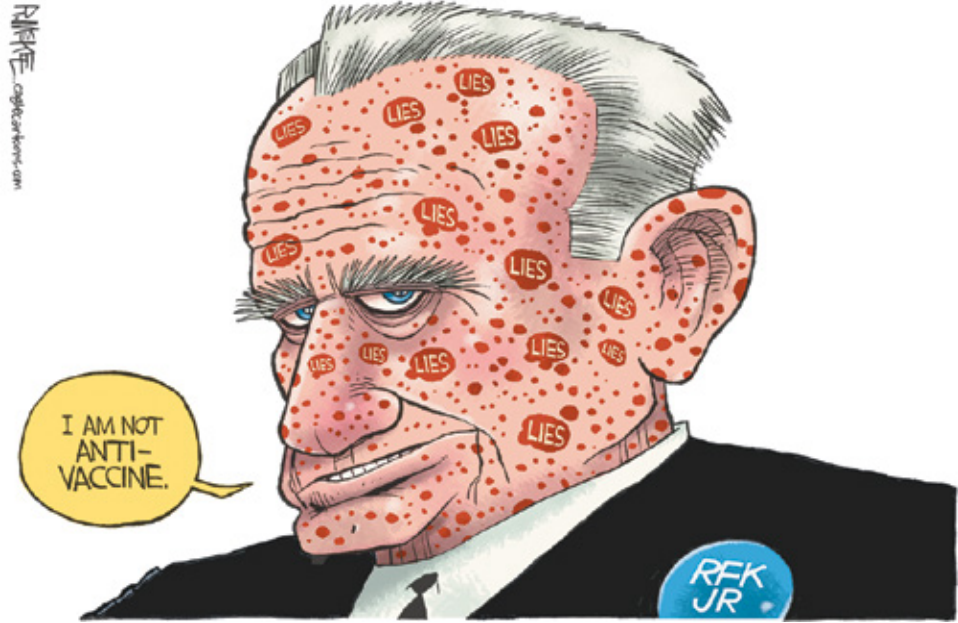
Noem is Trump's new secretary of Homeland Security, and she has some of the most extremist religious views of any of Trump's appointments.

Like Trump, Noem, the former South Dakota governor, has claimed to be divinely called to office. Her campaign website quotes Noem as saying, "I want to be obedient to whatever God has called me to do." She believes God has a divine plan for her life, telling a religious site: "We'll see what God has planned because I've learned he likes to surprise me."

After *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, she enthused to the Christian Broadcasting Network, "This is the decision that so many people have prayed for, for so many years."

Pam Bondi

Bondi was confirmed as the U.S. attorney general in February. She has demonstrated a commitment to pursuing a conservative Christian and political agenda over protecting the rights of the people. At her confirmation hearings, the election denier, who served as Trump's personal secretary during his first impeachment trial, refused to rule out probes of Trump's



foes, among other disturbing responses.

As Florida attorney general, she opposed legal equality for same-sex couples and sought to curtail women's reproductive rights. She also supported weakening the separation of church and state by advocating for a proposed constitutional amendment that would strip language in the state Constitution barring public funds to be spent "in aid of any church, sect, or religious denomination or in aid of any sectarian institution." Luckily, voters rejected the proposed amendment aimed at funding religious schools.

Robert F. Kennedy Jr.

Kennedy, who is best known for his outspoken and twisted views on vaccines, public health and other science issues, has been confirmed as secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services.

Trump encouraged Kennedy to "go wild on health . . . go wild on medicines." Kennedy's anti-scientific rhetoric poses serious risks to the American people — affecting public health, scientific trust and the overall quality of information accessible to the public. He is an attorney with no degrees in medicine or public health and is notorious for publicizing the discredited theory that childhood vaccines are a cause of autism.

Kennedy's efforts in Samoa to deceive families about measles vaccines led to a deadly outbreak that killed more than 80 people, many of whom were young children.

Tom Homan

Homan, Trump's new "border czar," is listed among the contributors to Project 2025. He was also a visiting fellow with the Heritage Foundation's Border Security and Immigration Center. While

he does not explicitly frame his views in religious terms, Christian nationalism often intertwines strict border policies with the preservation of a perceived Christian-American identity.

Linda McMahon

McMahon, who is nominated to be secretary of the Department of Education, is chair of the board of the America First Policy Institute, which she helped start with Tim Dunn, the billionaire Christian nationalist pastor seeking to destroy public education, privatize public schools and create a theocracy. The Institute's America First Agenda competes with Project 2025 as a playbook for Trump's return to the White House. It details the plans for a radical transformation of America's education system in "Pillar IV: Give Parents More Control Over the Education of Their Children."

Stephen Miller

Miller, Trump's deputy chief of staff, infamously helped design Trump's 2017 Muslim ban and the family separation policy. He identifies as Jewish, but his political strategies often overlap with those of Christian nationalist leaders and groups. These entities supported his policies and rhetoric as part of a broader agenda to enforce a Christian cultural framework in public life. His organization, America First Legal, was initially listed among the contributors to Project 2025.

Janette Nesheiwat

Nesheiwat, the nominee for U.S. surgeon general, is an emergency and family health physician and Fox News medical contributor. She has a new book that of-

fers "stories of miraculous recoveries, experiences in the ER, and global medical missions illuminate the transformative power of prayer and unwavering dedication to healing and service."

"I'm inspired by Dr. Nesheiwat's dedication to serving others in the name of Jesus Christ," writes "Fox & Friends" co-host Ainsley Earhardt. "Her extraordinary service is documented in 'Beyond the Stethoscope: Miracles in Medicine' where she showcases the power of Jesus guiding her work leading challenging and dangerous medical missions throughout the world. This book is a reminder of the blessings that unfold when we trust in God's love."

John Ratcliffe

Ratcliffe has been confirmed as director of the CIA. He was previously one of Trump's national intelligence directors and contributed to Project 2025. The playbook's chapter on U.S. intelligence was written by Dustin Carmack, Ratcliffe's chief of staff in the first Trump administration. As a key figure in the first Trump administration, Ratcliffe was part of an environment that frequently appealed to Christian nationalist themes, such as prioritizing "religious freedom" and invoking Christian imagery in political messaging.

Elise Stefanik

Stefanik, the former U.S. House member, will be taking over the role of ambassador to the United Nations. While introducing Mike Johnson in 2023 as her nominee for House speaker, Stefanik said to a standing ovation by her party: "Above the speaker's chair in the House chamber is our nation's motto: 'In God We Trust.' The times in which we are living demand boldness, unity and transformational leadership that begins with trust in God and each other. Trust is when the magic happens. In the story of King David, we are reminded that man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Russell Vought

Vought is now in his second stint as director of the Office of Management and Budget after holding that position in Trump's first term from 2019 to 2020. A self-described Christian nationalist, Vought founded in 2021 the Center for Renewing America, an organization that advocates for the idea of America as a "nation under God." He has also played a significant role in crafting Project 2025. His actions make it clear that his leadership would entrench a Christian nationalist agenda in the federal government — undermining the constitutional principle of state/church separation and radically endangering our secular nation.

Dave Weldon

Weldon is the nominee for director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. He is described as "an outspoken critic of the CDC and its vaccine program" and an ally of Robert F. Kennedy Jr. He has been tapped to head the agency at a time when bird flu, mpox and a spike in whooping cough and measles threaten public health. During his tenure in Congress, he championed religious and anti-abortion causes.



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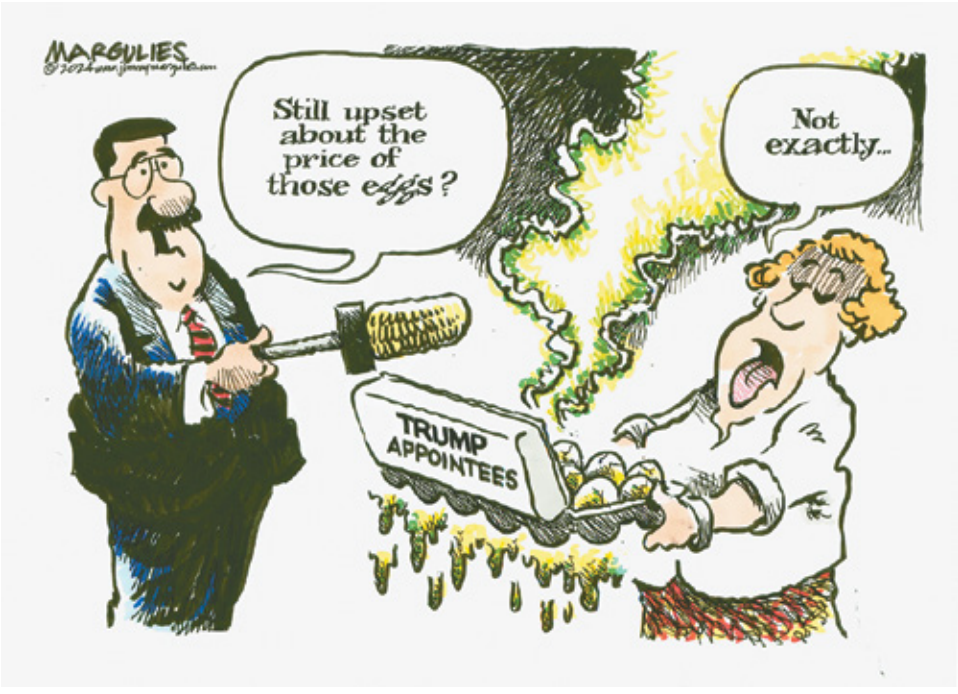
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Trump’s faith office will privilege religion

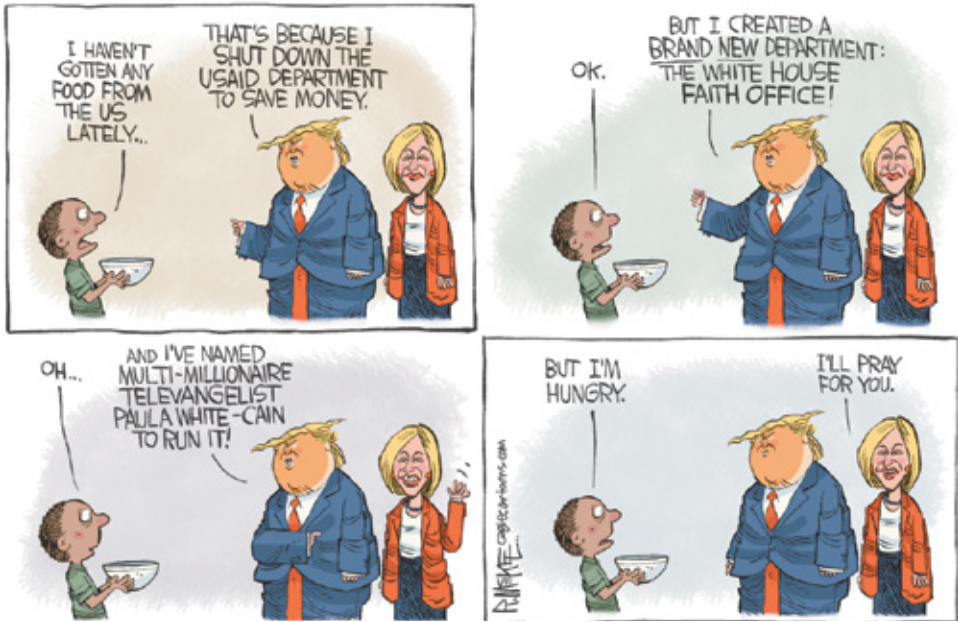
While President Trump’s executive orders to establish the White House Faith Office may seem like “deja vu all over again,” his tandem order to create a task force to “eradicate anti-Christian bias” signals his overt intent to privilege the Christian religion.

“We don’t need a task force to root out ‘anti-Christian bias,’ but one that will finally go after those who flagrantly violate the constitutional separation between religion and government,” charges Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-president.

Trump’s first order renames the current White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives as the White House Faith Office and (no surprise) installs at its helm Rev. Paula White-Cain, who led Trump’s Faith and Opportunity Initiative in 2019.

The goal is to not only to especially aid faith-based groups to obtain government grants, but also to influence policies in a broad range of social areas. This is a clear signal the White House appears to favor funding faith-based programs related to adoption and foster care, prisoners and that faith-based groups that discriminate, such as against LGBTQ clients, will be able to receive government grants.

Trump’s subsequent “Eradicating Anti-Christian Bias” executive order establishes a one-year task force to “eradicate anti-Christian bias,” which Trump an-



nounced will be led by Attorney General Pam Bondi, herself a Christian nationalist, to investigate the “targeting” of Christians.

Trump’s policy will “protect the religious freedoms of Americans and end the anti-Christian weaponization of government.” The order absurdly and explicitly attacks former President Joe Biden, a devout Catholic, for running an administration that “engaged in an egregious pattern of targeting peaceful Christians, while ignoring violent, anti-Christian offences.” This harkens to Trump’s pardoning of two dozen Christian anti-abortion harassers.

The order goes on in that vein, repeating a series of alleged grievances against the Biden Administration that Trump often brought up in campaign speeches, among these that Biden declared Easter Sunday as “Transgender Day of Visibility.” (The day of visibility occurs every year on March 31, which happened to fall on Easter in 2024).

The task force is ordered to identify unlawful policies, practices or conduct by all executive departments and agencies, and recommend additional presidential or legislative action. All heads of cabi-

nets and other key officials are required to sit on the task force, where they are to review activities of the departments of labor, state, justice, FBI, Health and Human Services, education, homeland security and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and “identify any unlawful anti-Christian policies, practices, or conduct by an agency contrary to the purpose and policy of this order.”

The order tasks them with identifying any groups or individuals “affected by anti-Christian conduct, faith-based organizations,” among others.

Trump said Bondi would work to “fully prosecute anti-Christian violence and vandalism in our society and to move heaven and earth to defend the rights of Christians and religious believers nationwide.”

The White House released a fact sheet about the faith office geared to evangelical supporters, bragging, “Promises made, promises kept,” listing what Trump called actions to safeguard religious freedom, but mainly privilege religion.

FFRF will be monitoring the White House Faith Based Office and the attorney general’s task force to ensure the rights of conscience of all Americans — especially the growing number of nonbelievers — not just Christians, are upheld by the federal government and that freethinkers and religious minorities are not persecuted.

FFRF, others concerned over Oklahoma charter school case

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and other leading groups are concerned that the U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear a case involving a religious public charter school in Oklahoma.

Along with FFRF, the Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the American Civil Liberties Union and the Education Law Center issued the following joint statement about the petitions for certiorari that the Supreme Court granted on Jan. 24 in Oklahoma Statewide Virtual Charter School Board v. Drummond and St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School v. Drummond. The secular and educational organizations represent public school parents, public education advocates and faith leaders in a separate lawsuit to stop Oklahoma from sponsoring and funding St. Isidore of Seville Catholic Virtual School.

“The law is clear: Charter schools are public schools and must be secular and open to all students,” the statement reads. “The Oklahoma Supreme Court correctly found that the state’s approval of a religious public charter school was unlawful and unconstitutional. We urge the U.S. Supreme Court to affirm that ruling and safeguard public education, state/church separation, and religious freedom for all. Oklahoma taxpayers, including our plaintiffs, should not be forced to fund a religious public school that plans to discriminate against students and staff and indoctrinate students into one religion. Converting public schools into Sunday schools would be a dangerous sea change for our democracy.”

FFRF, the ACLU, Americans United and the Education Law Center, with support from Oklahoma-based counsel Odom & Sparks PLLC and J. Doug-

las Mann, represent Oklahomans who object to their tax dollars funding a religious public charter school that will discriminate against students and employees based on their religion and LGBTQ-plus status, won’t commit to adequately serving students with disabilities, and will indoctrinate students into one religion. These nine Oklahomans and OKPLAC, a nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting public education, filed their lawsuit, OKPLAC Inc. v. Statewide Virtual Charter School Board, on July 31, 2023, in the District Court of Oklahoma County.

Following the June 2024 Oklahoma Supreme Court decision in Drummond v. OSVCSB blocking the religious public charter school, the OKPLAC plaintiffs and defendants reached a court-approved agreement to put the OKPLAC case on hold until at least Feb. 1 of this year while developments in the Drummond case are pending. St. Isidore agreed not to accept charter school funding from the state or open to students as a charter school during the 2024-25 school year as part of that agreement.

Losing Faith in Faith:
From Preacher to Atheist



By Dan Barker

How Dan “threw out the bathwater and discovered there is no baby there.”

— 392 pages / PB \$15 Item #FB145

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In case you missed it

FFRF and the FFRF Action Fund have been hard at work trying to safeguard Americans’ freedoms and the constitutional order, no small feat during these unprecedented times.

FFRF and the FFRF Action Fund have continued to stay on top of the nonstop deluge of unconstitutional orders emanating from Washington, D.C., and various state capitals.

The following are just some headlines of the numerous press releases FFRF and the FFRF Action Fund have sent out since the beginning of the Trump administration on Jan. 20.

To read the full releases and to see others that aren’t listed here, go to ffrf.org/news-releases and ffrfaction.org/category/news.

- Tennessee universal voucher scheme will hurt students and public schools. (Feb. 11)
- What freethinkers need to know about Elon Musk’s religious views. (Feb. 11)
- FFRF Action Fund applauds lackluster attendance at National Prayer Breakfast. (Feb. 6)
- Trump targets Dept. of Education in hostile takeover (Feb. 6)
- Trump weaponizing Justice Department to enforce Christian privilege. (Feb. 6)
- Texas bill defining life at ‘fertilization’ endangers contraception, women’s lives. (Feb. 4)
- Conservative lawmakers propose draconian nationwide abortion ban. (Feb. 3)
- Trump’s prejudiced agenda endangers security. (Feb. 3)
- FFRF, other groups urge Texas superintendents to reject religious curriculum. (Jan. 30)
- FFRF Action Fund condemns Trump executive order supporting vouchers. (Jan. 30)
- FFRF deplores Trump’s ban kicking out transgender from military. (Jan. 29)
- FFRF: Trump’s cruel global gag rule hurts women worldwide. (Jan. 27)
- FFRF condemns Trump’s Jan. 6 pardons. (Jan. 21)


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Trump will bulldoze state/church separation

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

A good indication on how church-state issues will play out in President Donald Trump’s second term can be found in his shameless hawking of an “Inauguration Day Bible,” part of a merch promotion from which he’s personally receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars in royalties. In marketing this book (\$69.99, not including shipping) Trump has insisted, “We must make America pray again.”

This unsavory mix of church, state and personal hucksterism foretells



Photo by Chris Line
Annie Laurie Gaylor

how brazenly we can expect Trump to continue to exploit religion and pander to his base of white evangelicals. Trump, who ignores the First Amendment’s promise that the government must not favor any particular religion, has vowed to root out “anti-Christian bias” and protect “pro-God context and content.” Trump’s first term showed how amenable he is to redefining “religious freedom” to mean the freedom to discriminate. He signed executive orders blurring the distinction between church and state, including orders granting faith-based contractors and health care workers a religious exemption from discrimination claims.

All executive departments and agencies were tasked with adopting “religious liberty protections” that likewise advanced the right to discriminate based on religious grounds. We can expect expansion of such special privileges for the “right” kinds of believers.

For example, Trump will undoubt-



Image by Shutterstock

edly repeat his unfounded claim that he has “repealed” the Johnson Amendment. That federal law, which enjoys popular support, ensures that nonprofits, including churches, are not engaging in partisan electioneering with their tax-free donations. Without the Johnson Amendment, churches — which are exempt from reporting requirements applying to other charities — could become dark-money political operatives.

In a nation predicated on a Constitution that bars religious tests for public office, we can expect another unconstitutional executive order, similar to the one he signed in 2017, banning travel to the United States based on a religious test primarily applied to Muslims from certain nations.

While Trump may be cynically using his Christian nationalist base, lead-

ers of that movement are even more cynically exploiting Trump to attack the secular foundations of the United States. They have made no secret of their agenda in documents such as Project 2025, a 900-plus page policy agenda with an overtly Christian nationalist laundry list. Key agenda items include instituting universal vouchers for religious schools, which Trump has endorsed.

Project 2025, Vice President JD Vance and other ideologues are also calling to resuscitate the 1873 Comstock Act, which would ban the mailing and shipping of contraceptives or abortifacients, thereby abolishing access to most contraception and abortion. And Project 2025 advocates for a “biblically based” definition of marriage and family and dismantling nondiscrimination pro-

tections for LGBTQ-plus Americans in the name of “religious liberty.” It even suggests amending the Fair Labor Standards Act to establish Sunday as the “Sabbath.”

Many of Trump’s Cabinet selections and other appointments, including his controversial defense secretary pick, Pete Hegseth, adhere to Christian nationalism. A slew of Trump’s nominees to environmental, energy and other vital posts either deny human-caused climate change or plan to look the other way.

This also placates the views of many white evangelicals, 68 percent of whom largely deny that climate change is tied to human activity. Trump is also expected to continue his radical changes to the makeup of the federal judiciary, including the Supreme Court, which brought America the Dobbs decision overturning Roe v. Wade.

“My life was saved for a reason,” Trump said in his inauguration speech, referring to his attempted assassination. “I was saved by God to make America great again.” He said his administration’s mission is to “give the people back their faith,” framing his presidency as not just an electoral mandate but a di`vine mission.

As the second Trump administration brazenly bulldozes the vaunted wall of separation between church and state, such destruction will also erode precious individual liberties which depend on keeping dogma out of government.

Americans who treasure what has truly made our country great — a secular Constitution that keeps religion out of our laws and social policies — must speak up to safeguard democracy for ourselves and future generations.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF. This column was written for Progressive Perspectives and Tribune News Service in early January.

CRANKMAIL

Here’s a collection of correspondence that FFRF receives (via USPS, email and phone messages) from those who question the foundation’s motives. Beware toxic language. Printed as received.

Antichrist: Hi there, I am the Antichrist my agenda is to crown seven Kings of the underworld and distribute my mark of the beast worldwide. I’m requesting funding to support my prophecy. Thank you

Liars!: You guys are some true Orwellian cunts who are not interested in the truth. You’re truly evil and I sincerely will pray that an active

shooter takes out every single one of you dumb cocksuckers. Fuck you, you lying fucking cultists.

Find God: You guys disgust me., If you have a relationship with God like I do personally. Your dad, Mr. Reagan would be ashamed of you. You’re ridiculous. You’ll burn in hell all right, for the rest of your life.

FFRF: You’re a bunch of idiots.

Losers: Fuck you. Fuck fuck fuck you. What’s wrong with you all?

Hell is hot!: I’d like you to keep your nasty religion off my broadcasting. Trashbags. It’s gonna be real warm where you’re going, cuz you’re going to hell.

Trans crap: Ahh, the irony of an anti-religion foundation succumbing to the new religion of TRANS BULLSHIT. You mention “reason and equality” yet you fail to exercise the former and regarding the latter apparently do not understand that free people are not equal and equal people are not free. It would seem you have flushed your brains, entirely. All for a group of people who suffer from mental illness and are ~1% of the population and who do nothing but cry all the time. All of you are clowns.

Go away: If you want a godless society go to North Korea. They would love to have you.

Atheist Traitors: Watching the confirmation hearings right now starting with that traitor and piece of shit Sen. Jack Reed. Put together many documents on many issues and pass them around. One of which is “Drag Queens in the Military 7-28-23” I keep harping about what happened when we took God, Prayer and the Bible out of schools and replaced them with the Communist-Marxist “socialist” filth infesting schools today. If you want to know why our military is complete shit and infested with Sick Freaks and why we now have groomers in children’s schools and children’s hospitals performing Nazi like surgeries and sexually butchering children you only have to

look in the mirror.

Die already: Your organization is a hate baiting group comprised of pieces of shit. It’s clear that your group has no intention but to cause division. If you are reading this, you need to think about your life choices and stop worrying about what other people do. You’re a fucking Karen. Eat shit and die please.

Commies: I’m watching your commercial. I think you’re a bunch of communists. You know you’re democrats and communists. That’s bad for America. Go back to Cuba or Russia or China.

We will rule: What are you going to do when you die. Nothing? We have the answers. We are the preachers of God. You’re an atheist, skeptic or agnostic. All three are gonna die. Are you gonna come back from the dead? We Christians come back from the dead and we rule the world. We’re the first and you’re the last, OK.

You’re wrong: I think we have touched a nerve. Why are you against Christians. Why? What’s your reason. Whatever your reason, it’s wrong.

My country, not yours: Get out of my country you queers. It was founded on Judeo-Christian values.

Billy Graham: I just saw the ad on TV with Ronnie Reagan and let you know that I have encouraged all Christians to donate to Billy Graham every time that’s on TV.

Stop your ads: You can accept Jesus and be saved. If you do not accept Jesus, you will burn in hell forever. I would suggest you believe in him. If you’re so damn stubborn, then go to hell and burn you stupid bastards. You’re pathetic. Don’t get on Sunday night TV and ruin our Sunday night TV. Just advertise in the paper. Have fun in hell.

Reagan Jr.: I’m leaving a message for Ron Reagan. When I’m singing “Hallelujah” in heaven, he’ll be burning in hell.

Get educated: It’s very interesting to see that

ad on TV. I guess if you don’t mind burning in hell, there’s no problem. Enjoy your trip. You might want to think about what kind of values our country has. There’s no crime in being ignorant, but we should stomp that out, so please learn more.

The great beyond: I wanted to tell you folks that I died twice on the table twice after a car accident. I’ve been to the other side and have seen it, so I hope you change your minds. You’ll be glad you did.

Eternity in hell: Ronald Reagan Jr. will burn in hell and then he will know what it means because it will last for ever and ever and ever. He will burn, as will all of you. Take your chances... you’ll lose.

Go back to Wisconsin!: You take your atheist bullshit and shove it up your ass. Arkansas doesn’t need your Wisconsin values.

Burn, baby, burn: Ron, get a lot of sunscreen, you’re gonna need it. Change your ways.

Jesus is king: Every knee will bow to Jesus. Your association is evil. You will come face to face with King Jesus.

Idiots: I think you are bunch of idiots. Everything morally is based on loving your neighbor. There has to be a supreme being and you have to follow the teaching if Jesus. Stop preaching hate.

Disgusting: I’m gonna leave a message, all right: You disgust me.

FFRF is evil: All y’all will have to answer to God who works for this company.

God vs. devil: There is a god, but I hope someday you meet the devil.

Fakers: Imma say one thing: You are all fake. You will burn in hell for your satanist views. Freedom from religion is a joke. I will campaign against you at all costs.

Save yourself!: I cried when I heard your commercial I’m praying for y’all. A second in hell is too long, let alone an eternity. Please turn to Jesus.

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Carefully crafted to stamp out ‘god’ on U.S. currency. Good for up to 2000 impressions.

‘IN REASON WE TRUST’
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Clarence Darrow Award

The rise of Christian nationalism

This is the speech given by Michelle Goldberg on Sept. 27, 2024, at FFRF's national convention in Denver, delivered prior to the November election. She was introduced by Lisa Strand, FFRF's director of operations. To watch the speech (and all others from the convention), go to ffrf.us/con24.

Lisa Strand: It's my pleasure to introduce this year's Clarence Darrow Award honoree. The award includes a statuette that is solid bronze and is a miniature of the 7-foot statue by Zenos Frudakis that FFRF erected in Dayton, Tenn., home of the Scopes trial.

We're delighted now to present this statuette to someone who has been ringing the alarm against Christian nationalism since 2006, when her prescient book, "Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism," first came out.

Michelle Goldberg is a New York Times columnist, and before that she was part of the New York Times team that won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for public service for reporting on issues related to workplace sexual harassment. She won the Front Page Award from the News-women's Club of New York for opinion/criticism that year, and in 2020 the Hillman Prize for opinion and analysis.

Michelle, please come up to accept the FFRF 2024 Clarence Darrow Award for your insightful journalism and contributions to the public debate.

By Michelle Goldberg

Thank you so much. That is so meaningful to me. When I was searching for inspiration to name my first child, I remember weighing whether the name Clarence had been so tainted by a more well-known one. But [Clarence Darrow] was really the only public figure I considered naming him after, although we ended up giving him a family name. So, it really just means so much to me.

My first book, "Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism," is 18 years old. I started working on it when I was 20. When I started writing it, Christian nationalism wasn't a buzz word. It was something I had to explain every time I spoke about it. I became aware of the strength of that movement, or the kind of growing strength of that movement, during another presidential election. It was 2004, and George W. Bush was running for reelection against John Kerry. I was in Ohio, and something you kept hearing from Democrats in Ohio was, "Where are they? Where is the ground game?" They were out on the streets going door to door, and they just didn't see the Republican operation. And it made them both nervous and cocky at the same time. But where they were was in the churches.

I wasn't entirely sure what to make of it, but I had started going to megachurches in Ohio, seeing both the way that they were railing against the abomination of gay marriage, tying that to a get-out-the-vote program, and doing a lot of this organizing right inside of the churches.

Once George W. Bush won on the strength, according to at least one survey, of "moral issues," I wanted to go deeper into this movement and also understand why so many people had missed it in 2004. Here's how I described the movement at the time.

"The United States has always been a pious country given to bursts of spiritual



Photo by Chris Line

Michelle Goldberg speaks about the history of the Christian nationalist movement and how it first began with fundamentalist preachers and Nazi sympathizers in the Depression era.

fervor, but Christian nationalism is qualitatively different from earlier religious revivals. Like America's past great awakenings, the Christian nationalist movement claims that the bible is absolutely and literally true. But it goes much further, extrapolating a total political program from that truth and yoking that program to a political party.

"It is a conflation of scripture and politics that sees America's triumphs as confirmation of the truth of the Christian religion and America's struggles as part of a cosmic contest between God and the devil. It claims supernatural sanction for its campaign of national renewal, and speaks rapturously about vanquishing the millions of Americans who would stand in its way.

"The motivating dream, then and now, of Christian nationalism is a restored Christian nation. That doesn't mean that me or you wouldn't get to live here anymore, but it does mean that we would be expected to know our place."

Twenty years later, the description of the movement largely holds up, but a lot has changed. Today, the movement is far larger, far more apocalyptic and far angrier. I'm going to talk about how that happened and how it's come closer to power than ever before.

Several antecedents

Today's Christian nationalist movement, like the one I wrote about, has several antecedents. The most significant are the Depression-era fundamentalist preachers and Nazi sympathizers — Gerald B. Winrod and Gerald L.K. Smith. They railed against communism, modernism and big government, and, in Winrod's case, Darwinism, and peddled a right-wing gospel conflating Christianity and patriotism.

Smith founded a group called the

Christian Nationalist Crusade, whose magazine, The Cross and the Flag, claimed Christian character is the basis of all real Americanism. As John Ganz writes in his great new book "When the Clock Broke," Smith became the chief propagandist for the populist, authoritarian Huey Long, whose third-party presidential campaign against FDR prefigured Trumpism in many important ways.

The movement also has its roots in the John Birch Society, which was a paranoid, ultra-right anti-communist movement founded in the late '50s that saw liberals as traitors seeking to replace the nations of the West with one world socialist government. Something you might have noticed if you follow the trajectory of the Republican Party is the degree to which Bircher language, especially about communists — the complete conflation of liberalism and communism and the conviction that there is some dark conspiracy in the Democratic Party against all that is good and holy and against the future of the republic — has just become such a part of Republican rhetoric that we almost don't notice it.

But, even 10 years ago, this was quite striking. It really comes straight from the John Birch Society, which was a movement that, at one point, some on the right had tried to marginalize, most famously William F. Buckley. I think not because he saw it as beyond the pale, but because he saw it as bad PR. He basically saw it as something that allowed conservatism to be dismissed. But now there are no more lines in this conservative movement in this Republican Party, and so it's come roaring back.

Some of you might know the Left Behind books. They were popular when I was writing "Kingdom Coming." They were these novels that imagined in salacious and pornographic detail the tribu-

lation scenes that all of us will experience after the rapture when we are left behind to gasp at how right all the people who are gone were.

But author Tim LaHaye is someone who got his start as a John Birch organizer.

The movement that we know is the Christian right, the sort of substrate of today's Christian nationalism, was born in the late '70s when a group of right-wing strategists and veterans of the Barry Goldwater campaign recruited a somewhat obscure Baptist televangelist named Jerry Falwell to found the Moral Majority. They wanted to use issues like abortion to split traditionalists from the Democratic Party, traditionalists who were unnerved by the social upheavals of the '60s and '70s. They wanted to harness the energy of this nascent evangelical awakening to build the Republican Party. Remember, there did not used to be this natural connection between being born again and being conservative. Our first born-again president in modern times was Jimmy Carter.

So, in 1988, the televangelist and media mogul Pat Robertson, who's the son, incidentally, of a Virginia Democratic senator who was virulently opposed to the civil rights movement, ran for president.

Dominionism

He's important in the story I'm telling here for two reasons. I hope you'll let me go a little bit down a theological rabbit hole. Robertson brought an idea called dominionism into the center of evangelical politics, and dominionism is really key for understanding how the movement is operating today.

Dominionism derives from an explicitly theocratic sect called Christian Reconstructionism, which advocates replacing American civil law with Old Testament biblical law, including the death penalty for crimes like homosexuality and apostasy, and even in some cases, disobedience to your parents. You can imagine that even among the very far right, the appeal of this movement is quite limited. It's kind of strict, joyless, Calvinist; it's quite different from a Christian right that loves rock music and science and wonders and has become increasingly enmeshed with Hollywood production values.

But its political philosophy, dominionism, has kind of pervaded the broader Christian right. Dominionism bases its claims on the passage in Genesis where God creates Adam and Eve and gives them dominion over the Earth. When man fell and was expelled from the Garden of Eden, their dominion was forfeited. But for those who are saved, dominion is restored, which means that God has given Christians the right to rule. So, Robertson appropriated this idea. "The Lord intends his people to exercise dominion in his name," he told Christianity Today. He said that while he disagrees with some Reconstructionist theology, "I admire many of these teachings because they are in line with scripture."

In 1984, he told delegates to an evangelical convention that they had to get ready to take over every aspect of secular society. What do all of us do? We get ready to take dominion, he said, predicting the changes were five years away. "It is all going to be ours. I'm talking about all of it. Everything that you would say is a good part of the secular world, every means of communication — the news, the television, the radio, the cinema, the

arts, the government, the finance — it’s going to be ours. God’s going to give it to his people. We should prepare to reign and rule with Jesus Christ.”

Dominionism was the impetus behind his presidential run. While that run failed, his followers learned a huge amount about political organizing. They learned about how to work within the grassroots of the party structure and the remnants of that campaign formed the foundation of the Christian Coalition, which was founded in 1989. The Christian Coalition, unlike the Moral Majority, focused on grassroots politics in a way that might sound familiar to you if you followed school board fights over book banning or gender or trans rights or tampons in gender-neutral bathrooms. It would train activists on the local level so that they would become Republican delegates. They’d run in school board races, they would transform politics from the bottom up. “I would rather have a thousand school board members than one president and no school board members,” said Ralph Reed, who was the former president of the Christian Coalition.

When I wrote my book, it was really a high point of this movement. George W. Bush was very much one of their own. He was reelected with their help. Twenty-two percent of voters in one exit poll said that moral values were their chief concern, which was more than Iraq at a time when that war had just started, at a time when it became very obvious that the war, which was always misconceived, was going really horribly wrong.

Patrick Henry University is a university that was founded to basically take home-schooled kids and train them so that they would be able to take their place in all sorts of elite institutions, provided 7 percent of the George W. Bush’s White Houses interns.

It’s not that the movement was always optimistic because this is by nature an apocalyptic movement, but it did have swagger. Patrick Henry College’s founder founded an organization called the Joshua Generation. The idea behind the Joshua Generation is that the previous generation was the Moses generation, which was going to lead them out of the bondage of Egypt, which, in this analogy, is secular society. And Joshua is the generation that’s going to conquer it. And they really believed that they were on their way. And then from the movement’s perspective, everything started to go wrong.

Barack Obama was elected and re-elected. Church attendance and Christian identification declined, and the number of people who said that they had no religion increased. In 2015, the Supreme Court legalized gay marriage. Going into the 2016 election, it seemed like Hillary Clinton, who was in many ways the incarnation of demonic evil for many people in this movement, seemed like she was going to be president, putting the Supreme Court out of reach for a generation.

Trump transformation

We all know what happened next. Trump has reinvigorated this movement, but he’s also transformed it the way that he’s transformed the conservative movement more broadly. If you look at what Trump has done to the Republican Party, the way he’s dethroned quasi-serious figures like Paul Ryan and Dick Cheney, who, for all their many sins, at least shared in the Venn diagram of overlapping realities, there was at least some maybe common ground.

So, he dethrones them and he elevates people who had been kind of kooks, people who had been considered marginal.

Steve Bannon and Alex Jones now have far more influence in the Republican Party than the former vice president of the United States or the former nominee for vice president of the United States.

Donald Trump did something quite similar in the religious realm. This is a hard thing to get across because it’s not as if Pat Robertson and his ilk and the people I wrote about in “Kingdom Coming” are sober, responsible, rational figures. But they really are compared to the new generation.

Basically, the ex-president elevated a class of faith healers, prosperity gospel preachers and road show revivalists who really appalled a lot of the “respectable evangelicals” who had clustered around George W. Bush. You’ll remember that, initially, many of the mainstream leaders of the Christian right didn’t like Donald Trump for obvious reasons. They didn’t see him as one of their own. They wanted a Ted Cruz or a Mike Huckabee.

There was one group that gravitated to Trump from the start, and they were just kind of independent, charismatic preachers and prophets and self-styled apostles. It’s a part of Christianity that exists outside of denominational structures, which can be kind of disciplining. If you are a Southern Baptist, you can’t just go about making up your own messages from God and expect to exist within that hierarchy. There’s dogma and there’s doctrine, and a lot of that dogma and doctrine is appalling to most of the people in this room, but it does create certain limits.

Whereas, this movement really believes that during the time of Christ there were signs and wonders and apostles and magic and supernatural gifts. Most Christians, including most evangelicals, believe that a lot of these phenomena stopped after that, after the time of Christ. But they believe that we’re in a new apostolic moment. There’s a part of this movement called the New Apostolic Reformation, this belief in magic and direct messages from the Almighty is really key to that.

This movement has so much overlap with the prosperity gospel. The prosperity gospel has always believed that wealth and material gifts are bestowed on believers. So, it can be a sign of favor, which

makes them much more likely to see a figure like Donald Trump as potentially holy.

Those people have always clustered around Trump from the beginning. When Trump ultimately became president, those were the people who he brought with them. There were other people who were very close to Trump who were not part of this movement. Other evangelicals who were close to Trump were not part of this movement, but he really elevated them.

His personal pastor, someone he gave a White House job to, was a thrice-divorced prophet named Paula White, who is a key figure in this movement and continues to be a key figure in this movement. This movement was organized in the ’90s by a guy named C. Peter Wagner. He was a professor at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary. He believed we were in a second apostolic age and he also incorporated dominion theology into this movement.

Right to rule

So, you have a movement that believes that it has this direct line to God. It also has something of a star system, because there’s no denominational structures. Everybody is competing for the wildest prophecy, the most ecstatic expressions of

fealty to Trump, the most clever kind of rationalizations of things that Trump does. So, you have this ratchet effect in this movement at the same time as you have this

real fundamental conviction that this movement has the right to rule every sector of society.

There’s an excellent book that came out recently, called “The Violent Take It by Force” about this movement, and the author, Matthew Taylor, writes about prophetic means. This idea is important because it’s something that’s very loose and networked and not really about doctrines and encyclicals and dogmas. It’s about ideas that float around and get grabbed and combined and remixed in these ever-escalating new and wild ways. He talks about prophetic memes which are constantly circulating. These are flashes of revelation or theological interpretation, and, when it comes to Trump, there are two prophetic memes, both originated by

“ Basically, the ex-president [Trump] elevated a class of faith healers, prosperity gospel preachers and road show revivalists who really appalled a lot of the ‘respectable evangelicals.’



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Michelle Goldberg receives the Clarence Darrow Award from FFRF Director of Operations Lisa Strand on Sept. 27, 2024, at FFRF’s national convention in Denver.

a guy named Lance Wallnau, that are really important.

The first is called the Cyrus anointing, and this is the notion of Trump as a modern-day Cyrus, a pagan king who saves the chosen people and you don’t expect him to be a believer. You don’t even expect him to be moral. You just need him to be strong. So, the idea that Trump is a modern-day Cyrus comes from Lance Wallnau. Maybe even more important is what’s called the Seven Mountains Mandate. You’ll hear a lot of echoes from what Pat Robertson said.

The Seven Mountains Mandate is the notion that Christians have the right and the obligation to seize the seven mountains of society, which are the home, the church, the schools, government, business, the media, and arts and entertainment.

If you go to a Christian nationalist church or listen to a Christian nationalist podcast or go to one of these revivals that are now doubling as Republican campaign rallies, you’ll hear references to the Seven Mountains, even if the kind of theology behind them isn’t explicitly laid out.

A couple of things have happened. The Seven Mountains Mandate, as you can imagine, provided a powerful rationalization for Jan. 6. There were a disproportionate number of people involved in this movement, the New Apostolic Reformation, the broader world of independent, charismatic Christianity involved in the Jan. 6 insurrection. And, in the aftermath of the insurrection, the theology and prophetic means that have circulated in this milieu have started to spread out and recombine with the broader conservative movement. What you’re seeing now is increasing overlap between this movement and the militia movement increasing overlap between this movement and some of the grassroots structures of the Republican Party.

A good example is Charlie Kirk. He’s an extremely influential young conservative. He founded an organization called Turning Point about 12 years ago. It was like a secular, libertarianish Chicago school right-wing organization that saw high taxes and big government as the greatest of evils. Charlie Kirk, being a sort of entrepreneurial conservative on the make, saw in the Christian right something of an impediment to his vision because it was repellent to a lot of the people that he wanted to attract. He said it was sanctimonious that conservatism couldn’t be so stridently anti-gay.

But, after Jan. 6, I think he saw which way the wind was blowing and has become increasingly entwined with the New Apostolic Reformation. You’ll hear him talk about the seven mountains. He does an event every month at a megachurch in Phoenix called “Freedom Night in America,” which is actually Assemblies of God, which has some overlap. It’s Pentecostal as opposed to independent charismatic. We don’t need to go into the differences for our purposes, but it’s all very kind of aligned in this milieu.

He’s working increasingly with Lance Wallnau, who said this in reaction to Kamala Harris’ debate performance:

“She can look presidential. That’s the seduction of what I would say is witchcraft. That’s the manipulation of imagery that creates an impression, contrary to truth, but it seduces you into seeing it. So that spirit, that occult spirit, I believe, is operating on her and through her.”

And, JD Vance, who is running to be vice president of the United States, is doing an event with Lance Wallnau tomorrow.

I’ll conclude with that. Thank you.

Freedom from Fundamentalist Religion’s \$50,000 award to HRC

Unapologetically and authentically normal

This was the (edited) speech given by Brandon Wolf at FFRF’s 47th national convention in Denver on sept. 28. He was introduced by FFRF Board Member Todd Peissig. You can watch the video of the speech (and all convention speeches) at ffrf.us/con24.

Todd Peissig: It is my pleasure and honor on behalf of the Board of Directors of the Freedom From Religion Foundation to bestow this year’s Henry Zumach Freedom from Fundamentalist Religion Award to an organization that has represented a population and uniquely targeted by the religious right and by Christian nationalists. The Zumach Award was created in 2017 by our ultra-generous Wisconsin member and activist Hank Zumach.

It has grown from its initial \$100,000 endowment to over \$1 million today. FFRF gives out 5 percent of the fruits of this endowment every year to reward and acknowledge major activism against religious intolerance and bigotry. This year’s recipient is the Human Rights Campaign. The HRC is our nation’s largest organization leading the fight for LGBTQ-plus rights. Here to accept the award today on behalf of the Human Rights Campaign is Brandon Wolf, currently serving as the national press secretary for the HRC. Brandon is a nationally recognized advocate for LGBTQ-plus civil rights and also gun safety laws. Brandon is a survivor of the 2016 Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting. He was the first survivor of the Pulse tragedy to testify before Congress, and returned in 2022 to testify before the House Oversight Committee on the rise of anti-LGBT hate and violence. His debut memoir, “A Place For Us,” was released last year and became an instant bestseller.

Now, I’d like to present Brandon with a plaque that he will keep and a \$50,000 check on behalf of the HRC for the vital work that it does. Please welcome Brandon Wolf.

By Brandon Wolf

Thank you for the incredible honor. And thank you all for being here. Thank you for your energy. Thank you for your passion. Thank you for your belief that a better world is possible. I’m so proud to serve as national press secretary for the Human Rights Campaign, our country’s largest LGBTQ-plus civil rights organization.

I again want to, on behalf of myself and my colleagues at HRC, express my deep gratitude for what is truly an incredible honor and a reflection of the power of the work that LGBTQ-plus people are doing every single day to fight for a better country. It’s not lost on me that there is a common thread that’s running through all of this today, this organization.

The reason you’re in the seats, the name of this award, the work of HRC, the thing that we’re all drawn to here in this moment is, at its core, a fight for freedom, but not the kind of freedom that you might see from the religious right. The hollow slogan that’s been hijacked and slapped on a bumper sticker somewhere.

We are here because we believe in real freedom, a freedom that every single person deserves by virtue of simply being a human being on this planet.

I believe we all deserve the freedom to live, the freedom to love, the freedom, yes, to be — simply because we’re here. And I have to say, from a personal place, you heard a little bit of my story, but it was ultimately that fight for freedom that brought me to not just HRC, but the work, the movement in general.

Growing up

I did not have grand dreams of stages like this or accepting awards like these. I did not envision that I would ever play a part in trying to change the world, because for most of my life, I didn’t know that there was a place in the world for me at all. I grew up a young, queer Black kid in rural Oregon, in a Seventh-Day Adventist household, desperately wishing that I could feel normal, desperately wishing that there was a place for me to belong in the world.

I wanted to experience freedom, the freedom to be me unapologetically and authentically, without having to be afraid of what might be lurking around the corner. Now, for a lot of people, I think the town I grew up in can feel very familiar. And many of you may know a town just like it. It’s the kind of town where if you went out and counted every head of livestock, you’d probably find more cows than people. It’s the kind of town where if you went out and counted the stoplights, they would prob-



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Brandon Wolf tells the FFRF convention audience in Denver about how he was at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando the night of the shooting in 2016, in accepting the Henry Zumach award on behalf of HRC.

ably fit on one hand. It’s the kind of town where, I am not joking, when Starbucks opened, they closed school for multiple days so that we could get a latte and take a picture with it.

So, in these towns there is a sense of familiarity. There are families who’ve known each other for generations. They’re the same people who you went to kindergarten with, or the people who you graduated high school with. For a lot of people, towns like that can feel like home. They can feel comforting in a way.

But, it wasn’t quite that simple for people like me, because, as you might imagine, in that little rural town in Oregon, around my little Seventh-Day Adventist dinner table, there were not a lot of people who looked like me, and there were certainly not a lot of people who understood what it was like to love like me. So, I did all of the things that people told me I had to do in order to belong in this world, in order to assimilate into that culture.

I did every after-school activity imaginable. I got straight A’s all the way through school. I held down a part-time job. I did music and theater and sports. I ran for student body office every year.

I overachieved because I think at my core, I wanted to believe that if I did enough, if I excelled enough, if I proved it enough, that maybe when I was finally honest about who I was, when I finally came out, that small town would forgive me. It’s just not that simple, though, for people that look and love like us.

I graduated high school and went off to college and thought that’s where everything gets easy. If high school is hard, college is a breeze. Everybody finds their way in school. But perhaps unsurprisingly, when you go to a state school a couple of hours from where you graduated high school, things feel a lot like high school. The same kid who was shooting spit wads at me in science class was there in my science lecture hall.

The same kid I would run away from in the cafeteria was there eating lunch in the college cafeteria instead. When I graduated high school, there were nearly 2,000 students in our school, and of those, only 11 were Black. And when I got to college, it wasn’t much more diverse than that.

It gets better

I was always going to have to find a way to shave down the edges of who I was to fit the mold, the box that I had been assigned. I started to internalize that. I wondered if it ever got any better than that for me. I was working at Starbucks at the time, and

I remember sitting in the back room of my off-campus store, and I was wearing this apron that smelled like rotting milk because I didn’t have enough money to put quarters in the washing machine at home.

I was eating a bagel that I’d found on the bottom of the refrigerator at work because I didn’t have enough money to put food in the cupboards, and I wondered, “Is this the best it gets? Do I never get to be free?” Would I ever get to be me in a place that can handle all of what that means?

And whether you believe in fate or coincidence or whatever, at that very moment, my shift supervisor came bounding in the back room and she’s holding a copy of the school newspaper, and she’s like, “Oh, I thought of you immediately when I saw this.” Now, if you knew me back then, you know that I thought right away someone had gone to jail or something like that.

But there on the page was an ad and it said, “Help Wanted — Walt Disney World,” and it’s like a light bulb went off. I was like, if there’s anywhere on Earth I can be really gay, it’s got to be Walt Disney World.

It turns out I was right about that. So, I did what any good college student does: I called my grandmother and said, “I have this great idea, Grandma. I’m going to drop out of college and I’m going to be famous working at Walt Disney World.” And she, like any good grandma, said, “How much do you need?”

So, I auditioned for a contract, got called for a job, and a couple of weeks later I was packing two suitcases and moving 3,000 miles away. I took a leap of faith. I was going in search of something different, of a place where I thought maybe I could be free for the first time. And, lo and behold, I stumbled into it.

People had told me my entire life that the world was never going to be ready for someone like me. Yet, I stumbled into this world that felt like it had been designed for me from the beginning. I found a sense of normal and belonging and safety and, yes, freedom — in foods I had never tried before, in languages I’d never heard before, in cultures I had never gotten the privilege to experience before. I found a sense of safety and belonging and normal and freedom in a chosen family, a phrase I didn’t really understand before that moment. It’s kind of like when people tell me there’s a new Taylor Swift album, and I nod my head like, “I know what you’re talking about, but I’m going to Google it later.”

“We can have the future we deserve, but it’s not going to happen by accident. Democracy is not a one-day holiday.”

Blind date

That’s how I felt about my chosen family. I thought I understood the concept, but you don’t get it until you’re sitting in the room with it. I met my best friend Drew in 2014 and he changed my life. We met on a blind date. Well, sort of a half blind date because, like any good millennial gay man, I had thoroughly Instagram-stalked him beforehand.

As I was scrolling through his feed, I’m picking out names for our children and deciding who would take whose last name. All of the priorities when you see your future husband on Instagram. I noticed that I had a mutual friend who was liking all of his pictures. I thought, I need another leap of faith in this moment.

I reached out to our mutual friend and said, “I see you also know my future husband, Drew. I wonder if you could set me up on a date with him.” He said yes. We got to date day and I was nervous because, and this might come as a surprise, but I am very naturally an introverted person, so it takes me a lot to work up to the one-on-one small talk, especially when there’s an attractive future husband across the table.

I have to do the working-myself-up type talk. I’m in my bedroom, staring at the full-length mirror and thinking, “OK, he’s going to ask you what your favorite food is. The answer is Mexican food. He’s going to ask you what your favorite color is. The answer is green.” I put on my lucky underwear knowing absolutely no one would see them but me, and I bolted out the door.

I get to the P.F. Chang’s at Millennium Mall, a very classy first-date establishment. I parked just far enough away so that if I had an embarrassing episode, I could sprint for the car. He’d never know what I drove and I would never see him again. I get to the restaurant and I can see through the doors. He’s sitting on the bench and he looks exactly like his Instagram pictures, which makes me more nervous than I was before.

I pull open the door and sit down next to him. There was a wait for our table, so he’d ordered us a round of drinks and he’s holding this big martini glass and says, “I have a question for you, Brandon.” I said, “Well, Drew, I have been preparing for this literally all day. So hit me with your best shot.”

He says, “I wonder what your thoughts are on the for-profit health care industry in America and its impact on consumer.”

I swear I almost blurted out “green!” because that’s what I had practiced so much. But, I had a couple sips of liquid courage and so I told him how criminal I think our for-profit health care industry is in America, and the devastation it has caused to so many people. And I said, “Why do you ask?” He said, “Oh, I work for a for-profit health insurance company. So, I just wasn’t sure how awkward this day could get.”

Profound moment

What is a funny story now was honestly profound in the moment because that one question about something I believe turned into an entire night of talking about what makes us us. We talked about music and movies, the things we like, the things we don’t like. We talked about old flings. And, in the middle of this crowded restaurant, never once did Drew lower his voice to make sure that the booth behind us didn’t hear us talking about boys instead of girls. Never once did he deepen the gravel in his throat or stiffen his wrist to avoid detection. It’s like all these people who had told me the world was never going to be ready for someone



Photo by Kyle Hilker

Brandon Wolf accepts the \$50,000 Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award on behalf of the Human Rights Campaign. He was given the award by FFRF Executive Board Member Todd Peissig.

like me, and yet there was this man in front of me who, with his very presence, was declaring that the world had better get ready because we were already there.

It was profound, and I wanted to understand more of it. So, we became attached at the hip. And when he met his partner Juan in 2015, we expanded to The Three Musketeers. We did everything together. We traveled together. We loved New Year’s Eve. It gave us a chance to twirl under disco balls and promise to live life more fully in the future.

I guess what I’m describing to you is that I found normal. The kind of normal that I didn’t think people like us ever get the chance to experience. I found freedom. That young, queer Black kid sitting at his profoundly Seventh-Day Adventist table was suddenly free to be unapologetically, authentically, audaciously normal.

Last normal day

We often refer to June 11, 2016, in Orlando as the last normal day, and everything about it was normal. It was Saturday — laundry day. I was folding socks and underwear on the couch. Drew and Juan were at SeaWorld. It was summer, so I fell asleep in a lounge chair by the pool. When the sun dipped below the horizon, I did the most normal thing. I texted my best friends and I asked if they wanted to go and get a drink.

They got to my place just before midnight and everything about it was normal. We listened to the same playlist we always listened to. We watched the same music videos we always watched. I was almost never allowed to have control of the cocktail shaker, because I make drinks like three times as strong as they’re supposed to be. I’m the fun friend.

But I think Drew could see that I’d had a rough week, so he relinquished control of the shaker, and he would just grimace at me from across the room when he took a sip. When it came time to decide where to go, we did the most normal thing. We picked a place we’d been to dozens, if not hundreds, of times before.

You see, Pulse Nightclub was a safe space for people like us. If I found normal and safety and freedom in community, I also found it on the dance floor at Pulse. It’s one of the first places I ever held hands with someone I had a crush on without looking over my shoulder first. It’s one of the first places I wore a suit as skinny as this one without being afraid of what someone might call me, or wear booty shorts as high as could be without being afraid of what someone would do.

Because it was a place where I could

be me. And it was that for so many people. That night, from the long line outside to the same drinks we always ordered to the beats radiating through the dance floor. We had a spot on the patio underneath the stars. And Drew, who had a master’s degree in clinical psychology, after he had a few drinks, would offer you a free therapy session whether you actually wanted that or not.

That night, his therapy session was about friendship and love. He was visibly frustrated that we so often let the little things get in the way of how much we care about each other. He couldn’t understand why we let our differences tear us apart, instead of focusing on our similarities. And when he was coming in for a landing on his point, he would drape a long, gangly arm over your shoulders. I think he might have been holding himself up after one too many, but it was endearing, nonetheless. That night he draped his arm over my shoulder and he pulled me in tight and he said, “What I’m saying, Brandon, is I wish we said ‘I love you’ more often.”

The most normal of conversations in the most normal of places became the extraordinary tragedy that rocked the world. Almost in an instant. It was just after 2 in the morning when I was washing my hands at a bathroom sink. I can remember this cup sitting on the edge of the sink, looking like it might fall off. I can remember the poster on the wall above the urinal. I can remember how cold the water was from the faucet that night.

And I will never forget the first sound of gunshots, the sense of fear and panic, the debate with people in the bathroom

about whether to run or hide. I remember sprinting for an exit, wishing I got a chance to say goodbye to my grandparents. I remember telling myself not to look left into the dance floor, willing myself to head for the sliver of light in the back of the room.

I’m so lucky that I made it to that sliver of light that I burst out onto the sidewalk, the night air rushing into my face. Too many people were not that lucky that night. In the early hours of June 12, 2016, a gunman charged through the front doors of my safe space, a place I had found safety and freedom, and he opened fire.

He used an assault weapon to kill 49 people, most of them LGBTQ-plus people of color, and injured 53 others. Drew and one my chosen family. My brothers were in very normal fashion, wrapped in each other’s arms underneath their favorite disco ball, right in that man’s line of fire. They never got the chance to come home and say goodbye.

I wish that I could tell you that I got up the next day and started fighting for a different kind of world. But, the truth is, I wasn’t sure that waking up the next day was worth waking up to see at all. I spent days with my head under the covers wishing that the nightmare would be over, but it never went away.

So, I found courage and community. I found it in the same place that I had found it. When I packed those bags and moved 3,000 miles away in the friendly embrace of a neighbor, in the smile of someone who I didn’t know in line at the grocery store. And as time passed, I came to understand my place in all of this.

Fight for better world

It wasn’t good enough anymore just to live that little slice of normal, to hold on to that little bit of freedom that I had uncovered. It was my job, my obligation, my duty to ensure that other people got a chance to experience that normal and freedom. I knew that if the people who were stolen from us that night were going to matter, if they were going to carry on the legacy of the joy and laughter they brought into the world, then we were going to have to fight for a better world in their honor.

A world where every kid, just like me, sitting around that staunchly Seventh-Day Adventist dinner table, knows that there is a world out there for them, that there is a place where they can be — unapologetically, authentically and audaciously.

That’s where our paths intertwine. That’s what brought me to the Human

See Wolf on page 18



Photo by Chris Line

Brandon Wolf takes a moment to listen to FFRF member Carolyn Golojuch during his book-signing event.

Let’s end religious overreach in schools

This column first appeared in *The Oklahoman* on Jan. 14.

By Mickey Dollens

As an elected official and a parent of two elementary school students in Oklahoma, I am deeply concerned by a growing national trend of government overreach that undermines parents’ rights through state-sanctioned religious extremism.

The actions of Oklahoma lawmakers and state schools Superintendent Ryan Walters should serve as a warning for the rest of the country. Walters has



Mickey Dollens

mandated public schools keep a copy of the bible in every classroom — the Trump-endorsed bible, no less. He’s also mandating the Ten Commandments be posted in every public school classroom and proposed the implementation of bible-based standards and curricula be taught in grades K-12.

I’ve spent years fighting for Oklahomans as a state legislator, but today I’m also speaking as a proud employee of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. A relentless wave of unconstitutional legislation is underway, designed to impose religious teachings into public school classrooms, an egregious attack on religious freedom and the fundamental rights of parents.

While a neutral, comparative reli-



Image by Shutterstock

gion class that explores multiple faiths can enrich students’ understanding of world religions, the decision to mandate ahistorical, Christian-centric curricula — such as Ryan Walters’ bible mandate — significantly deviates from an inclusive study of diverse religious perspectives, instead promoting a single religious viewpoint in public schools. These divisive actions are unconstitutional and create a classroom environment where some students feel alienated or excluded based on their religious backgrounds. Furthermore, requiring K-12 teachers to teach theology without proper theological education further complicates the issue.

Not only are the actions by Walters and politicians like him divisive and unconstitutional, they cost taxpayers and our public institutions. Paying large sums

to lawyers to attempt to defend ideologically driven legislation has become commonplace in Oklahoma. These resources would be better spent attacking Oklahoma’s poor math and reading outcomes.

The solution is clear: Public schools must remain neutral on religious matters, allowing students to explore a variety of ideas, beliefs and worldviews without being bombarded by government-endorsed religious instruction.

Secular education does not attack anyone’s faith. Instead, it ensures that every family — whether Christian, Jewish, Muslim, atheist or any personal belief system — can decide the moral and spiritual upbringing of their children without government interference. This neutrality empowers parents to make these deeply personal decisions within their homes and/or faith communities, preserving the

essence of freedom that our nation was built upon.

As lawmakers across the country, we must defend parents’ rights against religious extremism by taking the following steps:

1. **Speak up publicly.** Oppose the imposition of religious doctrines in schools to reassure constituents that their concerns are heard and addressed.

2. **Collaborate with local faith leaders and supportive nonprofits.** Partner with local faith leaders in your state who uphold the separation of church and state, such as those within the Oklahoma Faith Network. Additionally, engage with organizations like the Freedom From Religion Foundation to obtain legal support and strengthen your fight against religious extremism.

3. **Mobilize voters.** Encourage constituents to engage in advocacy by organizing community meetings, workshops and campaigns to support public education free from religion. In my role with the Freedom From Religion Foundation, I am helping elected officials push back against religious extremism. One way is by connecting lawmakers with local faith leaders who champion the separation of church and state. These partnerships are crucial in advocating for policies that respect parental rights and uphold religious liberty for all, not just a select few.

Mickey Dollens is the regional government affairs manager at the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He also represents District 93 in the Oklahoma House of Representatives and is author of “The Citizen’s Guide to Political Change.”

Brandon Wolf

Continued from page 13

Rights Campaign. It’s why you ended up in these seats today, because we understand that freedom is not an accident. Freedom is not happenstance. Freedom is our job. Freedom is our work to do every single day. We are at an inflection point in history. We are facing a crossroads and many challenges. We have to decide what kind of future we want and what that future is worth to us. We have to ask ourselves whether it is worth showing up every single day, every hour of that day, boldly and unapologetically, to demand better than someone’s regressive idea of who we should be.

We can have a white nationalist Christian dictatorship, or leaders who respect our constitutional freedoms, but we have to make that choice actively. We have to show up for the kind of future we want. We can have a country held down by someone’s regressive idea that there’s only one right way to be a human being, or only one right pew to sit in on one right day.

A country captained by groups like the Alliance Defending Freedom or the Heritage Foundation, who have promised to wield power as a weapon against anyone who dissents. We can have that country, or we can have a country with a daring vision that it is our diversity that is our strength, that our differing perspectives are our greatest asset, and that our freedoms should not be contingent upon conformity.

We can have that world if we choose to show up for it.

We can have the future we deserve,

but it’s not going to happen by accident. Democracy is not a one-day holiday. It’s a 365-day-a-year, 24-hour-a-day project that requires every single one of us on the front lines. Six days after the shooting at Pulse, we had a funeral service for Drew. It was the hardest day of my life.

His mom asked me to be a pallbearer that day, and it was an honor I was incredibly grateful for. As I was helping to push his casket down the aisle at the funeral, I found myself holding on to the side really tightly because I did not want to let go of my best friend until I found the right words to say goodbye.

We got to the front of the room. I looked down at his casket and I made him a promise that changed my life. I

promised him that I would never stop fighting for a world that he would be proud of. But, you see, that promise was never really about Drew. It was never really about me, either, because a world that Drew would be proud of is a world every single one of us can be proud of.

It’s a world where young people know they are valued exactly as they are. It’s a world where families are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve. It’s a world where every single one of us is free, without exception. That’s the world we deserve, and it’s right in front of us. The question is, what are we willing to do in order to achieve it?

We can have that world if we’re willing to roll up our sleeves and work for it. We

can have that world if we’re willing to have tough conversations across dinner tables with people who may not agree with us on almost anything. We can have that world if we then turn those conversations into actions. If we knock on our neighbor’s doors, if we pick up the phone to have more dialogues, we can have that world if we are willing to get involved in building it together.

Yes, that means showing up at the ballot box in November. But, guess what? It means showing up again at the school board meeting. It means showing up again at the state legislative hearing. It means showing up again at the PTA meeting. If it means showing up again and again and again every day until that future is in front of us.

That’s what it takes to build the kind of future we deserve.

So, I will end where I began, which is with some gratitude. I want to thank you for showing up. Thank you for showing up in this room today. Thank you for believing in each other in the community you’ve been able to build together. Thank you for believing in us at the Human Rights Campaign and the work we do every single day, to build a better future for all of us.

Thank you for this incredible honor. But, I have to tell you, for me, it’s just a reminder of why I’m in this work in the first place. For me, it’s a reminder of what’s possible when we win. For me, it is just another call to action, because I believe that the world that Drew would be proud of, all of us can be proud of the world we deserve.

I believe that freedom is worth fighting for, and I know this to be true. Every single time we fight, we win. Thank you all. I appreciate it.



Photo by Steve Solomon

Brandon Wolf, national press secretary for the Human Rights Campaign, speaks at FFRF’s national convention in Denver on Sept. 28, 2024.

FFRF CHAPTER UPDATES

East Tennessee Chapter

With the help of a supporter in Nashville and the Upstate NY Freethinkers, the East Tennessee chapter created a new website. We invite all members from Tennessee to visit the site and join our chapter! The East Tennessee chapter does not charge any dues, so if you are interested in joining, please visit ffrf-etc.org and complete the “Join” form on our new site. FFRF provides an annual \$5 rebate for each area FFRF member who joins the chapter. Please support the important local work we do. If another chapter should form in Tennessee (something we fully support), members who are located in that chapter’s region will be transferred to the new chapter.

Also during the month, FFRF East Tennessee President Aleta Ledendecker was asked to speak on how to address First Amendment violations at the inaugural meeting of “Be The Change.” This is a grassroots group in East Tennessee created to resist current threats to personal freedoms. Since Tennessee



FFRF-East Tennessee chapter’s new website is up and running.

is a very red state, Project 2025 unfortunately is thriving within its governmental structure.

Ledendecker has also been asked to speak on the same topic at a Coffee and Conversation event hosted by the Democratic Party. Visit ffrfetc.org to learn more about the East Tennessee Chapter of FFRF.

Upstate N.Y. Freethinkers

Feb. 6 marked the Upstate New York Freethinkers first anniversary as a chapter of FFRF, with more than 200 participants who collaborated with other humanist and atheist organizations to expand its reach.

Our volunteers offered freethought materials to local libraries; challenged Christian biases in local governments; supported the chapter through donations, website development and publications; participated in Pride events and the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum’s annual spring cleanup; attended the first annual chapter gathering at the Matilda Joselyn Gage Center (in honor of American suffragist, abolitionist and freethinker) and traveled to FFRF’s convention in Denver.

During the most recent election cycle, our volunteers concentrated on voter awareness in New York and Pennsylvania, where we witnessed a troubling rise of white Christian nationalism.

Simultaneously, New York saw a concerning trend toward politicians advocating for increased state/church entanglement. However, New Yorkers largely oppose this agenda, which is evident in the resounding passage of the NYS Equal Rights Amendment, which was aided by the active support of our chapter in defiance of anti-trans, anti-abortion and anti-immigrant campaigns. The chapter continues to leverage FFRF’s legislation tracking tool at unyft.org/legislation.

To further our mission, we seek passionate individuals with expertise in accounting, administration and public relations. The board also welcomes volunteers for regional gatherings and offers direct ship-



Some of the faces behind the Upstate N.Y. Freethinkers chapter.

ping of free giveaways for distribution at unyft.org/free.

Looking ahead, on March 29, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor will speak at the American Freethought roundtable at the Hyatt Regency Buffalo, and join the chapter at a dinner following the roundtable. Additionally, the chapter will hold its inaugural Western NY Region chapter meetup at a café the next morning. Reservations can be made for these events at unyft.org/go.

The chapter is also excited to announce that both FFRF Co-Presidents Gaylor and Dan Barker, along with renowned author and journalist Kate Cohen, will be featured speakers at the 2nd Annual Chapter Gathering in August. (Details at unyft.org/gatherings)

Support our mission! Donate, join or volunteer at unyft.org. Email info@unyft.org or phone/text (585) 454-9921.

Ozarks Chapter



Volunteering at the Thrift Store, run by NWA Women’s Shelter in Northwest Arkansas, are Ozark Chapter members, from left, Chris Sweeny, Chip Ballew, James Brazeal, Sarah Nickerson, Ryan Bradburn and Ruth Stanfield.

The Ozarks Chapter of FFRF stayed busy in January by volunteering at the Thrift Store, run by NWA Women’s Shelter in Northwest Arkansas, which provides shelter and support for those affected by domestic violence in the community. On Jan. 25, our group

collectively provided over 16 hours of help, sorting through donations, racking clothes and performing light cleaning around the store. Contact ozarksf-fjf@gmail.com for more information on the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF.

San Francisco Bay Chapter



The SF Bay Chapter held a fundraiser to support the emergency relief actions of World Central Kitchen, which is helping feed the firefighters, first responders and residents affected by the fires in the L.A. area.

When tragedy strikes, thoughts and prayers are fruitless. “God works in mysterious ways” lets religious folks shrug it off. Even worse, some pastors sermonize “This is God’s judgment, pointing us back to him,” hijacking the disaster and blaming the victims.

Thankfully, more humane people exist — both those with religious beliefs and those with no theistic beliefs at all — who respond through compassionate actions. The godless, however, are historically bypassed when notice of good works or moral actions is taken.

This past January, the San Francisco Bay Chapter of FFRF held a week-long fundraiser to support the emergency relief actions of World Central Kitchen (WCK), an organization which had and has been providing much-needed meals for firefighters, first responders

and residents affected by the recent (and, as of this writing, ongoing) wildfire and urban-fire devastation in the Los Angeles area.

Our chapter selected WCK after considering a number of worthy relief organizations. We then put out a call to chapter members and others about our fundraising drive. Over the course of a week, we collected \$2,500, with one contribution coming in from as far away as Ohio. These funds, along with a letter of appreciation to WCK for their tireless relief efforts, were sent to World Central Kitchen.

The SF Bay Chapter of FFRF wishes to thank all contributors to our fundraising drive. The values of freethinking people, in this instance, helped WCK in its work of feeding more than 200,000 (and counting) people. Visit sfbayffrf.org for more information.

Valley of the Sun Chapter



Pictured, from left, are Jeanne Casteen of Secular AZ, Karen McClelland of Secular AZ, Alex Zygmunt of Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix, Bhikkhu Vasu Bandhu of Arizona Faith Network, Mars de La Tour of FFRF Valley of the Sun Chapter, Rev. Ken Heintzelman of Shadow Rock UCC and Minister Nectaire Olivevilo of The Satanic Temple Arizona Congregation.

If anything can get a group of FFRF members into a church, it’s Secular AZ’s annual Secular Summit! This year’s summit, hosted at Shadow Rock United Church of Christ on Jan. 4, did just that. Yes, a Christian church hosted the 2025 Secular Summit. They’re just as tired of Christian nationalism as we are.

The summit created a valuable space for FFRF Valley of the Sun members to

engage with leaders from across the secular and religious spectrum. The event reinforced the importance of collaboration and civic engagement, reminding us there are allies, even in unexpected places, who share our commitment to protecting democracy and upholding the separation of church and state. Email info@ffrfvs.org for more information about the Valley of the Sun Chapter of FFRF.

IN MEMORIAM

Cecile Richards made the best kind of trouble

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

“Little lady, you are just trying to make trouble.”

That’s the first sentence of Cecile Richards’ memoir, “Make Trouble: Standing Up, Speaking Out, and Finding the Courage to Lead.”

Cecile Richards, the former leader of Planned Parenthood and ardent abortion rights defender who died at age 67 on Jan. 20 of glioblastoma, made only the best trouble. Cecile accepted the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s 2018 Forward Award, which recognizes individuals who have moved society forward.

I was a bit nervous about moderating the on-stage conversation Cecile requested for her convention appearance, but what a privilege it was. In introducing her, I recited some of my favorite quotes from her book, which included her advice: “Get comfortable with making others uncomfortable.” My first question was to ask her to explain that intriguing opening sentence of her book.

“I was in sixth grade,” Cecile responded, “and my teacher decided to open every day with the Lord’s Prayer, which I neither knew the words to or wanted to recite.” Cecile told her teacher, “That’s not what we do in my family.” Her teacher replied, “Are you just trying to make trouble?” Cecile said that she “realized I really wasn’t trying to make trouble, but if she thought I was, then I guess I was and that was OK. And it sort of stuck.”

Cecile had an amazing pedigree as a good troublemaker, freethinker, feminist and progressive. As a teenager, the intrepid daughter of the intrepid Ann Richards



Cecile Richards holds her Forward Award that was presented to her by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor at FFRF’s national convention in 2018.

(the plainspoken first woman governor of Texas) helped Sarah Weddington (who argued *Roe v. Wade*) win a seat in the Texas House. Cecile became a labor organizer, assisted in getting her mother elected, and then, seeing the dangers of the Christian Coalition, founded the Texas Freedom Network, which is still going strong. Felicia Martin, president of Texas Freedom Network, said in a statement, “As we find ourselves in a moment not dissimilar to 1995, where religious extremism and a loud, vitriolic minority continue to chip away at our freedoms and attack our communities, we at TFN are honored to carry on the vital mission of the organization that Cecile so graciously started 30 years ago.”

Cecile then became such an effective deputy chief of staff to Rep. Nancy Pelosi that Pelosi once said of her, “She should be president.” If only. Never resting on her laurels, Cecile next founded America Votes, which is also still going strong. And, of course, she served for 12 years as president of Planned Parenthood.

Even while she fought a grueling cancer, Cecile was still speaking out, such as on behalf of Vice President Kamala Harris at the 2024 Democratic National Convention, and establishing reproductive rights organizations that tell the stories of women and abortion.

My own mother, Anne Nicol Gaylor, an early abortion rights activist who went on

to become the principal founder of FFRF, would have assented. Anne spoke daily for more than 30 years with callers seeking abortion funding through the other charity she founded, the Women’s Medical Fund, and always lamented the fact that women and their life experiences were being ignored in the abortion debate. Cecile warned in that last interview that, in addition to demanding we hear the experiences of those needing abortion care, “We also need to prepare people for a long fight in all 50 states.”

Cecile gave a gracious endorsement of FFRF in accepting our award. “When did this idea come up that there was one true way, one true religion?” Cecile asked. “Of course, religion was being used to go after women’s rights, to go after LGBTQ rights. It’s happening again more and more, and I’m so grateful for what you all do because [of] the hypocrisy of the evangelical community standing with a president who has thrown in their face every single tenet of what they purport to believe. If there were ever a time to really unmask the danger to people of having religion dictate government, this is it.” How unfortunate that her caveat in 2018 remains just as timely today.

Her husband and three children made a poignant statement urging that we “remember something she said a lot over the last year: It’s not hard to imagine future generations one day asking, ‘When there was so much at stake for our country, what did you do?’ The only acceptable answer is: ‘Everything we could.’”

Cecile Richards did absolutely everything she could to help improve and save our democracy. We must do everything we can to keep making trouble: standing up, speaking out and finding the courage to lead.

Bill Sperber

Longtime FFRF Member and former Executive Board member Bill Sperber died June 13, 2024, after a debilitating illness.

Born Feb. 15, 1941, in Wisconsin, Bill studied biological and chemical sciences at the University of Wisconsin, culminating in a Ph.D. in microbiology. During his career, he worked for three major food companies — Best Foods, Pillsbury and Cargill — and became one of the world’s experts in controlling microbiological safety and quality of foods. Bill was appointed five times to



Bill Sperber

the National Advisory Committee on Microbiological Criteria for Foods, and was recognized for his pioneering work at Pillsbury in the development of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points food safety program model. He was widely published in the field of microbiology, including research articles, book chapters and authored books.

He had high ethical standards and once threatened to have a “sit-in” at a factory if it did not correct problems before he left the inspection. He received numerous awards, including Food Safety Magazine Distinguished Service Award in 2004 and the IAFP President’s Lifetime Achievement Award in 2013. “Bill was a smart, kind, gentle human being,” said FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. Our condolences to his wife Renate, also a member of FFRF, and children Linda and Trent.

Cheryl Hofbauer

FFRF Lifetime Member Cheryl Ann Hofbauer, 74, of Peoria, Ill, died Jan. 4, 2025, at OSF St. Francis Medical Center in Peoria. She was born Jan. 11, 1950, in Champaign, Ill., to John Joseph and Betty Jane Green Violano.

Cheryl was never afraid to march to her own drum and stand behind her convictions and encouraged others to do the same. She retired from Caterpillar in 2006, where she was one of the first and



Cheryl Hofbauer

few women to complete the Caterpillar Apprenticeship and work in Skilled Trades.

She never did anything in moderation, including loving her family and friends fiercely. She enjoyed doting on her grandchildren, playing poker, playing games with her family, reading and supporting causes she believed in. She served as a secretary for the Peoria ACLU Chapter and was a Lifetime and After-Life member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

She lived across from Bradley Park, which she loved, for over 50 years, and a park bench in her honor can be found there which includes the quote from Robert G. Ingersoll “Happiness is the only good. The place to be happy is here. The time to be happy is now. The way to be happy is to make others so.”

Joan Lawson

Joan Lawson, a Lifetime Member since 2006, died Dec. 26, 2024.

She was born Joan Mirsepasy on Dec. 13, 1934, in Savannah, Ga., raised in Spokane, Wash., and lived in Maine, North Carolina and Washington.

Her political involvement began doorbelling for her father at age 13. She was a poll worker and became a district and county party leader, candidate and session aid in legislatures in Maine and



Joan Lawson

Washington.

The United Nations Association, Unitarian Universalist Service Committee, Planned Parenthood and the League of Women Voters benefited from her leadership. She loved bluegrass music, Bob Dylan, jigsaw puzzles, *The Nation* magazine, cruises, waterfalls and lighthouses.

Alfred Johnson

Lifetime Member and major FFRF donor Alfred Johnson, 86, of Madison, Wis., died Jan. 10, 2025, following ongoing health issues.

Alfred was born in Chicago on Nov. 20, 1938. He was a U.S. Army veteran, serving from 1958 to 1960 as a Specialist E-4. Alfred worked for nine years at the Illinois State Bank of Chicago, overlooking Grant Park. He



Alfred Johnson

vividly recalled the anti-war demonstrations in the park during the 1968 Democratic Convention. During his daily lunch breaks in Grant Park, Alfred became a lifelong birder. His favorite birds were the abundant and friendly warblers. In Madison, Alfred worked as a loan officer at First Federal Bank, then at IDL Mortgage, and retired from Anchor Bank after 38 years in the lending industry. During this time, Alfred was the president of the Optimist Club and was a lifelong optimist.

Alfred’s favorite charitable organizations included FFRF and Women’s Medical Fund, both founded by the late Anne Nicol Gaylor in Madison. Another favorite organization was Doctors Without Borders.

Thomas Hannie

Lifetime Member Thomas Joseph Hannie Jr., a revered psychologist, died Feb. 13, 2021, at the age of 83, and left a bequest for FFRF. His final days were spent in the company of his family and friends at his residence in his hometown of Baton Rouge, La.

Tommy graduated from Catholic High School in 1955. He then went on to earn his undergraduate degree from Louisiana State University and his Ph.D. from the University of Georgia. Tommy



Thomas Hannie

was a clinical/forensic psychologist for over 30 years in both New Orleans and Baton Rouge. He was a gregarious soul and a friend to all.

Dr. Hannie had a profound influence on the psychology profession in Louisiana and over the last half century was a cornerstone of change for many pivotal milestones in the profession.

He was a forensic psychologist and a true applied scientist who was also a fascinating person. He possessed a depth of experience that, coupled with his exceptional analytical thinking, gave him a keen ability to critique any point of law, psychology or philosophy.

Tom’s abilities were complemented by his sense of humor and a contagious enjoyment of life and living. He was just as likely to invite you over for an LSU football party as to correct your flawed logic on some matter, and his colleagues counted themselves lucky either way.

“Very few psychologists have ever had anything close to the impact he had on psychology in our state, and over a very long time period,” said colleague Dr. John Fanning.

As an LSU psychology undergraduate in the 1960s, Tom helped in the successful effort to pass the original Louisiana licensing law. In 1978, he served as president of the Louisiana Psychological Association.

Tom served on the Louisiana State Board of Examiners of Psychologists and was chair in 1982. Along with serving as president of the Louisiana Psychological

Association, he also served as the president of the Orleans Psychological Society and as president of the New Orleans Society of Clinical Hypnosis.

Over the years, Tom was a clinical fellow in the Behavior Therapy & Research Society, and a member of many organizations, including the Association for the Advancement of Behavior Therapy, the New Orleans Behavior Therapy Society, the Southeastern Association for Behavior Therapy, and the American Institute of Stress.

He was also a member of the American Psychology-Law Society, the International Association for the Study of Pain, and the Society for a Science of Clinical Psychology. He was a member of the American Psychological Association, the Southeastern Psychological Association, and the Southwestern Psychological Association.

Dr. Hannie was known for his analytical accuracy and precision. “Tom’s advice was always the best,” said Dr. Susan Andrews. “He forgot more psychology than most of us ever knew.”

During his long career, Tom consulted in over 2,000 criminal cases, and several thousand civil/worker’s compensation cases.

In 2007, Tom retired, and this allowed him more time to enjoy his considerable range of hobbies. He greatly enjoyed professional level gambling, he was a sports car enthusiast, and he loved sports, most especially LSU football.

Also during retirement, Tom had more time for volunteer civic activities. He was a member of FFRF since 2017, Baton Rouge Freethinkers and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

In 2011, he was instrumental in opposing a bill that would have created a Ten Commandments monument on the Capitol grounds. Legislators dropped HB 277 after receiving Tom’s detailed letter with legal references. Dr. Hannie pointed out that the Ten Commandments are a religious text and the posting would be “constitutionally suspect and an affront to religious liberty and diversity in Louisiana.”

In 2013, the Baton Rouge Advocate printed his letter to the editor, which included: “Maybe more important than teaching our children biology is teaching them the difference between science and religion, as it is obvious that too many of our citizens haven’t learned the difference.”



George Pedraja

anywhere around Seal Beach, you were bound to see him there dancing to the music. He lived in Tacoma Wash., Lake Tahoe and made Seal Beach his final home. He loved the beach life. He would throw parties during summertime. He walked his dog Corgo twice daily. He loves Dachshunds, and he would only name them Corgo. He was married once and, after 20 years, they divorced.

George Pedraja

FFRF Member George H. Pedraja, 92, died on May 2, 2024, at his home in Seal Beach, where he lived most of his life. FFRF acknowledges posthumously his generous bequest.

George was born March 26, 1932, and was raised in New York before moving to California. He had two brothers, who had moved to California earlier and started their families. He worked as an air traffic controller for FAA in El Segundo in the 1970s and retired in 1985.

George loved to sing and dance. He was a nature lover and seasoned traveler. If there was a band playing

Stephen Kern

Lifetime Member Stephen Jeremy Kern died on June 5, 2024. Steve is survived by his brother, Mike, and Mike’s family and by his favorite bridge player and loving friend, Jane Malless.

In the public obituary, his family wrote: “In lieu of prayer, please con-

sider the thoughts of Roman philosopher-poet, Lucretius: ‘Life is a gift to no one. It is merely a loan. Look back in time. How untroubled, how care-free before our birth. In this way Nature holds before us a mirror image of our future after death. Is that so grim? So dreary? Is it not a rest more free from care than any sleep?’”

FFRF is very grateful to receive a major bequest from Steve’s estate.



Robert ‘Bob’ Dufek

Robert ‘Bob’ Dufek

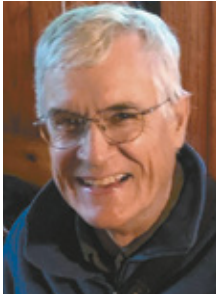
Lifetime Member Robert Charles Dufek died April 3, 2024, of complications from appendicitis.

He was born July 10, 1939, to Charles “Chas” James and Margaret Peters Dufek in Milwaukee.

Bob’s maternal grandfather, Otto Peters, a woodworker and gifted woodcarver, came to this country from Germany, settling in Milwaukee. Bob’s father’s large family, originally from Czechoslovakia, emigrated to the Lake Superior region near Ashland, Wis., with its various lake industries, fishing, shipping and the coal docks. Bob’s father moved as a young man to Milwaukee and married. Early on, Bob, hungry for knowledge and the world, and needing perhaps to have a little of his exuberance tamed, was sent to a private Catholic school, St. Norbert’s, in De Pere, Wis. From there, he went to the University

Michael Killian

Michael David Killian, age 73, died in Spotsylvania County, Va., on May 22, 2024, after a battle with brain cancer.



Michael Killian

Michael “Mike” was born on Feb. 20, 1951, in Lincolnton, N.C., to William David and Helen (Houser) Killian. He graduated from West Lincoln High School in 1969 and attended UNC-Chapel Hill.

Suzanne Shynne

FFRF Member Suzanne Tucker Shynne died at home in San Diego, on Nov. 15, 2022. She was born in 1947 in Greenville, S.C., to Ansel and Hellon (Reeves) Tucker.

Suzanne attended Westville Elementary, and, after graduating from Carolina High School, earned a bachelor of arts degree at Winthrop.



Suzanne Shynne

After moving to California in 1973, she earned an MBA at San Jose State. She retired from the city of San Jose after working many years as a budget analyst. Over the years, she enjoyed swing dancing, trad jazz, golfing, hiking, traveling (climbing the Sydney Bridge

of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, and, in the early 1960s, became the first in his family to earn a college degree. He often said how proud he was that his daughter earned a master’s degree, and his grandchildren are working toward advanced degrees in science and engineering.

Not long after graduating from college, Bob married and moved to New York City to hear real jazz, haunt the great museums and explore the city’s streets with his camera. There, he also discovered a lifelong fascination with motorcycles, and, in 1967, moved to Sea Cliff on Long Island to freelance at Cycle Magazine.

For more than 45 years, Bob was an industrial and commercial real estate broker, starting at the Polacheck Company, and moving on to several other firms, and then opening Dufek Realty. He was mentor to a number of young brokers, who describe him as a master of the art of the deal. He was consistently at the top of the Milwaukee market.

Bob was also very active in his community. He belonged to Shorewood Men’s Club, Shorewood Tennis Club and Milwaukee Mensa. In addition to motorcycling, he kept a boat at the Milwaukee Yacht Club, worked on his golf game at Black Wolf Run, and had a passion for target-shooting with friends at the Waukesha Gun Club.

Bob had a wide range of interests. He subscribed to — and read — four newspapers and always had a stack of books by his chair. He was an atheist and active member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and left it a very sizable bequest.

tension Service, he obtained a master’s degree in entomology from N.C. State.

On May 23, 1981, Mike married Joella Marie Chambers. They enjoyed traveling and exploring the natural world. Mike taught biology and chemistry at Courtland High School in Spotsylvania County and finished his teaching career at the University of Mary Washington as a senior lecturer in the Department of Biological Sciences.

Mike was a plant person at heart, but he loved to go fishing and play in any river, stream, swamp or marsh. He liked to believe that musical theater was the highest art form and regularly attended productions at UMW and the Riverside Dinner Theater. Mike and Joella were both members of FFRF. Mike was also a member of the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Fredericksburg and Fredericksburg Secular Humanists.

in 2017), playing piano and ukulele, sewing, reading and volunteering in a variety of ways. Her activities over the last few years were severely limited by debilitating weight loss and glaucoma.

Laura Larsson

Generous FFRF benefactor Laura Christine Larsson died Nov. 26, 2023, in Chehalis, Wash., her home of 18 years. She was born Nov. 11, 1945, in Ontario, Canada. Laura was a college research librarian who loved reading, researching, cooking, wool working, farming, new ideas, community outreach and creating opportunities for women. She was a kind, generous, caring person who went above and beyond for those in need, whether or not she had known them long. She was predeceased by her husband, Charles Sverre Hendrickson.

Atheist chaplains are forging a new path

This article first appeared on CNN.com and is reprinted with permission.

By Harmeet Kaur

Jason Callahan spends much of his days at the bedsides of people nearing the end of life. A chaplain in the palliative care unit of a hospital cancer center, Callahan supports patients and their loved ones as they confront some of life’s most challenging crises: How will I cope with the pain and suffering that accompanies this advanced illness? Did I do right by my dying family member? Did I experience and accomplish everything I wanted to? What will happen after I die?

Callahan isn’t afraid of digging into the deep stuff. In fact, he runs toward it. Sometimes, though, he’ll encounter



Harmeet Kaur

patients who brush him off when they learn he’s a chaplain — they aren’t believers, they tell him, and aren’t particularly in the mood for a sermon. He isn’t there to preach or pray, he reassures them. His job is to be there for them as a human being: To listen and to comfort them through whatever they’re struggling with.

In these conversations with patients who are wary of religion, Callahan slips in another detail: He’s an atheist himself.

Callahan is one of a growing number of openly atheist chaplains working in institutions around the country. Though the term “atheist chaplain” might sound like an oxymoron, he doesn’t see a contradiction between his beliefs and the work of tending to the human spirit.

“Being an atheist, nonbeliever, unfiliated, whatever you want to call yourself, lends itself really well to chaplaincy because we naturally don’t project our own stuff on the people,” he says.

Callahan’s role reflects a broader trend in society. About 28 percent of adults in the United States belong to a group known as the religious “Nones,” meaning they identify as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular,” according to Pew Research Center.

But even as the population moves away from religion, the desire for spirituality and connectedness remains. Pew’s survey indicates about half of Nones describe themselves as spiritual or say spirituality is important to them.

Fundamental questions that faith has long answered — from why we’re here and what it means to live a meaningful life — are just as urgent and relevant for the nonreligious, especially as humanity grapples with existential threats and technological advances that are reshaping our world in ways that are still unclear.

Chaplains like Callahan are helping people make sense of them.

Nonreligious spiritual care

Callahan is a chaplain at the Virginia Commonwealth University Massey Cancer Center, though this wasn’t necessarily a profession he imagined for himself.

Despite attending a Presbyterian church growing up, Callahan says religion never appealed to him. He realized early on that he didn’t believe in a higher power, and he felt the messaging around faith was “too soft” for a self-described



Image by Shutterstock

“street dude” and boxer like him.

Still, when he found himself in an advertising career that ultimately left him unfulfilled, he turned to his old pastor for guidance. When she told him he had a call to ministry, he was puzzled by the suggestion: What exactly did a call to ministry mean for an avowed atheist?

Callahan kept an open mind. The pastor advised that he obtain a master of divinity degree to open up a number of career paths, leading him to enroll in seminary. He thought he might eventually work as a community organizer or at a social justice-oriented nonprofit until, as part of his spiritual training, he spent a stint as a hospital chaplain at VCU.

There, he felt he found his calling.

The hospital, he says, was a microcosm of the city — a place where staff worked together across disciplines to provide care and where people of different backgrounds connected on a human level. Unlike traditional religious institutions where he felt he’d be isolated, Callahan says he saw a path at the hospital to serve people’s spiritual needs without all the baggage of religion.

“Chaplaincy opens up a door to living life and being raw,” he says. “You can’t get that in the churches.”

Though he’s an atheist, Callahan likens his approach to chaplaincy to the biblical figure of David, the courageous shepherd. He’s fiercely protective of his flock, and he’s willing to traverse difficult terrain alongside people who are suffering, no matter who they are or what they believe.

The difference between Callahan and his religious counterparts is his emphasis on life here and now, without concern for a higher power. And where religiously affiliated chaplains might lean on the teachings of their faith to guide others through crises, Callahan says he draws

on the philosophies of Muhammad Ali, Malcolm X and Tupac Shakur.

“Every single thing that a religious person experiences, nonreligious people experience, too,” Callahan says. “It’s just learning how to translate and speak that language in a way that makes sense.”

Chaplaincy has evolved

Chaplaincy, which arose from Christian traditions, grew into an established profession in the mid-20th century as Protestant theological educators who were wary of outside influences in spiritual matters sought to train their students to offer support in nonreligious settings.

Early chaplains were volunteer or retired clergy who made brief visits to patients from the same religious backgrounds and conducted rituals. As the profession became more institutionalized and chaplains became fixtures in hospitals and the military, they increasingly helped people grapple with moral questions and listened to their fears.

As U.S. demographics changed throughout the 20th century, the field expanded to encompass faiths outside Protestantism. Today, there are chaplains who are Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu or, like Callahan, of no religion at all.

But for the most part, becoming a chaplain for atheists and the nonreligious still involves religion. A typical path to chaplaincy involves getting a master’s degree from a divinity school or seminary, which were historically meant to prepare people for Christian ministry.

While some theological schools now offer programs for people of other faiths, few programs cater to the nonreligious — though Callahan says there has been talk around developing chaplaincy programs specifically for people who haven’t followed traditionally religious paths.

Even as the field is evolving and diversi-

fying, many people still think of chaplains as religious leaders (Christians at that), says Michael Skaggs, director of the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab. He and his colleagues take a much more expansive view: Modern-day chaplains should be able to serve people of all worldviews and traditions, and at the same time, atheists and nonreligious people should be represented in the field of spiritual care.

“There is a real power dynamic at play if someone is themselves atheist and they’re in need of some sort of support,” he says. “If there’s no one out there that shares their outlook on the world, it’s really difficult to feel supported.”

Helping find meaning

Greg Epstein, a humanist chaplain at Harvard University and MIT (some atheist chaplains prefer to identify as humanists), describes himself as “clergy for the nonreligious.”

Epstein was raised in a Jewish household and grew up in the religiously diverse New York neighborhood of Flushing, Queens. Early on, he says he came to understand that people — regardless of their religion — are more alike than different, bound together by a shared humanity. As he studied religion in college and graduate school, he grew captivated by the question of what gives life meaning and eventually discovered the field of secular chaplaincy.

Since he took on his position at Harvard in 2005, Epstein says he’s observed that secular society sometimes lacks the

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sense of purpose and connectedness that the religious find in their faith communities. Over the years, he’s tried a number of approaches to fill that void.

For a time, Epstein formed an alternative congregation, bringing nonreligious people together on Sunday afternoons for music, poetry and storytelling and for community service projects. But as society experienced monumental shifts — from the growing existential threat of climate change to the pervasive influence of technology in daily life — he felt its sense of connectedness was disrupted. True spiritual healing, he eventually concluded, wouldn’t come from replicating religious practices but from facing those realities head on.

These days, Epstein mostly meets with students one-on-one or in small groups to talk about what a fulfilling life looks like in the face of extraordinary change — the demand is so great that he says it’s hard to find an empty slot on his calendar.

Students frequently raise fears and anxieties about how they can best position themselves for success and opportunity, which Epstein feels are stemming from greater uncertainties about the direction the world is heading (a subject that he explores in his recently published book “Tech Agnostic: How Technology Became the World’s Most Powerful Religion, and Why It Desperately Needs a Reformation”).

“I really want students to step back from the treadmill for a while and ask them-



Image by Shutterstock

selves: Why am I studying so hard? Why am I working so hard? Why am I trying so hard to be successful?” he says.

Other atheist chaplains don’t shy away from religion at all, instead helping people explore faith and spirituality in nontraditional ways.

Vanessa Gomez-Brake, a humanist chaplain and senior associate dean of religious life at the University of Southern California, says more than half the student population she serves isn’t affiliated with a particular religion, though many are interested in connecting with their spiritual side. Responding to those desires, she and a colleague introduced a semiregular event on campus in which students can ex-

plore the metaphysical through astrology, tarot and crystals.

“We’re at a point in our society where we need to come up with new language,” she adds. “What is this meaning making if it doesn’t involve a religious institution?”

Becoming more relevant

There’s no official data on how many atheist or humanist chaplains are working across the country. But as society becomes less religious, the field of chaplaincy is likely to follow, says Skaggs, of the Chaplaincy Innovation Lab.

Epstein is already noticing an uptick. When he first entered the pro-

fession, he says most atheists and agnostics didn’t know chaplaincy was an option for them. Now, people constantly reach out to him to learn more about the field.

Already, atheist and humanist chaplains are taking on prominent roles: Epstein made national headlines in 2021 when he was named president of Harvard University’s organization of chaplains. Gomez-Brake is the first humanist to serve as dean of religious life at any U.S. university.

“I liken humanist chaplaincy to astronauts,” Epstein adds. “There’s not that many of us. You can’t just meet one of us wherever you go.”

“And yet . . . I see us as having a tremendous impact on the culture around us and on people’s overall sense of what is humanly possible.”

Callahan agrees. The world is changing, and society is changing with it. People are on edge, lonely and isolated — and many are no longer turning to traditional religion for solace and comfort. There may be few atheist and nonreligious chaplains right now, but as Callahan sees it, their numbers only stand to grow.

“As we become more and more personally disconnected, we need those people that specialize in people,” he says.

Harmeet Kaur is a culture writer for CNN.

Activities of nonreligious are ‘pretty tame’

This article first appeared Nov. 18, 2024, on Religion News Service and is reprinted with permission.

By Jana Riess

Picture bacchanalian revels, wine, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll! That’s what people who leave religion are up to, right? Without the moral strictures of religion, and with all that additional time they would have spent on being religious, nothing’s holding them back.



Jana Riess

Or maybe not. In “Goodbye Religion: The Causes and Consequences of Secularization,” sociologists Ryan Cragun and Jesse M. Smith say the reality is actually pretty boring. The book is an informative and often entertaining read that is chock-full of data and interviews with nonreligious Americans.

They’re actually pretty tame. Despite many religious Americans’ idea that people leave religion because they wanted to sin, “it’s a fairly boring story,” Smith said in a recent interview. He and Cragun studied data about time usage in America and found that nonreligious



Image by Shutterstock

people use their extra time on Sundays to . . . do more laundry, basically.

“They’re just doing normal things, right? None of it is crazy. They’re not out at the bars spending hours and hours. They’re spending a little bit more time with their family and a little bit more outdoors. They go hiking, they watch more TV and they get more work done,” Smith said.

Oh, and, according to the book, they might be a tiny bit more statistically likely to be having sex. Perhaps in between loads of laundry.

Leaving religion is not just for white men anymore, if it ever was. In past years, the archetype of someone who left religion was a young, well-educated white male. To-

day, the nonreligious look as diverse as the general population, a function of more and more people either leaving religion (religious exiters) or being born into nonreligious families (cradle “Nones”). As a result, said Cragun, “Just focusing on demographics doesn’t tell us very much.”

That’s not to say there aren’t other “push” factors, such as being politically or socially liberal. “People are increasingly finding that religious teachings are out of step with their actual political and social beliefs,” said Smith. The authors label this as “value misalignment.”

For example, 79 percent of nonreligious Americans don’t consider homosexual sex to be wrong, but only 45 percent of religious Americans see it that way. Religious people are significantly more likely to oppose abortion, gender equality and same-sex marriage.

When people experience too much value misalignment and find themselves disagreeing more and more with their religion’s political stances, they’re more likely to head for the doors.

There are also strong “pull” factors. “A lot of the literature looks at deconversion,” Smith said, but focusing only on the “push factors” — the things that people found unattractive about religion — ignores the corresponding “pull factors.” These include having more meaningful things to

do with their time, having the autonomy to make their own decisions and being able to embrace a modern worldview.

Younger people are driving a good deal of this. “Generational change is one of the biggest mechanisms of secularization,” Cragun explained. “This is not a ‘failure to transmit’ religion. This is parents granting their kids autonomy, which is a modern value that people have. And as a result, when you give kids autonomy, if they have a choice to go to church or stay home and play video games, it’s not a hard choice for most kids, right? Most kids are gonna make that decision pretty quickly.” Video games for the win.

Even religious Americans may not be as religious as we imagine. In the time usage data mentioned above, only 12 percent of Americans were doing anything religious on a given weekday, like praying, reading religious texts or attending religious meetings. Even on Sundays, it was only 17 percent. “That’s it,” said Cragun. “And literally, the survey has got everything. That includes waiting in line to get into your church service, or waiting in line in your car to turn into the parking lot to get into your church service. Like, that’s how detailed it is. It’s a shockingly small number. We were both surprised when we saw this.”

Nonreligious people don’t have a “religion-shaped hole” in their lives. One of the main ideas the authors challenge is that nonreligious people are somehow defective, or that they’re missing the presence of God or religion in their lives. The majority are not, said Smith. “They find meaning in life, they find beauty. They’ll make these sweeping statements about the majesty of the cosmos itself, and about their smallness in it. They talk about how people have to take responsibility for their own destinies and their own lives. They say, ‘Not only is it not bad to be without religion, but I haven’t lost anything. In many ways I’ve gained a wider view.’”

Jana Riess is a columnist for Religion News Service.

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LETTERBOX

Biblical measurements don't measure up

Would you trust a religion with primitive measurements? I Kings 7:26 measures the distance of a large basin [molten sea] to be “the thickness of a handbreadth” [A handbreadth was the width of 4 fingers. So, the basin was 4 fingers wide.]

And Genesis 21:16 has Hagar sitting “a good way off from her son, about the distance of a bowshot.”

The people claiming to know everything about the universe use hand width and bow shots for their measurements. You can't get more primitive than that, unless you used your fingers to do math problems at schools.

And the House speaker wants to base his legislation on this primitive book! Nonsense!

Indiana

Grateful for all the work FFRF does

As I have said before, I am exceedingly grateful for FFRF. For all FFRF staff and supporters, and for all the work you do, our country and world need you more than ever! I remain very proud to be a Life Member.

Maryland

Cenedella's art, column appreciated in paper

Thank you for featuring artist Bob Cenedella in your December issue of Freethought Today. I am a big fan of Georg Grosz, but somehow, despite living in and around New York City all my adult life, had never encountered Cenedella's wonderful and trenchant art work. I enjoyed his column, and have since learned a lot about his work and life through online resources.

It strikes me as absolutely outrageous that the Saatchi gallery, which has featured animal carcasses and cadaver heads in their art exhibitions, would recoil at Cenedella's honest and deeply felt depiction of the state of Christianity today. As Bob would probably say, “It's all about the money,” and Saatchi knows what sort of public controversy boosts or deflates their sales. His remarks about the art world in the documentary about him, “Art Bastard,” are wonderfully on point, as is his argument about religious censorship of (his) art in the article. Thanks again for bringing attention to Bob Cenedella, a great American artist!

I enjoy reading Freethought To-



day, and I look forward to making extra contributions to FFRF in the coming years to combat the arriving wave of theocratic bunkum under the Trump administration.

New Jersey

We need FFRF to keep fighting the good fight

Keep up the good fight! We heartily endorse and follow all of the battles that you folks undertake on behalf of religious freedom for our often defenseless fellow citizens.

With Trump 2.0 and Project 2025 and the respective ongoing threats, we can predict that the situation may well get worse before it gets better. That is all the more reason to keep up the fight and never give up. We thank you all at FFRF for being at the forefront of the resistance! It matters so much.

Washington, D.C.

In Persona Christi, and other fallacies

The Catholic religion (about which I have become increasingly familiar by listening to the right-wing Catholic station, Relevant Radio) is literally — there's only one word for it — spooky. Much of what I hear falls under the category of “you can't make this stuff up,” but of course, it is completely made up, all the while faithfully and blindly, accepted as fact by large number of adherents. I guess they must “suspend their disbelief” in practicing this religion, much as we do when encountering an unrealistic plot twist in a B-grade movie.

Here's are four interesting “facts,” among many, I have learned by tuning into the station.

- (It's become much more entertaining than listening to the news, now that he-who-shall-not-be-named is once again afflicting the nation.
- In Persona Christi, meaning “in the person of Christ,” refers to the phenomenon of Christ and his dad, God, speaking through a priest during the rite of confession. Maybe the Holy Ghost — pardon me, the Holy Spirit — also speaks at this time, but if it (he, she?) doesn't, it may feel neglected, since it is part of so-called Trinity, so essential to Catholic dogma. (Why have one god when you can have three, rolled into one?) Never having been to confession, I assume the priest's voice remains the same, unlike people “speaking in tongues” at tent revivals, or the devil-possessed daughter in the movie “Rosemary's Baby.”
 - Miracles are real; you better believe it. Resorting to reverse logic, the fact that miracles leave room for doubt is somehow supposed to make them more believable. Don't get hung up because they seem outside of the realm of the possible. If a miracle can be explained by scientific reasoning, then it's not a miracle. As long as it holds up to mysterious theological investigations by the Church, then presto: it's a miracle!
 - Roman Catholicism is the one true faith, created by Jesus through his club of 12 apostles who then went out and spread the word. Historically, though, it is said to be founded by Pope Gregory I in 590 A.D. By the way, if you're not Catholic, don't worry, for Catholicism says we can all go to heaven: Just get baptized — any bath tub will do — and say you love God. Easy.
 - “For all the saints, who from their labors rest” is the opening line of a hymn I used to sing when attend-

ing obligatory chapel at an Episcopal boarding school many years ago. They are “resting” because they are dead, but according to the Catholic Church they aren't dead, but very much alive along with, of course, God, Christ, the amorphous Holy Spirit, Virgin Mary, Satan, and all the angels. And when (or if) you get to heaven, all of them will surround you, all worshipping God. Wear your ear plugs; It'll be noisy.

This is indeed spooky stuff, beliefs I thought went out with the Salem witch trials, but which are essential to Catholicism. I should have included witches in the above list because according to Relevant Radio, “Anyone can be a witch, regardless of their gender, identity or background.” I'm glad to hear that this station and the religion it represents are practicing diversity, equity and inclusion.

Maine

How is pope worthy of Medal of Freedom?

President Biden awarded Pope Francis the Presidential Medal of Freedom. I guess this is in recognition of the pope's outspoken opposition to abortion and birth control, LGBTQ rights, including of course gay marriage, the separation of church and state, and his advocacy of open borders and taxpayer support for Catholic schools.

Biden could not travel to Rome to kiss the ring and present the medal personally due to the Los Angeles wildfires, but it's the thought that counts.

New York

A new pledge for a dis-united country

“I pledge allegiance to the flag Of the Dis-united States of America, And to the memory of the democracy invented here, Two nations, divided by religion, under-educated, With liberty and justice for straight white religious males.”

Thank you, FFRF, for continuing to produce the glue that connects us all.

Pennsylvania

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Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Oct. 17-19, 2025

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A concise case against Christianity

By Miklos Jako

From my decades of debating Christians, here are the arguments that I find make them most uncomfortable. On each topic I present the criticism, the Christian response, and then a rebuttal to their response.

Male chauvinism

Criticism: I can't believe in a religion that does not regard men and women to be of equal value.

Christian: But Christianity does regard them as equal. The bible says God created both men and women in the image of God.

Rebuttal: That's nice rhetoric, but the bible also says a woman who gives birth to a male child is unclean for seven days, whereas if it's a female child, she is unclean for 14 days. How is that not male chauvinism?

The New Testament says, "The head of every man is Christ, the head of woman is man." That is unequal value to me. [Gen1:27, Lev 12:2-5, 1 Cor 11:3]

False prophecies

Criticism: I think your prophecies don't hold up.

Christian: Oh, there are hundreds of prophecies that have come true! Very specific prophecies, like the Bethlehem prophecy and the virgin birth prophecy.

Rebuttal: The Bethlehem prophecy cannot be valid because that messiah was supposed to be a military leader. Jesus was not a military leader. And the virgin birth prophecy cannot be valid, because that messiah was supposed to be a sign unto King Ahaz. Ahaz died 700 years before Jesus was born.

Ezekiel predicted that the country of Egypt would be uninhabited for a 40-year period. That never happened. [Mic 5:2-6, Jn 7:42; Isa 7:14, Mt 1:22-23; Ezek 29:10-11]

Cryptogram answer

In the best case, faith leaves otherwise well-intentioned people incapable of thinking rationally about many of their deepest concerns; at worst, it is a continuous source of human violence.

— Sam Harris

Crossword answers

B	O	M	B		U	M	A		T	A	L	C			
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D	E	A	N				I	T	S			S	L	E	D



Image by Shutterstock

Science

Criticism: Shouldn't a true religion not contradict science?

Christian: Christianity doesn't contradict science. You have to understand that much of the bible is written in symbolic language.

Rebuttal: Even if referring to the "pillars of the Earth" is symbolic language, it is incorrect symbolism. The Earth is not set on a supportive structure.

And Moses cannot have gone 40 days without water, because humans cannot go that long without water. And ostriches described as uncaring parents is scientifically flat wrong. These claims show the bible was written by man, not by an omniscient deity. [1 Sam 2:8, Ex 34:28, Job 39:14-16]

Homosexuality

Criticism: I think the bible's condemnation of homosexuality is sheer bigotry.

Liberal Christian: Jesus never said anything against homosexuality.

Rebuttal: He spoke out against homosexuality, very loudly, by his silence. Jesus believed in the Old Testament scripture. [Lev 18:22]

Prayer

Criticism: Jesus completely oversells the power of prayer.

Christian: Jesus promised your prayers will be answered, but sometimes the answer is no, sometimes the answer is wait. But ultimately our prayers are answered in the afterlife, in heaven.

Rebuttal: Jesus didn't just promise prayers would be "answered," he promised they would be granted. He said, "Whatever things you ask in prayer, believing, you will receive." And he did not

qualify his words by saying "ultimately," or make any reference to an afterlife when he spoke about prayer. [Mt 21:21-22, Mk 11:24]

Jesus

Criticism: I can't believe in Jesus because he taught seriously wrong ideas.

Christian: But Jesus is universally regarded as a great moral teacher, even by non-Christians. What was he wrong about?

Rebuttal: He taught that belief is more important than behavior. The thief on the cross goes to heaven, after a lifetime of harming people. Yet the good atheist goes to hell, after a lifetime of helping people. I think that is a profound perversion of morality. Kindness is the prime virtue, not credulity. [Jn 3:18, Luke 23:41-43]

He thought the world would end in his generation. It did not. And it makes no sense to warn the apostles, urgently, about the world going to end 2,000 years in the future. [Mt 24:34, Mk 9:1, Mk 13:30]

He taught hell for non-believers. That's a teaching only a religious extremist can hold. That is what I think Jesus was, a religious extremist. He constantly overstated for the sake of impact at the expense of truth and reason. [Mk 9:43, Mt 25:46, Lk 16:24]

Theology

Criticism: I think Christian theology is irrational.

Christian: But Jesus showed his profound love for us by dying for our sins, reconciling us with God.

Rebuttal: No one can die for someone else's sin. We are all responsible for our own behavior. As for propitiating God by a human sacrifice, Christopher Hitchens had it right: "Vicarious redemption by human sacrifice is a very primitive and horrible scapegoating idea that belongs to a barbaric period of human history."

Contradictions

Criticism: Shouldn't a true religion not contradict itself?

Christian: You'll find that if you look into passages more carefully, there are really no contradictions in the bible.

Rebuttal: That's not what I found. I know you have a million "could have been" scenarios to allegedly resolve contradictions. But, the fact that so many of these problems exist is not a good sign. You tell me how David can have committed "only" one sin (Bathsheba) all his life, yet have committed another one (taking a census against God's will). You cannot "resolve" that contradiction. [1 Kg 15:5, 2 Sam 24:10]

Immoralities

Criticism: Your god condones deeply immoral behavior.

Christian: It may seem to be so, but when you read about the killing of the Canaanites, or about slavery, in the bible, you have to understand the cultural context of the time.

Rebuttal: No, I don't. Cultural context is irrelevant. These are the specific commands of your God, who orders the Hebrews to slaughter the Canaanites, right down to the very last infant and animal. And on slavery, he condones the owning of people as "property." The entire edifice of Christianity falls on that one word, "property." Human beings are not property. [1 Sam 15:3, Lev 25:44-46]

Hell

Criticism: I think the doctrine of hell is an unconscionable idea.

Christian: Hell is separation from God. And God gives us free will. People put themselves in hell by their own free-will choice.

Rebuttal: That is a dodge. Free will is not the issue. The obscene severity of the punishment is the issue. Christians are always quick to define hell as separation from God in order to avoid the specific imagery of fire, flame and furnace that Jesus uses. That's serious, serious pain. And it is forever. [Rev 20:10]

To believe that a god who has a hell is a loving god is insanity. That is a god of hatred, not love. Atheist YouTuber "Number One Son" says: "All the kind and gentle words of Jesus cannot possibly compensate for the evil that is eternal punishment."

...

I hope you find these arguments useful when you engage with Christians, and I do encourage you to engage with Christians. Separation of church and state is important, but so is refuting Christianity itself.

FFRF member Miklos Jako is a retired teacher who has the website confrontingbelievers.com.

We've joined Instagram!

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

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100th anniversary of historic trial

Sign up now for Scopes Centennial event



A sign on the courthouse grounds tells of the historical Scopes trial.

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

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

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

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

Edward Larson, who wrote the 1998 Pulitzer Prize-winning “Summer for the

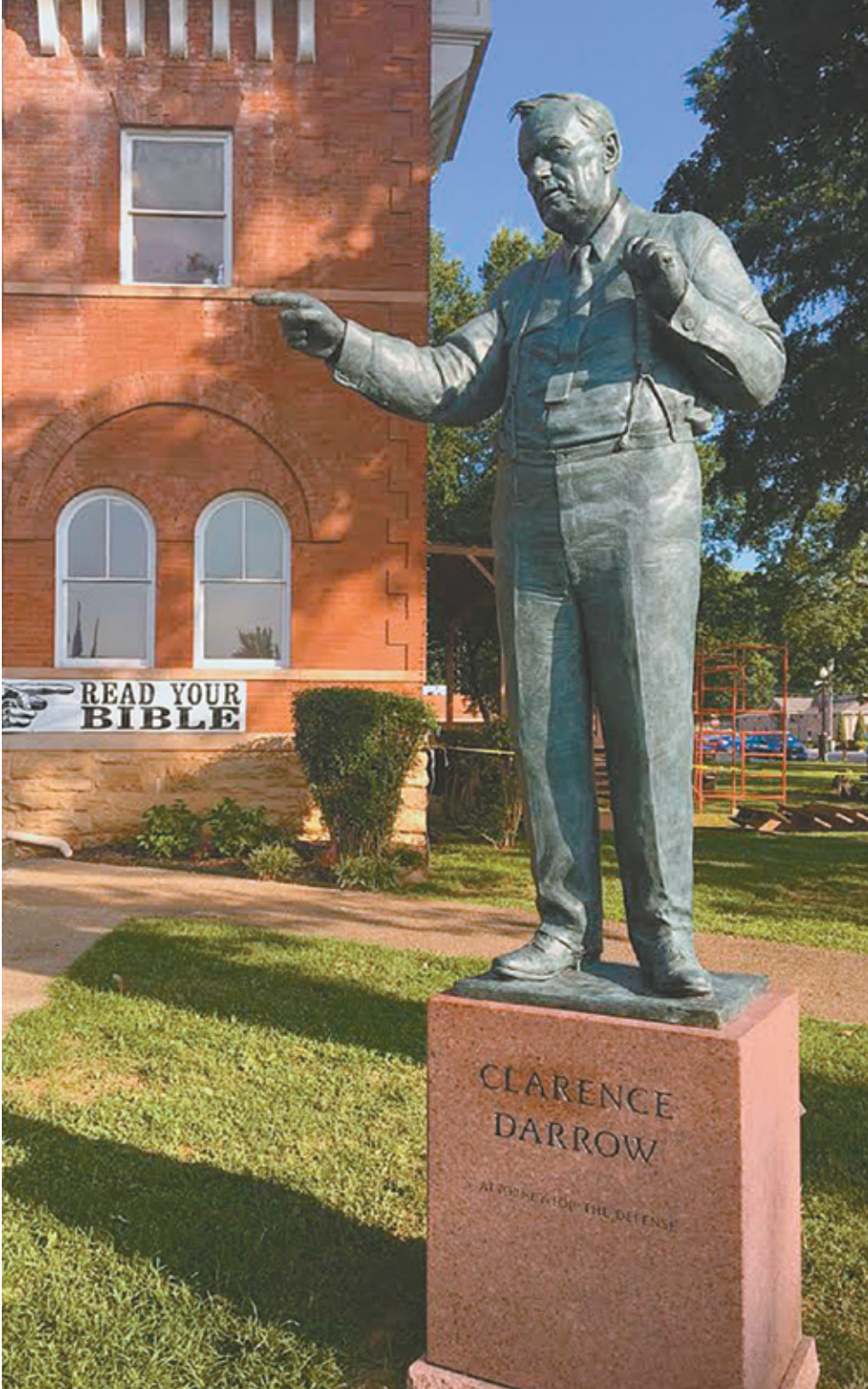
Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion,” will be presented with the “Clarence Darrow Award,” and Judge Jones will receive the “Defender of the Constitution Award.”

Additional featured speakers include **Richard Katskee** of Duke’s Appellate Litigation Clinic and former vice president and legal director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, who helped argue against intelligent design in the Dover case; **Katherine Stewart**, award-winning journalist and author who has covered religious nationalism for over 15 years; **Bertha Vazquez**, the award-winning science educator who heads the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science (TIES); **Susan Jacoby**, New York Times bestselling author and secularist; and **Chris Cameron**, history professor and author of “Black Freethinkers.” The marvelously funny **Leighann Lord** will entertain and also emcee the event. Other entertainment will include internationally known jazz singer **Tahira Clayton** singing popular songs from 1925, accompanied on the piano by FFRF Co-President **Dan Barker**.

In a CFI-only hosted event that all conference-goers are invited to attend that will take place separately Sunday morning, famed evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins will present the eponymous Richard Dawkins Award on behalf of the Center for Inquiry to Columbia University linguistics professor and New York Times columnist John McWhorter. The two will engage in an on-stage conversation.

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

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



A statue of Clarence Darrow, created by Zeno Frudakis and installed by FFRF in 2017, stands outside the Rhea County Courthouse in Dayton, Tenn.

Hotel information

July 18 – 20 (Friday – Sunday)

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1201 Broad Street

Chattanooga, TN 37402

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

Reserve your room

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

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

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

Reservation cut-off date

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

