

# FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**Coaches, stop pushing religion on athletes**

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**100 years later, the struggle continues**

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**High school essay contest winners named**

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## Evolution of a trial

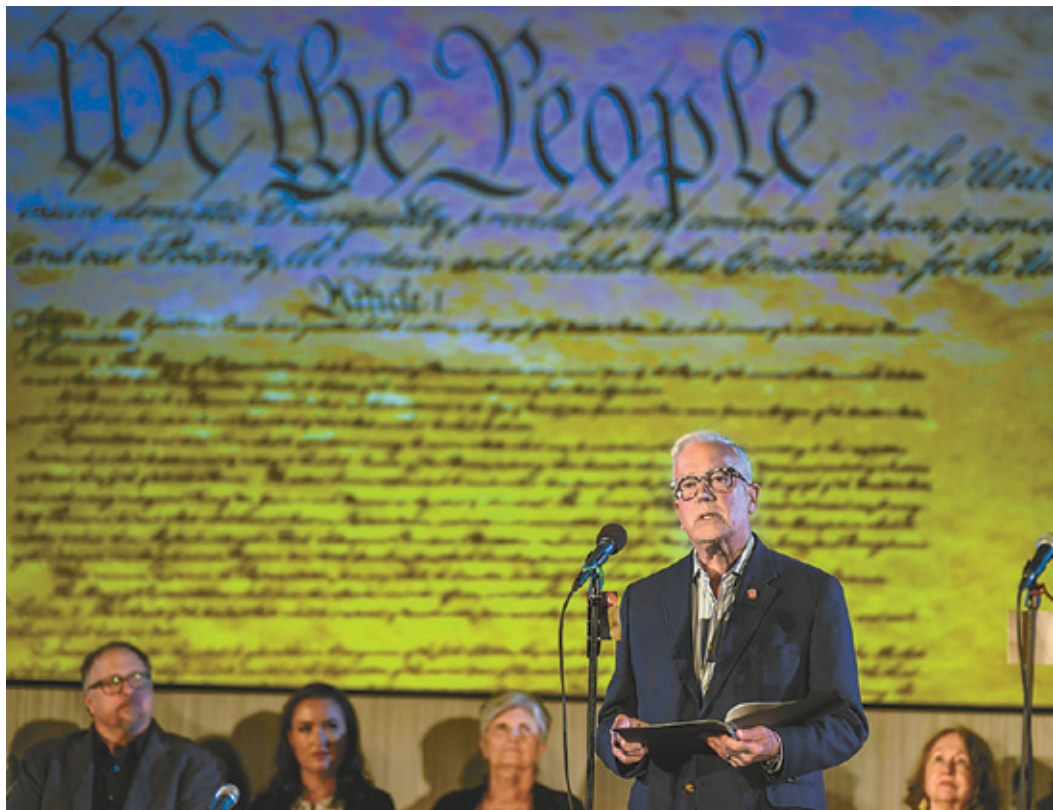


Photo by Chris Line

Judge John E. Jones III, who presided over the 2005 landmark case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover School District*, reads from his decision in that lawsuit at the Scopes Trial Centennial celebration in Chattanooga, Tenn., on July 19. Jones' ruling stated that it was unconstitutional to teach "intelligent design" within a public school science curriculum. In the Scopes trial 100 years ago in Dayton Tenn., teacher John C. Scopes was accused of violating a Tennessee state law which outlawed the teaching of human evolution in public schools. For more from the three-day Scopes convention, which was co-hosted by FFRF and CFI, see pages 8-13.

## Lawsuit dropped after Ten Commandments monument taken down

Following the removal of a large Ten Commandments monument from the lawn of the Jefferson County (Ill.) Courthouse, a coalition of multid denominational plaintiffs has withdrawn a lawsuit challenging the display.

Represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the ACLU of Illinois and the ACLU, a multifaith group of residents in Jefferson County, Ill., filed suit on June 9 in state court, challenging Jefferson County Sheriff Jeff Bullard's placement of the nearly 7-foot-tall bible monolith at the county courthouse in Mount Vernon. The lead plaintiff was Pastor Lynn Neal. Other plaintiffs included two lifelong Catholic residents, a Presbyterian deacon, an agnostic, a humanist Unitarian and an atheist taxpayer.

The lawsuit noted that the Ten Commandments monument on government property violated Article X, section 3, of the Illinois Constitution, barring government funds, property, resources or time "for any



**Only a concrete pad remains where the monument once stood on the courthouse grounds.**

sectarian purpose."

During a late June meeting immediately after the lawsuit was filed, the members of the Jefferson County Board of Commissioners who had initially approved the erection of the Ten Commandments monument on courthouse property voted to remove it. The monument was recently relocated to a more appropriate

*See Monument on page 7*

## Walters' FFRF suit dismissed

In a big win for freedom of speech, a federal judge dismissed on Aug. 14 a lawsuit against the Freedom from Religion Foundation by Oklahoma State Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters.

The suit, filed on March 31 at the behest of co-plaintiffs Walters and the Oklahoma State Department of Education, sought to punish FFRF for sending advocacy letters to school districts objecting to religious activity in public schools. The American Civil Liberties Union and its Oklahoma affiliate, which represented FFRF in the lawsuit, filed a motion to dismiss in May, arguing that the

suit was a frivolous attempt to silence protected speech.

U.S. District Judge John Heil III, a Trump appointee, agreed that no harm had come to the Oklahoma Department of Education because of the letters, asking, "In what way are plaintiffs precluded from administering Oklahoma's public schools because of defendant's letters?" The order reads: "Plaintiffs have failed to sufficiently demonstrate standing under the framework. Indeed, the complaint does not allege that it has stopped exe-

*See Walters on page 7*

## Ark. Commandments law blocked

A federal district court on Aug. 4, in a case brought by FFRF and others, issued a preliminary injunction prohibiting an Arkansas school district from implementing a state law that requires all public schools to permanently display the Ten Commandments in every classroom and library.

In the *Stinson v. Fayetteville School District No. 1* decision, U.S. District Court Judge Timothy Brooks held that Arkansas Act 573, due to take effect on Aug. 5, "is plainly unconstitutional" under both the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment.

Ruling that the law would lead to unconstitu-

tional religious coercion of the child plaintiffs and interfere with their parents' rights to direct their children's religious education, Judge Brooks explained:

"Students receiving instruction in algebra, physics, engineering, accounting, computer science, woodworking, fashion design and German will do so in classrooms that prominently display (the King James version of) the Ten Commandments. Every day from kindergarten to 12th grade, children will be confronted with these command-

*See Arkansas on page 7*

## Celebrating an animated life



Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist Steve Benson died July 8. A longtime friend of FFRF, Steve drew many cartoons specifically for FFRF, including the one pictured above. To read memorial tributes from FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker and to view more of his wonderful drawings, see pages 16-17. (As a bonus, the two cartoons on the Black Collar Crime pages in this issue are also by Steve.)



# Coaches, stop pushing religion on athletes

By Mickey Dollens

As a former Division I football player and Team USA bobsledder, and now a state lawmaker in Oklahoma, I know what it feels like when someone in power starts imposing their religious beliefs in ways that pressure people to conform, or risk being sidelined.

Faith should be a personal choice. It should never be used as a test of team loyalty or buy-in. But in college sports, more and more coaches are crossing that line, pushing their personal religious beliefs onto players and shaping the culture of the team around it.

And, in today's college game, players are not just risking playing time. They're also risking their scholarships, high-paying endorsement deals and career opportunities outside of sports if they fall out of favor with their coach.



Photo by Chris Line  
Mickey Dollens

No one embodies this growing trend more than Deion “Coach Prime” Sanders, a prominent head football coach abusing his position at the University of Colorado to push his personal religious beliefs onto student-athletes. He is not alone. Coaches like Hugh Freeze at Auburn, Spencer Danielson at Boise State, Dabo Swinney at Clemson and Dawn Staley at South Carolina have all wielded their personal religious beliefs onto team culture in ways that coerce student-athletes to conform.

Now, I want to be clear: I will always defend student-athletes’ rights to uphold their personal religious beliefs. The same goes for Sanders and other coaches — as long as they’re not forcing their beliefs onto others. But faith stops being personal when it’s pushed upon students or subordinates by someone in a position of power, whether that is a head football coach or a politician.

At a public university like Colorado, Sanders isn’t just a coach. He’s a state employee, and the First Amendment bars him from using that position to create a coercive religious environment. His right to promote his personal religious beliefs ends where another’s rights begin.



Image from Shutterstock  
Clemson University football players pray before a game in Clemson, S.C.

Supporters of Sanders have pointed to the Supreme Court’s 2022 ruling in Kennedy v. Bremerton, but that case involved a coach’s personal prayer to himself, not leading or promoting religion to the team. What we’re seeing in Sanders’ case is something very different: a head coach using his position to proselytize his religious beliefs onto players in ways that pressure them to conform. There’s a big difference between practicing personal faith and forcing it on your subordinates.

For student-athletes, the pressure to conform to your coach’s beliefs is high. If you push back on a coach-led prayer, you’re seen as a “distraction.” Refuse team chapel, you’re not “all in.”

When former NFL tight end Benjamin Watson was asked about religious pressure in football, he said, “I have never been in a situation where something like that was mandated. Sure, there were times when we had corporate prayer before a game. There is always the joke where players feel the pressure to pray before games, and some of that may be true.”

Watson fumbles the point. His response captures the willful blindness that allows religious coercion to persist on sports teams across America.

He acknowledges the pressure — albeit as a joke — but then dismisses it simply because team prayer is not technically required.

Religious coercion doesn’t need explicit mandates. It works through an implied understanding that nonparticipation will mark you as an outsider.

I experienced this myself when I played football at Southern Methodist University. Before games, the team held chapel sessions. Even though they were technically optional, I knew every coach would be watching who showed up and who didn’t. I wanted to stay in their good graces, so I made sure to attend, even when I didn’t want to.

We also had pregame team meals where our head coach, June Jones, would call on a player at random to lead the prayer, which I remember felt performative, not personal. It felt like players, including me, gave in to pressure to go along with what Coach Jones wanted, even when our actual beliefs were different. We wanted to play, and going against our coach’s beliefs could have risked our

place on the roster.

Whether at a public university or a private school, religious coercion has no place in sports.

In early 2023, the Freedom From Religion Foundation contacted the University of Colorado, reminding the institution that Sanders, as a public employee, could not use his position to promote Christianity through the football program. The university soon responded, saying Sanders had been given guidance on nondiscrimination policies and on the limits of religious expression for coaches. Yet, Coach Prime’s preaching didn’t stop.

Sanders responded to the university’s warning about the unconstitutionality of proselytizing players as a state employee by saying at a public press conference: “Nobody’s going to tell me NOT to.” Since then, he has invited preachers to give prayer in the locker room and posted videos to Instagram preaching about God to his players.

Most of these coaches probably have genuine intentions. They want to help student-athletes become better people. That is admirable, but good intentions do not excuse constitutional violations. Character development doesn’t require religious indoctrination. Let players pray or not pray on their own terms. Coaches should lead with strategy, discipline and character, not theology.

Thankfully, this was my experience as an athlete on the United States Bobsled Team. Our coaches emphasized toughness, discipline, accountability, teamwork and perseverance. They led by example and didn’t need team prayer to inspire us. They built a team where athletes could compete without having to compromise our beliefs. We lived the Olympic motto — Citius, Altius, Fortius — faster, higher, stronger. Our team’s success came from trust in each other and a belief in ourselves. It’s time for coaches everywhere to adopt that Olympian approach.

Mickey Dollens is the regional government affairs manager at FFRF. He has a diverse background as a state representative, author, high school teacher and coach, NCAA Division I football player and Team USA bobsledder.

“Coaches should lead with strategy, discipline and character, not theology.”

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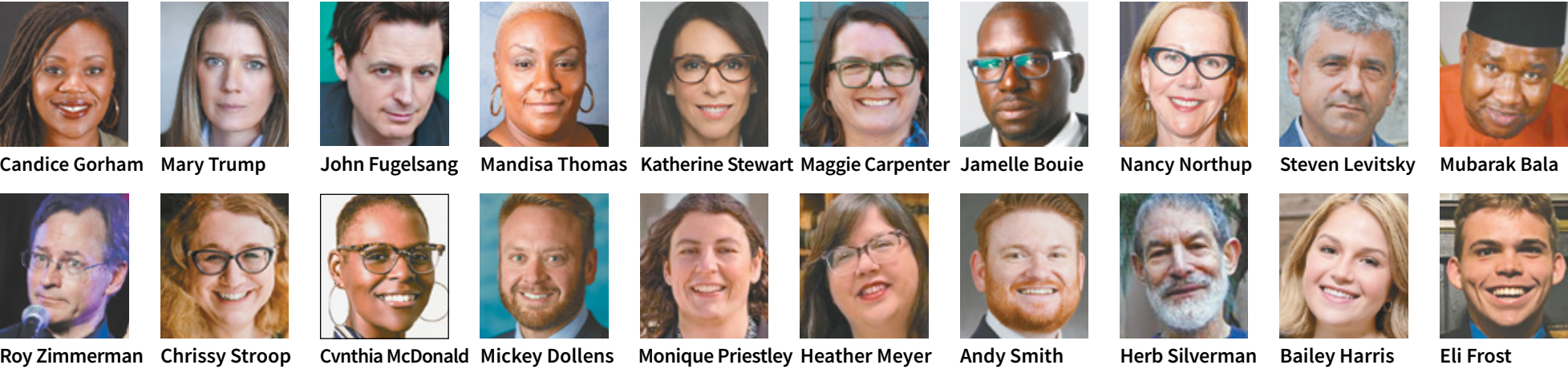
Legal crew's cruise

Photo by Chris Line

Members of FFRF's legal team took an afternoon trip on the Pontoon Porch on Lake Monona in Madison, Wis., in late July as an appreciation event for FFRF's summer interns. FFRF thanks Professor Paul Newman for the much-appreciated donation that funds the outing every year.



# Don't miss our Myrtle Beach convention!



We're just a little over a month away from this year's exciting convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C.! If you haven't already signed up, don't delay!

FFRF has a lineup of incredible speakers and lively entertainment to go along with great merchandise, delicious meals and, perhaps best of all, wonderful camaraderie among like-minded freethinkers. It's why so many of our members return year after year. Don't let this be the year you miss out on another fantastic event!

Sign up now for FFRF's 48th national convention, which runs from Oct. 16-19 at the Hilton Myrtle Beach Resort, 10000 Beach Club Dr., Myrtle Beach, S.C.

This year's convention features an array of interesting writers, activists, educators, legislators, performers and more! Just take a look at who will be on the FFRF convention stage this year:

- **Mary L. Trump**, niece of President Trump and a sharp critic of the current administration, will receive FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award, reserved for public figures who make known their dissent from religion.
- **John Fugelsang**, actor, comedian and broadcaster and host of "Tell Me Everything" on SiriusXM, has a timely new book, "Separate Church and Hate: A Sane Person's Guide to Taking Back the Bible from Fundamentalists, Fascists, and Flock-Fleecing Frauds."
- **Katherine Stewart**, columnist, author and last year's "Freethought Heroine" honoree, returns to talk about her chilling new tour de force, "Money, Lies and God: Inside the Movement to Destroy American Democracy."
- **Dr. Maggie Carpenter**, a brave abortion rights activist under prosecution by Louisiana and Texas for dispensing medication abortion pills to patients there, will receive FFRF's "Forward" Award.
- **Jamelle Bouie**, the distinguished New York Times columnist, will be given FFRF's "Clarence Darrow" Award.
- **Mubarak Bala**, the Nigerian atheist and human rights activist recently released from prison in Nigeria after five years' detention for committing "blasphemy," will get FFRF's "Avijit Roy Courage Award."
- **Nancy Northup**, president of the cutting-edge Reproductive Rights Center, which is receiving FFRF's Henry Zumach Freedom From Religious Fundamentalism award of \$50,000.
- **Steven Levitsky**, a Harvard professor of Latin American Studies and government, is co-author (with Daniel Ziblatt) of "How Democracies Die," which was a New York Times bestseller.
- Singer/songwriter **Roy Zimmerman** will perform his signature blend of heart and hilarity. His songs have been heard on HBO and Showtime, and his videos have garnered hundreds of millions of views.
- Ex-evangelical writer, speaker and advocate **Chrissy Stroop** will receive FFRF's 2025 "Freethought Heroine" award. Stroop is a full-time writer and speaker with bylines in Foreign Policy, Playboy, The Boston Globe, Political Research Associates and other outlets.

• FFRF's Regional State Manager **Mickey Dollens**, a seated state representative in the Oklahoma Legislature, will be speaking directly on the convention theme with his talk, "F.O.R.W.A.R.D.: Your Blueprint for Effective Citizen Lobbying."

• The convention also will feature FFRF's third annual panel made up of state representatives. **Rep. Monique Priestley** is a member of the Vermont House of Representatives, **Rep. Heather Meyer** is a member of the Kansas House of Representatives and **Rep. Andy Smith** is in his second term in the Minnesota House.

• **Dr. Herb Silverman**, who overturned South Carolina's unconstitutional religious test to run for office, will give a short welcoming address.

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

• **Bailey Harris**, 19, is receiving the Diane and Stephen Uhl Out of God's Closet Scholarship of \$5,000, and **Eli Frost**, 18, is receiving the Beverly and Richard Hermesen Student Activist Award of \$5,000.

• Other presenters include students winning FFRF 2025 essay competitions, and reports on the year's highlights by FFRF Co-Presidents **Dan Barker** and **Annie Laurie Gaylor**, by FFRF's legal team led by FFRF Legal Director **Patrick Elliott** and Deputy Legal Director **Liz Cavell**, and by the legislative team, led by Director of Governmental Affairs **Mark Dann** and State Policy Counsel **Ryan Jayne**.

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

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

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

For more details, menus and the registration form, go to [ffrf.org/convention2025](http://ffrf.org/convention2025).

## 2025 Convention Schedule\*

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 16		(concludes by 10 pm)	
4-6pm Registration opens <i>Reception and cash bar</i>		SATURDAY, OCTOBER 18	
FRIDAY, OCTOBER 17		8:00 am "Nothing Fails Like Prayer" Breakfast (ticketed)	
8:00 am Registration, sales tables open Continental breakfast, coffee and tea		Moment of Bedlam	
9:00 am Program begins "Die Gedanken Sind Frei" Dan Barker		Godless Gospel quartet "Let's All Give Thanks"	
Welcome Sadie Pattinson		9 am Ballroom, tables reopen	
"South Carolina Welcome" Herb Silverman		9:30 am Major Student Activist Awards Bailey Harris — "Out of God's Closet" Diane & Stephen Uhl Memorial Award Eli Frost — Beverly and Richard Hermesen Award	
FFRF Highlights of Year Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor		10:00 am Student Essay Winners TBA	
Chapter Welcome		10:30 am Break	
10:00 am Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award Center for Reproductive Rights Nancy Northup		10:45 am Avijit Roy Courage Award Mubarak Bala (remote)	
10:30 am BREAK		11:15 am Freethought Heroine Award Chrissy Stroop	
10:50 am "Money, Lies & God" Katherine Stewart		11:45 am Break, book signing	
11:30 am Break, book signing		Noon BUFFET LUNCH (ticketed)	
1:30 pm Ballroom, sales tables reopen		1:30 pm BUFFET LUNCH (ticketed)	
2 pm FFRF Legal Highlights Report		1:30 pm Ballroom, sales tables reopen	
3 pm FFRF Legislative Highlights		2 pm FFRF Legal Highlights Report	
3:30 pm Break		3 pm FFRF Legislative Highlights	
4:00 pm Forward Award Dr. Maggie Carpenter (remote)		3:30 pm Break	
4:30 pm Emperor Has No Clothes Award Mary Trump		4:00 pm Forward Award Dr. Maggie Carpenter (remote)	
5:15 pm Book signing		4:30 pm Emperor Has No Clothes Award Mary Trump	
6:00 pm Cash bar opens		5:15 pm Book signing	
6:30 pm Dinner		6:00 pm Cash bar opens	
8:00 pm Clarence Darrow Award Jamelle Bouie		6:30 pm Dinner	
8:45 pm Roy Zimmerman in Concert		8:00 pm Clarence Darrow Award Jamelle Bouie	
9:15 pm Dessert reception		8:45 pm Roy Zimmerman in Concert	
		9:15 pm Dessert reception	
		Noon BUFFET LUNCH	
		1:30 pm Ballroom re-opens	
		2:00 pm "Godless Gospel" song	
		3rd Annual Secular Legislative Panel	
		3:00 pm F.O.R.W.A.R.D. Rep. Mickey Dollens	
		3:30 pm Break, book signing	
		4:15 pm "How to Save our Democracy" Steven Levitsky Book signing	
		6:00 pm Cash bar opens	
		6:30 pm Dinner (ticketed)	
		8:00 pm Drawing for 'Clean Money'	
		8:30 pm An Evening with John Fugelsang Book signing	
		SUNDAY, OCTOBER 19	
		8:00 am Coffee, tea, pastries	
		9:00 am Business (Membership) Annual Meeting	
		11ish State Representatives Annual Meeting	
		ADJOURN BY NOON	
		*Schedule is subject to change	

Across

1. Pupil's place

5. \*Freethinkers Simon and Garfunkel song "April Come \_\_\_\_ Will"

8. Between Sigma and Epsilon

11. This and that

12. Court petitioner

13. Where there's trouble

15. Like Amelia Earhart's famous flight

16. Overnight lodgings

17. \*Voltaire: "There is \_\_\_\_ , but don't tell that to my servant..."

18. \*Freethinking \_\_\_\_ Nightingale

20. Lump of stuff

21. Like a haunted house

22. Opposite of nothing

23. Wall Street figure

26. Uppermost pine part, e.g.

30. Pirates' vice?

31. a.k.a. diazepam

34. Starbucks cup choice

35. Full of pep

37. Rascal

38. Atrium, pl.

39. Start of something big?

40. Murdering, slangily

42. \*Atheist Ron Reagan to President Ronald Reagan

43. Egg-shaped

45. Verb tense in Greek

47. Hot tub spout

48. Half Pint on "Little House on the Prairie"

50. \_\_\_\_ -do-well

52. \*Freethinking Impressionist artist Camille \_\_\_\_

55. Hawaiian veranda

56. "Anything \_\_\_\_?"

57. Just a little

59. Web mag

60. Not guilty, e.g.

61. Peacock's pride

62. \*Sundance \_\_\_\_ , freethinker Robert Redford's famous role

63. Between game and match

64. \*Freethinking Village People: place to "hang out with all the boys"

Down

1. Stomach pain-causing acronym

2. Raise it!!

3. It will

4. Drove off a fly

5. Saddam Hussein's branch of Islam

6. From this time

7. Gaelic

8. Jumping stick

9. Obstacle to jump through

10. It would

12. \_\_\_\_ Madre, Mexico

13. Acute one

14. \*Atheist author of "The Pillars of the Earth" Ken \_\_\_\_

19. \*Freethinking "Superman" actor Christopher \_\_\_\_

22. Human limb

23. \*Atheist Charlie Chaplin's famous character

24. Geometry class prop

25. Friend from Mexico

26. South American indigenous people

27. Tarsus, pl.

28. Mixtures

29. Manufacturing site

32. Milton Bradley's "The Game of \_\_\_\_"

33. International Monetary Fund

36. \*Freethinking Victor Hugo's "Les MisÈrables" character Jean \_\_\_\_

38. Ancient Greeks' assembly area

40. Over the top, in text

41. Post-roller coaster ride state

44. Falcon's home

46. Uniqueness

48. City in France

49. A useful part

50. Member of National Socialist German Workers' Party

51. British children's author Blyton

52. Livens up

53. What buffalos do

54. Like ear infection

55. Albanian money

58. Pie \_\_\_\_ Mode

Freethought Today Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10
11					12				13	14	
15					16				17		
	18			19					20		
			21					22			
23	24	25					26			27	28
30				31		32	33			34	
35			36			37			38		
39					40			41		42	
43				44				45		46	
			47			48	49				
	50	51				52				53	54
55						56				57	
59						60				61	
62						63				64	

Answers on page 25

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

OVERHEARD

American Christians are the most privileged group to exist in the country. But when you're afraid of losing the power and privilege you have, you become paranoid that any attempt to give others the same rights as you is an attack on your freedom.

**Tim Whitaker, a member of "The New Evangelicals," an organization devoted to rejecting Christian nationalism and promoting a faith "centered on justice."**  
*Salon.com, 8-1-25*

At a time when Christian nationalists are seeking to rewrite the historic narratives from a standpoint of American exceptionalism, with disregard for religious, racial/ethnic and gender minorities, the memo threatens the very freedoms it appears to be reinforcing.

**Rev. Karen Georgia A. Thompson, general minister and president/CEO of the United Church of Christ, in a statement regarding the IRS' rule change allowing churches to endorse candidates.**  
*Miami Herald, 7-29-25*

His refusal to say he's sorry for spreading lies is more than just political arrogance. It reveals the rotting foundation beneath his carefully constructed Christian nationalist persona. This is a man who demands moral purity from educators. Yet when Walters was at the center of a humiliating scandal — which, even if accidental, confirmed the basic truth of what his colleagues witnessed — he lashed out with lies, smears and conspiracy theories. He bore false witness against his fellow board members, violating one of the very commandments he wants posted in classrooms across the state.

**Hemant Mehta, on Oklahoma Superintendent of Public Instruction Ryan Walters, who claimed that two Board of Education members were lying when they said that, during a closed-door meeting of the board, a video was playing on the screen behind Walters showing full frontal nudity. As it turns out, the video clip was likely from a movie that happened to be playing on the default channel.**  
*The Friendly Atheist, 8-7-25*

Permitting synagogues and other houses of worship to endorse or oppose candidates undercuts the integrity and unity of these religious institutions, turning them into an extension of political candidates or parties.

**Rabbi Jonah Dov Pesner, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, in response to the IRS saying churches will not be penalized for political activism, a direct rebuke to the Johnson Amendment.**  
*Religion News Service, 7-14-25*

If you're a Christian nationalist and the nation fails, sounds like you got a pretty bad Christ over there. Sounds like you got a weak Christ over there. You know what I mean?

**Late-night TV host Stephen Colbert, who is Catholic, speaking on "The Spiritual Life with Fr. James Martin" podcast. Colbert was named FFRF Action Fund's "Secularist of the Week" on July 25.**  
*AmericaMagazine.org, 7-24-25*

The rise of religious fundamentalism as a powerful force in authoritarian politics is a vital component of democracies' deterioration in Brazil, in the U.S., in Hungary and India, in Israel, and many places around the world.

**Alessandra Orofino, producer and co-writer of "Apocalypse in the Tropics," which explores the intersection of faith, politics and power in Brazil.**  
*Religion News Service, 7-17-25*

Free speech is alive and well; with tax exemption comes public trust and public responsibility. We must stand up for what has always made nonprofits unique: the ability to serve all people, across all differences, without political litmus tests.

**Marie Ellis, public policy director for the Minesota Council of Nonprofits, in a column chastising the IRS' decision to abandon enforcement of the Johnson Amendment.**  
*Minnesota Star Tribune, 7-17-25*

Freethought Today Cryptogram

UMCXFXKA XE MRDMCCMAJ EJNHH HKU BMMZXAF

DKOOKA ZMKZCM VNXMJ. UMCXFXKA XE PYQJ BMMZE

JYM ZKKU HUKO ONUWMUXAF JYM UXDY.

— AQZKCMKA SKAQZQUJM

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

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

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ACTION FUND

Become an advocate!

Keep religion out of our laws and social policy

Sign up at FFRF Action Fund, FFRF's legislative arm. Receive action alerts about legislative issues affecting you and other freethinkers. Learn more: [ffrfaction.org/join-us/](https://ffrfaction.org/join-us/)

Paid for by FFRF Action Fund



# IN THE NEWS

## Trump admin moves to bar abortions at VA hospitals

Pregnant veterans would no longer be allowed to receive abortions at Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals in cases of rape, incest or when the pregnancy threatens their health under a proposed rule from the Trump administration that would revoke a Biden-era policy expanding abortion access.

Months after the Supreme Court ended the constitutional right to an abortion in 2022, the Biden administration implemented a rule change allowing the VA for the first time to provide abortion services for veterans and eligible family members in limited circumstances, including in states with abortion bans.

The VA said at the time that those bans, some near-total, were “creating urgent risks” to the lives of pregnant veterans. Thus, VA said, the policy change was “essential.”

In its filing Aug. 4, the Trump administration called the 2022 rule change “inappropriate” and “legally questionable.” The Trump team’s move to once again restrict abortion access has received praise from conservatives who staunchly oppose federal funding for abortion services of any kind. The VA said it would continue to provide care to pregnant patients in life-threatening circumstances.

A final ruling could land any time after public comment closes on Sept. 3.

## Southern Baptist ethics leader resigns

The head of the Southern Baptist Convention’s policy arm has resigned after nearly four years leading the staunchly conservative agency, which in recent years has fended off critics within the nation’s largest Protestant denomination seeking to push it even further to the right.

The Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission accepted the resignation of its president, Brent Leatherwood, the agency confirmed.

Church representatives at the Southern Baptist Convention annual meeting in June voted decisively to retain the commission — effectively a vote of confidence against efforts to abolish it. Some critics within the convention wanted it to take a harder-line stance on immigration and to endorse criminal penalties for women seeking abortions.

## Evangelicals: Overturn gay marriage ruling

A conservative Christian legal group asked the United States Supreme Court to review a decade-old case involving a former Kentucky county clerk who cited her faith when she refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples — a long-shot effort activists hope will result in justices ending nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage.

Liberty Counsel, a legal nonprofit that also describes itself as a Christian ministry, has long been involved in the case of Kim Davis, the Kentucky clerk who in 2015 gained international attention after she wouldn’t issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples despite the Obergefell v. Hodges Supreme Court decision, which legalized same-sex marriage nationwide that same year.

Davis’ refusal — which she said was rooted in her evangelical Christian faith — led to a series of legal battles she lost, resulting in a brief prison sentence as well as being ordered to pay \$100,000 in damages and additional legal fees.

### Congratulations, Sammi and Dante!



Photo by Chris Line

**FFRF Attorney Sammi Lawrence was recently published in the American University Law School’s Journal of Gender, Social Policy & the Law. The article’s title is “The Ambiguity That Isn’t: Why Same-Sex Marriage is Legal in American Samoa.” Lawrence is co-author with former FFRF Legal Fellow Dante Harootunian (inset).**

The nonprofit filed a petition with the court on July 24, requesting an appeal to Davis’ case and asking the court to overturn Obergefell.

Legal analysts have cast doubt on the likelihood of the court reviewing Davis’ case, noting justices already declined to take up an earlier version of her case in 2020.

## Court: Grant violates W.Va. Constitution

A Kanawha County (W.Va.) court has ruled that the West Virginia Water Development Authority violated the state Constitution when it awarded a \$5 million grant to an out-of-state Catholic institution.

Kanawha Circuit Court Judge Richard Lindsay ruled July 23 that the West Virginia Constitution prohibits the use of public funds for religious education and advocacy. The College of St. Joseph the Worker, which is based in Steubenville, Ohio, was awarded the funds in 2024 to expand operations into the state. In order to access the school’s trades education program, students must receive a degree in Catholic studies because that is the only degree conferred by the school.

The American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia brought a lawsuit in January on behalf of the American Humanist Association to stop the grants from being used to fund the school’s religious ministry.

The court gave the water authority 30 days to show evidence of its compliance with its constitutional obligations.

## Pakistani ‘honor killings’ continue despite protests

A double execution has shocked many Pakistanis, sparked protests and drawn widespread condemnation from politicians over the “honor killings.”

Bano Bibi, a mother of five, was shot three times, killing her over accusations that she was having an affair. Then the man accused of being her lover, Ehsanullah Samalani, a father of four, was shot and killed, as well.

In Pakistan, at least 405 women were

victims of so-called “honor killings” last year, according to the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, an independent rights group. They often take place in rural areas, where deeply entrenched patriarchal beliefs are used to justify violence against women.

Politicians and law enforcement officials in this Muslim-majority nation of more than 240 million people have long vowed to do more to protect women. They have repeatedly promised to take action against perpetrators of killings like these, which are carried out in the name of centuries-old traditions.

## Teacher put on leave over classroom crucifix

A Connecticut teacher says she is still being crucified for refusing to remove a cross from the wall by her desk.

Marisol Arroyo-Castro, a 33-year veteran teacher, was taken out of her seventh-grade classroom at DiLoreto Elementary and Middle School in mid-December for refusing to remove the 12-inch wooden crucifix on a classroom wall by the side of her desk. The vice principal said he got a complaint from two people and she was asked to move the crucifix to a new location under her desk. She did this for one day.

The principal then told her she had until the end of the day to put it back under the desk, but she refused.

“When I came back the next day, somebody else removed it and put it in a box, and they told me not to return to the classroom,” she said. “A representative from the union escorted me out of the building.”

## New Title X focus will help women get pregnant

The Trump administration intends to use funds from a decades-old federal program that provides birth control to low-income women to ramp up efforts to help aspiring mothers get pregnant, signaling a shift in policy that will appease religious conservatives.

The first sign of the change appeared on a little-noticed government website in early August, in a post offering a \$1.5 million grant to start an “infertility training center.”

The announcement is also an early indication that the administration is backing an alternative approach to infertility — one supported by conservative and religious policy groups that are skeptical of in vitro fertilization, even after Trump promised as a candidate last year to make IVF free.

While Title X has historically focused primarily on providing contraception, the program already offers a wide range of services beyond birth control, including testing for sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy tests, as well as basic infertility care.

Angie Fellers LeMire, co-founder of Community Centered Reproductive Health, an organization dedicated to increasing access to contraception in low-income and rural communities, said she worried that putting a greater spotlight on infertility in Title X clinics would mean less money for birth control for women seeking to avoid pregnancy.

## U.S. to destroy nearly \$10M of contraceptives

The Trump administration has decided to destroy \$9.7m worth of contraceptives rather than send them abroad to women in need.

A State Department spokesperson confirmed that the decision had been made — a move that will cost U.S. taxpayers \$167,000. The contraceptives are primarily long-acting, such as IUDs and birth control implants, and were almost certainly intended for women in Africa, according to two senior congressional aides, one of whom visited a warehouse in Belgium that housed the contraceptives. It is not clear to the aides whether the destruction has already been carried out.

The department decided to destroy the contraceptives because it could not sell them to any “eligible buyers,” in part because of U.S. laws and rules that prohibit sending U.S. aid to organizations that provide abortion services, counsel people about the procedure or advocate for the right to it overseas, according to the State Department spokesperson.

## Nones make up 24.2% of world population

The world’s population expanded from 2010 to 2020, and so did the number of adherents to most religious groups, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of more than 2,700 censuses and surveys.

However, people with no religious affiliation — the Nones — were the only religious category aside from Muslims that grew as a percentage of the world’s population. The number of religiously unaffiliated people rose by 270 million, reaching 1.9 billion, which is 24.2 percent of the world population, making Nones the third-largest group in this study, after Christians and Muslims.

Christians remained the world’s biggest religious group, but they did not keep pace with global population growth from 2010 to 2020. The number of Christians rose by 122 million, reaching 2.3 billion, but, as a share of the world’s population, Christians fell 1.8 percentage points, to 28.8 percent.

Muslims were the fastest-growing religious group over the decade. The number of Muslims increased by 347 million and rose 1.8 percent to 25.6 percent of the world population.



## FFRF VICTORIES

# FFRF gets FCA out of schools in 4 districts

By Greg Fletcher

The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, a nonprofit Christian sports ministry based in Kansas City, often infiltrates public schools under the guise of coaching and teaching student athletes, when, in fact, they are there to proselytize to impressionable young minds.

FFRF continues to fight against allowing FCA access to students as part of their public schooling, and has had recent successes. In four school districts (two in Kentucky and two in Tennessee), FFRF has been able to minimize or end FCA’s reach into those schools.

### Muhlenberg County, Ky.

FFRF learned that a minister from Cleaton Baptist Church spoke at the March 13 meeting of the South Muhlenberg Elementary School FCA meeting. Photos of the event showing the minister speaking with children were posted to the South Muhlenberg Elementary School official Facebook page with the message, “We’d love to see even more kids join us next time!” Additionally, the page posted photos from the April 24 meeting of the South Hulhenberg Elementary FCA which show a different adult speaking about “the story of Zacchaeus,” and reminding students that “Jesus knows us, sees us, and loves us just as we are.”

“Absent the Equal Access Act, which does not apply to elementary schools, the Establishment Clause prohibits religious clubs, because elementary students are too young to truly run a club entirely on their own initiative with no involvement from school staff or outside adults, and school employees may not organize a religious club for students,” FFRF Anne Nicol Gaylor Legal Fellow Kyle J. Steinberg wrote to the district. In response to FFRF’s letter, Hulenberg County Public Schools Superintendent Contessa Orr emailed FFRF, writing, “I can confirm that there are currently no FCA clubs utilizing elementary school property.” Orr also confirmed that the situation FFRF wrote about initially had been dealt with in an appropriate manner.

### Logan County, Ky.

FFRF reminded the Logan County Schools system in Russellville, Ky., that student athletes must not be coerced into religious “team building” exercises.

FFRF learned that the Logan County High School’s boys baseball program was permitting a Fellowship of Christian Athletes “character coach” to deliver religious talks to the baseball team every Wednesday during official team activities. While the FCA claims that character coaches teach “values” and not religion, the values the character coaches preach are based in evangelical Christianity, and FCA is an explicitly religious organization. The official Logan County Cougar Baseball Facebook account additionally posted a screenshot depicting the FCA representative presenting to the baseball team on what appeared to be school property.

“Any claims that students aren’t pressured to participate in the character coach talks are naïve at best, and the FCA’s own website states coaches can require student-athletes to participate in character coach activities,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the district sought legal counsel from English, Lucas, Priest & Owsley LLP to review the situation. Attorney Michael A. Owsley reported that the character coach was present to facilitate player-initiated and player-led discussions and team building exercises, but failure to be present and participate in the pre-practice team-building exercises did not result in punitive measures against players. However, due to FFRF’s concern, Owsley reminded the district’s baseball coach and athletic director that these pre-practice team building and character coaching sessions must remain entirely secular and voluntary for baseball players to attend. “It is never the intention of anyone in the district to promote one religion over the other,” Owsley wrote. “The district encourages and wishes all of its students feel valued and free to express his or her own beliefs, and to reach those beliefs on their own.”

### Pulaski, Tenn.

FFRF received a report that the Richland High School softball program and the Giles County High School soccer, basketball, baseball and softball programs in Pulaski, Tenn., were permitting FCA “character coaches” and other adult FCA

A Superior presentation



Photo by David Cole

FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott was in Duluth, Minn., on Aug. 3 to deliver a presentation to the Lake Superior Freethinkers, a chapter of FFRF. Patrick discussed recent attacks on the separation between state and church and the work that FFRF is doing to push back.

leaders to regularly attend sports practices to deliver religious talks to the teams. The FCA organization involved in Giles County, Southwest Middle TN FCA, has direct statements of their Christian faith on their website homepage.

Several social media posts demonstrated the involvement of FCA character coaches with various athletics programs within the district, such as posts naming specific character coaches for specific teams that discussed “sharing the hope and love of Jesus.” Posts stretched back as far as 2020, indicating that the district had a years-long pattern and practice of routinely permitting FCA character coaches to enter school property and proselytize to captive audiences of young student athletes, regardless of whether the students were all voluntary FCA members or not.

“Here, it is clear that both Richland and Giles County high schools have crossed the constitutional line by allowing these FCA ‘character coaches’ to entangle the schools’ athletic programs with Christianity,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district. “These individuals are inappropriately leading entire teams in prayer and delivering religious talks to them.”

After FFRF sent the district a letter, School Board Attorney Timothy P. Underwood responded on behalf of the district. Underwood confirmed that the district director of schools met with Underwood to discuss the contents of FFRF’s letter as well as the social media posts proving FCA representatives interacted with district student athletes.

“It is our goal, before the commencement of any athletic events during the upcoming school year, to meet with our coaches directly and confirm they understand the legal requirements and their duties as coaches,” Underwood wrote. “Based on that discussion, my client will continue to monitor all extracurricular activities to

confirm that no religious belief, or non-belief, is being promoted by the school system.” Underwood additionally invited FFRF to reach out if any further concerns were to arise regarding the district.

### Smith County, Tenn.

FFRF notified the Smith County School System that Fellowship of Christian Athletes clubs cannot genuinely be run by elementary school students.

FFRF learned that Gordonsville Elementary School and Defeated Elementary School are opening a chapter of the FCA. On March 13, Gordonsville Elementary School’s official Facebook account posted a reminder that there was an FCA meeting that morning in the school library. On March 14, Defeated Elementary School posted photos on its official Facebook from that morning’s meeting of the school’s FCA. Another post from Defeated Elementary School on May 2 contained photos of another FCA meeting and thanked a representative for speaking with the group.

“Religious clubs for students at elementary schools cannot genuinely be student-initiated and student-run, and as such are unconstitutional,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After FFRF’s letter, the district took action, as FFRF learned from Attorney Robin C. Moore, who assured FFRF that the district was taking the complaint seriously, and would be monitoring policies and procedures to maintain compliance with the law. “The district is currently reviewing the matters raised in your letter to ensure that all school activities and practices align with constitutional and statutory requirements,” Moore wrote. “Smith County School System remains committed to upholding its obligations under the law while supporting a welcoming and inclusive environment for all students and families.”

## Note to members

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

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

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

If you would like to continue

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

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

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



# FFRF, 1,000 orgs defend Johnson Amendment

The Freedom From Religion Foundation and its legislative arm, the FFRF Action Fund, are proud to be among some 1,000 nonprofit organizations signing onto a public letter calling on President Trump and Congress to champion nonpartisanship and public trust by defending the Johnson Amendment.

“Today [July 30], the National Council of Nonprofits, American Humanist Association, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Independent Sector, Interfaith Alliance, Public Citizen and other leading nonprofit organizations launched a national sign-on letter addressed to President Trump,” announced the press release from Public Citizen, which helped coordinate the campaign.

“Undermining the Johnson Amendment would do lasting harm to our democracy,” the press release quotes Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of FFRF and president of FFRF Action Fund. “That’s why such a broad coalition — spanning secular and religious organizations, good governance advocates and nonprofits across the political spectrum — is speaking out together.”

The letter to Trump condemns efforts to ignore or weaken the Johnson Amendment. This longstanding federal law prohibits 501(c)(3) nonprofits from using their tax-exempt resources to endorse or oppose political candidates.

“For more than 70 years,” the letter states about the Johnson Amendment, “it has ensured that all tax-exempt charitable nonprofits — including houses of worship — do not become conduits for partisan politics, protecting public trust in religious institutions and preserving the integrity of elections.” The signatories remind Trump that churches and faith leaders already have the right to speak out about political issues in their personal capacity,

and even run for office, and can speak out on policy concerns in a nonpartisan manner.

The letter was sparked by a proposed legal settlement involving the Internal Revenue Service and National Religious Broadcasters, in which the IRS shocked the nation by saying that “communications from a house of worship to its congregation in connection with religious services” do not violate the Johnson Amendment.

At a press conference announcing the group letter, Guthrie Graves-Persimmons of the Interfaith Alliance cited survey after survey showing that the public, including 98 percent of evangelical leaders, do not want churches to endorse from the pulpit. He pointed out the U.S. Catholic bishops have announced that Catholic parishes will not be endorsing from the pulpit and that the

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons) has likewise eschewed politics from the pulpit.

Representing the National Council of Churches, Rev. Leslie Cope-land-Tune, a Baptist, noted that worshippers consider church a “safe and sacred place” that would be sullied by partisan politicking, and that such actions would damage public trust in clergy.

Rob Weissman, co-president of Public Citizen, noted how the overturning of the Johnson Amendment “threatens to be the most catastrophic degradation of campaign finance law since Citizens United.” He warned, “Expect huge amounts of dark money to flow — not just dark money but tax-deductible dark money.”

That there is such broad support, from the public, religious groups and sects of diverse persuasions, and hundreds of other nonprofits, underscores the importance of ensuring that the Trump administration is not allowed to do an end-run on the Johnson Amendment.

“Survey after survey show that the public, including 98 percent of evangelical leaders, do not want churches to endorse from the pulpit.”

## Monument

Continued from page 1

ate location, the West Salem Trinity Church in Mount Vernon. In the July 29 joint motion to dismiss, the county affirmed that “the monument will not return to county property.”

“We’re happy that the county eventually conformed with Illinois’ church-state guarantees,” says Hirsh M. Joshi, Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow at the Freedom From Religion Foundation, who first asked the county to remove the unconstitutional display 11 months ago. “It was an honor to help my fellow Illinoisians keep their local government secular.”

“We’re delighted that after we sued, the county acted with alacrity to remove these biblical edicts from the seat of county government,” adds FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gay-

lor. “This action shows that Jefferson County understands it has no right to tell residents which gods to worship, how many gods to worship or whether to worship any gods at all.”

Kevin Fee, legal director for the ACLU of Illinois, noted the role that local residents played in the victory: “Our clients showed great courage in coming together and challenging this illegal action by their local elected officials. It is easy to be silent and not speak up. But these brave residents stood up for constitutional values and demanded change.”

Daniel Mach, director of the ACLU’s Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief, applauded the county’s decision: “This is a victory for religious freedom. Although county officials had no business prominently displaying scripture at the seat of local government, we’re glad that they’ve now fixed their constitutional error.”

## Walters

Continued from page 1

cuting its duties or ceased administration of Oklahoma’s public schools because of defendant’s letters. Nor does the complaint allege that the schools have ceased any policies or practices because of defendant’s letters. For these reasons, the court finds that plaintiffs have failed to show an injury in fact.”

“We are so pleased that Walters’ frivolous lawsuit seeking to muzzle FFRF and our free speech rights was promptly dismissed,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “It was an outrageous attempt by a Christian nationalist public official to attack FFRF’s work to uphold the First Amendment. FFRF will continue our vital work to protect the constitutional rights of students and families around the nation, including in Oklahoma.”

“This decision affirms a fundamental freedom: the right to petition the government for change,” says Vera Eidelman, senior staff attorney with the ACLU’s Speech, Privacy, and Technology Project. “The government has no business suing advocacy organizations for exercising their First Amendment rights, and we are grateful that the court recognized that

government actors responding to the public doesn’t qualify as an injury.”

“As we enter a new school year, this judgment reaffirms our right to speak out against school policies and advocate for change,” says Megan Lambert, legal director at the ACLU of Oklahoma. “The right to dissent is now more important than ever, and we remain committed to ensuring that people can continue to advocate for better governance and equity in Oklahoma public schools..”

FFRF thanks the American Civil Liberties Union and the ACLU of Oklahoma for its representation. They argued that the lawsuit was a “Strategic Lawsuit Against Public Participation” (SLAPP), an abusive legal tactic that seeks to chill expression by saddling defendants with potentially lengthy and expensive litigation in retaliation for protected speech.

FFRF is also part of a coalition suing Walters and the state education department over a separate matter — a plan to use taxpayer funds for classroom bibles and bible-based instructional materials.

FFRF and the ACLU are also part of a coalition that opposed a Walters’ state-wide email last year focused on a “Mandatory Announcement” linking to a video entitled “Prayer for the Nation.”



The Ten Commandments monument now sits on private property, where it belongs, at the West Salem Trinity Church in Mount Vernon, Ill.

## Arkansas

Continued from page 1

ments — or face civil penalties for missing school.”

The decision also sounds the alarm against growing state efforts to “experiment” with government establishments of religion: “Why would Arkansas pass an obviously unconstitutional law? Most likely because the state is part of a coordinated strategy among several states to inject Christian religious doctrine into public-school classrooms.”

“We are delighted that reason and our secular Constitution have prevailed, and that children will be spared this unconstitutional proselytizing,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. “Our public schools exist to educate, not to evangelize a captive audience.”

“Public schools are not Sunday schools,” says Heather L. Weaver, senior counsel for the ACLU’s Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. “Today’s decision ensures that our clients’ classrooms will remain spaces where all students, regardless of their faith, feel welcomed and can learn without worrying that they do not live up to the state’s preferred religious beliefs.”

“Today’s ruling is a victory for Arkansas families and for the First Amendment,” says John Williams, legal director for the ACLU of Arkansas. “The court saw through this attempt to impose religious doctrine in public schools and upheld every student’s right to learn free from government-imposed faith. We’re proud to stand with our clients — families of many different backgrounds — who simply want their kids to get an education.”

“We are heartened by today’s well-reasoned decision that underscores a foundational principle of our nation: the government cannot impose religious doctrine,” says Jon Youngwood, co-chair of Simpson Thacher’s Litigation Department. “This ruling is critical to protecting the first amendment rights of students and families to make their own decisions as to whether and how they engage with religion.”

The preliminary injunction, issued by the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Arkansas, prohibits the school-district defendants, including Fayetteville School District No. 1, Springdale School District No. 50, Bentonville School District No. 6, and Siloam Springs School District No. 21, from “complying with Act 573 of 2025 by displaying the Ten Commandments in public elementary- and secondary-school classrooms and libraries.”



# SCOPES TRIAL CENTENNIAL

## Is America becoming one great big ‘Hillsboro’?

These are the slightly edited opening remarks on July 18 at the Scopes Centennial Conference in Chattanooga, Tenn.

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

On behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation: Welcome — and thank you for being part of this historic event. FFRF is delighted to be a cosponsor with Robyn Blumner and CFI, and to present a remarkable line-up of speakers.

I’ve been surprised by the number of individuals who, when I’ve mentioned this conference, have never heard of the Scopes Trial. Let’s hope this isn’t the kind of case that freethinker George Santayana warned about in his oft-quoted words, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

What’s the takeaway from the “Trial of the Century”? I’m eager to learn how our assembled experts and historians at this event evaluate its legacy. Briefly, I’d like to recount one little-known bit of legacy from “the monkey trial.”

William Jennings Bryan famously died a tragic figure five days after the trial. Tragic, because, as H.L. Mencken wrote of Bryan: “It is a tragedy indeed to begin life as a hero and to end it as a buffoon.” Bryan’s admirers decided to create a bible college in Dayton in his name, which opened in 1930 and has since dominated Dayton. It emphasizes a conservative Christian biblical worldview. For nearly 75 years, the bible college sent missionary students, known as the Bible Education Ministry, into Dayton public schools to evangelize students in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Some 24 years ago, a father who was not religious moved to Dayton for a job along with his wife and two young children. He was shocked by the overtly proselytizing classes and contacted FFRF. Dan Barker oversaw that lawsuit and located two excellent Tennessee attorneys who then sued. The town was outraged and we quickly sought a protective order to keep the identity of the family confidential.

In the midst of the lawsuit, the malicious-minded newspaper editor declared that he was going to publish the family’s name anyway. Our attorneys jumped in a car and drove from Nashville to Chattanooga late that night so they could be at the courthouse first thing in the morning to seek a restraining order, which was granted.

We proudly won that case in February 2002 before U.S. District Judge R. Allen Edgar, who, by the way, was appointed by President Reagan. Edgar wrote a forceful opinion saying this kind of lesson might be found in “a Sunday school class in many of the Christian churches in Rhea County.”

Edgar continued: “The lesson plans retained by Bryan College reveal that the children are being taught that the bible conveys literal truth about God and Jesus Christ reflective of the Bryan College ‘Statement of Belief,’ that the bible is literally true. Students are asked to memorize bible verses, act out skits of biblical stories, and sing songs such as ‘Jesus Loves Me,’ ‘My God Is So Great,’ ‘Pharaoh, Pharaoh,’ ‘Twelve Men Want to Spy on Canaan,’ ‘Shout to the Lord,’ ‘Change My Heart, Oh God’ and ‘I’m In the Lord’s Army.’”

Edgar also observed: “Rhea County, Tenn., is no stranger to religious controversy. In 1925, the Rhea County Courthouse was the site of the well-known ‘Scopes’ or ‘Monkey’ trial . . . The legacy of that trial in some respects gives rise to this lawsuit.”



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor gives the opening remarks at the Scopes Trial Centennial celebration in Chattanooga, Tenn., on July 18. View the Scopes speech videos at [ffrf.org/scopescon](http://ffrf.org/scopescon).

The indignant county appealed our victory. Two years later, the 6th Circuit firmly agreed with us, our plaintiffs and Judge Edgar that the bible ministry program, conducted in public school classrooms, during school hours, and for children as young as kindergarten, was patently unconstitutional.

The parents were so concerned about security they didn’t tell their two small daughters that their family was the one suing until long after they won the case and had left Dayton. But it was an open secret — to everyone but the girls. One daughter contacted us about a decade later and explained that she and her sister did not know why they were pariahs. No one would eat with them in the cafeteria. Kids would sometimes slam lockers on their little fingers. She imputed it to racism — their mother was Native American. Now she finally discovered the reason. Need anyone know more than this sad story to understand why divisive religion does not belong in our public schools?

Ed Larson’s riveting Pulitzer-Prize winning book, “Summer for the Gods,” revealed that the play and movie, “Inherit the Wind,” had lots of phony details in it. The irony is that Dayton, in many respects, thanks to three generations of fundamentalist indoctrination in its public schools, appeared to have evolved to resemble the town that the playwrights conjured up as the mythical “Hillsboro.”

Fast forward to 2018. FFRF and supporters were readying to dedicate Zenos Frudakis’ magnificent statue to Clarence Darrow on the Rhea County Courthouse lawn, to balance the statue of William Jennings Bryan already there. But the town hadn’t forgotten FFRF’s lawsuit, including a septuagenarian grandmother who pictured herself on Facebook with a rifle, and promised to be there for the dedication.

Fortunately, all went well.

To thank those who had so generously dedicated the statue, including playwright and actor John de Lancie, FFRF had purchased front-row tickets of the play the town puts on every year. When the play concluded, every single stagehand and actor, including those portraying Scopes and Darrow, turned in unison to face our party and belt out Christian hymns at us. Undoubtedly, some had learned those hymns during the public school’s bible classes. We hope 21 years without bible indoctrination

in Dayton’s public schools is making a difference. But June Griffin, the woman with the rifle, is still around, and called our office recently to tell us we still aren’t welcome in Dayton.

The good news is that a slim majority of Americans for some time have finally accepted evolution. However, a disturbing Supreme Court decision, *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, just handed down by the Supreme Court, promises to have a chilling effect on evolution and other curriculum in our public schools. Justice Samuel Alito, who authored the broadly worded decision, wrote:

“A government burdens the religious exercise of parents when it requires them to submit their children to instruction that poses ‘a very real threat of undermining’ the religious beliefs and practices that the parents wish to instill.”

As dissenting Justice Sonia Sotomayor put it, the decision hands veto power to a subset of parents who claim public school curriculum exposes children to messages that conflict with a parent’s religious beliefs.

Meanwhile our nation is in the middle of a wholesale federal war against science, in the form of the current dismantlement of public health, the mass firings of scientists and medical researchers. The Association for the Advancement of Sci-

ence announced a week ago that cuts to the budgets of federal agencies and programs doing scientific research or providing grants to researchers and universities doing scientific research already will fall by more than a third — research that has brought the world so much progress, medical cures and innovations. There’s RFK Jr.’s dogged destruction of our vaccination policies. Then there’s the climate change denial, the demolition of key weather forecasting that saves American lives during the increasingly severe weather. And now the Senate approving the rescission package that reneges funding for NPR and PBS. Because autocrats fear above all an informed citizenry.

As we watch the wreckage from the ongoing takeover of our nation by billionaires and Christian nationalists being rubber-stamped by the extremist Supreme Court, it is hard not to wonder if our entire country is on the verge of becoming one great big “Hillsboro.”

In their foreword, the playwrights of “Inherit the Wind” presciently observed:

“The stage directions set the time as ‘Not too long ago.’ It might have been yesterday. It could be tomorrow.”

What would Clarence Darrow do? He’d be saying: Keep your eyes on the 2026 midterms, baby!

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.



For a full gallery of photos from the Scopes convention, go to [ffrf.us/scopespics](http://ffrf.us/scopespics), or use the QR code here.





Photo by Chris Line



Photo by Steve Solomon

Entertainment on the opening night got rave reviews, including a concert by New York City jazz singer Tahira Clayton, accompanied on the piano by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, performing standards from 100 years ago that live on.



Photo by Chris Line

Professor Chris Cameron spoke about Black freethought in the 1920s, including the Harlem Renaissance.



Photo by Chris Line

Annie Laurie Gaylor awards Pulitzer Prize-winning author Ed Larson with FFRF’s Clarence Darrow Award, a miniature of the statue in Dayton.



Photo by Chris Line

Eddie Tabash, a Lifetime FFRF Member and CFI Board member, helped welcome the audience of 250 people at the conference opening on July 18.



Photo by Chris Line

Brenda Wineapple spoke about her powerful new history on the Scopes Trial, “Keep the Faith,” available at [ffrf.org/shop](http://ffrf.org/shop).



Photo by Chris Line

Richard Katskee recounted the victorious 2005 Dover Trial, an update to the Scopes Trial, as one of the legal counsel challenging so-called “intelligent design.”



Photo by Steve Solomon

Science teacher Bertha Vazquez talks about launching the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science (TIES) in 2015 and is education director at the Center for Inquiry.

Watch videos of the speeches at [ffrf.org/scopescon](http://ffrf.org/scopescon)





Photo by Chris Line

The crowning moment of the conference was when former federal judge John E. Jones III portrayed himself during the conclusion of the audio play about the Dover trial, dramatically reading his own declaration ruling “intelligent design” unconstitutional. Not visible at far left was Eugenie Scott, who founded the National Center for Science Education, and appropriately portrayed the real-life science educator Barbara Forrest.



Photo by Chris Line

Playwright and actor John de Lancie performing in his audio play, “The Dover Panda Trial,” which ended the conference.



Photo by Chris Line

A local cast of 16 actors joined playwright John de Lancie and his actress wife Marnie Mosiman in portraying the Dover intelligent design trial. The performance received a warm standing ovation.



Photo by Chris Line

Actress Marnie Mosiman portrayed the Narrator in the play, “The Dover Panda Trial,” written by de Lancie and Kristen Tregar, who also performed in it.



Photo by Chris Line

The Scopes Centennial Conference was organized by FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF Event Planner Sadie Pattinson, CFI Events Coordinator Eric Shaver and CFI President Robyn Blumner. Special kudos to Robyn for proposing it.



Photo by Chris Line

Big thanks to FFRF Director of Operations Lisa Strand, Shop Manager Katina Gehn and Event Planner Sadie Pattinson for their dedicated conference support. Not pictured are volunteers Ece Gundoglan (with CFI) and Aleta and Carl Ledendecker (with FFRF).



Photo by Chris Line

The behind-the-scenes audio-visual crew, from left: Videographers Stephanie Benicek and Tori Neels, FFRF Video Director Bruce Johnson (center), audio engineer Noah Gilfillan and floor manager Mallory Johnson. Not pictured: Convention photographer and attorney Chris Line.



Photo by Chris Line

Enjoying the opening night program are Freethought Society President Margaret Downey (black headpiece) and renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis (tuxedo).



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Board Chair Mike Cermak and Board Secretary Cheryl Kolbe enjoy a moment touring the Scopes Trial Museum.





Photo by Chris Line  
Dan Barker, in front of the courthouse, talked about how reading science in his early 30s transformed him from a fundamentalist creationist to freethought activist.



Photo by Chris Line  
Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, author of “The God Delusion,” speaks outside the courthouse.



Photo by Chris Line  
CFI President Robyn Blumner made remarks outside the courthouse in Rhea County, as the statue of Clarence Darrow by Zenos Frudakis erected by FFRF looked on.



Photo by Chris Line  
Five busloads of freethinkers rode from Chattanooga on July 20 to Dayton to listen to an outdoor rally, see the Clarence Darrow statue and tour the Scopes Trial courthouse.



Photo by Chris Line  
About 200 conventioners participated in the “pilgrimage” to Dayton, Tenn., where they toured the historic Rhea County Courthouse and where the tour host talked about the courtroom itself and the trial.



Photo by Chris Line  
FFRF saw to it that a statue to Clarence Darrow, sculpted by Zenos Frudakis, was added to the Rhea County Courthouse in 2018 to balance one there of William Jennings Bryan.



Photo by Chris Line  
Conference-goers who were game enough to sport 1920s regalia on the opening night of the Scopes Centennial Conference assembled for a group portrait.



Photo by Chris Line  
“Very Funny Lady” Leighann Lord opened on the evening of July 18 with some gentle standup, then kept the audience laughing as the conference emcee. Here she’s doing the Charleston dance.

Watch videos of the speeches at [ffrf.org/scopescon](http://ffrf.org/scopescon)



# 100 years later, the struggle remains

*This is the speech given by Katherine Stewart at the Scopes Trial Centennial convention in Chattanooga, Tenn., on July 19.*

By Katherine Stewart

I am reminded of an earlier moment in the American struggle for freedom. In 1865, after the Civil War had ended and the 13th Amendment had been passed, many of the abolitionists and social reformers gathered and some, including William Lloyd Garrison, said it was time to close up shop. Mission accomplished. But Frederick Douglass stood up and said this was no time to shut down the movement for freedom. Yes, slavery in its recent form is gone, he said, but who knows what new shape the monster will take?

The trajectory of the Scopes trial, which took place about 60 years after that moment, reminds me of that same wisdom. Because, at first, it looked to most observers as if Clarence Darrow had won. William Jennings Bryan and his bible thumpers were made to look ridiculous. And even though the jury initially voted in their favor, the episode was generally understood to be an embarrassment and a setback for their cause.

When the film “Inherit the Wind” was made in 1960, the assumption was that, in America at least, religious fundamentalism represented the past. Its advocates were blinkered, backward-looking and already being pushed aside in the forward march of history.

But I want to say: Who knew then what new shapes the monster would take? In fact, the struggle in that trial, 100 years ago, is in many ways the struggle in which we are still engaged. The specifics have changed, but the opposing forces are mostly the same.

Today I want to talk about the war on science, the war on education, the war on the truth and the war on democracy itself. Because they are all the same war.

## War on science

For starters, let’s talk about our current president’s lunatic, chainsaw attack on America’s scientific research apparatus. In the five months since the Trump administration has taken power, it has gutted the scientific and health research apparatus that has grounded America’s economic strength and made us the envy of the world. It has destroyed agencies that handle food and drug safety and approve new medications. It has fired people who handle nuclear codes and air traffic, weather research and emergency management. It has shuttered labs and slashed funds for scientific research at America’s top universities.

Make no mistake: This is a total war on science in America. If an enemy power wished to demolish one of the pillars of American economic, military and political strength over the past century, this might be what they would do.

If you listen to the DOGE people, it’s about saving money. But it isn’t. The destruction of science is partly an ideological project and partly an inevitable consequence of authoritarian politics. The ideological project says that science is hopelessly politicized by “woke warriors” who believe in lies like climate change, so it needs to be destroyed. It says that science has become a key part of what anti-democratic forces call the “administrative state” and therefore must be obliterated. The ideology probably motivates some number of the apparatchiks over,



Photo by Chris Line

**“Religious nationalism has brought to American politics the conviction that our political differences are a battle between absolute evil and absolute good,” said Katherine Stewart. View her speech at [ffrf.org/scopescon](https://ffrf.org/scopescon).**

seeing the destruction. But the people calling the shots are driven much less by ideology than power.

So, what’s the deeper reason for this wholesale attack? It’s that authoritarian power is incompatible with the scientific pursuit of truth. This movement identifies the scientific system as detrimental to its political goals because science depends on facts and reason. Facts and reason are inimical to dictatorial power. Authoritarian leaders maintain their power by spreading lies and propaganda and superstition. Quite simply, this movement’s leaders know that truth is their enemy.

Democracy relies on specialized knowledge. It relies on expertise and rational accountability and an educated public to function. The current administration understands intuitively that a disinformed public is easier to control. So, they have set about destroying centers of expertise both inside and outside the government. They divide the population through sanctimonious displays and identity politics. Only an uneducated public can be persuaded that an administration marked by epic and unprecedented levels of financial corruption and mismanagement is *fighting for them*.

This anti-rationalist ideology comes in several flavors, not all of them consistent. One wing comes out of the evangelical hard-right, which has long argued that science has been turned into a weapon against faith. A large subset of the Christian nationalist movement, for instance, claims climate science is not merely a hoax, but a secular plot to undermine religion. Some say it is itself a false and literally demonic religion, a “Green Dragon.”

Then there is a different approach emerging from people in the orbit of far-right think tanks such as the Claremont Institute. They hold the view that science has become part of a “woke bureaucracy” that is intent on pushing undesirable social views and cutting off opportunities for a genuine — and dictatorial — leader of “the people.” They saw we need a “Red Caesar,” who can enact his will without facts and reason getting in the way. They

see in science an evil bureaucracy and simply want to destroy it.

We should also keep in mind that the war on science is part of a battle for control of higher education. Consider that most scientific research is carried out at universities, and government research grants are the first thing to cut when the Trump administration is looking for blackmail opportunities. So, the war on science is in some sense collateral damage from a battle for control of elite institutions.

## War on education

The attack on Harvard and other universities follows an elemental fascist playbook. The core idea is to coerce cultural and scientific institutions to conform to the ruling party’s ideological agenda. The administration is demanding that the universities in their crosshairs let the MAGA power clique control its hiring of faculty, its curricula and even its choice of students. This is exactly the kind of government manipulation of the pursuit of knowledge that fascists promote. It is antithetical to democracy.

The attack on the universities, like much of what this administration does, is all about performance — specifically performance related to the culture wars. It’s a performance aimed at people who are indoctrinated by Fox

News and other propaganda outfits to believe that all the courses Harvard teaches have to do with how to conduct your gender surgery operation, or how to be the most “woke” person in town.


It is aimed at people who don’t understand that the money Harvard gets from the government isn’t in fact a subsidy; it is overwhelmingly funding for research and for services that the government asks for through competitive bidding, along with fairly rigorous grantmaking processes. That research is then utilized by a range of private enterprises that yield substantial benefits to our economy, our health care sector, et cetera.


Like almost everything else the administration does, the attack on the universities is also characterized by a certain amount of incompetence. The orders it has made against Harvard are poorly thought out and almost certainly illegal. This is a typical feature of regimes that are headed toward fascism. They break the law out in the open, over and over again, precisely because they want the people to think that the law simply doesn’t apply anymore. The absolute premium on loyalty to the leader means that individuals with professionalism and integrity are positively unwelcome in the administration. They just want to appeal to their misinformed base, and any bad outcomes can be covered with more lies.

Gaining control of the institutions of education is part of any authoritarian project. But this also shows the extent to which the New Right/Project 2025 radicals are driving the bus. They have long said that the only way for their movement to win is to smash not just the administrative state, but also to destroy cultural institutions, like the universities, which they think have been conquered and colonized by the evil and progressive “woke” culture.

Mind you, this is a movement that lectured us for decades about the importance of viewpoint diversity and the horror of “cancel culture.” We see now that the “free speech” talk was a sham. They can’t stand that there may be some people at universities that express opinions they don’t like. So, they want to destroy them and then rebuild from the ground up on the wreckage in order to ensure that cultural institutions are aligned with a reactionary, pro-authoritarian agenda.

The attack on higher education is of a piece with this administration’s attack on democracy on other fronts. Because a functioning government, run by rational decision-making processes, subject to ethics rules and expertise, is a hindrance to dictatorial power.





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War on truth

Which brings us to the war on truth. Just as no individual is genuinely free in a state of delusion, no society can govern itself democratically in the absence of reasoned public discourse. Truth is therefore the great enemy of anti-democratic movements of all types. The attack on truth is the way they consolidate their power.

In the pre-2016 American domestic political world, when the right was obsessed with what, in comparison with today, look like micro-scandals, from Watergate to Hillary’s Clinton’s alleged profiteering in Whitewater of tens or perhaps hundred thousand dollars, the mantra of the time — “It’s not the crime, it’s the cover-up” — was an indirect way of saying that the truth still matters. It sounds quaint now. There are no cover-ups anymore. There are just crimes.

The state of play in America now is evident in the extraordinarily muted response to the sewer of corruption that now runs through the White House. There is no parallel in American history to the crypto-scams, meme coins, family business tie-ins and countless other gifts that Trump and his family use to convert public office into billions of dollars in private riches. There is no parallel to the miracle of DOGE, where one of the government’s biggest contractors (along with his 19-year-old minions) was put in charge of all contractors across the government. JD Vance, as we are now learning, brought his investment portfolio with him into the White House, and companies in which he had a stake won millions in federal contracts. To compare all this with Watergate, or even Teapot Dome, is to say that serial killers are just fine because we’ve had some shoplifters at the corner store in the past.

In a functioning democracy, this degree of corruption would be on the front pages every day and adjudicated in court. But here we are in America today.

It is not just the degree of corruption that matters but also its function. In a world where democracy is taken for granted, the unstated assumption is that corruption is mainly a matter of personal selfishness and venality. Under the anti-democratic pathology, however, corruption is the form of government. Put it simply, this is what monarchical leaders always did and still do. They suck money from the public and distribute it among their cronies in order to reinforce their own power.

One of the most overused myths about fascism is that it makes the trains run on time. It doesn’t. It just makes the train operators fork over cash to cronies,



Photo by Chris Line

Katherine Stewart speaks in front of a full house at the Scopes Trial Centennial celebration in Chattanooga, Tenn., on July 19.

who then use the money to gain still more power. (FEMA’s apparently sham-bolic response to the Texas flood that has taken over 120 lives, and Noem’s and Trump’s denials of incompetence, are more representative examples of authoritarianism in action.)

Given that the present administration rose to power with the support of the religious right, many people suggest that we are headed for theocracy. Certainly, we are seeing the implementation of a Christian nationalist agenda in our laws and society. But the end state won’t be pure theocracy; it is rather a cronyistic, kleptocratic, corrupt autocracy with theocratic features.

Religious nationalism has brought to American politics the conviction that our political differences are a battle between absolute evil and absolute good. When you’re engaged in a struggle between the “party of life” and the “party of death,” as many religious nationalists frame our political divisions, you don’t need to worry about crafting careful policy based on expert opinion and analysis. Only a dictator, free from the scruples of political correctness, can save the righteous from the damned. Fealty to the cause is everything; fidelity to the facts means nothing.

What we are learning is that the U.S. constitutional system really only works when it comes with respect for certain norms and institutions. It isn’t designed in such a way that it can survive an assault from bad-faith actors within.

War on democracy

How did we get here? The one sad thought I keep returning to is that it didn’t have to be this way. Yes, there are long-term forces at work — rising

economic inequality and a huge rise in the propaganda economy. Yes, these things are happening around the globe. It isn’t just Trump. It’s a whole system that generates a deadly mix of mass discontent and mass disinformation. Still, some countries find a way to recover; others just go deeper into the hole of reactionary, theocratic, kleptocratic authoritarianism.

What is to be done? The first step is to reject the cynical efforts to deflate the threat. The standard form of denial is to say that politicians have always lied, that presidents have always tried to pull one over the other branches of government, that our system has always been for sale. This is a bit like saying that you’ve heard the neighbors shouting at their kids from time to time, so it’s no big deal if they start breaking their legs.

Another form of denial is to suppose that the rot will stop through some natural process of self-correction. The guardrails will hold, or maybe the authoritarian regime will be satisfied once it achieves some supposed policy aims. This is wishful thinking. Fascism isn’t a policy program, it’s a political dynamic that afflicts political systems, and it gets worse if it isn’t treated. Today’s crimes will necessitate further crimes; corruption now requires still more corruption tomorrow. Fascism thrives in a state of emergency, and it often succeeds through its own malfeasance and incompetence in bringing about precisely the emergency it needs to continue.

Yet another form of denial is to blame the victim. In this case, that tends to mean blaming the Democratic Party. If

only they had done this or that, if only they had “listened to me,” none of this would have happened, or so the comforting line of argument runs. There is one big mistake that the anti-MAGA world has made, and it is the same one that opponents of fascism in the early 20th century made: They failed to unify. They failed to recognize that their genuine enemy was not the person immediately to the left or right of them but the person who was trying to tear down a democratic system altogether and replace it with strongman politics.

If we are lucky enough or organized enough to overcome these denials, a few things are critical: The first is quite simply to mobilize enough voters to shift course. Our electoral system is fragile, but enough of it remains in place that we can still reasonably hope to vote for a different future. There is no substitute for voter turnout, and we have elections in less than a year and a half, so everyone should be working, right now, to bring people in their circle to the side of democracy.

The second is that we need a big tent. To paraphrase a former president, the person who agrees with you 80 percent of the time is your 80 percent friend, not your 20 percent enemy. The pro-democracy coalition is very large and noisy and diverse. It’s like a very big, squabbly family. None of us are going to get everything we want, and frankly, we probably shouldn’t get everything we want. But if we can agree on some core democratic principles, we can work together.

That brings me to a third point: The oldest trick in the playbook is divide and conquer. We need to get smarter about recognizing when the supporters of autocracy weaponize certain issues to divide us. We can be more adept at avoiding the traps they are setting for us and turn the spotlight back on their corruption and failures.


And, finally, should we manage to gain enough political power to do so, we need to prepare for the deep, structural reforms that will be necessary to revive democracy in the face of a threat that will undoubtedly outlive its present incarnation. My book “Money, Lies and God” includes a number of specific recommendations, and I do hope you will pick up a copy.

Thank you!

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### What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

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

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



# FFRF announces 2025 high school essay winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the winners of the 2025 William Schulz High School Essay Contest. FFRF has awarded \$17,950 in scholarship money for this year’s contest!

College-bound high school seniors were asked to write a personal persuasive essay based on this prompt: “To do good is my religion. Write a first-person essay that asserts why ‘doing good’ is not dependent on religious belief.”

FFRF awarded 11 top prizes and 10 honorable mentions. (FFRF seeks to distribute essay scholarship monies to a higher number of students, so ties — such as eighth place in this contest — are not regarded in the typical tie fashion, where, in this instance, ninth place would be skipped.)

Winners are listed below and include the college or university they are now attending and the award amount.

- FIRST PLACE**  
Shaurya Bhartia, UC-Berkeley, \$3,500.
- SECOND PLACE**  
Benjamin Meerson, UC-Berkeley, \$3,000.
- THIRD PLACE**  
Ian Klimov, Yale, \$2,500
- FOURTH PLACE**  
Patrick Le Febvre, University of Connecticut, \$2,000.



- FIFTH PLACE**  
Alice Giambalvo, Texas A&M, \$1,500.
- SIXTH PLACE**  
Noelle Kim, California Institute of Technology, \$1,000.
- SEVENTH PLACE**  
Dong En Wu, Marquette University, \$750.
- EIGHTH PLACE (tie)**  
Kiera Robinson, Nova Southeastern University, \$500.  
Kennedy Cordle, North Carolina A&T State University, \$500.
- NINTH PLACE**  
Callum Wilford, University of Florida, \$400.

- TENTH PLACE**  
Chauntel Berry, Rochester Institute of Technology, \$300.
- HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)**  
Isabella Cassells, Coastal Carolina University.  
Ariana Delgado, University of Texas-El Paso.  
Jayden Fernandez-Morales, University of California-Riverside.  
Caleb Forehand, East Carolina University.  
Anna Izquierdo, Colby College.  
Jocelynn Malone, Heidelberg University (Ohio).  
Eden Sterk, University of Florida.

Aliani Timmons, Carnegie Mellon University.  
Sophia Wang, University of Florida.  
Josiah Wiegrefe, Minnesota State University-Moorhead.

The high school contest is named for the late William J. Schulz, a Wisconsin member and lifelong learner who died at 57 and left a generous bequest to FFRF.

FFRF warmly thanks FFRF’s Lisa Treu for managing the minute details of this and FFRF’s other annual student competitions. And we couldn’t judge these contests without our volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Don Ardell, Dan Barker, Wrenna Fine, Jon Galehouse, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Brian Gillaspie, Susan Gould, Richard Grimes, Ricki Grunberg, Linda Josheff, Sammi Lawrence, Tori Mizerak, Henry Mongrain, Jason Mosebach, Joanna Papich, Gene Perry, Rose Mary Sheldon and PJ Slinger.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010 and one dedicated to students of color since 2016. A fifth contest, open to law students, began in 2019.

## FIRST PLACE

# Shantih without saints

FFRF awarded Shaurya \$3,500.

By Shaurya Bhartia

When my father’s monitor chirped its antiseptic lullaby, I folded my hands by his bed and whispered T. S. Eliot’s final benediction — “Shantih, shantih, shantih.” Peace, however, arrived not from heaven, but from Earth: My mother translating medical jargon into treatment plans, nurses rehearsing compassion in midnight shifts, a technician tightening the IV line with the tenderness of a friend. That ward became the first classroom in which I learned that goodness is a verb, not a theology.

Marcus Aurelius crystallized what the ward had taught me: We govern only our choices and the help we extend. Virtue, he wrote, is “what you do when nothing compels you but conscience.” In practice, secular conscience is potent. Developmental psychologist Paul Bloom shows that infants display empathy before they can pronounce a single prayer; compassion is older than creed. When critics claim morality collapses without scripture, I recall the cardiology resident who stayed past her shift so my father would not wake up



alone. Her kindness did not depend on a promised heaven.

I have tried to pass that kindness forward. At the Altadena (Calif.) Library, I coach 8-year-olds through the baffling opening of the Queen’s Gambit; the moment a child spots a three-move checkmate, the room feels brighter. In my Political Discourse Club, students wear-

ing MAGA hats trade questions — not epithets — with self-described socialists. These spaces thrive on dialogue, the “solidarity of conversation” that Richard Rorty celebrated, rather than on catechism.

Skeptics ask what anchors secular ethics. Neuroscientist Sam Harris proposes a simple metric: the flourishing of conscious beings. By that measure, my mother’s evidence-driven relentlessness lengthened a single life. A low-cost Raman detector I helped build during my photon systems internship can safeguard thousands more by spotting contaminants in clinic samples. Moral progress, then, is not divine revelation but cumulative troubleshooting — science, empathy, iteration.

Thomas Paine distilled this ethos into one sentence: “The world is my country, and to do good is my religion.” I sign on to his congregation of the unaffiliated. Like Eliot’s fragments, our lives are scattered — yet in each deliberate act of help we stitch another thread across the gaps. No choir sings for the nurse’s quiet heroism, no scripture canonizes a child’s first self-

“Moral progress . . . is not divine revelation but cumulative troubleshooting — science, empathy, iteration.”

less move on a chessboard, yet the world tilts incrementally toward mercy.

So, I keep Eliot’s blessing, but address it to human hands: Shantih to the researcher cultivating hope in a Petri dish, Shantih to the student who listens before arguing, Shantih to anyone who does good for its own quiet sake. In that shared, earthbound liturgy, I find all the sanctuary I need.

Shaurya, 18, will be attending UC-Berkeley. “I am a British-Indian student who moved from London to Los Angeles just before Covid. I was the valedictorian of Maranatha High School and an AP Scholar with Distinction. I pair a passion for bioengineering with a love of philosophy. I founded a 100-member Political Discourse Club, tutor children in chess at the Altadena Library, and lead service projects as National Honor Society president. On the technical side, I interned at Photon Systems, helping to build a Raman-spectroscopy web database, and captained a SeaPerch robotics team a top 10 international finish.”

## SECOND PLACE

# Morality without God

FFRF awarded Benjamin \$3,000.

By Benjamin Meerson

On Feb. 17, 1600, a Dominican friar, after seven years of imprisonment and torture, was escorted to his execution at Campo de’ Fiori. His tongue was secured with a metal clamp in fear that he might address the crowd with his “wicked words.” The friar was then stripped

naked, hanged upside down, removed from the gallows while still alive and, finally, burned at the stake. His name was Giordano Bruno.

It is a well-known story, as are those of others who came before and after. Some, like Copernicus and Galileo, were spared, at the cost of renouncing their ideas. Others, like the Alexandrian Hypatia, were lynched by religious fanatics 1,200 years before Bruno, yet for the same crime —

teaching the heliocentric model.

These stories did not lead me to faith. They led me away from it.

I am not religious. Morality is not a set of rules etched in divine stone, but a living practice born of reason and empathy. A mind unconstrained by religious doctrines will never understand why a harmless theory, proposed by Aristarchus of Samos in the third century B.C.E., could coexist with ideas for 700 years, and then be-

come a pivot of a murderous controversy. How can “doing good” require alignment with dogma? And how can the Church, which scorched a man alive for imagining infinite worlds, claim authority over virtue?

Plato, through Socrates in Euthyphro, asked whether the good is good because God commands it, or whether God commands it because it is good. If the latter, then goodness exists beyond the gods, and that is





Benjamin Meerson

where I place my trust — in rational principles, in virtue that asks no reward and fears no hell.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I delivered groceries to elderly neighbors, not because scripture commanded it, but because they needed help, and I could give it. I have taught the impoverished and supported drug-rehabilitation initiatives, not because scripture commanded it, but because they needed help that I could give.

And so, like the Greeks, I ask questions. Theirs was a religion without monopoly; their gods, uncertain and fallible. Greeks believed in gods, but there was no monopoly on the secrets of gods, nor did the gods themselves know these secrets. And since authoritarian answers were not possible, people kept searching.

As time passed, and holy scriptures became the absolute authority, the only possible question could be “what these scriptures meant.” People who asked different questions were stoned and burned. Those who believe it to be the price of order may speak with the words of Dostoevsky’s protagonist: “But what will become of men then? Without God and immortal life? All things are permitted then, they can do what they like?” And, yet, there will always be Socrates, who famously denied the gods of Athens, who knows how to

“Morality is not a set of rules etched in divine stone, but a living practice born of reason and empathy.”

live a moral life for the sake of virtue, even if it leads to death. He knew, as do I, that to be moral is to live in accordance with reason, not fear.

*Benjamin, 18, is attending UC-Berkeley.*

*“I come from a Jewish-Russian family and grew up as the son of first-generation immigrants in New Jersey. I scored a 5 on the AP Latin exam, completed two years of Classics coursework at Princeton University, and was the only student in the United States accepted into Princeton’s High School Teacher Preparation Program for Classics. I’ve earned four seals of biliteracy and hold the highest Latin exam score in my school’s history. I’ve taught refugee children for more than 100 hours, served as outreach director for a similar organization, and worked tirelessly in drug prevention, serving on the boards of two major drug rehabilitation nonprofits.”*

THIRD PLACE

# Two Jews, three opinions, no god

FFRF awarded Ian \$2,500.

By Ian Klimov

The running joke is: “two Jews, three opinions.” Add me in, and you get four — and not one of them includes God.

I was raised Jewish, the kind of Jewish that meant Shabbat candles sat next to Darwin’s “Origin of Species” on the bookshelf. We kept Passover but also kept Richard Dawkins in print. And still, my Bar Mitzvah was earnest: Hebrew school, Torah portion, suit and tie. The speeches were heartfelt and the bagels plentiful. But somewhere between the gefilte fish and the Haftarah, I realized: I don’t believe any of this; the parting of the sea or the talking bush, divine plan, the man in the sky, the afterlife with unlimited lox — none of it.

Setting aside the stupid things we think when we’re 13, overdressed and overwhelmed, there was another deep, evolutionary force at work that propelled those thoughts to my mind:

“Had I let science books, TED Talks and Darwin chip away at my faith? No. I got cognitively dissonanced.”

cognitive dissonance. Our minds are restless, torn between conflicting beliefs. We experience mental discomfort when trying to reconcile two opposing beliefs. And eventually, the tension breaks. This was the day I had supposedly been building toward since I could walk. My parents beaming, my sisters squirming in their chairs, and me, standing there, utterly unmoved. Was I a bad person for having these thoughts? Had I let science books, TED Talks and Darwin chip away at my faith? No. I got cognitively dissonanced. And, after that day, I braced myself for the existential fallout — teenage angst with a theological twist. But what happened instead was . . . nothing. I found the sense that doing good didn’t require divine permission.

I’ve never stolen. I say thank you. I hold doors open for strangers, even when I’m in a rush. I co-led a neuroscience education group that translated research into public outreach, so others could access the same sense of curiosity that animates my studies.



Ian Klimov

Instead of asking the question “What would God want me to do?” I find myself inquiring “What kind of person do I want to be in a world that often forgets to ask?” When people say atheists can’t be moral, I wonder what morality they mean. Fear-based obedience? Or the kind built on empathy and reason, as well as the insistence that everyone deserves dignity, with or without divine endorsement?

If “doing good” is a religion, then sure, I’m devout. But my commandments aren’t written on stone tablets. And my temple? It’s the laboratory, the classroom, the stranger on the subway. I believe in doing good. And I don’t believe you need God to do it.

*Ian, 18, is attending Yale University.*

*“I am planning to major in molecular, cellular and developmental biology, with the long-term goal of becoming a neurosurgeon. I’ve conducted research at Mount Sinai Hospital and Stony Brook University. I was the leader of the content creation team for Neuroscience Foundation, working with students to make research accessible to the public. I also served as concertmaster of my high school orchestra, performed violin for pediatric patients at NYU Langone Hospital, and tutored high school students in math and science.”*

FOURTH PLACE

# Empathy is my commandment



Patrick Le Febvre

FFRF awarded Patrick \$2,000.

By Patrick Le Febvre

If morality is dictated by divine command, does good cease to be good without God? While one’s perspective of morality is subjective, what is good is good, and does not require justification in the name of the Lord. Rather, I contend that morality is rooted in empathy and compassion. It does not require religious backing, and ethical systems can exist robustly without reference to the divine.

Religion has not been incorporated into my upbringing, as I have only ever been inside churches as a gigging musician. While I was not raised in a religious setting, my lack of spirituality is derived from much more than a lack of exposure. I don’t see the value

in spending one’s life appealing to an unproven higher power when this one life is all that we are promised. So, I strive to maximize my time and make the one world we are sure of a better place. Life is too short to concern oneself with what lies beyond. I would much rather focus on improving what we do have, ensuring a better world for humanity’s future generations.

Regarding morality, I believe that it should be based on simply asking the question “Am I making the world a better place?” Being kind and compassionate and generous doesn’t require a bible commanding you to do

“I don’t see the value in spending one’s life appealing to an unproven higher power when this one life is all that we are promised.”

so. The common argument that atheists are immoral is not true. In fact, I would argue that a nonbeliever is more morally sincere because we are not doing good out of obligation. In the bible, Proverbs 19-17 states: “Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will reward them for what they have done.”

People who follow scripture often do good out of obligation or in hopes of being rewarded in heaven. My morality, on the other hand, is backed in my commitment to do good unto others, to be the good I want to see

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# Le Febvre

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in the world. I do this not out of obligation, and not because of rewards in the afterlife. I do good simply because I want to make the world a better place.

A project I am proud to work on is running my school’s food bank. I do this to make a difference in my community, not to appease a higher

being. My actions are no less moral than if they were backed by an ancient book. My morality is built on empathy, responsibility and a conscious choice to leave the world better than I found it. In this way, like Thomas Paine, to do good is my religion.

Ultimately, I believe that morality thrives when we act not out of obligation to a higher power, but out of genuine concern for the well-being of others. To me, goodness is its own re-

ward; it needs no promise of heaven or fear of hell. Like Paine, I choose to make doing good my guiding principle, because in this one life we are certain to have, it’s the most meaningful thing we can leave behind.

Patrick, 18, is attending the University of Connecticut.

“I am an aspiring human rights lawyer, a dedicated musician of guitar and trumpet and am committed to a life of service. Throughout high school I was heavily involved in my local humane shelter,

St. Hubert’s, as a volunteer responsible for fundraising, socializing the animals, and notating my interactions with them to provide to the shelter staff. I am committed to service through music, performing Taps at local venues for Memorial Day, having had the privilege of performing at the Army National Ball at Picatinny Arsenal. I have also worked with a kindergarten Class in Lviv, Ukraine, to supply its children with letters, school supplies, holiday costumes and toys during these trying times.”

## FIFTH PLACE

# Burning stardust

FFRF awarded Alice \$1,500.

By Alice Giambalvo

Throughout my life I was told, with steely eyes and sure-fire voices, that the church is good. From cardboard signs held on the side of the highway to chants that echoed off the curves of the land, God was good, Christians are good. I was 8 years old when one of those good Christians told me to go to hell. I was so excited to learn and share the fact that we are made up of the same stuff as stars, and apparently that landed me a spot in hell. I was only 8 and she was only 8 — just children reflecting the hatred of the world.

As I got older, I began to notice that those cardboard signs held hateful words. “Honk if you hate the gays,” one of them read. The public library was the next target, as people following the all-loving God banned book after book. You have to protect the children, you know. God forbid I read of love without boundaries. God forbid there was more than one god.

I grew up in Central and West Texas, the Bible Belt. Belts are supposed



Alice Giambalvo

to hold you up and give you support. Rather, it was used as a convenient whip. I came to the conclusion that if following hatred is good, then I’d rather be evil.

So, let me tell you how evil I am. I come from a long line of evil. My dad was a pastor, but through the years he had more and more questions that religion refused to answer. That led

him to renounce religion and switch to an education major. Religion in Bible Belt public schools was about as much of a nightmare as you would expect. Atheism was a well-kept secret. I grew up being told it didn’t matter what you had to do to keep that secret, just do it. Lying made us sinners, but we were already destined to hell.

Instead of God, morality should be based on doing good for the sake of doing good. I have no God to impress, I have no spot in heaven to earn, yet I’ll help that man on the street. According to the pre-meal prayers, I can’t be good without God. I can solve world hunger and build a million homes, but I’m not good if I stayed home on Sunday. I believe that atheists are proof that someone can do the right thing simply because it’s the right thing to do. I’m not trying to avoid hell, I’m trying to avoid a fellow human going hungry.

I’ve met evil atheists and good Chris-

“I have no God to impress, I have no spot in heaven to earn, yet I’ll help that man on the street.”

tians, as well as good atheists and evil Christians. What you’re doing on a Sunday morning doesn’t determine who you are as a person. In the end, we’re all just one big mass of carbon and hydrogen. I don’t do good since I’m afraid of burning. I’m made up of the same stuff as stars, I was made to burn.

Alice, 18, attends Texas A&M Corpus Christi.

“I plan on majoring in environmental science with a minor in journalism. I am passionate about nature conservancy. When I was younger, my family got involved in Jane Goodall’s Roots and Shoots program and began volunteering around the community by setting up bird boxes, picking up trash and removing the invasive zebra mussel shells from our local lake. When I was 10, I attended Al Gore’s Climate Reality Project Conference. Recently, I have become involved with the Nature Conservancy. After attending as a student my freshman year, my sophomore year I received the honor of being a leader in the West Texas Women in Conservation Retreat.”

## SIXTH PLACE

# Reason, empathy and doing good

FFRF awarded Noelle \$1,000.

By Noelle Kim

In the Western world, people have long equated religion with morality. Growing up Catholic, I once subscribed to this exact viewpoint, grounding the entirety of my moral compass in sacred scriptures. However, as I grew older and began to critically examine my beliefs, I realized that morality doesn’t actually require faith in a god or adherence to arbitrary religious dogma. Instead, it can — and should — be based on reason, compassion and the desire to do good for others.

Contrary to common belief, I find it dangerous to tether one’s morality entirely to religious dogma. Religion creates a structure of “absolute truths” — a hierarchy of rules and values that cannot be questioned or disputed. In fact, under Catholicism, disagreeing with or speaking out against dogma is actively considered a sin, no matter your reasoning. Under this framework, religion can ac-

“I find my morality from the simple guiding principle that I want to do the most good and the least harm possible for others. It’s purposefully ambiguous.”

tively encourage people to act in harmful and cruel ways — even when certain rules contradict one’s conscience or others’ rights. This is why historically, and even currently, biblical passages like Exodus, Leviticus and Corinthians have been used to justify and support slavery, homophobia and patriarchal gender norms. Although these systemic evils clearly perpetuate injustice and violence — contradicting more fundamental values like “Love thy neighbor as thyself” — religious dogma leaves no room for people to question these contradictions. Instead, it stifles our morality.

While many people believe atheists “can’t be good without God,” I instead find greater potential for good in secularly derived moral systems. In the absence of the “absolute truths” posited by religion, morality must derive from reason. Without having a god or central dogma to turn to for all the answers, atheists are forced to critically question what they believe as right or wrong — which is arguably more powerful and allows us



Noelle Kim

to navigate more complicated, nuanced situations with care. There is no universal, one-size-fits-all solution to every moral dilemma. Instead, we must rely on our empathy, reason and collective humanity to guide our decisions.

I find my morality from the simple guiding principle that I want to do the most good and the least harm possible for others. It’s purposefully ambiguous. I don’t have a set law or formula that can automatically tell me what’s right or wrong. Instead, I have to use my best judgment

and think deeply about how my actions affect others. This moral philosophy guides every aspect of my life.

At school, I serve as a teacher’s aide, creating hundreds of pages of accessible study materials to share with others. Outside of school, I volunteer as a crisis counselor on the national suicide hotline, providing nonjudgmental support to anyone struggling with their mental health. And in every interaction I have with others, I know to treat everyone with respect, regardless of their identity, faith or background. It’s not something I do because of religion or any expectation of divine reward or punishment. Instead, empathy is my god, compassion is my sacred scripture, and “to do good is my religion.”

Noelle, 18, attends the California Institute of Technology.

“I plan to major in mechanical engineering and minor in aerospace engineering. I am a Pete Conrad Scholar, Coolidge Senator and NASA Space Apps Challenge Global Finalist. I interned at Boeing, NASA and George Mason University, and also led an independent research team in developing LotICE: a sustainable alternative to the harmful de-icing chemicals used in the aerospace industry. I am also passionate about mental health advocacy and I served as a crisis counselor on the National 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.”



SEVENTH PLACE

# To do good is my religion

FFRF awarded Dong \$750.

By Dong En Wu

Having grown up in the youth program of Christ’s Commission Fellowship (CCF), I always lay awake at night with questions that would not go away. Everybody else around me was so sure where morality came from, but I just could not connect with their answer. They always said morality came from God, from faith in the Holy Spirit. It left me feeling like a stranger, like there was something amiss with me for questioning. Why did goodness have to be about things that I myself could not accept?

It hurts when people assume you can’t be moral without religion. The accusation stings: “Without God, what’s stopping you from doing whatever you want?” Like the only thing restraining everyone from chaos is fear of punishment by a deity. But, in all sincerity, doesn’t that presumption say more about them than it does about me? I do think there is goodness because I’ve seen the un-



Dong En Wu

adulterated pain of watching people suffer and the raw joy of helping to ease some of that suffering — not because I’m afraid of some cosmic scoreboard.

When I look up at the stars, walk through a forest or stand on the beach,

I’m struck by nature in a way that makes any cathedral seem small. I see and I feel the causes. I look at the sand and know that the beach I’m standing on took hundreds of thousands of human lifetimes. Understanding that feeling — that sense of being part of something large and complete — is the foundation of my ethics. It’s not in any book, but it’s in the way my chest aches when I witness injustice and the way my soul rises when I see people choosing kindness in the face of it all. It’s in the way I see nature and humanity’s place in it.

My experience with CCF had a surprise lesson for me — that even though we all thought differently, whether about Christianity, faith or whatnot, we all acknowledged the same acts of kindness as being good. Whether driven by scripture or by humanity, we shared common ground in service to others.

“When I look up at the stars, walk through a forest or stand on the beach, I’m struck by nature in a way that makes any cathedral seem small.”

As I graduate from high school, I’m still working on getting it together. But I do know this: Goodness is not supernatural. Goodness is being most fully human — embracing our potential for empathy, reason and commonality. And, in the moments that I can make the world a little better, I feel a sense of purpose that I imagine must be a lot like what others get out of conventional faith.

Good deeds aren’t my philosophy — they’re where I find meaning. And isn’t that what religion is all about anyway?

Dong, 18, attends Marquette University. “I like volunteering. I’m currently studying to become a physical therapist. I volunteer at the North Texas Food Bank and I love traveling. I speak Spanish and Chinese along with English and I really hope to work in pediatrics for kids with disabilities. I also like learning about different religions.”

EIGHTH PLACE (tie)

# Redefining pro-life through love and action

FFRF awarded Kennedy \$500.

By Kennedy Cordle

The “pro-life” stance in America un-masks the conflict that exists between morality and religion in defining good. I believe “doing good,” as referenced in biblical principles, is the highest form of morality; showing love, offering empathy and uplifting others. However, if we, as a country, are to truly call ourselves pro-life, our actions must reflect a commitment to life beyond the womb.

Faith-based communities define pro-life solely as anti-abortion, ignoring the complexities of real life. What about the mother who must undergo a life-saving abortion? Or the teenager forced to carry a pregnancy as a result of sexual violence? These women are often condemned and judged by the same people who claim to stand for life.

After the Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization decision overturned Roe v. Wade, conservative-leaning states quickly restricted reproductive rights

“We are better off being guided by empathy rather than dogma.”

without any alternative plan to ease impact. Left unprotected and ignored, low-income women, who are disproportionately women of color, suffer in silence. According to the Centers for Disease Control, Black women in the United States are nearly three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women. This holds true across all variables of age, education and income. Nearly one in five children in America live in poverty, yet we rarely see the same energy for fixing underfunded schools or expanding affordable housing as we do for policing women’s choices. If our society truly took up the mantle of pro-life advocates, this would spark national outrage.

Pro-life has to be greater than a political initiative for it to be effective. It has to have moral consistency. The same bible once used to justify slavery and deny women equality is now used to shame vulnerable people. That is not love. That is control dressed up as conviction.

Religion is not the guiding principle behind the good we can achieve as a society. That would require humanity. When we



Kennedy Cordle

love one another, neighbors and strangers, with the same love we have for our close-knit families, then we value the lives of others. We empower women, protect children and create a society that doesn’t feed off of someone else’s shame. We are better off being guided by empathy rather than dogma.

“Doing good” is grounded in action. I’ve hosted baby drives to provide diapers and supplies to new mothers in need. Why? Because supporting life means easing the

burdens that come with it. I’ve volunteered at Parent Night Out events, giving parents four hours of free childcare outside of business hours so they can rest, relax or simply breathe. And for the last three years, I’ve worked in Teen Courts across Montgomery County, Prince George’s County, and Baltimore City, advocating for first-time nonviolent youth offenders to receive second chances and restorative justice. Love in action reflects how we treat one another. If we truly loved each other, we wouldn’t be having this debate at all.

Kennedy, 17, attends North Carolina A&T State University. “I plan to major in construction management because I want to build a more sustainable and equitable future. I have supported first-time juvenile offenders through Teen Court programs across multiple Maryland counties, and amplified young adult voices as an Office of the Attorney General DC Leadership Academy Ambassador. I’ve developed a strong foundation in environmental engineering through internships at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. My global perspective has been shaped by international study and travel as an Albrecht Fellow at the World Trade Center Institute. I served as a chief petty officer in my U.S. Naval Sea Cadet Corps–Mid-Atlantic Region, and was a mayor at Maryland Girls State.”



Kiera J. Robinson

EIGHTH PLACE (tie)

# Good without God

FFRF awarded Kiera \$500.

By Kiera J. Robinson

There was a time when humans foraged plants, hunted animals and survived not through divine guidance, but through cooperation and pure instinct. We did not rely on gods to tell us how to share food or protect one another. We just did it. We did it because it made sense for our survival. As society evolved, so did

our desire for meaning and structure. Religion offered comfort and community, but it also became a tool for division. It alienated those who did not conform, creating barriers and creating an “us” and “them.” Many attribute their good deeds to God, claiming it guides their sense of right and wrong. As an atheist, I see things differently because I do not perform good deeds to win divine favor. I do good because it feels right. In some ways, I believe this makes my actions

more genuine as they are rooted in empathy, not obligation.

I used to feel pressure to believe, considering religion was something pushed onto me from a young age, and it never felt natural. Once I stopped trying to believe, I felt freer and more motivated to act out of personal values rather than fear of punishment or hope of reward. I no longer needed external validation to

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Robinson

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know I was doing the right thing. Anyone who has taken a biology class knows humans are animals. Unlike most, we’ve developed intricate languages, technology and complex societies. But, at our core, we are still just social creatures. We cooperate, form bonds and care for each other — not because of religion, but because it’s in our nature. Other animals do this, too, without the belief in a higher power. Vampire bats share their blood meals with less successful foragers, even with those who have

not reciprocated before. And, dolphins have been known to help injured dolphins stay afloat to prevent drowning. Several species practice altruism and show compassion, but we seem to be the only animal that revolves it around an alleged higher entity. As the Roman philosopher Appianus Claudius once said, “Man is the architect of his own destiny.” We are responsible for our actions, whether they are good or bad.

When you blame the devil for wrongdoing or credit God for kindness, it removes agency from the individual. We are not puppets to a higher entity; we make our own decisions regardless of whether we blame God or not. To me, morality is not about divine command. It is about the impact you make following the question, “Do your actions help or harm?” That should be the universal standard. If the only reason you’re being kind

is because your religion tells you to, then your morality is conditional. True goodness comes from within. It should stem from empathy, reason and a desire to make life better for others. *Kiera, 18, attends Nova Southeastern University.* “In high school, I participated in the Medical Club, UNICEF and Model United Nations. I volunteered at the Greater Chicago Food Depository, packaging meals and working as a team to distribute them. I enjoy creative writing, learning Lao, doing my friends’ nails and pretending I’m in a fashion show when I try on new clothes. I hope to become an obstetrician/gynecologist, while pursuing heavy research on endometriosis, adenomyosis and much more.”

NINTH PLACE

Choice, not consequence

FFRF awarded Callum \$400.

By Callum Wilford

What should you eat for breakfast? Which route should you take to work? Do you simply nod to that friend when you pass in the hallway, or do you stop and spark a conversation? Every day, our brains process countless choices, evaluating the potential consequences of our actions. Naturally, most people answer the majority of these questions without even considering them, guided by their internal desires and goals. For more complex ethical concerns, many people rely on a more rigid set of moral guidelines: religion. Religion, as a personal or organizational endeavor, can be a truly benevolent tool, uniting people, giving them hope even in the bleakest of situations. The issue arises, however, when religion is used as a broader moral compass. The guiding hand of religion is unfortunately reinforced by the threat of eternal punishment, revealing that many efforts to “do good” by religious people are, at their core, an attempt to gain the favor of their chosen deity. While this may seem harmless, the intention behind an action is almost as important as



Callum Wilford

the result. Enacting true good should flow from an individual’s will to improve other people or their situation, not from their fear of a personal consequence. Society is built upon the mutual trust, support and sacrifice of a group of individuals working together to sustain one another. As such, the morality that controls society’s action cannot be built upon religious beliefs that center around the individual. The shared values, intelligence, critical

thinking and traditions of a society are what should compose its morals, not the desire to please some unseen omnipotent entity. I am extremely grateful to my parents that they chose to not impose any specific religious beliefs on me as a child and allowed me to develop and explore the beliefs of others in an organic way. This relates to the first of my qualms with religion: the lack of choice. I find it overwhelmingly difficult to justify the indoctrination of young children with religious beliefs that they cannot yet possibly comprehend. Furthermore, religion severely reduces the responsibility that should be placed upon people. Spreading hate for specific groups of people is a common theme among religions, whether it is people of a different religion or sexual orientation. Religion is far too often used as an excuse for actions that should not be tolerated in society. A perfect illustration of this is the prevalence of the “pro-life” movement in the abortion discussion. Christian values are unapologetically utilized to justify stripping

women of basic control over their bodies. For my own part, I try to maintain an open mind and accept that everybody is entitled to their own beliefs. Meanwhile, I strive to help others by leading campus cleanups, providing free math tutoring to those who need it, and instructing students in martial arts and self-defense. For me, it does not matter in the slightest the creed of the person I am helping; what matters is how they treat others.

*Callum, 18, attends the University of Florida.* “For my first 10 years, I was homeschooled, which placed me several years ahead in mathematics and English. I started public school in fifth grade, where I joined the Technology Student Association (TSA) and gained a passion for music. In middle school, I joined the National Junior Honor Society and the band program. In high school, I became an active member of an array of new clubs, including Academic Team, the National Honor Society, Mu Alpha Theta (a national math honors society), and Sci Find (a science tutoring club).”

TENTH PLACE

The fundamentals of morality

FFRF awarded Chauntel \$300.

By Chauntel Berry

As Thomas Paine once famously declared, “to do good is my religion” is a sentiment I highly agree with. As someone who identifies as agnostic, bordering on atheist, I believe that doing good, a long-term human imperative, is not based on religious belief at all, and that having a good moral compass does not rely on worshipping a god, holy bibles or rigid dogma. My identity of being agnostic stems from my deep respect for evidence and scientific research. To me, a claim as large as the existence of a supreme being requires extraordinary evidence, and overall, nobody has proven such a thing. Furthermore, it is due to the scientific lens I see through, which revolves around critical thinking and a reliance on observable phenomena, that I cannot simply believe. Faith, while a powerful force

for many, often requires a suspension of disbelief that I find difficult to follow due to my understanding of the universe and the science that follows suit. Furthermore, I believe that the core of my morality is empathy. To me, the foundation of ethical conduct resides in the capacity of shared understanding and bonding through others’ emotions. Human beings are inherently social and possess a fundamental need for connection. The realization that one’s actions could inflict suffering or create joy within another person serves as a significantly better motivator to me than the fear of divine punishment or the promise of eternal reward. Additionally, my core belief of empathy extends to my work to advocate on climate change. To dig deeper into this subject, when I see the overwhelming amount of evidence that our planet is warming due to human activity, which will cause huge consequences that inevitably impact vulnerable communities



Chauntel Berry

around the world, I feel the need for change. My “doing good,” while not large-scale, involves reducing my carbon footprint by, for example, choosing to walk instead of driving, or minimizing electricity and water consumption, and even just by advocating for small, sustainable practices. Overall, this doesn’t involve pleasing a deity, but instead acknowledges humankind’s interconnectedness, as well as accepting responsibility for the well-being of the

current generation and future ones. A frequently heard myth is that atheists inherently lack morality and that, without a divine authority, there is no base for ethical conduct. However, I believe that these statements are false. The existing legal systems provide most, if not all, the foundation for ethical behavior. Additionally, historical evidence suggests that the concept of morality occurs before organized religion, shown by the famous “golden rule” that advocates to “treat people how you wish to be treated.” This theory, which is observed in many cultures and belief systems, shows empathy as the foundation of human values. Overall, my moral beliefs are based on logic, empathy and the dedication to the well-being of both humanity and the environment. These core fundamentals serve as more of a motivator than any god, holy bible or rigid dogma could. *Chauntel, 18, attends Rochester Institute of Technology.* “I am a future psychology major and am passionate about the realm of mental health and research, which is why I am striving to obtain a Ph.D. in psychology so that I can become a research psychologist. I am interested in singing, drawing and writing short stories.”



# High school essay contest 2025 honorable mentions

The following are excerpts from the essays of those who earned honorable mention distinction.

## Isabella Cassells

I volunteer at Feed My Starving Children, a nonprofit that packages nutritious meals for malnourished kids around the world. I've spent hours scooping rice, sealing packets and boxing meals alongside people from all backgrounds — religious, spiritual and secular like me. No one asks about your religion at the door. What matters is your willingness to show up and care.

My motivation doesn't come from a promise of heaven or fear of punishment. It comes from imagining what it would feel like to be a child going to bed hungry and knowing I have the power to help. I don't need scripture to tell me that letting someone starve is wrong.

*Isabella, 18, is from Hastings, Minn., and attends Coastal Carolina University with plans to major in molecular and cellular biology and minor in genetics.*

## Arianna Delgado

Sin is a weaponized concept used to uphold oppressive power structures. Morality should be based on understanding people, an understanding of reality. Understanding history makes it impossible for me to see religion as a universal good.

I volunteer at a local queer organization, setting up events to spread joy. I donate blood because the prick of a needle is nothing compared to the suffering of those who need it. Doing good isn't about what God you worship. It's about taking action against injustice, understanding your situation with oppression, and dismantling it. My lack of religion is not a lack of morals, it is refusing to blindly obey at the cost of others.

*Ariana, 18, is from El Paso, Texas, and attends the University of Texas-El Paso, with plans to major in media production.*

## Jayden Fernandez-Morales

The idea that atheists are inherently immoral due to a lack of belief or denial of faith comes from a true misunderstanding of the true meaning of morality. It isn't about following a set of objective instructions, it's about how we treat others and how our actions affect the world around us.

The idea that it falls solely from God and his holy books is limited and fails to consider the complexities of human nature. We can be good people

and have positive actions with a clear understanding of the needs of others. We don't need religion to be moral; we need to care for the world around us.

*Jayden, 18, is from Rio Linda, Calif., and attends the University of California Riverside, with plans to major in biology.*

## Caleb Forehand

In those cramped backrooms of a tiny church, in a tiny county, is where I completely lost my faith. In my last few moments of innocence, I stood to ask a question. "What would happen if I did bad things?" "Well, you'd go to Hell." The words slipped out of the teacher's lips, cool and terse; utterly different. It was like she was reciting a fact out of a textbook, not condemning a child. I felt no love in those words. I started to panic. My mom's done bad things, right? My dad? I couldn't stay in that room anymore. I excused myself to the bathroom and waited, with tears dripping, until the session was over.

As I look around today, still I see far more love and acceptance pour out from the scientific community than from the churches. Accepting people as they are and as they would like to be, not shunning those for their sexual orientation or belief system. Standing together as one body and proclaiming that we are here, pushing out against the void. We are here, and we love because we want to, not because we were told.

*Caleb, 17, is from Camden, N.C., and attends East Carolina University, with plans to major in physics.*

## Anna Izquierdo

Religion always particularly fascinated me. I checked out book after book about a wide variety of religions from my local public library, including a children's edition of the bible. However, no matter how many books I read, I never understood how people could let these stories dictate their lives.

The more I learned about religion, the more I felt that no one religion was more valid than the others. The more I learned about natural sciences and human history, the more skeptical I became about religion in general. Slowly, my skepticism developed into atheism.

I do good because I care, and caring is something every person can do, whether they hold sacred the bible or "On the Origin of Species." Goodness does not belong to religion. Goodness belongs to humanity.

*Anna, 19, is from Massapequa Park, N.Y., and attends Colby College, with plans to major in environmental science.*

## Jocelynn Malone

My atheism follows from a simple question: If there is an omnipotent, good God, then why is there so much injustice and suffering in the universe? Natural catastrophes, poverty, and brutality afflict innocent individuals disproportionately — facts not consistent with the conception of an all-powerful, benevolent deity. While some may see these difficulties as "tests of faith" or "God's will," I see them as evidence of a world that operates independently of divine control. This has not led me to nihilism or indifference but has strengthened my resolve to be an instrument of compassion in an indifferent world.

I believe that ethics should be based on empathy, critical thinking, and a sense of common good. Empathy allows us to connect with people's experiences despite not having them ourselves. Critical thinking allows us to evaluate the impact of what we do aside from the temporary gratification or self-interest.

*Jocelynn, 18, is from Albany, Ohio, and attends Heidelberg University, with plans to major in veterinary medicine.*

## Eden Sterk

I've seen the effects of how seemingly altruistic religious people can promote problematic ideas and effects in vulnerable communities. To me, part of being an atheist is the importance of free will. If someone does good deeds simply to get into heaven, is helping people their true intention?. I would argue doing service without the ulterior motive of accruing "points" to secure your own afterlife is perhaps more valuable—there are no contingencies to the people you will help if you are not worried about needing to convert them.

As an atheist, I know there is nobody to save us but ourselves. To believers this can seem like an inherently negative thing; however, I disagree. It means that every child in cancer remission has science and not a miracle to thank. It means that when rescuing people after natural disasters, it was because of our search and rescue and first responder teams, not an entity from the sky. It means that we are capable of great things on our own.

*Eden, 18, is from Cape Coral, Fla., and attends the University of Florida, with plans to major in microbiology.*

## Alani Timmons

I'm not religious anymore. I don't believe in God. But I do believe in doing what's right even when it's hard. Those beliefs weren't handed down from scripture. They came from simply living and breathing. From my own experiences. From helping someone and feeling the genuine reward of their relief, not a promise of heaven I was constantly told.

I've helped strangers who were lost



Alani Timmons

and stranded in the rain. I've sat and listened to my friends when they felt alone. I've stood up for classmates when it wasn't popular. Not because I thought someone was watching over me, keeping score, but because I knew it mattered, and that it would help someone.

Doing good isn't exclusive to the religious or devout. It's something anyone can choose. It's the only thing I need.

*Alani, 17, is from St. Albans, N.Y., and is attending Carnegie Mellon University, with plans to major in business.*

## Sophia Wang

Working at my parents' restaurant became a learning center for me. I witnessed and experienced countless customers, ironically wearing a cross around their necks or wearing a T-shirt from a community church, cursing at my parents and me. It was jarring. These people who claimed a life free of "sin" and the grace of God were treating people with cruelty and entitlement. What gave them the right to speak with so much hostility while supposedly standing for compassion and kindness?

How could a belief system that was supposed to promote love and understanding allow for such a cruel and dismissive mindset? Where was the golden rule of treating others the way you want to be treated?

*Sophia, 18, is from Oviedo, Fla., and attends the University of Florida, with plans to major in biology.*

## Josiah Wiegrefe

When I was 13, I started questioning my beliefs and began to realize how little it all made sense. It's not hard to poke holes in Christian teachings, but the thought of all I knew being wrong terrified me. In an attempt to regain my faith, I spent a year and a half, on and off, researching. The more I looked, the less it made sense.

I would say my morals have become more fleshed out since I stopped being Christian, as I have actual reasons for thinking the things I do rather than letting some third-party entity determine what I think.

The capacity for empathy in humans is one of our most beautiful traits; it's ridiculous to say we need the fear of eternal suffering and damnation to be kind to one another.

*Josiah, 19, is from Fargo, N.D., and attends Minnesota State University-Moorhead, with plans to major in film production.*



# We'll miss 'Latter-day Ain't' Steve Benson

This is an excerpt of Annie Laurie's full column, which can be found at [freethoughtnow.org](https://freethoughtnow.org).

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Back in the late 1980s, after FFRF started an organized campaign to educate columnists, politicians or others insulting atheists or promoting theocracy, I wrote an earnest rebuke to a Mormon cartoonist at the Arizona Republic who'd drawn a cartoon negatively depicting "Secular Humanists." Had I known the erring artist, Steve Benson, was the grandson of Mormon President Ezra Taft Benson, it would have explained a lot. My letter must have gotten under his skin, as he surprised me with a growling handwritten reply ending with "Get a life!"



Photo by Chris Line  
Annie Laurie Gaylor

A few years later, another cartoon by Steve Benson caught my eye — this time because it skewered religion. It shows a priest waving goodbye to the retreating backs of a little boy and girl, while a thought bubble above his head depicts them naked. It created a furor that sparked columns of angry and supportive letters by "Benson Backers and Bashers." We featured the cartoon on the front page of Freethought Today.

Soon after, in 1993, Steve deservedly won a Pulitzer for that powerful look at priestly pedophiles and a collection of other cartoons. Even today, the power of the Catholic Church to muzzle criticism is apparent in the fact that the Arizona Republic archive showcases only nine of the 10 winning cartoons. (Guess which one is missing.)

Imagine my surprise when this member of the Mormon "First Family" left his church that same year.

Steve's views evolved into outright atheism and we invited him to speak at our 1999 national FFRF convention, offering him a "Tell it Like it Is" Freethought in Media Award. We introduced him using his own quip about why he left the Mormon church: for "another day off, a 10-percent raise and getting to choose my own underwear."

Steve wowed the audience in San Antonio with his story of going "from Latter-day Saint to Latter-day Ain't," illustrated by entertaining cartoons.

Steve offered to put together a presentation, "Tooning Out Religion," with more cartoons on religion and state/church separation, for our St. Paul convention in 2000, where he was again a crowd pleaser.

At the 2003 convention in Washington, D.C., Steve received our "Emperor Has No Clothes



Steve Benson draws a caricature of Nancy Northup, director of the Reproductive Rights Center, at FFRF's 2019 convention in Madison, Wis. Steve died on July 8 at age 71.



Award," which he nicknamed "The Imp" and dressed up in some tissue-paper Mormon underwear. See Dan's remembrance on the next page for their "dynamic duo" show.

Steve phoned me at work one day with the express purpose of embarrassing me, reading aloud my letter castigating his cartoon against secular humanism that he'd found in his files. (Steve hadn't put two and two together until then.) It still makes me smile. When we interviewed him for "Freethought Matters" in 2018, Steve claimed my letter was the "lightning bolt" that set him on a path to freethought.

What made Steve so funny was that he was, like many comedians, unfiltered. Steve's colorful vernacular and stream-of-consciousness commentary cracked us up. He and Dan Barker gleefully traded wisecracks. Steve's syndicated cartoons were serious contri-

butions to national politics, puncturing political and religious hucksters, the death penalty, racism, sexism, injustice and war.

Steve enrolled in what he called "Breed 'em Young" University, married, had four kids and became a brilliant cartoonist.

Steve was fearless about controversy. Fellow cartoonist David Fitzsimmons recalled how Steve assured him, "You judge your effectiveness by the hate mail."

Speaking of controversy, Steve created a cartoon for the Freedom From Religion Foundation depicting Santa saying, "Yes, Virginia ... There is no God," which we turned into a Winter Solstice card and put on billboards in Las Vegas that were promptly removed after the uproar. One of his published cartoons graced FFRF's most controversial ad, appearing in 2012 in the New York Times.

FFRF briefly placed Steve on retainer after his newspaper downsized. He produced a smorgasbord of superb cartoons we're still using.

He suffered a massive stroke in February 2024. At first, there was hope, but he never recovered. When Dan read me the text from his wife Claire reporting that Steve, age 71, had died on July 8, he could barely get out the words. How could such a vital force be gone?

More than once, aware of his punishing work habits, I'd jokingly recited to him Edna St. Vincent Millay's lines:  
*My candle burns at both ends  
It will not last the night  
But ah, my foes and oh, my friends  
It gives a lovely light.*

FFRF, Dan and I were privileged to have basked in some of that glow. We'll treasure our memories of Steve Benson's humor, humanity, quirks and brilliant "editorial harpooning" that told it like it was.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.





# ‘Tunes ’n Toons’ draws upon creativity

This is an excerpt of the Dan’s full column, which is available at [freethoughtnow.org](http://freethoughtnow.org).

By Dan Barker

Steve Benson died on July 8, and I am still struggling to believe it. When Steve’s wife Claire told me the news that day, the world changed to black-and-white for a moment. “There’s a big gaping hole in the universe,” I replied.

He was a Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial page cartoonist, ex-Mormon atheist, wordsmith, humorist, freethinker, nature lover and a devoted friend. I can’t say Steve was my BFF because neither of us believed in forever. But we did have an enduring friendship that lasted a quarter century. We were both former devout believers. I was a fundamentalist missionary to Mexico, and he was a Mormon missionary to Japan. We both abandoned our faith. We were both professionally creative. We liked to play with words and make jokes. Not long after we met, Steve said, “Hey! You write tunes and I draw ’toons. Let’s do a show together!”

Thus was born “Tunes ’n Toons.”

“Tunes ’n Toons” was one of the funnest things I have ever done. And one of the hardest. Steve’s cartoons primarily drove the show — and he had thousands of them. After choosing the images for each show, I would write songs or parodies for each theme, as well as background music for some of the stories. Steve would often suggest lyrics, which made them even sillier.

I was constantly amazed at Steve’s productivity, his fountain of ideas and his perseverance. I can come up with creative ideas, but not at that rate and intensity. After decades of creating daily editorial cartoons for the Arizona Republic on a hard deadline, Steve simply could not back off and wait for “inspiration.” Imagine that! Six days a week, Steve had to create an idea (based on the news), come up with a gag line or text balloon, draw a sketch, submit it to his editor and if approved (which was not always), he had to draw the cartoon in time for publication the next day.

“Tunes ’n Toons” was hard to write because each one was unique. It had to be topical, with news up to that week, even to that day. Over the years, we ended up with four to five hours of material. We had a couple of evergreen segments, but we had to trim each show down to 60–90 minutes, often adding new cartoons (and music and jokes) at the last minute.

For one of our shows at an FFRF convention, at the last minute we decided to include the humorous poem “Reincarnation” by cowboy poet Wallace D. McRae, which I set to music with permission. Steve didn’t have enough time to draw the series of images we envisioned, so we improvised. While I sang the lyrics to the live audience, Steve drew



Steve Benson and Dan Barker show off their “Toons and Tunes” T-shirts in 2001.

Photo by Brent Nicastro



the scene on an overhead projector, including the gravesite, the growing flower, the horse eating the flower, and the horse later dropping the result on the ground. That got us a standing ovation.

But probably the greatest crowd-pleaser was our rendition of “Why BSA?,” a parody of “YMCA” by the Village People. After showing some of Steve’s cartoons about homophobia, we started singing the “Hiking Song” that Steve grew up singing as a young Mormon camper. Then we morphed into

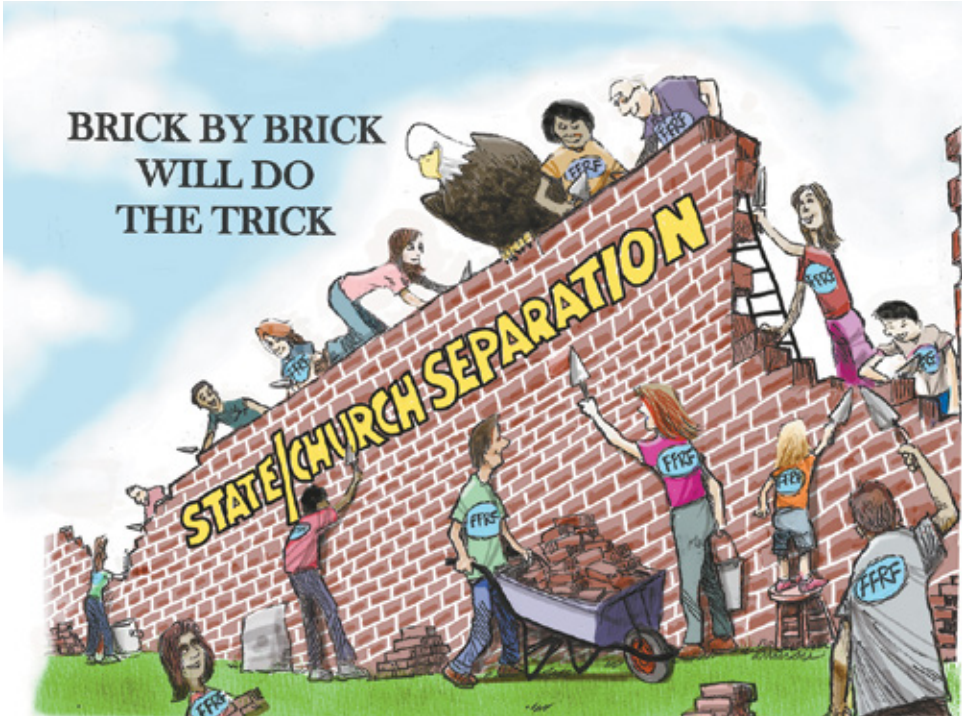
macho voices to sing, “Young man! Did you say you’re a scout? I said, Young man! If you’re gay, then watch out!” That song’s most appreciative audience was the “Affirmation: LGBTQ Mormons, Families & Friends” conference. Since that time, the Boy Scouts have started allowing gays to participate, but they still exclude atheists.

We performed “Tunes ’n Toons” about 15 times: at FFRF conventions, at a feminist conference, at local humanist meetings, at a Unitarian Fellowship and at the July 4th “Freethought Advance” for FFRF’s chapter in Alabama. After a hiatus of more than a decade, we decided to revive “Tunes ’n Toons” for FFRF’s 2024 convention in Denver. But Steve’s stroke occurred in February that year, and he never recovered.

Steve was generous. He was visiting Madison, Wis., one weekend for a rehearsal, but we had to take a break because I was playing the piano in a band for the wedding reception of my drummer friend’s daughter. Steve asked if he could come along. Knowing who Steve was, my friend said, “Sure!” Steve set up an easel and drew caricatures of the guests, the band and the wedding couple, all for free. The newlyweds treasure that unexpected present from a person they didn’t even know.

The universe is achingly empty without Steve; but it is much fuller because he lived. He did not believe in life after death or reincarnation. Nor do I. But Steve lives on through the profound effect he had on me and the lives of countless others.

Dan Barker is co-president of FFRF.





# Dick Hewetson was ex-priest, gay activist

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

FFRF Lifetime Member Dick Hewetson, 95, who chose his own date with destiny, dying by doctor-assisted suicide on July 19, was the cheerfulest man I ever met. My husband, Dan Barker, who shared Dick's path of going from minister to atheist, can attest that Dick even died cheerfully.

Friend and San Francisco chapter activist Dana Treadwell notified us as we were traveling from Wisconsin on Thursday, July 17, to the Scopes Centennial Conference in Tennessee that Dick had decided to depart that Saturday, and would very much like Dan to sing one of Dick's favorite songs. Dan accordingly left the conference ballroom Saturday to phone Dick that morning, just a few hours before his scheduled death.

Dan says the conversation was surreal, not because it was weird, but because it was so . . . ordinary. They told stories, remembered past experiences, compared their deconversions from the ministry, joked and laughed, both knowing Dick would be dead in a few hours. Dan jokingly told him he was finally going to see what is on the "other side," and Dick replied, "It's like the old song: If I get there before you do, I'll drill you a hole and pull you through," chuckling heartily like he always did. Dan asked Dick if it was a hard decision, and he replied: "Not at all! I'm ready to go."

Dan relayed that the FFRF Executive Board, which had been informed of Dick's decision, had expressed its appreciation for all he had done for the organization over the decades and affirmed that they respect and admire his decision. "I'll tell them you said 'Hello,'" Dan offered, and Dick replied, "No. Tell them I said 'Goodbye.'" Dan sang his song "Nothing Fails Like Prayer" to Dick, and said it was hard to finally hang up, knowing it would be forever. How do you say "farewell" for the very last time? But Dan admired Dick's unflinching control of his own destiny.

Dana later told us that as Dick was resting before falling into a final slumber, he requested that a recording of "Nothing Fails Like Prayer" be played several times. Dick, poignantly, wiggled his toes along with the music.

We're glad Dick went out on his own terms, after being in hospice for some months, as we should all be allowed to do, and that he was lucky enough to be living in California, where medical aid in dying is lawful. But it's sad commentary on the times that in the third-person obituary he composed himself, he wrote: "He had a wonderful life but was discouraged with the state of the world and the USA. At the age of 95, he was ready to go."

Dick was born in a suburb of Chicago on March 31, 1930, and died at Brookdale Senior Living in San Jose, Calif. At the age of 42, he became involved in the budding gay rights movement. He emerged from the closet ("ripping the door off its hinges," according to a friend). He was instrumental in getting a gay rights ordinance passed in 1977 in St. Paul, Minn. Because lesbian Carla Messman and he were active union members, Minnesota state employees had the first union contract protection for LGBTQ-plus employees in the nation.

He helped his then-partner, David Irwin, in establishing Quatrefoil Library. Opening in February 1986, it is one of the largest LGBTQ-plus libraries in the country, and it has become the de facto LGBTQ-plus Center for the Twin Cities.



Dick Hewetson, who began his career as an Episcopal priest, had been a member of FFRF since 1979.

As Dick wrote about himself and David, "Together, they reached the conclusion that the greatest enemy of LGBTQ-plus people was religion." He and David joined FFRF in 1978. Dick continued a life of activism including mental health issues, women's rights, LGBTQ-plus rights and for the separation of state and church.

At the age of 80, he met the love of his life, John Vu, a Vietnamese refugee. Dick is also survived by his beloved niece and nephew, Kim and Ron Spawn, and countless cherished friends. He generously suggested donations in his memory to Freedom From Religion Foundation and Quatrefoil Library.

I first connected with Dick at the 1979 national convention of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, where his ever-ready chuckle and beaming smile put everyone at ease.

In a speech at our 1985 convention, he reported that he had been favorably impressed at his first FFRF conference by three things. The first was that the membership was "older and wiser and wonderful people who thought sensibly." The second was appreciation for being at a convention where "everyone wasn't plotched" on booze. His third observation was that "David and I arrived as a gay couple, and it didn't matter, there were no waves, no nothing, no judgmentalism. We were here and we were welcome." Well, of course, what else would one expect from a roomful of freethinkers, even back in 1979? But what a sorry reflection on society that he had been afraid of his reception.

As Dick noted in his own obituary, "He grew up in a world where homosexuality was considered illegal, immoral and an illness. For the first 42 years of his life, he did everything to fit in." That included having a steady girlfriend from ages 16 to 20, and eventually choosing the Episcopal priesthood as a career in part because he thought he would be accepted as an unmarried man.

It would take years before Dick learned to crack his fa-

## IN MEMORIAM

vorite joke: that he joined the ministry so he could "be among men who put on dresses on Sundays." Dick explained that he blamed his chronic doubts about religion upon himself. "So I prayed and I prayed, and I tried to have faith. And as Anne Gaylor has said so well: Nothing Fails Like Prayer." (My mother asked Dan to turn her aphorism into a song, which is now sung at every FFRF convention nonprayer breakfast.)

As Dick stated in his 1985 FFRF talk in a panel of ex-clergy he titled "The Queer Road to Atheism," he truly hoped to do some good in the ministry. Then he realized, as he told us during a Nov. 1, 2008, interview on Freethought Radio (ffrf.org/radio), that the church was getting in the way of doing good.

Dick later gave another talk, "From Christian to Human Being," at FFRF's San Francisco mini-convention in 1999, where he confessed, "I didn't really believe any of this Christian stuff. . . The hardest time I had every week was preparing a sermon because what are you going to say to people when you don't really believe it?"

Dick was able to retire with a pension from the Episcopal Church, but always encouraged FFRF to do something about the privileges religion is given by the government, including the housing allowance. FFRF gave it a valiant try in federal court, to Dick's delight, fighting hard and winning a major federal court ruling by Wisconsin Judge Barbara B. Crabb that declared the parish exemption unconstitutional and made international headlines. Unfortunately, our victory was thrown out by the appeals court.

Dick bid in his farewell: "Please remember the good times we had together." Dan and I and so many FFRF members and friends around the country who looked forward to seeing Dick for four decades at national conventions, will indeed remember the many good times together and greatly miss his cheerful, rational presence and passionate commitment.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.

## THEY SAID WHAT?

Sheep do not judge their shepherd.

**Alexis Rosentool, a priest working in the Australian and New Zealand Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church, telling his congregation that it was wrong for them to condemn a fellow priest who was recently found guilty of sexual abuse.**

*The Friendly Atheist, 7-9-25*

[Thomas] Jefferson said he revered that act of the whole American people, which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between Church & State." Jefferson clearly did not mean that metaphorical "wall" was to keep religion from influencing issues of civil government. To the contrary, it was meant to keep the federal government from impeding the religious practice of citizens.

**Speaker of the House Mike Johnson, in response to the IRS saying it would no longer hold churches accountable to the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits nonprofits from politicking.**

*Deseret News, 7-14-25*

And you're all believers. Is there an atheist in the room? Any atheists? I don't think so. I wouldn't want to raise my hand if I were. You'd be in big trouble.

**President Trump, during a luncheon at the White House, speaking to a group of CEOs and business leaders who donate to faith-based charities. The event was organized by the White House Faith Office, which Trump established**

**by executive order in February.**

*YouTube, 7-15-25*

Christians could not vote Democratic. There's no way that a Christian could affirm the slaughter of babies, homosexual activity, homosexual marriage or any kind of gross immorality.

**Rev. John MacArthur, during an August 2020 podcast associated with Liberty University, in which President Trump called him to thank him. MacArthur, described as a "fiery preacher and culture warrior," died at 86 in July.**

*New York Times, 7-16-25*

This is my stipulation. I want that man who caused, who raped, and caused that child now to be killed, I want that man to be charged for first-degree murder, as well.

**Indiana Lt. Gov. Micah Beckwith, who supports an exception for rape victims in abortion bans only if the perpetrators face the death penalty. Beckwith was named FFRF Action's "Theocrat of the Week" on July 31.**

*Vimeo, 726-25*

The bible is indispensable in understanding the development of Western civilization and American history. These documents are mandatory for the holistic education of students in Oklahoma.

**Ryan Walters, Oklahoma's superintendent of public instruction, whose directive required a physical copy of the bible, the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence and the Ten Commandments to be provided as curriculum resources.**

*The Stand, 8-1-25*



# Meet FFRF’s 2025 student summer interns

Each summer, FFRF hires graduate and undergraduate students to work throughout the summer as interns. This year, FFRF hired seven students, six who worked in the legal department and one who works in the communications/marketing department. Here’s a look at this year’s team of interns.

## Regan Allen

**Hometown:** Green Bay, Wis.  
**Religious upbringing:** None  
**Undergrad school:** University of Virginia.  
**Grad school:** University of Wisconsin Law School.

**Why did you want to intern at FFRF?** I wanted to experience work at a nonprofit, and I really appreciated the opportunity to do something that aligns with my values.

**Favorite part of working here:** First, I’ve never felt in the majority as an atheist. So, being around this many nonreligious people has been refreshing. Second, meeting so many people who are kind and supportive and use their law degrees for good has shown me that I never need to compromise my beliefs in order to have a successful career as a lawyer.

**Career goals:** I’m not sure yet. Maybe something in the nonprofit sector.

**Something interesting about you:** I’m knitting my first sweater right now. Hopefully I can finish it before the weather gets cold.

## Zoe Gunderson

**Hometown:** Chicago.  
**Religious upbringing:** Raised Lutheran, consider myself spiritual.  
**Undergrad school:** Colorado State University.  
**Grad school:** University of Wisconsin-Madison Law School.

**Why did you want to intern at FFRF?** I was really interested in constitutional law as well as the intersectionalities of religion and government. So, when I was offered a position at FFRF, I happily accepted!

**Favorite part of working here:** The amazing staff and my fellow interns!

**Career goals:** Criminal defense attorney.

**Something interesting about you:** I play six instruments and can speak three languages!

## Zoe Halaban

**Hometown:** New York City.  
**Religious upbringing:** Jewish.  
**Undergrad school:** Yale University.

**Why did you want to intern at FFRF?** My first exposure to church/state separation was when I was 15 and a high school intern for Assembly Member Richard Gottfried. I was working on answering constituent questions about an upcoming HPV vaccine mandate in public schools. Unsurprisingly, most of the concerns and requests for exemptions came from ultra-religious communities.

I became fascinated with religion and how it was the intersection of culture, literature, philosophy, art and my personal favorite, politics. The latter, of course, has only become more pronounced under MAGA. My grandmother gave me the book “God and Government” by Rev. Barry Lynn and showed me FFRF’s website — making FFRF my first introduction to advocacy groups fighting to keep the separation between church and state.

**Favorite part of working here:** This Supreme Court season was action-packed



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF’s 2025 summer interns are (front row, from left) Zoe Gunderson, Regan Allen, Zoe Halaban, (back row, from left) Justin McCulloch, Tyler Parteka, Ashley Harrison and Isabelle Hoffman.

for religious liberty cases, and June, my first month here, was a rollercoaster of decisions. The work we were doing was fast-paced and relevant. Though some of the decisions were extremely depressing, it was also very clear that the legal work is of utmost importance.

My very favorite part was my co-intern cohort: Justin, Zoe G., Tyler, Isabelle and Regan. My summer here was made by them. So, thank you!

**Career goals:** I am hoping to go to law school after graduation! I would love to stay in the church/state world. There is a lot to be done.

**Something interesting about you:** I am a yogi, runner, and lover of spaniels — particularly my Springer Spaniel, the Marvelous Mrs. Marmalade.

## Ashley Harrison

**Hometown:** Brookfield, Wis.  
**Religious upbringing:** My ex-Christian parents raised me and my younger brother free from any religious expectations.

**Undergrad school:** University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where I am a journalism, advertising and media studies (JAMS) major with a focus on advertising and PR, set to graduate this December. I have also been lucky (and skilled) enough to land a campus job doing social media marketing at the Manfred Olson Planetarium, where I have worked since October 2023 and will continue working until graduation.

**Why did you want to intern at FFRF?** My FFRF journey began with an Indeed easy-apply post. As a lifelong atheist, I was pleasantly surprised to learn an organization like FFRF existed and was taking applications. I scoured FFRF’s social media pages, verified that we aligned (and that it was a legit org, thanks r/atheism), then hit “apply.”

I expected to never hear back (any online job hunter would know, Indeed easy-apply posts are notorious for ghosting would-be interviewees). But, here I am, a real-deal intern! It’s been a fun, rewarding experience.

**Favorite part of working here:** My favorite part of coming in each day — other than “the mission,” because that feels like a cop-out — is getting to exercise relative creative freedom in a blossoming team that genuinely values my input and ideas. I have felt so cared for, so listened to at FFRF, and it’s hard to overstate how important that is to me. Not only does FFRF stand for something good, but they treat their employees well regardless of tenure

or standing.

**Career goals:** In the future, I would like to continue working in the nonprofit sector as a digital marketing and/or publicity specialist. It could be at FFRF or another place like it. Either way, I am so happy that this early in my career I already have hands-on experience doing exactly what I love most, and that is making change however I can.

**Something interesting about you:** I will end with a fun fact that’s actually a shameless plug: I make bookish videos on YouTube under the channel name “Ashley Reads Books by People.” I would point any new viewers to my mini-documentary project I made for a videography class, featuring Gretchen Treu from the Madison bookstore A Room of One’s Own. I think it’s important for everyone to have a creative outlet and I like to use mine to share my love of reading with the world.

## Isabelle Hoffman

**Hometown:** Sterling Heights, Mich.  
**Religious upbringing:** United Methodist Church.  
**Undergrad school:** Grand Valley State University.  
**Grad school:** University of Wisconsin Law School.

**Why did you want to intern at FFRF?** I wanted to intern at FFRF because I think its work upholding the separation of state and church and fighting Christian nationalism is hugely important. I also wanted to use my legal education to further a public interest cause that I am passionate about.

**Favorite part of working here:** My favorite part about working at FFRF is the people. It is very heartening to be surrounded every day with people who share the same commitment to social justice and to the principles of the Constitution. I have really enjoyed getting to know the staff at FFRF throughout the summer and they have taught me so much about legal advocacy and nonprofit work.

**Career goals:** I’m still unsure what area of law I would like to pursue, but I am committed to working in a public interest field in some way. Over the next year, I will be working with the University of Wisconsin Law School’s Neighborhood Law Clinic and a local law firm who works in plaintiff-side employment law.

**Something interesting about you:** I really enjoy playing volleyball, both indoor and sand.

Throughout the summer, I have been playing weekly in a recreational league.

## Justin McCulloch

**Hometown:** Coconut Creek, Fla.  
**Religious upbringing:** Christian; now a practicing Episcopalian.  
**Undergrad school:** The George Washington University.  
**Grad school:** University of Pennsylvania Carey School of Law.

**Why did you want to intern at FFRF?** If you can pardon the religious allusion, I would have to say that the spirit moved me. Church/state relations is not something within my work experience (although it is a prominent academic interest). I have spent most of my time in the legal field involved in labor and employment law. However, Christian nationalism represents the greatest threat to our democracy that I have seen in my lifetime. That being so, I knew that I had to do my part this summer. Even still, I do not see this as separate from my work in labor and employment. The proliferation of religious exemption has given religious employers the upper hand and curtailed the power of workers. As I see it, church/state separation is a victory for workers’ rights.

**Favorite part of working here:** The people. FFRF is staffed by some of the kindest and most hardworking people I have ever met. Their spirit and warmth makes our difficult fight much more pleasurable.

**Career goals:** I hope to go into a career representing workers and unions, ensuring that all workers can enjoy a safe and prosperous work environment — including one with freedom of conscience.

**Something interesting about you:** I collect political memorabilia, and I am a part of a group of collectors called the American Political Items Collectors (APIC).

## Tyler Parteka

**Hometown:** Hartford, Wis.  
**Religious upbringing:** Confirmed Lutheran! Atheist for the past seven years.  
**Undergrad school:** UW-Madison, degree in neurobiology.  
**Grad school:** UW Law School

**Why did you want to intern at FFRF?** I became an atheist after losing my faith and reading “The God Delusion” by Richard Dawkins, which helped me articulate my struggle with religion. Since then, I’ve been interested in the work of atheists like Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Dan Barker. I wanted to intern at FFRF to protect religious minorities like myself from being governed by the religious agendas of others.

**Favorite part of working here:** I feel like my work is helping make an impact in a way I couldn’t do at a typical private practice law firm. Everyone at FFRF is passionate about what they do, and it’s been a pleasure working with such like-minded people!

**Career goals:** I am a lieutenant in the Army on a contract to serve on active duty as an attorney in the Army’s JAG Corps after graduation. Following military service, I plan to work in the public interest field, similar to FFRF.

**Something interesting about you:** I enjoy training Brazilian jiu-jitsu, playing guitar and traveling with my fiancé. I’m also a big board game nerd who has a Magic: The Gathering collection worth more than I would like to admit!



# LETTERBOX

## Turning Point USA has all earmarks of a cult

The column by Caitlin Berray (“A life of servitude, motherhood for women”) in the August issue was well investigated and quite eye opening. I had no idea of what Turning Point USA, and its founder Charlie Kirk, were up to. This leadership summit for young women is clearly a cult. And history has shown that nothing ends well in a cult.

West Virginia

## Patel’s loyalty polygraph is not unlike Saul’s

Talk about biblical dictatorship! Kash Patel has ordered employees to take a polygraph test to find out who among employees has said a derogatory word about him. And they are to be fired!

Then turn to I Samuel 14:24. King Saul lays a curse on anyone who eats food before evening and before he has avenged his enemies. None of the troops had eaten food that day when they came upon a honeycomb, dripping with honey. No troops ate the honey, but Jonathan had not heard the oath, so he dipped his staff into the honeycomb and tasted it, brightening his eyes.

Saul found out about the “sin” of someone eating, so he determined to find the “sinner,” breaker of the fast, even if it was his son, Jonathan. Then, there was an assembly with mysterious religious objects, the Urim and Thummin, which would somehow determine “by lot” whether Jonathan had “sinned” against Saul’s curse. [Like a polygraph test].

“Jonathan was taken,” meaning he lost the test. He confessed that he had “sinned” and was ready to die. But the people “ransomed Jonathan” and he did not die.

Who will be able to “ransom” the victims of Patel’s theocratic dictatorship of edicts? We do not need to have Old Testament-style proclamations to terrorize people.

Indiana

# CRANKMAIL

Please enjoy the latest compilation of correspondence we have been inundated with from FFRF’s detractors. Printed as received.

**Trump!:** We are not the bad guy on the world stage. We’re finally respected. This is our country. M\*\*\*\*\*. And these illegals have no right to be here, because you guys opened up the border and shoved them down American’s throats for us to feed and clothe and house. And give them a phone and medical and an education. We never agreed to that I can’t afford to raise my family. I’ll be g\*\*\*\*\* if i’m gonna raise a bunch of f\*\*\*\*\* illegals.Because you say so. What needs to be sanctioned? Is you piece of s\*\*\*, You go f\*\*\* yourself, you lunatic, b\*\*\*\*\*

**Constitution:** I’m calling in response the Supreme Court regarding Catholic Charities. They voted correctly. You people know nothing about the Constitution. Catholic Charities have a right within their congregation and outside their congregation to follow their beliefs. You’re in violation of the Constitution when you say the courts voted wrong. I’m fed up with the Freedom From Religion Foundation trying to annihilate whatever religion suits your fancy every day.

### Worthy of a red ribbon!



### 2nd PLACE - BENCHES

### WISCONSIN STATE FAIR - 2025

This photo showing FFRF Member Tom Drolsum reading Freethought Today on a bench (while also wearing FFRF’s “Out of the Closet Atheist” cap) took second place in its category in the 2025 Wisconsin State Fair photo competition. “Hopefully, the fairgoers who see it in August will notice what I am reading,” Tom writes. The picture was taken on the Glacial Drumlin State Trail in Jefferson County, Wis., in October 2024. (This photo initially ran in Freethought Today in the December 2024 issue.) Congratulations, Tom!

## Let’s go back to good ol’ hangings, beheadings

There continues to be concern among death penalty supporters that because lethal injections have proved problematic on occasion to dispatch the condemned, it might be used as an excuse to do away with the death penalty altogether. The folks say ever since pharmaceuticals replaced “Old Sparky” to do away with nuisances, things just aren’t the same. To relieve their anxiety, I offer this “Modest Proposal” — bring back public hangings, or at least the firing squad. Better yet, how about beheadings!

I think reestablishing these tried and true forms of punishment would go a long way in restoring the peoples’ confidence in the death penalty — make ’em feel right at home.

I’d even go one step further. I recommend that all executions be

televised. In addition, I urge that all capital punishment events be viewed complete with slow-motion, stop-action and instant replay coverage, along with in-depth color commentary analysis. All of which, I’m sure, will exponentially add to the day’s festivities; just think of the TV ratings it would generate.

I realize, of course, there are other alternatives one can choose. For example, the bible provides a rich resource and plethora of ways to permanently remove troublemakers that include stoning, impaling, drowning, being burned alive and being thrown to the lions. I think, however, that these biblical remedies are passé and out of date.

I hope death penalty enthusiasts will assiduously consider this “Modest Proposal.” I believe it will result in effectively resolving the lethal injection controversy once and for all.

Florida

W Wrong on abortion, wrong on lgbt indoctrination (which is especially odd considering this page is supposedly anti child exploitation), wrong on just about anything political that yall post. And stop attempting to censor people’s speech like tyrants do.

**Jesus saves:** I declare in the name of Jesus Christ receive total healing and freedom from all powers of darkness Amen!

**Devilish:** FFRF just hates Christians meeting anywhere and exercising their freedom of religion. FFRF is demonically influenced.

**Drag show:** I just looked up your website and found that among those who spoke at your national convention was a drag queen. Did she or he strip or just speak? Wow. I wonder... is there anything you people will not do to virtue signal? Please keep the world posted as to any further outrageous virtue signaling you plan. I think you have the potential to do some really outrageous things!

**Christian nation:** Horrors! Christian chaplains! It’s almost as bad as the Christian-influenced activities of Deists Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin and Mason George Washington! How about freedom from atheists who have a personal axe to grind, so have to shut down any threat to the beauty of their world of meaninglessness? And

## Learning is how each of us evolves in this life

In Annie Laurie Gaylor’s essay on ramblings from the new pope, an obvious idea came to mind. It seems the increasingly complicated world is creating armies of specialists, of which religious leaders are no exception. When someone lives their whole life going down one path, they lose sight of the real world around us all. The article listed a lot of inconsistencies and downright hypocrisies.

However, to me, the largest, by far, is the religion/meaning connection. “A lack of faith is often tragically accompanied by the loss of meaning in life.” Here’s the huge problem: LIFE (writ large) is not just about humans but all the millions of species on this planet. The meaning of LIFE is to evolve and we individual humans evolve (or should) through knowledge and constantly learning. Of course, learning can be anathema to religious thinking. This is clear through the ramblings of religions’ hierarchies.

Washington

## Why would God test us if he knows the result?

Theodicy — dealing with the problem of evil in a universe ruled by a benevolent God — has a long history. In the Old Testament, we usually get the same hard-hearted answer to the question as to why God’s people suffer: They deserved it; their faith wasn’t strong enough; they picked up twigs on Saturday; they masturbated, etc.

An alternative explanation for suffering, which I heard from believers more than once during the terrible Covid-19 pandemic, is that God is testing us, just as he tested his chosen guy Abraham in the book of Genesis. But this “testing” idea, besides its distasteful suggestions of divine sadism, raises a fundamental metaphysical question for me: Doesn’t God know how the “test” will come out? If he knows, then he’s just allowing his innocent creatures to suffer unnecessarily, while everybody waits for the inevitable outcome — good or bad. But if

guess what? I’m not even a fundamentalist. Why don’t you quit being disingenuous with this hiding behind the Constitution nonsense? Well, let me just speculate. Because if you were honest about it, you’d have to admit that to obtain your desired end you would need a completely different government. Because this country has an unbroken history of freedom for Christian expression, as you well know.

**Born again:** Many, many people believe themselves to be Christian when in fact they never were. When you are born again you become a new man. You are not the same anymore. You cannot turn your back on God because his spirit lives within. I hope and pray that you change your mind about God. He is real. He saves. He changes lives forever.

**Terrorists:** FFRF is a domestic terrorist group and a manifestation of the evil that is destroying our country.

**We deserve respect:** Stop hating the Lord for no reason and respect believers! I know Satan loves stopping God’s kingdom but seriously, stop. What is wrong with being good persons like Jesus? The rapers weren’t real christians... A real Christian was i.e. Francis of Assisi.



God doesn’t know the test result, that means that God can’t foresee the future. And if he can’t foresee my future, well, there goes any faith I might have in his “plan” for me, which his preachers are always trying to sell me. (I say “sell” because somehow “the plan” usually involves money.)

God “testing” me? May I please just take an “Incomplete”?

Arizona

Groups should sue to make churches pay taxes

Since the IRS has said it’s OK to politic from the pulpit, is now not the time to join all forces of the separation of church and state organizations to file lawsuits to remove churches’ tax-exempt status once and for all? It seems that if they want to play in the political arena that they should have to pay their fair share. I have to pay my taxes, shouldn’t they?

California

Anatomy of a scriptural euphemism for gay

When I was a lad, reading the bible like I was supposed to, one of the many passages that perplexed me was a vague phrase in I Corinthians 6:9 — “abusers of themselves with mankind.” I had no idea what it was referring to. The KJV (King James Version) was reluctant to spell it out.

Even though I long ago solved the mystery for myself, I thought I’d see how the phrase was dealt with in other versions of the bible.

The Catholic Rheims New Testament, which is older than the KJV (1583, to be exact) offers a slightly less euphemistic “liers with mankind.” But the use of “mankind” in both would seem to be a reference to the entire human race, when it’s actually one at a time, right?

Perhaps the problem was the antiquity of these texts. So, I then moved on to the much newer Revised Standard Version (1946). This version uses simply “homosexuals.” Then I checked with the American Bible Society’s Good News for Modern Man (1966), hoping for insight from a modern take. But this renders it as “homosexual perverts,” which goes a bit further than the KJV.

Maybe the problem was English. I checked an old German bible, one using Martin Luther’s translation. This employs one word here: “Knabenschaender.” The word is not in my Langenscheidt’s German/English Dictionary, but I knew “Knabe” means “boy” and “schaenden” is a verb that translates as “to dishonor; disgrace, profane, rape, violate.” Not really what the Greek original says.

This contrasts with my grandmother’s Dutch New Testament (a 1618 translation), which phrases it as “die

Crossword answers

I	R	I	S		S	H	E		P	H	I			
B	O	T	H		S	U	E	R		A	F	O	O	T
S	O	L	O		I	N	N	S		N	O	G	O	D
	F	L	O	R	E	N	C	E		G	L	O	P	
		E	E	R	I	E			A	L	L			
T	R	A	D	E	R		T	R	E	E	T	O	P	
R	U	M		V	A	L	I	U	M		T	A	L	L
A	L	I	V	E		I	M	P		A	T	R	I	A
M	E	G	A		O	F	F	I	N	G		S	O	N
P	R	O	L	A	T	E		A	O	R	I	S	T	
		J	E	T		L	A	U	R	A				
	N	E	E	R		P	I	S	S	A	R	R	O	
L	A	N	A	I		E	L	S	E		I	O	T	A
E	Z	I	N	E		P	L	E	A		T	A	I	L
K	I	D			S	E	T			Y	M	C	A	

Vacation elation!




Photo by Chris Line

FFRF After-Life Member Jeff LaVicka and Mary Katherine Hecht and their children Emery Hecht and Winslow LaVicka stopped by Freethought Hall (what Jeff referred to as the “Mother Ship of Freedom”) in Madison, Wis., and were excited to pose with the lifelike Charles Darwin mannequin in the FFRF library. The family was on vacation in July visiting relatives in Wisconsin.

bij mannen liggen” (they that lie with men). Not boys, Luther.

A Spanish translation of the KJV uses an even longer phrase than its original: “Ni los que se echan con varones,” which is even more vague and confusing than the original.

Getting back to the KJV, the translators gave us a euphemistic phrase that beats around the bush when the original Greek text has but a single word: “arsenokoitai.” Those with a knack for etymology can decipher it for themselves; but for the others, it means “assfuckers.” That was how Paul chose to write it. Remember, this is the guy who just a little later in I Corinthians (7:1) wrote, “It is good for a man not to touch a woman.”

I guess we can’t touch anything.

Pennsylvania

Evangelicals must share blame for killing kids

Trump’s Big Beautiful Bill, which almost all Republicans in Congress voted for, cuts nearly a trillion dollars from Medicaid, while giving trillions in tax breaks to the rich. It is Medicaid that provides medical care to our poorest and most vulnerable citizens, many millions of them children. Respected health economics researchers estimate that these cuts will cause more than 40,000 additional deaths each year. Again, many of these victims will be children.

Both Trump and Republicans in Congress were elected with heavy support from evangelical voters. Can these voters escape being responsible as the death toll rises among our most innocent ones? I ask you, please don’t let them escape!

Isn’t it true that a most despised trait is to brag with words that don’t match your deeds? Evangelicals claim that by

Cryptogram answer

Religion is excellent stuff for keeping common people quiet. Religion is what keeps the poor from murdering the rich.

— NAPOLEON BONAPARTE

obeying the holy scriptures, they are better persons than nonbelievers. Obviously, they didn’t take a copy of this bible passage into the voting booth with them:

“If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.”

For those who oppose these cuts in Medicaid, I would like to promote this way of fighting back: When you discover through news, social media or obituaries of a child’s death and suspect that this tragedy occurred because the family did not have access to affordable medical care, you bring this to the attention of the evangelical congregations in your community and shame them for their Big Beautiful Bill support.

Colorado

Poem reflects on 86 years of a life well lived

I’d like to share a poem with FFRF and its readers that I wrote, inspired by my upcoming 86th birthday.

Thank you for all that you’ve done and continue to do.

Musing

I’ll soon be eighty-six  
And I find myself in a bit of a fix  
My own demise is in sight  
And I feel that it’s a slight sleight  
All the experiences I’ve had over the years  
The joys and laughter, the struggles and tears  
To have to give up this life  
Including my children and wife  
It just seems like such a shame  
That these are the rules of the game  
As time passes, I think that evolution  
Will bring about an improved solution  
So, I’ll take what time I have left  
To savor my life and not be bereft  
As I have often said with a little touch of mirth  
My life is a part of the greatest show on Earth  
It is, and has been an unbelievable journey for me  
To have had good health and been born relatively free

California

Atheists rely on lack of evidence, not faith

In the August edition, there were two letter writers who claim that there is no such thing as atheism, that atheists can only be agnostics. I must respectfully disagree, though I will grant you that, sure, in the most literal sense, we are all agnostics, because we can’t 100 percent prove that there is no god. Much like we can’t prove that there is no such thing as the Tooth Fairy or the Easter Bunny.

The two letter writers both claim that it takes “faith” to not believe in a God. So, let’s compare atheism with the criminal justice system. Assume that a suspect has committed a murder, but there is no actual video of the suspect killing his victim. What there is, however, is evidence. The police are able to match DNA of the victim to the scene of the crime. The police are able to collect the murder weapon and find that the suspect’s fingerprints are all over the murder weapon. The police are able to find boot prints at the scene of the crime that are from the same boots as what the suspect wears. The police are able to match cellphone records that place the suspect’s phone at the same place and same time as where the murder occurred. The police are able to interrogate the suspect for hours, finding inconsistencies, unexplained time lapses, signs of deception, a motive, and so on. Everything but a confession.

With all that evidence, the suspect goes to trial, and based on all that overwhelming evidence, the suspect is found guilty. The evidence is so strong, in fact, that the jurors reach a verdict quickly. Yet, throughout the whole process, there was never actual video of the suspect committing the murder.

No one relied on faith to find the suspect guilty. The evidence was so strong that it was an open and shut case.

That’s how atheism works for many of us, definitely for myself, only in reverse. The evidence, or rather, lack thereof, is so strong, so convincing, that no faith is needed to not believe in a god.

Atheist podcaster Matt Dillahunt sums it up nicely, and I’m paraphrasing, when he says, “I’m not saying there is no God; I’m saying that there is no evidence to suggest that there is a god.”

The burden of proof is on those theists making the claim that a god exists. Atheists get to sit back and relax and let the theists have at it in trying to make their case. But, in all the centuries after centuries, there has yet to be one speck of evidence to suggest that there is a god. Atheists do not rely on faith for their nonbelief; they rely on a complete lack of evidence.

Wisconsin

Bar time in Myrtle Beach is 11:59 p.m. Saturday

Here’s a head’s up for FFRF conventioners in Myrtle Beach this October: Bar time on Saturday night is 11:59 p.m. As a hard-drinking boy from Brewtown, the first time I was in Myrtle Beach I was taken aback at being cut off at the knees by the bartender and the blue laws of South Carolina.

Me: “It’s Saturday night! Why can’t I buy a drink?”

Bartender: “It’s not Saturday night, it’s Sunday morning!”

However, there is a balance to the universe. The 2026 FFRF convention will be held in my hometown of Milwaukee, where bar time is when you run out of cash.

Sláinte!

Texas



