

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



The right to
freethinking and
criticizing ideas

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Let's get those
counternarratives
out there

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law student essay
contest winners

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Vol. 43 No. 3

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April 2026

Court permanently blocks Arkansas' Ten Commandments law

A federal district court issued a permanent injunction on March 16 prohibiting the school district defendants from implementing an Arkansas law that requires all public schools to permanently display a government-chosen, Protestant version of the Ten Commandments. The Freedom From Religion Foundation was part of a coalition of secular groups that represented the plaintiffs in the case.

In his decision in *Stinson v. Fayetteville School District No. 1*, U.S. District Court Judge Timothy Brooks wrote, "Act 573 must be permanently enjoined. Failing to do so would violate the Establishment Clause rights of all Arkansas public-school children and their parents and also violate plaintiffs' Free Exercise rights."

Ruling that the law, which sought the display of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom and library in the state, would lead to unconstitutional religious coercion of the child plaintiffs and interfere with their parents' rights to direct their children's religious education, Brooks explained: "Act 573's purpose is only to display a sacred, religious text in a prominent place in every public-school classroom. And the only reason to display a sacred, religious text in every classroom is to proselytize to children. The state has said the quiet part out loud."

Brooks added: "Nothing could possibly justify hanging the Ten Commandments — with or without historical context — in a calculus, chemistry, French or woodworking class, to name a few. And the words 'curriculum,' 'school board,' 'teacher' or 'educate' don't ap-

pear anywhere in Act 573. Accordingly, there is no need to strain our minds to imagine a constitutional display mandated by Act 573. One doesn't exist."

Represented by the Freedom from Religion Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas, the ACLU, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, with Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel, the plaintiffs in *Stinson v. Fayetteville School District No. 1* are a group of 10 multifaith and nonreligious Arkansas families with children in public schools.

"Act 573 is a direct infringement of our religious-freedom rights, and we're pleased that the court ruled in our favor," said Samantha Stinson, who is a plaintiff in the case along with her husband, Jonathan Stinson. "The version of the Ten Commandments mandated by Act 573 conflicts with our family's Jewish tenets and practice, and our belief that our children should receive their religious instruction at home and within our faith community, not from government officials."

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

The injunction, issued by the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Arkansas, permanently prohibits the school-district defendants from "complying with Act 573."



Photo by Dan Barker

On March 8, FFRF Governmental Affairs Director Mark Dann, far left, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, second from left, and Dan Barker (photographer) were joined by D.C.-area FFRF members to demand the release of Betty Lachgar from a Morocco prison. To dramatize Lachgar's medical situation, protesters wore a sling on their arm.

FFRF leads protest

FFRF joined an international action on March 8 to demand the release of a prisoner of conscience being held in a Moroccan prison.

FFRF held a protest at the Moroccan Consulate in Washington, D.C., to spotlight the imprisonment of feminist and freethinker Ib-tissame "Betty" Lachgar. Other protests were held around the world, including in London.

Lachgar has been named FFRF's 2026 Avijit Roy Courage Awardee. (For more on FFRF's convention, turn to page 3.)

Lachgar, a Moroccan clinical psycholo-

gist, atheist, feminist and longtime human rights campaigner, was found guilty last fall of wearing a T-shirt that "insulted Islam" and was sentenced to 30 months in prison. She is being treated inhumanely, even being denied a mattress and a pillow. Making her release urgent is the fact that Lachgar is a bone cancer survivor who was scheduled at the time of her arrest last August to have surgery on a failing prosthesis in her left arm. She's been warned that without that surgery, she risks amputation of her arm.

FFRF is part of the Free Betty Coalition, which includes 150 organizations around the world. Internationally renowned groups, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, have taken up Lachgar's cause.

Sign the petition: freebetty.org.



Betty Lachgar

Barker debate: 'Does the God of the Bible Exist?'

On Feb. 6, FFRF Co-President Dan Barker participated in a debate at Restoration Church in Rowland, Texas, on the topic "Does the God of the Bible Exist?" against Christian philosopher Elias Ayala. The debate was part of a weekend conference sponsored by "The Gospel Truth." The following was Dan's opening statement. (You can watch that entire debate at youtube.com/watch?v=yeucoXcUE7c)

By Dan Barker

On Easter Sunday in 2008, 11-year-old Kara Neumann of Weston, Wisconsin, died at home after suffering from horrendous pain for many days from easily treatable diabetes. She



Dan Barker

Photo by Chris Line

died because her Christian parents refused to treat her or take her to the hospital. They trusted the god of the bible, who promised in James 5:

"Is anyone among you sick? Let them call the elders of the church to pray over them and anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer offered in faith will make the sick person well; the Lord will raise them up." (James 5:14-15, NIV)

Because of the bible, a talented and

vivacious young girl lost her life on the day Christians celebrate their lord's victory over death.

Kara's parents were convicted of second-degree reckless homicide—but they remain unrepentant. They still believe they did the right thing because, in fact, the bible god does promise that prayer will heal the sick. Jesus said in Matthew 21:22, "all things, whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing, you shall receive." He didn't say "maybe," or "if I feel like it," or "if you have been good." He said "all things." That word "all" means . . . "all."

Other passages confirm this:

Matthew 18:19 "If two of you shall

agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven."

Mark 11:24 "Whatever you ask for in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours."

These and other verses guarantee that believers will experience miracles. Christ and his followers reportedly performed healings and miraculous deeds, and Jesus specifically promised in John 14:

John 14:12-14 "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these . . . If in my name you ask

See Debate on page 2

Debate

Continued from page 1

me for anything, I will do it.”

There is no way to misinterpret this: “I will do it.”

Kara Neumann is not the only victim of bible belief. Rita Swan of Children’s Healthcare is a Legal Duty documented hundreds of other cases in America alone where children have needlessly suffered and died because their Christian parents put their faith over their love.

Clearly, the god of the bible does not tell the truth.

This is simple logic: The bible god says he does not lie and keeps his promises. He promises to answer prayers. But prayers are not answered. Therefore, the bible god does not exist.

In fact, every time you pray a petitionary or intercessory prayer, you are proving his nonexistence. Why should a loving god even have to be asked?

Suppose I saw my daughter drowning, and I just stood and watched. And you ask me, “Why didn’t you jump in to save her?!” And I say “You didn’t ask,” or “You didn’t have enough faith” or “Not enough people prayed hard enough.” You would think I was a callous psychopath! The bible god says he is a loving father, who will not give a stone for bread (Matthew 7:9–11), yet he ignores the cries of his children whom he has promised to love. Look at the Holocaust.

Walk into any children’s hospital, and you know that the bible god does not exist. Good Christian parents are praying desperately for their children, and their success rate is no better than that of modern medicine and random chance. Prayer might offer temporary comfort, but it makes no practical difference.

And that is my main argument. The absence of miracles proves that a god of miracles does not exist.

But there’s more. A being with mutually incompatible characteristics cannot exist. Like a “married bachelor.” A is not



In this screenshot from a video, Dan Barker speaks during his opening statement in his debate with Christian philosopher Elias Ayala.

equal to not-A.

- The bible god says he is good, yet he created, commanded and committed evil. “Can a good tree bring forth evil fruit?” (Matthew 7:18)
- He said “Thou shalt not kill,” but then said, “Kill, kill, kill!” Including merciless genocides, cannibalistic slaughter and innocent children. Believers should be happy to dash babies against the stones. (Psalm 137:9)
- He says he is just, yet he commits unjust acts, punishing children for the deeds of their ancestors and punishing David’s adultery by having his wives raped (II Samuel 12:7–14). He sentences all wrongdoers, regardless of the severity, to the same hell.
- He says all are created in his image, but then treats slaves and women as property. He boasted that he rapes women in Jeremiah 13 — “I myself will

lift up your skirts.”

- He says he is merciful, then commits merciless acts.
- He says he is unchanging, yet he changed his mind. (See Exodus 32:14, Jonah 3:10, 2 Kings 20:1-11, Amos 7:1-6)
- He says he is wise, yet he was sorry he made Saul king (1 Samuel 15:11) and regretted creating humans (Genesis 6:6), so he drowned most of them all and started over.
- He says no one is blameless, yet he said some, such as Noah and Job, were blameless.
- He says no one can see his face, yet he says some did see his face.
- He claims he is perfect, yet his perfect creation, Eve, did something imperfect.
- He says he is all-powerful but could not defeat chariots of iron. (Judges 1:1)
- He claims he is all-knowing yet says the sun orbits the Earth, the moon is a light and the stars are holes or little lights in a solid bowl called the firmament placed upside-down over a flat Earth.
- He claims he is all-loving, yet he created mosquitos! He failed to tell us about

“Walk into any children’s hospital, and you know that the bible god does not exist. . . Prayer might offer temporary comfort, but it makes no practical difference.”

parasites, pathogens and germs. Jesus did not wash his hands before eating.

- He is confessedly intelligent and benevolent, yet he was unable to write a book that is clear enough to keep his followers from killing each other, fracturing into divisive denominations, bickering beliefs and feuding philosophies.

To presuppose the existence of such a shambolic character is to build your house on the sand.

I know what you are thinking. You’re thinking: “I can explain! Context, metaphor, free will, hermeneutics, the broader picture, the New Covenant,” and so on. When a woman catches her husband in bed with another woman, what does the man often say? “I can explain.” Well, maybe he can, but he is still in bed with another woman. Any criminal can “explain” their actions.

But why should the perfect word of a loving god have to be explained at all?

If the bible is God’s revelation to the human race, I am the intended reader, with the right to judge it as I see it. If I can’t grasp its “true meaning” without squabbling sectarian experts “explaining” what it really means, then God is inept. He’s a bad communicator.

He is also immoral. In my book “God: The Most Unpleasant Character in All Fiction,” I document more than 1,500 horrific deeds and cruel words of the bible god showing that even if he did exist, he would not be worthy of my admiration, much less worship. (All of those passages can be found at unpleasantgod.ffrf.org)

Don’t misunderstand me. I’m not saying the reason he doesn’t exist is because he is unscrupulous and capricious. Such a preposterous monster could theoretically exist. The reason he does not exist is because his words and his deeds cancel out, like matter and anti-matter, like a married bachelor.

Maybe some other god exists—and that is a different debate—but since the bible god is described as honest, loving, just, merciful, all-knowing and powerful, and since he is depicted as dishonest, unloving, unjust, merciless, ignorant and impotent—unable to perform as he promised—he does not exist.

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

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FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

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 freethought-today.com also follows this protocol.

Only the actual print newspaper contains all of these items.

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

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

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

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

American Infidel: ROBERT G. INGERSOLL

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By Orvin Larson

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— 316 pages / PB

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What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

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

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FREETHOUGHT

TODAY

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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Milwaukee, Wis., Oct. 15-18

Registration opens for FFRF’s convention



Percival Everett



Jennifer Welch



Gigi Cervantes



Drew McCoy



Peter Isley



Jim Obergefell



Ron Reagan



Betty Lachgar



Johnny Cotton



Steven Emmert



Maya Wiley



Randi Weingarten



Forrest Valkai

A provocative line-up of diverse activists, authors, podcasters and state/church activists will join the Freedom From Religion Foundation’s lineup at its 49th annual convention, taking place at Milwaukee’s Baird Convention Center in mid-October.

Registration is now open. Register online at ffrf.us/con26register or by completing the form on the back page of this issue.

The formal conference encompasses two full days, Friday, Oct. 16–Saturday, Oct. 17, preceded by “early bird workshops” and a complimentary reception on Thursday afternoon, Oct. 15. The convention is followed by the annual membership and state representatives meetings on Sunday morning, Oct. 18, ending by noon.

FFRF offers a discounted room block at the Hilton Milwaukee Hotel, 509 W. Wisconsin Ave., of \$229 plus taxes per night. Book online: ffrf.us/con26reserve or phone 800-774-1500 noting you’re with the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and providing our group code “90N.”

Speakers include novelist **Percival Everett**, author of the powerful book “James,” which won the 2025 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and is a retelling of “Huckleberry Finn” from the point of view of the enslaved James (not “Jim”). The distinguished professor of English at USC will receive FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award, reserved for public figures who make known their dissent from

religion. “James” was published in March 2024 to great critical acclaim, and Everett will sign copies of his book. “American Fiction,” the feature film based on his novel “Erasure,” was released in 2023 and was awarded the Academy Award for Best Adapted Screenplay.

Jennifer Welch, an atheist who co-hosts the “I’ve Had It” podcast, which reaches over 3 million listeners a month and has 150 million-plus monthly views on its YouTube Channel, will speak on “I’ve had it with Christian nationalism.” Journalist Mehdi Hasan recently described Welch as “perhaps the most influential woman in the Democratic Party right now.” Welch also co-hosts the daily news series IHIP News and is the co-author of “Life Is a Lazy Susan of Sh*t Sandwiches.” Welch will also receive FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award.

Jim Obergefell, the lead plaintiff in Obergefell vs. Hodges — the 2015 Supreme Court decision that legalized marriage equality — and an atheist, will receive FFRF’s Forward Award and statuette reserved for individuals who have moved society forward. He’ll talk about the case and sign copies of his book, “Love Wins: The Lovers and Lawyers Who Fought the Landmark Case for Marriage Equality.”

Other honorees will include two Texas teachers of integrity, who quit their jobs rather than display Ten Commandments posters in their public school classrooms: **Gigi Cervantes**, a high school theatre and activating teacher in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and **Johnny Cotton**, a band leader and teacher for 42 years in the Carthage ISD. They will receive a “First Amendment Heroine” Award and “First Amendment Hero Award” respectively.

The Clarence Darrow Award and statuette will go to Milwaukee’s **Peter Isley**, a survivor of childhood sexual assault by a

Roman Catholic priest who co-founded the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP).

The Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalism Religion Award, now at \$75,000, will go to the Secular Coalition for America’s Education Fund and be accepted by SCA Executive Director **Steven Emmert**. The Zumach Award has been solely endowed by a generous Wisconsin state/church activist to recognize and further the work of allies.

Maya Wiley will be presented with a “Champion of Civil Rights Award” for her work directing the Leadership Conference on Human Rights and Civil Rights, and will talk about current threats to civil rights and democracy.

Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, a union of 1.8 million individuals, will be speaking and signing copies of her new book, “Why Fascists Fear Teachers.” Prior to her election as AFT president in 2008, Weingarten served for 11 years as president of the United Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 2, worked as a lawyer on Wall Street and taught history at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn. Weingarten was included in Washingtonian’s 2022 Washington’s Most Influential People. Weingarten holds degrees from Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the Cardozo School of Law.

Other speakers will include **Drew McCoy**, creator of the “Genetically Modified Skeptic” YouTube channel, with over 850,000 subscribers. Drew was raised as an Independent Fundamental Baptist, but left religion in 2016 and has been a full-time atheist content creator and activist for the past eight years.

Forrest Valkai, a popular Oklahoma-based biologist, science educator and content creator known as the Renegade Science Teacher, will also speak.

FFRF is also proud to announce it will be bestowing the \$5,000 Avijit Roy Courage Award, memorializing the slain Bangladeshi-American freethought author and activist, to **Ibtissame (Betty) Lachgar**, a Moroccan freethinker, feminist and civil libertarian who has been imprisoned for “insulting Islam.”

The conference will end with an after-dinner keynote address by **Ron Reagan**, known for his fearless political commentary, his independent views, as well as his generous TV commercial endorsement of FFRF — in which he describes himself as an “unabashed atheist . . . not afraid of burning in hell.”

FFRF will be offering “early-bird” workshops on Thursday afternoon, including the popular “Ask an Attorney” panel where FFRF legal eagles will take your questions on state/church issues and concerns, and an interactive panel to practice lobbying with Regional Governmental Affairs Manager **Mickey Dollens**, a seated state legislator in Oklahoma, and FFRF’s other legislative team members. In addition, leaders from FFRF’s grassroots chapter program will run a workshop providing an overview of the benefits of starting an FFRF chapter in your area. That will be followed by a complimentary late afternoon reception.

The annual conference will also include the usual executive, legal and legislative reports, student essay winners or activists, a chance to mingle at book and sales tables, the NonPrayer Breakfast (with its popular “moment of bedlam”), the drawing for “clean” (pre-)In God We Trust”) currency and several optional group meals and complimentary receptions.

Sign up today at ffrf.us/con26 or turn to the back page for further details.

MOVING?



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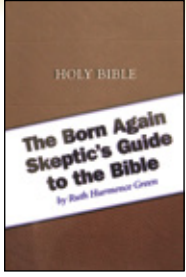
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Across

1. Chowder morsel

5. *Freethinking E. M. Remarque’s “A Time to Love and a Time to _____”

8. *Self-proclaimed nonbeliever M. Sendak’s “Where the _____ Things Are”

12. Word-of-mouth story

13. Passerine bird

14. *Agnostic J. Irving’s “_____ House Rules”

15. Like ear infection

16. Unagi, pl.

17. Assuage

18. *Freethinking “Vanity Fair” author

20. Hemorrhaged

21. Creative or pretentious

22. J. Edgar Hoover Building org.

23. Capital of Bahamas

26. Pronounceable

30. Over the top, in text

31. One of the Caymans

34. Like debatable point

35. Protest, e.g.

37. Kimono sash

38. USA Network detective show (2006-2014)

39. Type of shark

40. Italian pomace brandy

42. Laos resident

43. Like U. S. Constitution, 27 times

45. *Freethinking Friedrich

_____, Karl Marx’ colleague

47. Aptitude test, acr.

48. 4:1, e.g.

50. Small ladies’ handbag

52. *Atheist Jodie Foster’s TV show “True _____” (2024)

56. S-shaped moldings

57. O in B.O.

58. Photoshop option

59. Mountainous

60. Loud booms

61. Golfer’s destination

62. Nobel Peace Prize home

63. *Atheist Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “_____ to the West Wind”

64. Poker amount

Down

1. Blood lump

2. Reluctant

3. *Freethinking Bizet’s “Habanera,” e.g.

4. Flocked-to destinations

5. Certain textile industry workers

6. Embedded design

7. Peasy’s partner

8. *Freethinking “Good Will Hunting” actor Robin _____

9. Doing nothing

10. Old paint hazard

11. Like some martinis

13. Auditory canal, e.g.

14. Taxi driver

19. Deadly snake

22. It’s all the rage

23. Marilyn Monroe’s given name

24. Mr. T’s team, with The

25. *Burning at the _____, once popular punishment for heresy

26. Beauty salon sound

27. *Freethinking “The Tortilla Curtain” author T. C. _____

28. Like farm-to-table

29. Not pathos

32. *”The _____ shall make the pestilence cleave unto thee” (Deuteronomy 28:21)

33. Lawyers’ league, acr.

36. *Irreverent George Sand’s famous novel

38. Run on a bank, e.g.

40. Acquire

41. *Freethinkers O’Toole and Tchaikovsky

44. *Freethinking F. Scott Fitzgerald’s character _____ Buchanan

46. “I see your point”

48. Made over

49. Do penance

50. Shining armor

51. *Freethinking Friedrich Schiller’s “Wilhelm _____”

52. Famously extinct bird

53. Golf club

54. Retired electric Chevy

55. Fencer’s weapon

56. Exclamation of surprise

Freethought Today Crossword

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

Answers on page 21

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

OVERHEARD

Theater is my church, and in its noblest form, theater is a service. It is a place to learn, to connect with others, and to experience joy as a performer and an audience member. And if it’s particularly wonderful, we’re all going to have this incredible experience at the same time.

Actress Julie Halston, known for playing Bitsy von Muffling on “Sex and the City.”
New York Times, 1-11-26

The suspect allegedly admitted he wanted to kill a doctor for providing legal health care. President Trump has spent his time in office emboldening this kind of radicalism.

Liz McCaman Taylor, senior federal policy counsel at the Center for Reproductive Rights, after a Montana man was charged with planning to shoot and kill a Missoula-based abortion provider.
The Missoulian, 3-18-26

It is telling that the Heritage Foundation issued a grand statement about how welfare wrecked marriage and children two days after the Trump administration froze \$10 billion in funding for needy families in five Democratic-led states. . . Instead of figuring out a real way to make life easier for families, all the Heritage Foundation does is propose razing what little government support exists while scolding young people for their decadence because they want fewer children and more bathrooms.

Jessica Grose, in an article tracing the Heritage Foundation’s war on gender equality, in its new policy paper, “Saving America by Saving the Family.”
New York Times 1-28-26

I went on birth control at a young age after being assaulted. That’s another big reason I wanted to pursue sterilization. Because we live in a state that, you know, you can’t get an abortion.

Unnamed Tennessee woman, who says Ascension St. Thomas Midtown in Nashville, Tenn., canceled her scheduled sterilization surgery on Feb. 27,

after she had been admitted and an IV had been placed. The cancellation came after the passage of House Bill 1044, a law that protects doctors from liability or lawsuits when they decline to perform procedures that conflict with their religious or moral beliefs.
WSMV4, 2-23-26

We are called to love all of our neighbors, including our Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, Sikh, agnostic, atheist neighbors. And forcing our religion down their throats is not love.

Texas state Rep. James Talarico, in a censored interview with Steven Colbert. Talarico was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the week” on Feb. 28.
YouTube, 2-18-26

I don’t think that any of these things that he’s done have any Christian values to them. . . . The other thing is, this country began with freedom of religion. Christianity is not the only religion in this country. We’ve got many, many different faiths. I think we all have the same values, and that’s to treat people as we would want to be treated.

Dr. Holly Neaton, a veterinarian and farmer based in Minnesota, in a panel discussion on President Trump’s State of the Union address on Feb. 24. For her remarks, Dr. Neaton was named the FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” on March 5.
MS Now, 2-24-26

It blew my mind that there were people who’d never thought that hard about whether there was a god. They were just trying to be good people. And I was like, “Oh, that’s an option?”

Comedian Taylor Tomlinson, who was raised by conservative Christian parents but now considers herself an agnostic.
Rolling Stone, 2-24-26

Freethought Today Cryptogram

MOR WPRNMUH ODW BL UAAQWULBW DELQM AUKR, BLT D ZDUB

ERAURK UB MOR NTLSUWR LK USSLTMDAUMI. WUBHR MOUW

AUKR ORTR DBC BLX UW DAA XR HDB PBLX, LQT SLWM

TRDWLBDEAR LNMULB UW ML AUZR UM KQAAI.

—NDQA PQTMG

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

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

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

What are you missing? Check out our other offerings!

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

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Freethought Radio - weekly show
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Freethought of the Day - online calendar
Daily online calendar of famous freethinkers
ffrf.org/day

FFRF press releases
ffrf.org/releases

Legislative action alerts
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IN THE NEWS

Decades of priestly sexual abuse in R.I.

Catholic priests in Rhode Island preyed on hundreds of children for decades, and were protected by bishops more concerned with the church’s reputation than the victims, according to a new report on clergy sexual abuse that echoes findings elsewhere.

The report, released March 4 by Attorney General Peter Neronha, follows a multiyear investigation into the Catholic Diocese of Providence, R.I.

Neronha said the full scope of the priest abuse problem in Rhode Island — the smallest U.S. state but the one with the highest Catholic population per capita, at nearly 40 percent — had long remained elusive. He agreed with victims who say not enough has been done to address the problem long after it was exposed in the nearby Boston diocese in 2002.

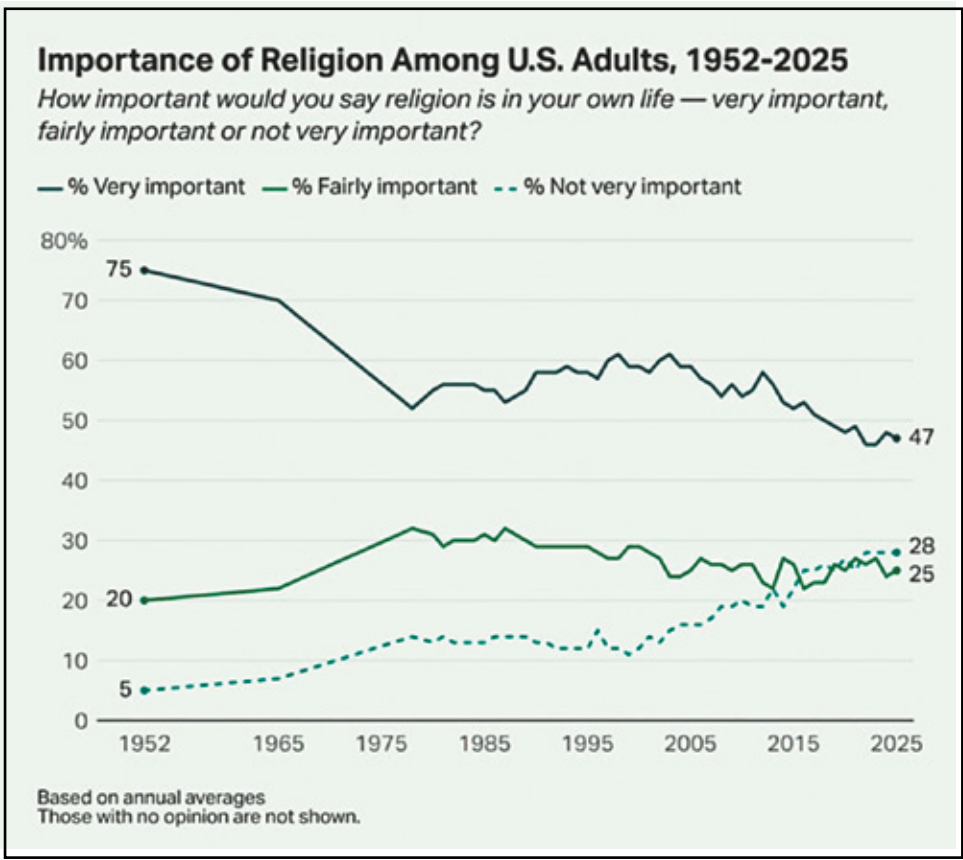
The investigation found that 75 Catholic clergy molested more than 300 victims since 1950, but officials stressed that the number of victimized children and abusive priests is likely much higher.

Church records show the diocese transferred accused priests to new assignments without fully investigating complaints or contacting law enforcement, a practice exposed in investigations in Boston, Philadelphia and elsewhere. By the 1990s, accused priests were sometimes placed on sabbatical leave.

Christian nationalism rejecters prefer pluralism

A new PRRI report on Christian nationalism, released Feb. 17, shows that most (83 percent) of those who reject Christian nationalism — the idea that America was founded by and belongs to Christians — say they want to live in a pluralistic country. Not surprisingly, those who embrace Christian nationalism, according to PRRI’s measuring index, prefer a nation made up of Christians (73 percent).

Since 2023, PRRI has tried to measure support for Christian nationalism in the United States, using a series of five questions. Those questions ask if the government should declare the United States a Christian nation, if being Christian is important to being an American, if U.S. law should be based on Christian values, if Christians are called to have domination over American society and if the U.S. will fall apart without its Christian foundations.



GALLUP

About 1 in 10 Americans (11 percent) are what PRRI calls Christian nationalist adherents, meaning they agree or completely agree with all questions, according to the new report. One in 4 Americans (27 percent) are “rejectors,” meaning they completely disagree with all five statements. Twenty-one percent of Americans are Christian nationalist sympathizers, according to PRRI, meaning they agree with most of the statements, but don’t completely agree with them. Thirty-seven percent are skeptics and disagree — but not completely — with most of the five statements.

Trust in clergy members at record low, poll finds

A recent Gallup poll revealed that only 27 percent of Americans now feel clergy members are trustworthy, a record low for a survey that’s been administered for 50 years.

The last time more than half the country felt they were trustworthy was in 2012, and now nearly one in five (18 percent) Americans say clergy members have low or very low ethics.

Pharmacists, high school teachers, clergy members and business executives are each two or three percentage points lower than their previous record lows.

Nurses continue to get the highest ethics rating, a distinction they have held for a quarter century, with 75 percent rating them “very high” or “high.”

Tenn. bill would require schools to teach bible

A Tennessee legislator is seeking to require that public schools in the state teach the bible and create legal ramifications for noncompliance.

The bill, HB 1491, is sponsored by state Rep. Gino Bulso, who has also sponsored bills this term saying same-sex marriages do not have to be recognized and that the definition of a person should be expanded to begin at fertilization.

If passed, the bill would enact the “Protecting Religious Liberty and Expression in Public Schools Act,” which would require “public schools to use the bible within their instruction and to provide for a period of prayer and reading religious texts.”

Public schools would be required to

teach the bible to all students, except those with a written request to be excluded. Those lessons would focus on the bible being taught “as literature,” with teachings about Israel’s history, the Old and New Testaments, Jesus, the history of the early Christian church and the bible’s influence on Western civilization.

Majority rarely/never go to religious services

According to a new Gallup Poll, religious service attendance reveals a picture of steady decline. A majority of U.S. residents — 57 percent — say they rarely or never attend religious services. (By comparison, in 1992, only 42 percent said they rarely or never attend services.)

Also, the percentage of Americans who say religion is “very important” in their lives has leveled off at 47 percent in 2025. (It’s been up or down 1 percentage point since 2021.)

“They like the idea of religion — that hasn’t changed — but they don’t actually go as much,” said Ryan Burge, a political scientist and statistician. “So it’s sort of like a symbolic religion.”

The number of men who said religion was “very important” in their lives fell from 51 percent over the past 20 years to 43 percent, an 8-point drop. Even more significant is the number of women who say religion is “very important,” which fell from 66 percent to 51 percent over the past two decades, a 15-point drop.

Court: Ten Commandments law can take effect

FFRF and allied groups are disappointed in a 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruling Feb. 20 that it is premature to determine the constitutionality of a Louisiana law requiring public schools to permanently display a government-approved, Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in every classroom.

The decision vacates a federal district court’s November 2024 preliminary injunction in *Rev. Roake v. Brumley*, which prevented the defendant state officials and school boards from implementing House Bill 71. In its ruling, the appeals court held that the *Roake* lawsuit was premature because the scriptural displays had not yet been posted in the children plaintiffs’ classrooms, so it “cannot

yet know . . . how the text will be used.” The court acknowledged, however, that “nothing in today’s narrow holding prevents future as-applied challenges once the statute is implemented and a concrete factual record exists.”

Represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the ACLU, ACLU of Louisiana, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the plaintiffs in *Roake v. Brumley* are a multi-faith group of nine Louisiana families with children in public schools. The organizations representing the plaintiffs issued the following statement in response to the decision:

“[This] ruling is extremely disappointing and would, if left in place, will unnecessarily force Louisiana’s public school families into a game of constitutional whack-a-mole in every school district where they must challenge each individual school district’s displays. Longstanding judicial precedent makes clear that our clients need not submit to the very harms they are seeking to prevent before taking legal action to protect their rights. But this fight isn’t over. We will continue fighting for the religious freedom of Louisiana’s families.”

Kan. House OKs clergy as mandatory abuse reporters

A bill that would make clergy members mandatory reporters of child abuse passed the Kansas House of Representatives on Feb. 19. Kansas is one of several states that does not require clergy to report suspected child abuse.

The final vote was 111-5 in favor of HB 2352. The bill had never come to a vote at the House before. It will now go to the Senate for approval, although it will likely not clear a Senate committee.

The bill still protects the confessional seal — private communications between clergy and congregants during religious confession.

“The fact that privileged communication is exempted from this bill is absurd. In no rational world is a priest getting excommunicated — the punishment for revealing confidential information learned through confession — more damning than letting a child continue to suffer sexual abuse,” Hemant Mehta writes in his blog, “The Friendly Atheist.”

Judge: Ind. abortion law violates religious freedom

A Superior Court judge in Indiana on March 5 granted a permanent injunction in the ACLU of Indiana’s religious freedom challenge to the state’s abortion ban. The ruling lifts Indiana’s abortion law, enacted in 2022, for some with religious objections.

The law is a near-total ban. It only allows for exceptions in the case of a woman’s health, rape or incest, or a fatal fetal anomaly — each with varying time limits.

The ACLU filed a class action lawsuit three years ago for Hoosier Jews for Choice and two anonymous women. The unnamed plaintiffs are women of different faiths who say their beliefs can necessitate the procedure.

The ACLU argued the law imposes a substantial burden on religious exercise protected by the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Because the court certified the case as a class action, the ruling may reach beyond the plaintiffs. The state’s attorney general has appealed the decision.

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FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

Colorado

FFRF successfully halted the teaching of creationism in the science curriculum at a Colorado public charter school.

FFRF wrote to the CEO of James Irwin Charter Schools after a concerned parent reported that James Irwin Charter Middle School in Colorado Springs was planning to include “intelligent design” and “creationist theory” alongside evolution in its eighth-grade science curriculum. According to an email sent to parents by the school’s science lead, the evolution unit proposed to “teach Intelligent Design and evolution” and “present a creationist theory and an evolutionist theory regarding natural selection, adaptation and evolution.”

FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district explaining that teaching creationism or intelligent design in public school science classes violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

“Promoting creationism, intelligent design or any of its offshoots in public schools is unlawful because creationism is based solely on religion, not scientific fact,” her letter stated. FFRF noted that the Supreme Court and federal courts have consistently rejected attempts to introduce religious doctrine into public school science classes, including the landmark ruling in *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987) and the federal decision in *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* (2005), which struck down policies promoting creationism and intelligent design.

FFRF’s intervention had the desired result. Following its letter, the school system investigated the matter and scrapped the pseudoscience portion of the curriculum.

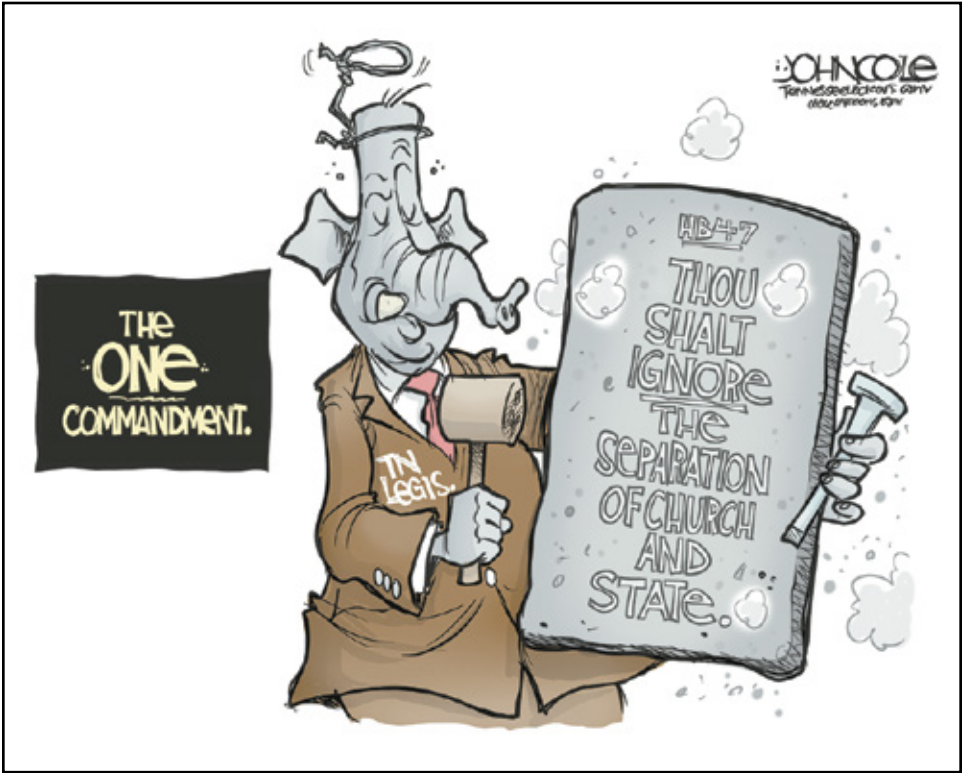
“Please know that this practice has ceased,” CEO Rob Daugherty wrote in a response to FFRF. “Intelligent design will not be taught in the middle school or in any other James Irwin Charter School as part of a science curriculum.”

Iowa

FFRF taught the Fort Dodge Community School District in Iowa that student religious clubs must be student led, and school employees cannot promote or participate in these clubs.

A community member reported that adult staff members at Fort Dodge Middle School (FDMS) were overtly and inappropriately involved in organizing, leading, advertising and encouraging participation in the school’s Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA) club. FFRF learned that during the workday, staff members at FDMS were promoting the FCA club to students and encouraging them to join. FCA is an explicitly religious organization based in evangelical Christianity and the Iowa FCA has direct statements of its Christian faith on its website homepage. Additionally, a multitude of Facebook posts were discovered that show the district having a long pattern and practice of routinely permitting staff and outside adults to organize, lead, promote and sponsor the middle school’s FCA club in violation of federal law and the school board’s own policy.

“Even if the club is properly rent-



ing school space for its meetings, the school cannot advertise an outside-run religious club, grant outside adults special access to students, recruit students to join the club, or promote the club’s religious message,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

FFRF’s letter led to the district reaching out to legal counsel for advice as to how to resolve the matter. Superintendent Joshua Porter wrote in an email, “You can assure [the community member] that we have worked with our legal counsel on this matter and will follow their recommendations.”

North Carolina

FFRF stood up for a nonreligious student in the Montgomery County Schools system in North Carolina after a bible distribution left them feeling excluded, resulting in the district being advised not to allow similar events to take place in the future.

A local parent reported that last December, Star Elementary School allowed an outside adult to distribute bibles to students on school property during the school day. Reportedly, the adult was allowed to approach students to distribute bibles. When the parent wrote to FFRF regarding the distribution, they expressed their discomfort by the event, saying, “it forced my child into an environment where they felt like an ‘outsider’ for not participating in religious-leaning instruction.”

“When a public school allows the distribution of bibles to students on school property during the school day, it entangles itself with religion, and specifically Christianity,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Charlotte R. Gude wrote. “Distributing bibles needlessly marginalizes students, such as our complainant’s child, who are non-religious, as well as those who belong to minority faiths.”

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the district contacted legal representative Patricia Robinson to ensure full compliance with the Constitution. Robinson confirmed that the district investigated the situation, stating that, while the bibles were available for students to pick up and were indicated not to be district affiliated, the event “was not consistent with board policy regarding the distribution of non-school materials.” Robinson additionally provided legal training to school administrators regarding

the First Amendment and compliance with board policy regarding distribution of non-school materials.

Oklahoma

Thanks to information provided by a local member, FFRF’s work saw the San Springs Public Schools system in Oklahoma stop a high school football coach from leading students in prayer before games.

After receiving a report from member William Dusenberry, FFRF learned that the head football coach at Charles Page High school had reportedly led student-athletes in the Lord’s Prayer before a game in December 2025. In order to protect student rights, FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district, calling for an investigation to put a stop to coaching staff pushing prayer on students.

“When coaches lead students in prayer and direct or encourage them to pray, the student-athletes will no doubt feel that participating in that prayer is essential to pleasing their coach and being viewed as a team player,” Lawrence wrote.

The district rightfully looked into the situation, and FFRF learned from the district’s legal representative, John E. Priddy, that action had been taken. “The administration and I have spoken about ensuring that this does not happen in the future and the administration is committed to ensuring the law is followed.”

Pennsylvania

The Muhlenberg School District in Reading, Pa., made sure that the superintendent wouldn’t continue the practice of emailing students overtly religious content.

A student informed FFRF that on April 18, 2025, the district superintendent sent a schoolwide email to all Muhlenberg High School students and staff that explicitly promoted Christian beliefs, including a statement about how students need to “remember that Jesus gave His life out of love for all humanity.” The email signature additionally promotes faith. The student explained that this was not the first time the superintendent has promoted Christianity in a school setting, and they felt unheard and unseen due to the superintendent’s actions.

“Public school staff, including super-

intendents, may not promote religion to students,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the school board.

The school board reached out to its legal representative Brian F. Boland. “The matter you brought to the school district’s attention in July has been investigated and addressed,” Boland confirmed. “We welcome you to advise us if any such issues should come to your attention in the future.”

Tennessee

The Mount Juliet Police Department in Tennessee removed a bible quote after FFRF explained how it isolated non-Christian members of the community.

A concerned resident informed FFRF that the Mount Juliet Police Department’s roll call room in its headquarters had a bible verse displayed prominently on the front wall. It read, “Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying. ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?’ And I said, ‘Here am I; send me!’ - Isaiah 6:8.” The resident who reported the quote stated that seeing the bible verse made them feel that “the police are working on behalf of one religious group rather than all.”

“Minority religious and nonreligious citizens should not be made to feel like outsiders in their own community because the MJPD promotes a particular religious group’s beliefs, implying official support for Christianity,” FFRF Legal Fellow Charlotte R. Gude wrote to Chief of Police Tyler Chandler.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the violation was corrected. In an email to FFRF, Chandler addressed the complaint, stating that it would be resolved quickly. “I opted to have our construction manager and the graphics vendor revise the quote, and I am waiting for the work to be completed,” he wrote. “There are other graphic items in the new building that need to be corrected (not related to your specific inquiry), and all work should be completed by the end of the month.”

Wisconsin

The school district of Loyal, Wis., made sure to refocus future Veterans Day programs by removing a scheduled prayer from future events.

A district parent reported that in 2024 and 2025, the district’s Veterans Day programs on Nov. 11 included prayer as a scheduled part of the program. Additionally, FFRF learned that the football coach was leading the team in prayer before games and at team dinners.

“Even if students and parents know about the religious content of these activities and are able to opt out, voluntariness is no excuse for violating students’ rights,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the district.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, Superintendent Chris Lindner took the time to respond to the concerns and ensure that students’ rights were the district’s top priority. “I will talk to the program director of the Veterans Day program about taking this off the schedule,” Lindner wrote. Thankfully, Lindner also confirmed that the coach was not leading prayers, and that students were not being forced to participate in the religious practice.

‘Great American Freethought Songbook’ FFRF monthly music series begins in April

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is pleased to announce it will be offering a unique monthly concert series, both in person and streaming live, beginning on Monday, April 13, and continuing through November.

“The Great American Freethought Songbook with Dan & Darcie” will feature FFRF Co-President Dan Barker, an accomplished jazz piano player and music history aficionado, and mellow Madison vocalist Darcie Johnston. The 7-month concert series will not only celebrate timeless standards, but explore the largely unrecognized freethinking views of so many of the Great American Songbook composers.

Freethinking composers of the Great American Songbook whose work will be featured include: Jerome Kern (Monday, April 13), Irving Berlin (Monday, May 11), George and



Darcie Johnston

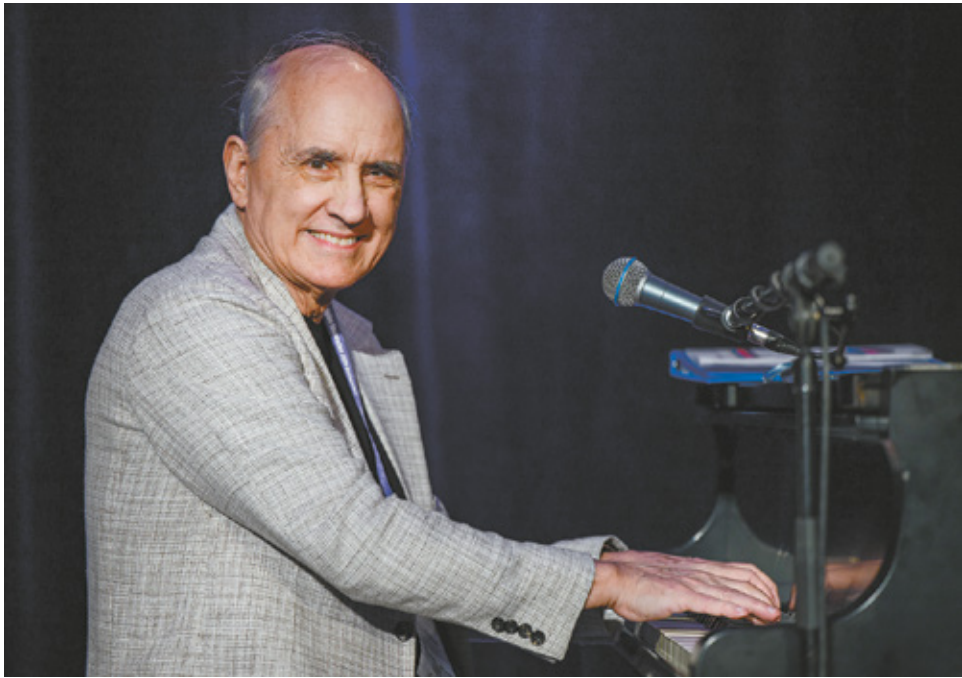


Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Co-President Dan Barker will accompany Darcie Johnston in a concert series.

Ira Gershwin (Monday, June 8), Yip Harburg (Monday, July 13), Cole Porter (Monday, Aug. 24), Richard (and Mary) Rodgers (Sept. 21), and a finale (Monday, Nov. 9) that will include

a medley of other nonreligious 20th century songwriters, including Jay Gorney, Burton Lane, Tom Lehrer, Frank Loesser, Thelonious Monk, Stephen Sondheim and Charles Strouse.

The hour-long evening concerts, ending with a light dessert reception, will be free to Madison, Wis.-area FFRF members and their friends and take place at 7 p.m. CDT in the Charlie Brooks Auditorium at FFRF’s office building, Freethought Hall, in downtown Madison. Area members will receive monthly reminders and all members will receive a monthly email invitation to enjoy the live stream.

The concerts will be available for posterity on FFRF’s YouTube channel and on Freethought TV, FFRF’s new, free app for smart TVs and devices, which contains the full library of FFRF video productions, including convention speeches. (Find out more about downloading the Freethought TV app at: freethoughttv.ffrf.org.)

Thanks to Special Projects Video Director Bruce Johnson for readying FFRF’s Charlie Brooks Auditorium for the concerts, including building a stage, overseeing installation of lighting and managing the friendly crew at Audio for the Arts that will record the live-streaming event.

‘End Times’ ideology driving policy in Middle East

The Freedom From Religion Foundation warns that Christian nationalist “End Times” theology is embedded in the worldview of key officials making decisions about the U.S. attack on Iran.

The Military Religious Freedom Foundation alleges receiving multiple complaints from service members that commanders are characterizing the Iran war as the start of Armageddon. Journalist Jonathan Larsen has stated MRFF’s claims that non-commissioned officers were reportedly briefed by a combat-unit commander who said that the war is part of God’s plan and that President Trump was “anointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth.”

Influential religious-right figures such as John Hagee and Lance

Wallnau have openly celebrated the strikes in Iran as prophetically significant, aligning them with biblical feast days and “End Times” timelines. This chorus reinforces the idea that war with Iran fulfills divine prophecy.

“Americans should be outraged that biblical prophecy is being treated as a foreign policy framework,” says FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “War against another nation cannot be justified as ‘God’s will’ or as a step toward Armageddon. That’s not constitutional governance — that’s theocracy in action.”

When top civilian leadership saturates the institution with Christian nationalist messaging, it is hardly surprising that some commanders interpret military operations through an apocalyptic lens. The tone has been set at the top.

For example, in June, U.S. Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee urged President Trump to “hear from heaven” as he weighed decisions about the escalating Israel-Iran conflict. In a message later publicized by Trump, Huckabee insisted there is “only ONE voice that matters. HIS voice” (referring to God). Huckabee disingenuously compared Trump’s position to that of President Harry S. Truman in 1945 authorizing the use of atomic bombs against Japan.

Huckabee made a direct appeal to the U.S. president to base catastrophic military decisions on perceived divine revelation. Huckabee’s apocalyptic vision is rooted in literalist readings of the Book of Revelation, which depict a climactic Middle East battle ushering in Armageddon and the Second Coming. For adherents of

this theology, war involving Israel is not merely geopolitical, it is prophetic fulfillment.

In late February, Huckabee came under renewed scrutiny after appearing on Tucker Carlson’s podcast. During the interview, after Carlson asserted that, according to the bible, Israel is entitled to “essentially the entire Middle East,” Huckabee responded that “it would be fine if it took it all.”

More troubling still is the central role of self-described War Secretary Pete Hegseth, whose record demonstrates a sustained pattern of infusing the U.S. military with his brand of Christian nationalism.

At the recent 2026 National Religious Broadcasters International Christian Media Convention, Hegseth railed against the “Godless left,” praised “Western Christian” values and declared, “We are not in woke we trust, we are in God we trust.” He asserted that advancing administration priorities “is not political — it is BIBLICAL.” Such rhetoric collapses the distinction between constitutional governance and sectarian doctrine.

Hegseth has repeatedly portrayed secular governance itself as a threat. In a December video, he attacked “secular humanism” and claimed the military’s Chaplain Corps had been weakened by “political correctness.” He criticized the Army’s Spiritual Fitness Guide for failing to actively promote Christianity. He further pledged to elevate “spiritual well-being” to the same level as physical and mental health as part of what he called a “top-down cultural shift.”

Hegseth has also normalized overtly sectarian worship within the Pentagon. Last May, he held an inaugural

Christian prayer service in the Pentagon auditorium during official working hours, reportedly encouraging attendance. Since then, monthly worship services have been held, merging a specific strain of evangelical Christianity with official government authority.

Hegseth has publicly praised extremist pastor Douglas Wilson, who advocates for a Christian theocracy and opposes women’s suffrage, reposting a CNN segment about Wilson with the caption, “All of Christ for All of Life.” Hegseth is a member of a church connected to Wilson’s ultraconservative network and personally attended the launch of Wilson’s new congregation in Washington, D.C. Hegseth has even invited Wilson to lead official prayers at the Pentagon.

In December, Hegseth hosted a “Christmas worship service” at the Pentagon featuring evangelist Franklin Graham, who ominously declared from the podium, “God is also a god of war.”

The convergence is unmistakable: an ambassador urging the president to heed God’s voice, a defense secretary openly declaring policy to be “biblical,” Pentagon communications infused with scripture and commanders describing war as part of God’s divine plan.

FFRF urges swift congressional oversight and accountability to ensure that sectarian ideology is not steering military policy. The machinery of war cannot be entrusted to those who see global conflict as prophetic fulfillment. The American people deserve leadership anchored in democratic principles, not “End Times” fervor.

“Americans should be outraged that biblical prophecy is being treated as a foreign policy framework.”

— Annie Laurie Gaylor

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‘Good Books’ in need of good disposition

By Betty Johnson

I had two generations worth of life to clear from my mom’s four-bedroom house after she died. A big part of that job was books, because my mom read at least two books per month right up until her end at 87 years old. After gathering up all the books, some going back many decades, I ended up donating 38 bags of books to the charity Friends of the Library.

I found five bibles among all the books, but I held those back from the donation because I wasn’t sure how I wanted to deal with them.

My mom was raised going to a Methodist church for the dress-up holidays, and my parents were married in a Methodist church, but after that, our family didn’t attend church.

My family was nonreligious my whole life, for which I’ve always been grateful. The only time I remember having an adult conversation with my mom about God was in the last year or two of her life when I had said something about being a nonbeliever, which she knew, and she said, “You know that’s not how I feel, right?” and I said yes, I did know that. And that was the end of the conversation. Then she moved on to happily threatening to haunt me if I ever told a story about her. So, if it turns out I’m wrong about my beliefs, “Hi Mom!”

Most of the bibles I find at Mom’s house were inherited from generations past, so prior to serious contemplation of the bibles’ disposition, I flip through the pages of all five bibles, looking for any handwriting. Or money. Being a devout capitalist, I’m hoping to find a bit of cash to add to the \$14 in long-forgotten winnings that I found in the back of Mom’s desk drawer next to a lottery form. Alas, these bibles do not give up any shekels.

I find no dates of births, marriages or deaths, or anything else of family historical significance in the bibles, except for one handwritten note that was signed by my great granddad: “After I lost Emily, the whole world became hard. . . I could not rely on those I felt would never falter . . . It is terrible to realize that those most trusted fail for it has been proven to me.”

From the prominent placement of his pronouncement — the inside front cover of a bible — he clearly wanted his feelings known, so I’ll say this: Your message of deep disappointment has been received, great-granddad, and, sadly, I can relate.

My first thought is to give the bibles to my mom’s caregiver. She loved my mom a lot, but she’s a born-again Christian and I don’t want to give her a reason to attach sentimentality to books that I feel don’t deserve it — books which have been used for thousands of years to oppress and instill fear in people and which contain shocking cruelty, inconsistent



Image by ChatGPT

and confounding teachings, acceptance of heinous activities toward other human beings, and egregious omissions from the 10 guiding principles.

I intend to have an estate sale at some point, but 1) I don’t want to profit from selling these bibles, and 2) in my grief and fatigue, I’m just not up to a potential conversation with someone who might be interested in buying the bibles: Why are you selling them? You don’t believe in God? Don’t you worry about . . .? No, I do not.

Side note: I did end up having a God conversation at the estate sale with a fabulously dressed woman who stopped by on her way home from church. She’s interested in buying a sculptural framed Nefertiti which had hung over my mom’s bed. This woman tells me about how she had gotten Covid, and how God’s grace had saved her.

Treading lightly, I ask why she thinks God had saved her and not the hundreds of thousands of other Christian Americans who had lost their lives to Covid. (This was in 2021). She thinks for a moment, then answers, “You know, I don’t know why I was saved, but it’s not our place to question. God has a plan.” She bought the Nefertiti. I remain a nonbeliever.

With so much work to do, I kick the bible disposition decision down the road for several months while I clear Mom’s house in the hours before and after working my remote job.

But, finally, when there’s not much left in Mom’s house, I need to address what to do with the bibles. I wonder if there’s a standard protocol for getting rid of old bibles, like for an old American flag. My mom had an old, faded U.S. flag that I wanted to dispose of, so I had left messages at the VA, the VFW, and the Boy Scouts (I had read they pick up old flags and burn them). But none of those places returned my calls, so I left that old, faded flag in the garage for the new owners of

Mom’s house. I just couldn’t make myself throw it in the trash.

At this point, I’m too exhausted to research if old bible disposition protocols exist.

I’d been doing a lot of shredding over the past few months — tax returns, bank statements, mortgage documents, etc. — so, with no other option feeling right and time running out, I finally decide: I’m just going to shred the bibles.

I do realize it says something about me and my beliefs that I revere the American flag more than these bibles. I’m OK with that.

It’s time: I take the bibles into Mom’s office and pull out the shredder. Fahrenheit 451 comes to mind. Oh, good grief. . . I’m not making a political statement, I argue with myself; I’m not stopping anyone from reading other bibles. In fact, I wish people would read the bible more, but use critical thinking with an eye toward history and consider how humans should treat one another in a civilized society.

So, I’m taking just these five bibles out of circulation. Quietly, in a room by myself, no fist-shaking, no fires. Well, not so much in quiet, as accompanied by the noise of the shredder. But, definitely no fires.

As I start to rip pages from the first bible prior to feeding the maw of the shredder, I get a queasy feeling in my gut. Oh, come on . . .

I thought this was settled. I have no sentimental or religious attachment to these books, so what’s giving me pause?

Then it comes to me: My queasy gut is evidence of my discomfort, not with the content of these books, but with the fact that they are books and I love books, as did my mom. But, sometimes, for books about which you have strong negative feelings, it really is OK to let those books go.

I get a shredding rhythm going that feels like choreography. I find I can rip

pages out with my left hand, and use my right to put them through the shredder; left hand rip, right hand shredder, riiiiip, whirrr, riiip, whirr . . . it’s like I’m rehearsing for a heathen version of Stomp.

The shredded paper from the first bible is surprisingly soft. Soft paper? I had never encountered such a thing. The paper from the other shredding I had been doing, bank statements, etc., was rough and, well, normal. The internet tells me that bible paper is typically wood-free and contains cotton or linen fibers. Well, OK, if this comes up at pub trivia, I’ll be ready.

I pull the next bible from the stack, the bible with my great-granddad’s handwritten note. I tear off the cover on which he had written his note and I set it aside. I don’t know what I’ll do with it, but as I have such a visceral understanding of his disappointment in those close to him in a time of grieving, it feels keep-worthy for now.

While tearing out the pages from my mom’s youth bible, I catch some of the more disturbing chapter headings:

- “A spring sweetened by salt; and water that looked like blood.”
- “The rich man’s son sold as a slave.”
- “The reign of fire that fell on a city.”

I feel umbrage bubbling up — such stories in a youth bible! — but then I think of Edward Gorey, Roald Dahl, the Brothers Grimm, and my umbrage meter returns to zero.

Then I also see — “Jonathan’s love for David” — admirably progressive for a kid’s bible.

Just then, the shredder starts acting up. Some people would say this is a sign that I shouldn’t be shredding bibles. No, no, it’s simply a sign of an overworked shredder due years of accumulations of paperwork. Nothing more.

Sadness and grief over the death of a loved one can spin the mind to dark places and mid-shred through the last bible, I contemplate what would happen if I have a heart attack and keel over dead right now. When someone finds me, they’ll see shredded bible detritus all over the floor. They might presume I was angry at God, and that I was struck down for destroying these books.

Stop, I tell myself. And I bring the curtain down on this mini drama, deciding to save my dwindling energy reserves for more important contemplations.

And suddenly, that’s it. I’ve finished the task. Now let me get these bags out to the recycle bin.

Betty Johnson is an FFRF member from California.

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Edited by Annie Laurie Gaylor

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Freedom depends on freethinkers

Darrell Barker was longtime freethought activist



Darrell Barker

FFRF is very sad to report the death on Feb. 3 of long-time member Darrell Barker, 74, brother of FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

Darrell, who first joined FFRF in 1986, became an outspoken atheist and humanist after Dan left the ministry in 1984. Darrell was a state/church activist, FFRF state representative, chapter leader and staunch defender of the First Amendment.

In 1986, Darrell was the initial complainant about a display of large statues depicting the life of Jesus in a San Bernardino County park adjoining a church in Yucca Valley, Calif. He was a plaintiff in the ACLU lawsuit that resulted in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals declaring “Desert Christ Park” unconstitutional on public property. The U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear the appeal and the county was forced to divest itself of the property in 1992.

In 2004, Darrell complained about a Christian cross on the city seal of Redlands, Calif., where he was a resident. He once again offered to be a plaintiff in an ACLU lawsuit. Rather than fight a losing battle, the city decided to change its seal, resulting in a quick victory for state/church separation.

After moving to the state of Washington, Darrell started the FFRF chapter “Unfettered Freethinkers of South Sound” and served as its president for many years. In 2008, complaining about a Christian nativity scene inside the state Capitol in Olympia, he obtained a permit and helped FFRF install a freethought display beside the creche. That display (which was later vandalized and stolen) ignited a national storm of protest from the religious right, including a story on “The O’Reilly Factor” condemning FFRF and a large rally of outraged Christians storming the Capitol. The governor decided to move the nativity outside the building. Every year since, Darrell (with the help of local freethinkers) erected an FFRF display near the nativity scene



Darrell Barker at the No Kings rally in 2025.

on the Capitol grounds. When that display was vandalized, Darrell quickly restored it.

Darrell was the primary moderator of FFRF’s early online forum, which was popular pre-Facebook, and spent many volunteer hours to further online discussions. He attended FFRF conventions as an FFRF State Representative. He was also a dedicated reader and judge for many years of FFRF’s student essay contests.

The youngest of three brothers, Darrell was born on Sept. 2, 1951, in Santa Monica, Calif., to Norman Barker and Patricia Ruth (Swenson) Barker. He was an enrolled member of the Delaware (Lenape) Tribe of American Indians. After serving in the U.S. Marine Reserves, Darrell was a missionary with “Christians in Action” (CIA) and formed a Christian band called “The Lord Led.” An award-winning salesman, he sold everything from business forms and trash trucks to plumbing supplies and manufactured homes. His last job before retiring was with Washington

Home Center in Shelton, Wash., where he was the leading salesman.

Darrell was always doing wordplay. He coined the phrase “No SOUL-iciting,” which he displayed on his front porch. He liked to spell the word “believer” as “beLIEver.”

Darrell’s second wife Suzan — also a strong atheist — died in 2019. He is survived by his children from his first marriage, son Matthew, daughter Brandy, eight grandchildren, and by his brothers Dan and Tom.

In mid-January, Dan visited his brother, who seemed in good health. Darrell spoke to a crowd at an FFRF chapter gathering in Olympia, where he told his state/church story and introduced Dan’s concert of freethought music. Darrell took Dan on two long hikes in the Olympia area and drove him to some restaurants and to the Shelton Senior Center, which had become



Darrell Barker with his older brothers Dan and Tom.



the center of his life. They played chess, told stories and relived family memories. They watched an episode of Freethought Matters on the Freethought TV streaming app. Darrell showed Dan some of his current woodworking projects and improvements to his home.

Two weeks later, Darrell went to the hospital complaining about pain. On Jan. 30, the doctors discovered an extremely aggressive liver cancer that was unstoppable. Darrell told Dan on the last morning of his life, “I’m ready to go.”

“Darrell was more than just a little brother,” Dan says. “He was a true friend, an original thinker with a shared sense of humor, and a stalwart co-worker in the cause of reason, humanistic morality and state/church separation. His death is a tremendous loss not just to me and my family, but to the freethought world.”

Darrell died with no prayers on his lips. One of the last messages he texted to Dan was, “Life is living, loving, losing and letting go.”



All dressed for church! Dan Barker, mother Patricia Barker (who became an FFRF member), Darrell Barker and Tom Barker.



Darrell, far right, placed an equal-time winter solstice display annually for almost 20 years. He and FFRF’s Olympia, Wash., chapter placed this sign in December 2018 . A nativity scene is on the left.

\$65,000+ in total scholarships

FFRF announces 2026 essay competitions

The Freedom From Religion Foundation has announced its four 2026 essay competitions for freethinking students. (Its fifth 2026 contest, for law students, Winners' essays are published on pages 16–18.)

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

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

All essays are due no later than June 1. For more details on the contest requirements and to apply, go to: ffrf.org/studentessay.

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

High school seniors graduating this spring and attending college in the fall are asked to write on the topic of **“My favorite freethought/humanist hero/ine.”** (Gap year students who took time off after graduating high school before applying to attend college in the fall of 2026 should enter this contest.)

“The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments — of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue — are complete skeptics in religion.” — John Stuart Mill

Studies show that nonbelievers are still near the bottom rung of the ladder when it comes to social acceptance. Many Americans don't realize how many activists or achievers they admire are not religious. To help educate them, write a personal essay about your favorite freethinker or humanist and what they did or are doing to improve or enrich our lives. It might be a nonreligious scientist, an artist or writer, a reformer — or an everyday person in your life who has made the world better and inspired you. Please briefly explain their influence or accomplishments and briefly document their nonreligious views. Tell us what they have meant to you as a humanist and nonbeliever. For quotes or citations, please document using links or footnotes.

Word limit: 350–500. Deadline: June 1.

Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students

Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24; does not include college-bound high school seniors) may write on: **“Why President Trump is wrong that ‘you just can't have a great country if you don't have religion.’”**

Write a first-person essay that makes the case about why Trump is wrong to claim that “you just can't have a great country if you don't have religion.” Choose one or more such quotes by Trump (citing them in your



essay) and show why his claims are fallacious. You may wish to marshal evidence or history that contradicts Trump's claims, or address how his words threaten state/church separation and religious freedom. Save room to include something about your own reaction as a nonbeliever to such pronouncements by the president. Include links or footnotes for quotes or major citations.

The \$1,000 prize in the ongoing college competition has been generously endowed by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold. Madison, who is now 90, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living

bequest, what he calls a “pre-quest.” Word limit: 450–650. Deadline: June 1.

David Hudak Memorial Essay Contest for Students Who Are First-in-their-Family to Attend College

Students who will be first in their family to attend either a two- or four-year college or university and who are ages 17–21 (which includes college-bound high school seniors to currently enrolled college students), may write on the topic of: **“Why white supremacy goes hand in hand with Christian nationalism.”**

Write an essay about the inherent white racism in Christian nationalism.

You may wish to write about it from a historic or a political perspective, but please be sure to include why it is a threat to our secular democracy and to you as an individual, or to your own community or other ethnic or racial minorities in the United States. Include something about your own experiences with or reactions to white Christian nationalism.

Word limit: 350–500. Deadline: June 1.

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

Graduate students (through age 30) and “older” undergrads (ages 25–30) are asked to write about **“Why the 250-year-old United States of America is not a Christian nation.”**

Research and write an essay documenting why the U.S. government is not based on God or Christianity. Refute the claim by President Trump and others that the 250-year-old Declaration of Independence proves that our government is based on God. Include and refute a few other timely examples of legislators, public officials or other individuals promoting the Christian nation myth. Save space to include your own thoughts on why you find “Christian nation” propaganda and disinformation dangerous to our democracy and also how you feel about this as a nonbeliever. Include links or footnotes for quotes or major citations.

Word limit: 550–750. Deadline: June 1.

Additional prompts on the topics and contest rule requirements can be found at: ffrf.org/studentessay.

All eligible entrants will receive a digital year-long student membership in FFRF and non-winners also will be offered a book or other thank-you.

FFRF is appreciative of its members who make the effort to contact local high schools, colleges and universities to help publicize its competitions. (See the back of the Freethought Today wrap which may be copied or cut out and sent to your local schools or universities.) Or email them this link: ffrf.org/studentessay.

FFRF seeks judges for four student essay contests

The Freedom From Religion Foundation proudly hosts five student essay competitions a year — four of which are judged by volunteer FFRF members and staff.

We are seeking qualified volunteer readers to help judge this year's FFRF scholarship contests.

Do you have a special background and interest in encouraging freethinking students? Do you enjoy reading the winning essays in issues of Freethought Today? We are looking for judges who have backgrounds and experience that make them particularly suited to judging student essays.

This background can include degrees in English or writing, being a teacher (or retired teacher), writing instructor or tutor, etc. — or other life experiences and freethought activism. With the gradu-

ate competition, it can be helpful, although not a prerequisite, to have judges who have advanced degrees or have taught at the college level.

Required: Being able to read and score essays online (remotely). Judging takes place in the summer. You are able to indicate which competition(s) you are most interested in helping to judge. Volunteer judges will be identified and thanked by name in Freethought Today and in FFRF's Year in Review.

Each competition typically awards about \$16,000 in total prizes, with 10 top awards ranging from \$3,500 for first place to \$300 for 10th place, and additional \$200 honorable mentions at FFRF's discretion.

You may contact Lisa Treu with any questions at ltreu@ffrf.org. To apply: ffrf.us/essayjudge.

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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

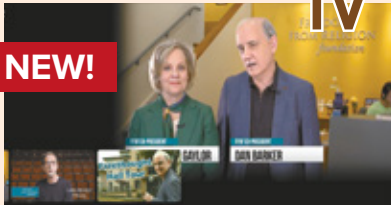
Founded in 1978 as a national organization of freethinkers (atheists and agnostics), the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc., works to keep state and church separate and to educate the public about the views of nontheists. FFRF has about 42,000 members.

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

FFRF members wishing to receive online news releases, “blogs” and “Freethought of the Day” should contact info@ffrf.org.



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FFRF ON THE ROAD IN COSTA RICA



Photo by Nancy McClements

While visiting the national museum while on vacation in San José, Costa Rica, in February, FFRF Co-Presidents Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor not only ran into another FFRF member (Jim Kovalcin, in the black hat), but realized they were signed up for the very same tour! Pictured from left: Dan, Annie Laurie, Annie Laurie’s twin brother Ian Gaylor, a lifetime FFRF member, and Jim and Diane Kovalcin. The photo was taken by Nancy McClements, a Lifetime member married to Ian. The sphere is one of many mysterious pre-Columbian monoliths discovered in Costa Rica. Pura vida!



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker (kneeling at left) spoke in Spanish to a gathering of the Costa Rican humanists in San Jose on Feb. 22, some of whom are pictured here. Dan related his journey from evangelist to atheist, and discussed his most recent book, “Contraduction.” Dan also gave a short keyboard concert. Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, standing to left of Dan, also spoke briefly about FFRF (in English!). Dan and Annie Laurie thank their hosts, including Reiner Retana.



Emanuel Campos interviewed Dan about his preacher-to-atheist story.



Dan, Reiner, FFRF Board Member and Hispanic American Freethinkers Founder David Tamayo (not pictured) and several Latin American activists are planning the annual Latin American Freethought Conference in San Jose, Costa Rica, in November.



Dan performs his song “Es Solo Natural” to the Costa Rican humanists at El Lobo Mestizo restaurant.

THEY SAID WHAT?

Any school that stands in the way of a Club America program in their school should be reported immediately to the Texas Education Agency, where I expect meaningful disciplinary action.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott, at a news conference on Dec. 8, when he vowed to bring Turning Point clubs to every Texas high school. Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick pledged \$1 million in campaign funds toward the goal.

New York Times, 12-9-25

Gone is godless and divisive DEI, gone is gender-bending equity and quotas, gone is climate change worship to a false god. We are one military, one fighting force, one nation under God. We are not in woke we trust, we are in God we trust.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, in a speech at the National Religious Broadcasters International Christian Media Convention in Nashville, Tenn. Hegseth was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Feb. 26.

CNN, 2-20-26

Professor Ostermann’s extensive public advocacy of abortion rights and her disparaging and inflammatory remarks about those who uphold the dignity of human life from the moment of conception to natural death go against a core principle of justice that is central to Notre Dame’s Catholic identity and mission.

Bishop Kevin Rhoades, of Fort Wayne-South Bend, Ind., opposing the appointment of pro-choice Professor Susan Ostermann to lead the University of Notre Dame’s Institute for Asia and Asian studies. He led a rosary and prayer service to

oppose the appointment. Ostermann decided not to accept the post after weeks of backlash from anti-abortion Catholics.

Religion News Service, 2-26-26



Josh Thifault

them about the founding of the country.

Josh Thifault, senior director at Turning Point USA, speaking at the Tennessee Capitol. Since Turning Point founder Charlie Kirk was assassinated, its school chapters have more than doubled to over 3,000.

New York Times, 1-10-26

I wouldn’t label the evangelical community as extreme because I believe they are following the scripture and what the scripture says about Israel: “Those who

I want to create a future where the leftist parents are scared that their kids are going to be a teenager, because that is when their Club America chapter is going to tell them about Jesus. That’s when their Club America chapter is going to tell them about the founding of the country.

bless Israel will be blessed.” They take it literal and I’m one of those people. . . I believe Jesus will come back and I’m going to be on his side.

U.S. Rep. Tim Burchett, when asked about his religion’s influence on support for Israel.

Young Turks, 3-4-26

The lack of evangelicals in the halls of power contributes to anti-institutional public sentiment. It also deprives those institutions of an important pool of talent.

Aaron M. Renn, author of “Life in the Negative World: Confronting Challenges in an Anti-Christian Culture,” in an op-ed titled “Why America needs evangelicals on the Supreme Court — and more.”

Washington Post, 3-6-26

Muslims don’t belong in American society. Pluralism is a lie.

Rep. Andy Ogles, a member of the hard-right Freedom Caucus, who has previously called for a “Muslim ban” and was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week.”

X, 3-9-26

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

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

**— 392 pages / PB
\$15 Item #FB145**

Published by FFRF

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@ ffrf.org/shop

2025 Avijit Roy Courage Award

The right to freethinking and criticizing ideas

This is the speech given by Mubarak Bala at FFRF's national convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C., on Oct. 18, 2025. He was introduced by Bonya Ahmed, a former FFRF Forward Award winner. To watch the speech, go to ffrf.us/con25.

Bonya Ahmed: Hi, everybody. Looking at all of us this morning, I was just thinking that there couldn't be a better way to protest and show solidarity with the No Kings Day than what we are doing here, all of us together. It is a wonderful protest against the kings and queens all over the world who are still persecuting people for political and religious reasons, for just expressing their thoughts.

It's very sad to see that it's not just all those poor, developing countries in the Global South, either. It's here in America, too. We have to protest against an elected king in office.

We thought we had made some progress. We got a little ahead of those countries where autocracy and hateful persecutions are so prevalent. We have progressed so much on these freedoms — individual freedom, freedom of rights, freedom of thought — but, now, everything is under attack. We have to continue to fight.

I'm here to introduce the 2025 Avijit Roy Courage Award and the recipient of this award. Avijit Roy was trained in biomedical engineering and worked in IT and was a prolific writer. He was born in Bangladesh. I was, too. He also happened to be my husband. Alongside our day jobs, in the 15 years that we were together, he wrote eight books and edited two. I just managed to write one book on evolution of life, but for Avijit, writing was his passion.

He also created the first Bengali online platform back in 2000 when blogging was becoming hip. He wrote books on science, philosophy of atheism and humanism. He wrote against the oppression of women, minorities, homosexuals. We both decided to write in Bengali or Bangla, our native language, because these kind of books on taboo topics were not easily available to in our native language, even though we lived in Atlanta for decades. His writings inspired many. But at the same time, it really enraged those militant Islamists back home.

In 2015, we decided to visit our home country. We used to go every few years, especially to visit Avijit's parents. That year, we attended a book-signing trip for Avijit's two new books in a historic month-long book fair in Bangladesh. That's where we were targeted and attacked by the militant Islamists of al-Qaida of the Indian subcontinent.

Avijit bled to death in the middle of the street, and I don't know how I survived with four machete stabs on my head and a chopped off thumb. But, you know, I have to admit that nine fingers work pretty well. Yeah, I can do pretty much everything.

Anyway, let me introduce our hero, the recipient of the Avijit Roy Courage Award — Mubarak Bala. He's a human rights activist and president of the Humanists of Nigeria. He was arrested in 2020 for posting a Facebook comment, which was deemed as an insult to Prophet Mohammed in Nigeria. It's the same way in Bangladesh, too. I've had a lot of my friends arrested for the same reason.

He spent a year in detention before being sentenced to 40 years in prison. An appeals court later was very kind to reduce it to five years. But, last year, he



Photo by Chris Line

Mubarak Bala, speaking via video recording to the FFRF convention audience on Oct. 18, 2025, shows off the Avijit Roy Courage Award.

was released and is now studying in Germany. Many international groups, including FFRF, have called for his release and repeal of the blasphemy laws. Mubarak Bala will be accepting the award remotely. I give you Mubarak Bala. Thank you.

By Mubarak Bala

Thank you, thank you. Bonya Ahmed, the widow to Avijit Roy. Thank you for presenting this award to me. I got it, not virtually, but in actual form.

Firstly, I say thank you. I hope the spirit of Avijit continues to give us the courage to work in these kinds of dangerous waters. There's still much, much more work to be done regarding freedom of religion and freedom from religion. A lot has been achieved in our own sphere, not with the government, but within our own circles. We have understood how we can balance between these freedoms of speech and how we reach out to the communities, to hostile communities, which are mostly Muslim.

This is my message to the Muslim communities: We are leaving your religion and we are criticizing your religion, but it doesn't mean we hate you or we don't like you. We, as much as we can, would want to remain in our countries. I want to go back home. I don't want to live in Germany. I don't want to live in Europe.

But, we need to have this understanding that I have the right to leave my religion or the religion I was born into, and I have the right to criticize the religion that would sentence me to death for just leaving. It's just the apostasy that gets you killed. Also, the blasphemy aspect of it, which is criticizing mostly the culture that you have come from.

Our problem is all these cultures have tolerated us for centuries before, even millennia. Because, with the philosophers and the Greek school of thought, we know that there are criticisms before the Abrahamic religions. People have thought and have said what they felt — this is how the universe works. Or maybe just philosophical inquiries, generally.

Then there is trouble when it comes to Abrahamic religions, especially Chris-

tianity and Islam and maybe Judaism. I think Jesus, in that aspect, was killed for blasphemy, if he existed. So, Judaism has a problem with criticism. Christianity has a problem with criticism. And, now, Islam has a big, big problem with criticism. They call it blasphemy.

It's discouraging that it's the British who have enshrined these laws in Bangladesh, in Pakistan, through the colonial times, and then in the Sahel region of West Africa, where I come from in Nigeria.

Busy childhood schedule

I'll give you a little background of my story. I was born from a religious family in northern Nigeria — Kano state, to be precise. I grew up with a simple life, where all I had to do is just wake up at 5 a.m. to study the Quran for an hour or two and prepare myself at 7 a.m. to the normal Western education schools, which is a privilege only a few would ever get in my part of the world. Then 4 to 6 p.m., you're going back to study the Quran. Again, we have several subjects and several other things, like how you conduct yourself, how you pray, how you fast, how you conduct daily activities. Then it ends at 6 p.m. Between dusk when the sun sets, around 8 p.m., there's another hour that you had to study. This was my routine. Then you also had another routine again from 8:30 to 10 p.m. This was a very tight schedule.

I had no other options but to be in this system and had no contact with non-Muslims. The school I went to was a Saudi-funded primary school, and, even though Western education was taught, it didn't allow Christians to join the teaching of science basics.

My secondary school taught us science, geography, physics, chemistry, but no non-Muslims were allowed. I was so isolated from the world. There was no internet. All I knew was Islam. There was nothing I could ever know. Then I got to understand science, but it didn't really match with what I got from the Quran.

So, the conflict began. I was trying to bring these two together, hoping that maybe if I could reconcile the religion

with the science, then most probably it would be the most attractive religion in my mind. I thought, maybe I'm saving people from hellfire. Not just that, but also women. I wouldn't want everyone killed because they said the Mahdi will come at the end of times, convert people and then kill whoever doesn't convert. This is what the Shiites believe. This is what it was that even the Sunnis believe.

My conflict began in my teenage years. Gradually, I got to realize that maybe the religion is wrong. But I can't really say it. I realized that if I said it to friends, they would say, "What weird thoughts you have! What the devil is disturbing your mind?"

Actually, they call it the heart. You feel a doubt in your faith. For example, if I said man landed on the moon in 1969, then someone would say, "Really? But, the Quran said the moon is on the fourth floor of heaven, and it has seven layers." Heaven one, two, three, four, five, six, seven. God is on that last layer, which is the seventh heaven. Then you have angels, and then you have the sun on the fifth layer. You have the moon on the fifth layer, and you have the flat planet, the planet Earth, and then everything. I think we have also another seven layers below ground where hellfire is at the last ground, and then the angels have torture and this and that.

These are things that I would express doubt about and that people will say, "You have to be crazy and you have to be careful because this could get you killed." But I am just a teenager. So, at my university, I gradually grew out of this, and I got my independence of mind. And I was comfortable with what I thought is right.

Then I started telling my family and also started writing. It was activism, but there was no internet, so I could just write letters to governors or to presidents about how I think our society should be governed and no one would listen. Then one day I felt I had to tell my mother because I was traveling to the U.K. for my master's degree — petrochemical engineer. I told her I didn't want to break her heart, but that I would tell the world that I'm not a Muslim.

I don't believe in Islam anymore. It has been like this for almost half a decade. But I want you to know. And my mother felt sympathy for me, that maybe I'm here to go to paradise. Everybody would go and be saved while I'm condemned. So, she was really concerned, and she told my father to sit with me and discuss these things with me, because I thought he was reasonable enough to understand it, because he had gone to school.

Psychiatric evaluation

Instead of that, he arranged for a psychiatric evaluation because the Sharia demands that if you said you don't believe, you've got three days — 72 hours — to recant and repent and convert back, or you would be subjected to psychiatric evaluation, whether it be after the confirmation that you left the religion as opposed to lose your head. In some instances, it says if they can't kill you, maybe they could crucify you, but only after you lose opposing limbs — lose one arm and one leg, left arm, right leg. And then you get crucified or exiled, which is what I've been facing for a decade-plus now: exile. I tried as much as I can to remain in my country so I can be as normal as possible, normalize being an atheist as well as mingle with the

people and try as much as I can to.

I don't have to convert anyone. They already have the same mindset, so they try to come to me with explanations and we give ourselves courage and we form our own communities. But my aim is not really to convert anyone. If you have the mindset, then at least you have someone, a friend. But my own hope was that if my society could first tolerate me that I could get to leave the religion without any repercussions, then I think I'll be safe.

But it started with that. The first instance I was at the psychiatric hospital, the doctor said, "Well, it's not really a psychiatric issue to disbelieve in God." But, six months later, I ended up in the same psychiatric hospital with a senior doctor who thought the Adam and Eve story was true, who thought I was crazy to say God does not exist.

He'd sedated me for 24 or 48 hours. I was unconscious, but then I woke up in a psychiatric hospital. Then my troubles started. I wrote a few emails and sent them out in June 2014. They had given me antipsychotics and antiepileptic drugs. I knew how crazy it was because it was messing with my brain. I couldn't think, I couldn't stand, I couldn't do anything. So, the rescue came through. Folks such as you and the media picked it up, and my father felt he was in trouble, so he let me go.

The hospital just let me go, and I asked for the file so I could see the symptoms they wrote because they felt embarrassed that the doctor misdiagnosed someone. All they could do is just to call a strike, a general strike for all the doctors. So all patients were released. And this is how I got out.

But then everyone now wanted me dead. The leader of Boko Haram released a video saying that I should die, but also my state government, the whole region, practiced the Shariah, and they want me dead. So, I had to flee the region and try to roam about in Nigeria without actually leaving Nigeria, hoping I could maybe find some succor to whatever trouble I was in.

People also looked actively to kill me. I roamed about for half a decade again. Then I settled in Kaduna state and started work as an engineer in an electrical company. But then Covid-19 came and people were locked up and they had time. They had the internet and they had time.



Photo by Chris Line

Bonya Ahmed introduces the 2025 Avijit Roy Courage Award winner, Mubarak Bala. Avijit was Bonya's husband and was killed in a machete attack in Bangladesh in 2015.

They saw what I was writing and they felt that person that was supposed to be killed five or six years ago is still alive and is still in Nigeria. Now we could get him. Then, the search started again for me to be killed. But, the government thought if it could put me in custody, it could appease these fanatics.

The appeasement came. If you took someone from a region that is safer, you're supposed to take him away from that region so that no one kills him. My government smuggled me back home to Kano state, where it's almost 100 percent Muslim. For blasphemy, for apostasy, you could get killed.

For the third accusation of insulting the prophet, this is almost instantaneous. You get killed in Pakistan, you get killed in Somalia, you get killed in Afghanistan, you get killed in northern Nigeria. There's no doubt about that. Still, they took me there. They told me that the trial could get you killed. But we have to take you.

I asked why. They said you have to convert back to Islam if you don't want this to happen. We take video that you repented, but on the condition that you no longer be online

again, you no longer talk to infidels again, meaning I don't have any contact with non-Muslims, and then you have to behave like the good Muslim you are. We have to marry you to a Muslim woman in an Islamic way, and then

you have to live in Kano state without ever leaving ever again. And you will never have access to social media or phone or whatever. This went on for three months, and when I refused to convert, they sent me to jail with 2,000 Muslims who could kill me if they knew who I was.

I was offered the same religion again and I had to now convert. Then the trial started, and I realized that they were showing them evidence on Facebook of five to eight of my posts. I realized if they want to dig deeper, maybe they'll give me a thousand years.

“ The Sharia demands that if you said you don't believe, you've got three days — 72 hours — to recant and repent and convert back, or you would be subjected to psychiatric evaluation.

It's better I just plead guilty because now you're in the biggest trouble you could ever be. Now you're public. Now people know your location, people know the prison, people know the courts and the dates, subsequent dates that would come up. Then you are in the biggest trouble. Even the policemen cannot hold the mob that would come for you.

Also, you have to know that my society kills people just because they are blasphemous anywhere in the world. If it happened in Paris, if it happened in London, they could just go out to kill people. So, the trial would get people to go out on the streets to kill people, and then it would be my responsibility.

40-year sentence

I didn't want that trial to happen ever. But, immediately they wrote me the charges. I pled guilty, which is supposed to be just three years, meaning after serving 24 months, I got freedom. But they said, well, 24. And they counted it as three years plus two years. That's five years. And stretching them to the eight counts, they gave me 24 years plus 16 years.

This is how I ended up with 40 years in jail. I sought a transfer out of the prison in Kano back to the capital. Then we started an appeal. The appeal also sat in Kano instead of the capital, meaning they cannot be free to judge.

I have served nearly five years, which is equivalent to seven years in jail. And they said, well, you could be released now because you have served a few lessons in your life that you now know you're in trouble. So, we got the freedom on condition that I could appeal to all the state government that took me. They don't have the jurisdiction, so they didn't appeal.

I have the chance to appeal. This is what we are on an appeal. And then I got this scholarship to come to Germany for six months. Reparations. But if I could extend my stay until we get the Supreme Court judgment done, this is what I intend to do.

So far, I'm still working on it, working on trying to reach more people so we can enshrine this freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from religion, as well as freedom for everyone to practice what they believe as long as they don't want other people killed.

CRANKMAIL

Here are some comments (via email or phone messages) from non-members who wish to give FFRF some advice. Printed as received.

Go away: Go live with the Muslims out of America. God needs to be in the government and everything to do with America. You are the problem. No I dont have a problem with a church or God I have a problem with this group.

Losers: YOU CAN TAKE TOUR FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION & STICK IT UP YOUR ASS!!! WHER THE FUCK DO YOU PEOPLE GET OFF??? GOD IS GREAT!!! JESUS IS OUR SAVIOR... YOU ARE NOTHING BUT

A FUCKED UP GROUP THAT NEEDS WAKE UP CALL!!! I BELIEVE THE GOOD LORD HAS ONE JUST FOR YOU!!! WHAT A FUCKING DISGRACE!!! THE LAKE OF FIRE WILL BE WAITING...LOSERS

You are the problem: Tell your legal counsel to take his letter To Sarah Huckabee Sanders and shove it up his evil ass. Please convey his mother should have swallowed the night he was conceived. It's your foundation, and people like your miserable fuck of a lawyer, that are the problem with this country. May you all burn in hell.

Stay in Wisconsin: In regard to your threats to take legal action against a small High school (Honaker Elementary) Va. Mind your own business in Wisconsin and leave Virginia alone! You sinners are going to hell anyway and Satan is awaiting with open arms!

Miserable losers: You are all a bunch of retarded faggots and I hope one day you realize how sad and miserable you actually are. It's wild watching people masquerade as intelligent when their intellect is on par with a hydrocephalic spider monkey. Also, how does it feel to be fucking cowards? It's funny, I've never seen your org go after Islam or Judaism. Of course, that requires moral fortitude. Your family probably hates you, deeply.

You'll find out: This organization sent the governor of Arkansas a letter wanting her to retract what she said about Christmas being about Jesus. Well that's exactly what it's about. and she's not going to retract anything at all. You people are going to find out when you meet your maker. Oh yes she will answer to him. You will answer to God and you will answer to Jesus do you understand me. That's what this day is about — the birth of Jesus Christ it's not about anything else. This is an awful organization.

Assholes: Do you guys like the biggest assholes to ever walk the planet. You're useless. Nobody gives a shit what you think. You got the fuck up in mind your own goddamn business. Okay. You're sad you're pathetic small little people.

Stop the ads: Hello, this is America. Stay off my TV. I can't stand to see your hatred.

Worthless idols: Freedom from religion, you are your own God. You are an idol. You are a useless Idol. You will die you will be no more. You will be final. You are your own God which is an idol idolatry. You are without hope you have nothing to live for.

Accept Jesus now: Jesus is coming back where were you spend eternity if you're going to hell. God help you. My prayers are for you guys to

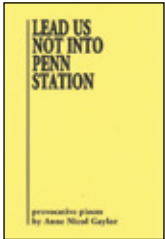
change your hearts and minds. Jesus is real, hell is real, it's fiery. Accept him today.

Stupidity: This has got to be the stupidest organization I've ever heard of — freedom from religion. You know society's fall without having a good religion Christianity is what founded America. You guys need to get lost and get real.

Repent: Jesus Christ is King and God no matter how much you want to fight it. America is a Christian country and the world belongs to Christ. Your attempts at making blasphemy normal are in vein and will be to your detriment at the last judgement. Repent.

Solve problems: You're big thing is getting people free from religion. You're not talking about solving problems in Ukraine or in Minnesota or poor people or health care. All you want to do is be free religion. I don't. I don't have to be worried about being free of religion, it's really something that happened from your childhood. Get off your nonsense pedestal and deal with real problems for people instead of being on this kick. I would never join your organization.

Burn forever: It says that your hours are at 9 to 5, I believe, but your hours on the fires of Hell will be 24 hours a day for eternity. I hope you burn in hell.



Lead Us Not Into Penn Station — Provocative Pieces
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Freethought Heroine Award

Let’s get those counternarratives out there

This is an edited (for space) transcript of the speech given by Chrissy Stroop at FFRF’s national convention on Oct. 18, 2025, in Myrtle Beach, S.C. She was introduced by FFRF Director of Operations Lisa Strand. To watch her speech, go to ffrf.us/con25.

Lisa Strand: Our 2025 Freethought Heroine, Chrissy Stroop, was raised an evangelical in the Indianapolis area and in Colorado Springs. She was sent to culture-warring Christian schools that demonized queerness, abortion and anything viewed as liberal. She earned a Ph.D. in modern Russian history from Stanford University and worked as a senior research associate with the University of Innsbruck’s Postsecular Conflicts Project, which investigated international right-wing networks. A former weekly columnist for openDemocracy and a frequent contributor to Religion Dispatches, Stroop is now a full-time writer and speaker with bylines in Foreign Policy, The Boston Globe, Political Research Associates and other outlets.

Her newsletter, The Bugbear Dispatch, explores American politics and society through the lens of an ongoing moral panic, of which Stroop, as an out transgender woman, is a primary target. She is also a co-founder and co-owner of the intersectional feminist outlet The Flytrap, and with Lauren O’Neil, coeditor of the essay collection “Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church.”

Please welcome Chrissy Stroop, FFRF’s 2025 Freethought Heroine awardee.

By Chrissy Stroop

Thank you for that warm introduction. It’s truly an honor to be receiving the Freethought Heroine Award. It kind of came out of the blue to me. I don’t really think of myself as too brave of a person.

I grew up in Indiana, which is about the southernmost Northern state you can find. I grew up within evangelical subculture and young-Earth creationism and all kinds of wacky evangelical ideas and that kind of indoctrination. It really does a number on you. As I started to deconstruct that and reject it, that was a long, painful process for me because that indoctrination runs deep. Leaving that often comes with a high social cost. I started wanting to find other people like me who had had the same experience and same values — progressive values, secular values, valuing the separation of church and state.

So, today I am going to talk about evangelicals and how they are at the at the root of what has happened, certainly with the overturning of Roe and the attacks on DEI, and anything that the right defines as CRT and also, of course, transgender rights and LGBTQ rights more broadly.

Exvangelicals

But I’m also going to talk about exvangelicals and the power of stories, particularly of counternarratives, to challenge prevailing narratives like the many false narratives that are currently shaping our society. The term exvangelical, it’s a neologism. My friend Blake Chastain coined it in 2016, and he used it as a hashtag on Twitter. Twitter was much more useful to promote counternarratives at that time before Elon Musk took it over. Prior to that



Chrissy Stroop speaks Oct.17, 2025, at FFRF’s national convention in Myrtle Beach, S.C.

Photo by Chris Line

time, I was in grad school at Stanford and, before that, teaching English in Russia for a year.

I was really just unpacking my youth and how much it turned out that it traumatized me and how much I hadn’t been really aware of before getting some distance. I really hoped to meet more people like me, but I’d only ever managed to connect with a couple. And then Blake Chastain comes up with this hashtag “exvangelical.”

Suddenly, a lot of people start connecting online, especially on Twitter. Blake also founded a podcast by that name, and then he created a Facebook group for it, and then he opened up the Facebook group to everybody from that background, not just people who listened to his podcast. I served as an admin of that group for a couple of years, and it grew to over 10,000 members. That’s pretty remarkable.

There is a blossoming amount of literature, by and about exvangelicals, that I think can serve as very powerful counternarratives. I would appreciate your help in getting it out there. Maybe gifts for family or friends, maybe put them in Little Free Libraries and, the essay collection “Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church” is a pioneering volume in that regard.

This award that I’m receiving today, I really need to give thanks also to Lauren O’Neill, my co-editor for that volume. We both contributed essays and then we curated the collection and found a very diverse group of voices of people who had all grown up in one form or another of high-control Christianity — some Catholic, some Mormon, mostly evangelical.

I’ll just take a moment here to define my terms. When you use the word “evangelical,” I think most people know what you’re talking about. It’s a religious community. Yes, but it’s also very much

a cultural community. It’s a community steeped in American white supremacy. It is an intensely patriarchal community, hierarchical community. You can try to define it theologically, and that’s fine. I think some theological definitions work well enough.

When I’m talking about evangelicals and the kind of evangelicals that I grew up with, they have, since the Reagan years, been the backbone of the Christian right. They started building up their institutions in the 1970s. That’s when you get the Heritage Foundation and things like that. Also Focus on the Family. I’m not going to lie; I’m kind of happy that James Dobson is dead. Yeah, I said it. That man did more than anyone to insist that godly Christian parents must use corporal punishment on their children.

I’ve got to say, the worst I ever got was the wooden spoon. They occasionally broke, but not that often. I’m the oldest child, and if my parents even looked at me funny, I would start crying. I have a highly sensitive personality, so they didn’t have to discipline me that much. I tried to be a people pleaser. I think that’s also part of why it took me so long to reject everything, and then to stop being silent about it, because it’s hard to rock that boat with your family, and you risk losing a lot of social support. You don’t know how much you’re going to lose.

And, I certainly have lost some. I am grateful that I now, at this point, have an open and honest relationship with my parents. But it took some doing. It took a lot of hard conversations over the years, and not everyone comes out that lucky. So, leaving is risky.

Getting back to defining evangelicalism, sociologically and culturally, it’s interdenominational, it’s decentralized, but it’s connected through what are sometimes called parachurch institutions. Those include things like summer camps and missionary organizations.

They’ve got their own books, they’ve got their own music industry, and used to have a lot of brick and mortar bookstores. Not so much anymore. I think that has less to do with American secularization simply than with macroeconomic changes in the book market. But they’ve still got their own presses, and a very powerful lobby.

Growing up Christian

I was sent to Christian schools. My mom is a retired Christian school teacher. I had that sort of awareness that my mom was one of the teachers at the school, and, it’s a private school. So, a lot of people were richer than the teachers’ families. When you come back from spring break, people are like, “Oh, I went to Cancun.” “Oh, yeah? We went to Santa Barbara.” “We went to Disney World.” They’d ask me, “Where’d you go?” and I’d say, “Uh, we went to Target.” It was definitely a whole thing.

For most of my K-through-12 education, I went to a school called Heritage Christian School in Indianapolis, but I didn’t know that “heritage” was such a loaded word, because, for me, for many years, it was just the name of the school that I went to. But, I did find out from an alum (who was the son of the original elementary school principal) that when the school was founded in the 1960s, it was a feeder school for Bob Jones University, which I think pretty much does qualify it originally as a segregation academy. In that school, children have to say three pledges every day, not just one.

We had to pledge not only to the American flag, but also to the Christian flag and the bible. Some of you may know the history of the Christian flag — it’s a white background with a blue, sort of square and then a cross inside it — was founded as an ecumenical thing for the nicer Protestants, but has become largely a symbol for right-wing Christians, evangelicals and fundamentalists.

It showed up, for example, in the Jan. 6 Capitol riot. There were Christian flags along with Trump flags. “Don’t tread on me.” There are multiple versions of the pledge to the Christian flag. The original one ends with some sort of nice vague thoughts about brotherhood, but ours ended with “one savior risen and coming again with life and liberty for all who believe.”

Not for all. No, there’s hell for the rest of everybody. It was very much an anti-pluralist thing. And evangelicalism, in the sense that I’m talking about it, is deeply opposed to pluralism, whereas pluralism is essential for democracy. So, it is authoritarian and anti-democratic at its core.

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I define American evangelicalism as a form of Christianity whose adherents uphold white, cisgender, heterosexual, patriarchal and anti-pluralist values and has no tolerance for those of us who exist outside these realities. In practice, with the individual, how much tolerance there's going to be can vary. Obviously, most of the time we go out and about in society and you're interacting with evangelicals, in the grocery store or whatever, they're mostly normal, but sometimes they go into Target and smash the Pride signs and then Target caves and backs away from a lot of its Pride stuff. Yeah, you can boo that if you like.

Regarding the kind of Christian schools that I went to, I like to say that we were doing alternative facts before it was cool. And, we were doing disinformation and propaganda that now is so much more prominent than it was back then.

Based on some data that was gathered by the Huffington Post back in 2017, we can conclude that there are approximately 2,400 non-Catholic Christian schools using extremist curricula. And that would be specifically Bob Jones University Press, Accelerated Christian Education, also known as ACE, and Abeka Books. Those are the big three. Now, there may well be other schools that don't use that curriculum or do use them and don't receive voucher funding.

There undoubtedly are. So, this is a low estimate. If there are about 2,400 such schools in the United States, there's at least a few hundred thousand kids going through this kind of education in Christian schools at any time.

These Christian schools still practice corporal punishment. They paddle kids and they teach all kinds of pernicious things. Everything from creation science to being gay or being trans is a sin. Growing up in this environment, I always felt off and different from people, and it made me a very cerebral kid and a good academic performer. That turned out to be a way out of it for me.

I just never felt like I could fit quite right. I couldn't go along with the flow of everything, instead stepping back and kind of just observing life. I always felt a little uncomfortable in my own skin, but it took me until I was 33 years old to realize that I was queer because that was all just so repressed, and I was working through so many underlying issues, this kind of long-standing crisis of faith. By the time I was 21 or 22, I didn't believe in hell anymore.

I was still trying to believe in God and Jesus, and I was actually still very afraid of hell. You don't shake the fear as quickly as you can shake the ideas and the beliefs, because it is instilled in you from your earliest years, when are told that basically you're broken. "You're a terrible person. You're lucky that God loves you. Only he can fix you. You got to have Jesus in your heart. If you don't, you're going to be tortured literally forever."

As a highly sensitive kid, that does some damage. That also means you gotta check all these particular boxes. You've got to live that middle-class white picket fence dream.

Power of stories

What I want to talk about now is the power of stories. The Christian right uses stories to exert control, and they don't want to just tell their own stories, they want to make everyone else fit into their story. They want to tell my story. They want to tell your story.

Part of what I've been trying to do with promoting exvangelical literature is to try to get that counter story out



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF Director of Operations Lisa Strand presents Chrissy Stroop with the 2025 Freethought Heroine Award.

there, reclaim my own story and help other people reclaim their stories so that we don't just end up being object lessons and get swept away by this fascist movement that is so powerful in America right now.

There's the old canard that Darwin converted on his deathbed. They taught me that as a kid in Christian school, and I just believed it for a while. The narrative that Darwin converted on his deathbed is very old, but it was debunked right away by Darwin's family and friends who were there when he was dying.

It doesn't matter to evangelicals that this has been debunked. They want to believe it's true and so it's true. That is how authoritarianism operates.

Another one of those stories is that abortion is murder. I was taken to an anti-abortion protest by my church in 1991. It was quite a way to grow up, and it's all part of creating this narrative and creating this space in which that narrative is supported. They want to control women's bodies. They want to control queer people's bodies.

Another one of those stories is that trans people like me are really just "men in dresses" who want to sneak into women's spaces for nefarious purposes. Unfortunately, that fear tactic has worked really well. That has created a big moral panic. I created my newsletter, the Bugbear Dispatch, which is hosted on Ghost, as a way to examine fear and moral panic in the context of Christianity and society.

A lot of it is autoethnography, to use a kind of technical academic word. I know that I am writing about my own lived experience, and it's ethnographic in the sense that I also take in social context. I read a lot of data, I pay a lot of attention to Pew and PRRI and that sort of stuff.

It seems like evangelicals and other right-wingers don't even know that transgender men exist. It's all just about "men in dresses sneaking into bathrooms." That is the story they like to tell. And I think the reason for that is that the patriarchy is threatened, obviously, by women's bodily autonomy. One of the scariest things for people with patriarchal values is what they see as the feminization of men. So, that is what it is. And transgender Americans and trans people in general, and especially trans people of color, are often subjected to violence.

Toward the future

How can we look ahead to the future and work for a more democratic America against these anti-democratic forces that

should have been prevented from taking over by the wall of separation of church and state, but were not prevented?

The essay collection "Empty the Pews: Stories of Leaving the Church" was published by a small press based out of Indianapolis. I'm kind of happy about how that worked out. Being from Indianapolis, I first used the phrase "empty the pews" on Twitter as a hashtag in 2017 after the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, where, you may recall, Trump said there are very fine people on both sides. And major right-wing Christian figures like Franklin Graham and Robert Jeffress were just right behind him saying things like, "Oh, Trump doesn't have a racist bone in his body."

I knew these guys. They don't listen to the opposition. That is one of the ways in which they control the narrative, as they just don't give any space for oppositional voices. But I thought the one thing they are scared of is losing the youth. My dad's a music pastor, so I also got all these pastor narratives growing up and one of the things that I understood that churches were very concerned with constantly is how to reach the kids and keep them in the church.

I came up with the hashtag #emptythepews to throw in their faces and say, "Look, America is secularizing, and you guys are losing the youth. Suck it, pastors." Can I say that?

Anyway, later, as Lauren O'Neill and I were working on this essay collection, we realized this could be a good title for our essay collection. In fact, the pews are emptying, and yet the public sphere

is still very much pro-religion, very afraid that secularization is going to be a bad thing for America, even trying to blame the illiberalism of the current moment in some cases on secular people, which is absolute nonsense.

Conflict intervention specialists Bernard Meyer and Jacqueline Guzman, authors of "The Neutrality Trap: Disrupting and Connecting for Social Change," point out that counter stories can be very powerful. They can bring people together and help foster understanding and empathy.

A counter story is, for example, when people talk about sexual harassment or racism or other kinds of marginalization; they often result in backlash. I think that makes it more important to get counter stories, like exvangelical stories, out there to challenge what's going on in contemporary America.

There are many people in the chattering classes who think secularization is a bad thing. I think they are wrong. It used to be the evangelicals would laugh at the mainline churches because they were losing members, whereas evangelicals were not losing members. Well, now they are. And you can kind of take as an approximation here the Southern Baptist Convention; its numbers have been going down and down in recent years.

The last thing I want to say, though, is that demographics are not destiny. We do have to keep fighting, and democracy requires pluralism.

But stories have a chance to reach people. If you want to be treated with respect, you also have to be respectful. Now, I don't mean the people who are completely unreachable, but people of faith who are on our side, we need to work together.

If you want to have everyone be non-religious, that's going to take coercion, too. Just look at the Soviet Union as an example and how well that worked out for them. The Russian Orthodox Church, this is actually my area of expertise, is now back. And, it's basically in the same position of power it was in during the Tsarist empire.

So, use cooperation where we can stay away from coercion. Let's build a better pluralist future and let's help get there by getting counternarratives out there. In this case, particularly the counter narratives from people who grew up evangelical or from similar hardline Christian backgrounds. Many of us are queer, many of us are women or otherwise marginalized.

And that's why that faith doesn't work for us. That's why I think we leave it. Let's get those stories out there.

Thank you.



Photo by Chris Line

Chrissy Stroop chats with convention attendees at her table following one of the convention meals.

FFRF’s 2026 law student essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the three winners (and two honorable mentions) of the Diane and Stephen Uhl Memorial Essay Competition for Law Students.

FFRF paid out a total of \$10,000 to the winners of this year’s contest.

Law school students were asked to write an essay on this topic: Analyze how the principle of “parental rights” has changed. In 2025, the Supreme Court extended *Wisconsin v. Yoder* (1972), cit-

ing it repeatedly in *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, where the court sided with religious parents who objected on religious grounds to public school instruction that included books with LGBTQ themes or characters. Analyze how the principle of “parental rights” changes from *Yoder* to *Mahmoud*. What other constitutional or societal interests might conflict with this expanded understanding of parental rights in the First Amendment context? Discuss how the court could or should

balance these competing interests in future cases.

For ease of reading, the essays published here do not include the footnotes and citations that were included in the authors’ submissions. Thanks to attorneys Jennifer Green, Monica Toole, Tyler Steeb and Sammi Lawrence for grading and selecting the winners.

Winners are listed below and include the law school they are attending and the award amount.

First place: Sam Foer, Washington & Lee University School of Law, \$4,000.

Second place: Zoe Schacht, Brooklyn Law School, \$3,000.

Third place: Ashni Verma, New York University School of Law, \$2,000.

Honorable mentions:

Wesley Michael Harris, Florida A&M College of Law, \$500.

Maya Gardner, University of South Carolina Joseph F. Rice School of Law, \$500.

FIRST PLACE

The collapse of a constitutional boundary

By Sam Foer

Introduction

In 1972, in *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the Supreme Court carved out a narrow but profound exception to compulsory education laws. Amish parents could withdraw their children from public high school not because they objected to a lesson or two, but because the state’s entire educational project threatened to dissolve their religious community’s way of life. Fast forward to 2025. In *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, the Supreme Court faced a very different kind of question: Do religious parents have a Free Exercise right to opt their children out of specific lessons depicting LGBTQ+ families? The court granted the opt-outs.

At first glance, *Mahmoud* looks like a straightforward extension of *Yoder*. Both cases invoke parental rights and free exercise. But on closer inspection, *Yoder* concerned coercion through an immersive, values-laden state environment that left no room for alternatives.

Mahmoud, by contrast, concerns exposure, as a child encounters ideas in a pluralistic curriculum without any requirement to endorse them. This shift moves authority over a child’s engagement with difference from public schools to private belief. The court could have limited its holding to instances of compelled personal affirmation, but instead extended constitutional protection to curricular exposure as such.

Mahmoud does more than extend *Yoder*; it recasts it, transforming a narrow protection against state domination into a license to withdraw from public norms. That shift reshapes what public education is allowed to be. In the process, it unsettles the balance among parental authority, child development and the state’s interest in civic education. The court has collapsed the category of coercion into the category of exposure, converting a narrow shield against state domination into a general parental veto over content.

I. Yoder and the core of parental rights

Yoder was never a broad license for parents to customize public education, but an emergency exit designed for a community under existential threat from the state’s most comprehensive form of coercion: compulsory schooling.

What made *Yoder* unique is that the court didn’t just worry about exposure to disagreeable ideas, but about forced assimilation of an insular community. High school wasn’t neutral; it was engineered to cultivate mobility, individualism and secular citizenship, which are values fundamentally at odds with Amish life. As Justice Warren Burger noted, the Amish community was self-sufficient, vocational and deeply insular. Forcing Amish teens into high school sought to reshape their identity.



Sam Foer

Yoder treated compulsory schooling as forced participation that placed Amish children inside a social world fundamentally incompatible with their way of life. That’s why the parental right recognized in *Yoder* functioned as a shield against state formation, not a scalpel to remove unwanted lessons.

Crucially, the Supreme Court underscored how little the state gained from crushing the Amish way of life. The Amish were law-abiding, productive and socially isolated; extra schooling offered them little benefit while imposing profound religious costs. *Yoder*, then, turned on a rare convergence: comprehensive coercion, minimal state interest and a cohesive community facing cultural dissolution. It did not establish a right to opt out of uncomfortable ideas in an otherwise diverse curriculum.

This understanding aligns with the court’s longstanding wariness of state orthodoxy. In *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* (1943), the Supreme Court refused to let the state compel flag salutes, recognizing that forced affirmation breaches liberty. *Yoder* extended that principle from compelled speech to compelled socialization. Both cases, however, dealt with affirmation or assimilation, not exposure to difference.

II. Mahmoud v. Taylor: From coercion to exposure

Mahmoud v. Taylor presented a different problem altogether. Parents didn’t object to school itself. They objected to a handful of readings that showed, *inter alia*, families with same-sex parents. They asked only that their children be excused from those lessons, not that the curriculum change for everyone.

The school refused, arguing that a unified curriculum matters. The court sided

with the parents, reasoning that denying opt-outs forced families into an untenable choice: violate your beliefs or leave public school altogether. That, the court said, was a burden on free exercise. What is striking is how the court moves from protecting religious conscience to treating exposure itself as a form of harm.

Mahmoud repurposed *Yoder*’s logic. Where *Yoder* forbade coercive environments, *Mahmoud* forbids exposure to disagreeable content, even when that exposure is passive, non-endorsing and part of a broader pluralistic education. For example, a specific instructional and interactive prompt requiring a student to identify which pronouns “fit” them comes closer to compelled personal affirmation, and an opt-out for that narrow category could be justified without constitutionalizing objection to instruction itself.

In *Yoder*, the state required Amish children to live within a value system hos-

tile to their own. In *Mahmoud*, the state presented a social reality, albeit with some potentially constitutionally questionable action items. Treating these situations as constitutionally equivalent blurs a line the First Amendment has long recognized: the difference between

coercing belief and encountering difference. Once that line blurs, the curriculum quickly fragments. From LGBTQ+ families to evolution, climate science and history.

III. Cognitive liberty, parental stewardship and what coercion really means

A useful way to assess the shift from *Yoder* to *Mahmoud* is to distinguish between coercion of conscience and exposure to disagreement. The Constitution assumes that people can encounter ideas without being compelled to adopt them. This assumption is what allows schools, libraries and public spaces to expose students to disagreement without turning every lesson into a constitutional crisis. It also limits what the state can demand from students, even in the name of education.

From this perspective, the state may structure educational environments and present ideas, but it may not compel belief, require endorsement or penalize dissent. Exposure to contested views is not itself a constitutional injury. Coercion arises only when the state attempts to direct belief formation or occupy the interior space where conscience develops.

Children, of course, are still developing. But that does not mean they must be shielded from every difference their parents find unsettling. Parents play a legiti-

mate role in guiding early moral and religious formation, but that role is neither absolute nor permanent. It is developmental because it diminishes as the child matures, and it is bounded because it cannot be used to permanently insulate the child from pluralistic contact. Parental authority exists to steward a child’s emerging autonomy, not to monopolize the child’s mind. The same is true of public education.

This distinction explains *Yoder* and clarifies *Mahmoud*. In *Yoder*, the state imposed sustained participation in an environment designed to reshape long-term commitments. In *Mahmoud*, the curriculum exposed students to social realities without compelling belief. Treating exposure itself as coercive turns parental guidance into a claim to control what a child is allowed to encounter. Cognitive liberty collapses when exposure is treated as harm, because belief formation requires contact with difference, not insulation.

IV. The costs of expanding parental rights

When parental rights expand as *Mahmoud* envisions, they collide with the child’s, the school’s and society’s interests. Children are not mere vessels of parental belief. They are future citizens who must learn to navigate a diverse and disputatious democracy. Allowing routine opt-outs from neutral curricular content doesn’t just protect belief; it encloses understanding. The harm isn’t indoctrination; it’s isolation.

This isn’t just theory. In *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944), the Supreme Court noted that “the custody, care and nurture of the child reside first in the parents,” but added that “the state parens patriae may restrict the parent’s control by requiring school attendance.” A child’s interest in receiving a broad education is not merely the state’s, but also the child’s own.

Meanwhile, public schools serve a civic function: to prepare students for shared citizenship. Widespread opt-outs don’t just customize education; they fragment it. They risk turning schools into belief-based silos, undermining the common ground that public education is meant to cultivate.

V. Finding the boundary: A way forward

So, the real problem is not just *Mahmoud* itself, but what it invites next. Courts moving forward should sharpen, not blur, the line between exposure and coercion. Neutral depictions of social realities, without compelled affirmation or penalty, should generally fall within the state’s educational authority. Greater caution is warranted when instruction is explicitly normative or condemnatory, with the pronoun issue raising a legitimate concern in *Mahmoud*. Courts should also watch for cumulative effects: an opt-out here or there may be manageable, but a pattern of exemptions that insulates children from pluralistic contact is not.

“Preserving freedom requires more than protecting belief; it requires allowing people to encounter ideas they may reject without turning that encounter into a constitutional injury.”

Yoder was designed as a narrow escape from state domination. Mahmoud repurposes it into a tool for screening out unwelcome ideas. That shift may please some parents in the short term, but in the long term, it risks weakening both genuine religious liberty and the shared civic fabric

upon which all liberties depend. Preserving freedom requires more than protecting belief; it requires allowing people to encounter ideas they may reject without turning that encounter into a constitutional injury. From Yoder to Mahmoud, we’ve moved from protecting con-

science to policing content. That’s a turn we should think twice before embracing. *Sam Foer attends Washington & Lee University School of Law and is a graduate of the University of Rhode Island (2020). His interests center on constitutional law, civil rights and liberties, anti-discrimina-*

tion and jurisprudence, with a focus on how law both protects and erodes the conditions of liberty and legitimacy. Sam has led multiple First Amendment and anti-discrimination advocacy campaigns and interned at the Rhode Island Attorney General’s Office in Summer 2025.

SECOND PLACE

Preferential ‘veto’ power

By Zoe Schacht

In the public school setting, the principle of “parental rights” has evolved from being a quasi-no-exemption rule to a preferentially treated “veto power.” This expanded understanding of the parental right to object to public school curricular or educational requirements on religious grounds creates potential tension with other constitutional or societal interests, such as the assertion of parental rights in nontraditional and progressive settings, the right to free exercise by non-conservative religious believers, and LGBTQ+ rights, generally. In future cases, the United States Supreme Court is unlikely to have a universal approach in navigating these competing interests. While it is unlikely to do so, the court should give this new “veto power” a leg to stand on and protect the parental right to raise children with the “beliefs and practices [they] wish to instill,” even when those beliefs and practices diverge from traditional, conservative values.

In the summer of 2025, when the court handed down its decision in Mahmoud v. Taylor, the principle of parental rights was substantially recharacterized for the first time since the landmark case, Wisconsin v. Yoder. Before Mahmoud, the court’s “constitutional canon” on parental rights was concise, consisting primarily of three cases: Pierce v. Society of Sisters, Meyer v. Nebraska, and Yoder. Unlike the earlier two cases, Yoder added that if there is a religious motive to the parental rights at issue, strict scrutiny is applied to the claimed state interference. Following Yoder, courts generally looked to a case that came out of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Mozert v. Hawkins County Board of Education. Mozert created a quasi-no-exemption rule — so long as children are not compelled to affirm or deny any religious beliefs, exposure to content objected to by parents on religious grounds does not burden their constitutional freedom to exercise religion. After denying certiorari, it seemed that the court agreed with 6th Circuit’s decision to not apply Yoder in Mozert to resolve the issue of whether there was a parental right to object to school curriculum on religious grounds.

In many ways, Mahmoud revived Yoder, which has been viewed as a rarely applicable, dormant decision or sui generis. The Mahmoud opinion, written by Justice Samuel Alito, expressly rejects this characterization of Yoder’s reach. Instead of applying the long understood parental rights principles expressed in Mozert, Alito looked to Yoder. Alito breathed life into Yoder, presenting a new reading of its holding. In doing so, he overlooked how courts — and the Supreme Court itself — had long interpreted Yoder.

After Mahmoud, when determining whether the government impeded on parental rights, the question is whether there is a presence of “a very real threat of undermining’ the religious



Zoe Schacht

beliefs and practices that parents wish to instill.” By finding that Yoder is “[un]confined” to the special circumstances of the Amish, the Mahmoud majority’s expansion of parental rights presents in two ways: (1) a lower threshold to trigger strict scrutiny and (2) an express elimination of the exception to religiously motivated government actions that are neutral and generally applicable.

For courts to determine whether “a very real threat” to parental rights is present, Mahmoud prescribed several factors. In applying the “threat” test, courts are instructed to look to the specific nature of the parent’s asserted religious beliefs, the nature of the curricular or educational requirement, the child’s age, the context in which the materials are presented, and whether they are presented in a way that is “‘hostile’ to religious viewpoints and designed to impose upon students a ‘pressure to conform.’”

Though this standard appears to closely align with Mozert and Yoder, it differs in application. Rather than requiring a showing of compulsion, a child’s exposure to objectionable ideas or viewpoints is enough for a court to find “a very real threat.” Though the Mahmoud majority expressly rejected the notion that “mere exposure” is enough under the “threat” test, looking at the court’s findings shows that exposure is the necessary showing. As Justice Sonia Sotomayor argues in her dissenting opinion, this new standard is the “clearest” version of “mere exposure to objectionable ideas.” Before Mahmoud, neutral and generally applicable government actions which conflicted with the First Amendment’s protection of free exercise were generally constitutionally permissible. As a recognized “hybrid rights” case, Yoder was read to be an exception to the neutral and general applicability exemption. Mahmoud, however, expressly rejected this characterization of Yoder. Further delineating from Mozert as the template for decisions on similar claims,

the court explained that if a burden on parental rights is akin to the burden in Yoder, whether the law is neutral or generally applicable is now irrelevant. Yoder has not historically extended to claims of such nature. Moreover, Mahmoud’s rejection of Yoder as a “hybrid rights” case is in direct conflict with the Yoder opinion which specifically identified the additional non-free exercise claim at stake.

Further, finding in Mahmoud that the burden on parental rights equated to that in Yoder, was a result of differing analyses — with Yoder utilizing the affirmative compulsion inquiry and Mahmoud the lower threshold “threat” test. Therefore, the Mahmoud expansion of parental rights not only discards the hybrid rights standard for exemption, but it weakens the level of harm necessary for government action to be subjected to strict scrutiny. Now, a showing of mere exposure to an objectionable idea is enough, regardless of whether the government action at issue is neutral and generally applicable.

Mahmoud fundamentally changed the judicial balancing of parental rights with the public education system’s authority to decide curriculum on nonreligious grounds. Parents now hold a “veto power” over public school curriculum which Yoder — itself — recognized belongs to school boards and legislatures. Despite Alito claiming that parental rights inquiries “will always be fact-intensive,” the extent of this parental “veto power” is unlikely to be all encompassing, only applying to parental objections to nontraditional, progressive curriculum. This expansion of parental rights is indicative of the Roberts Court’s growing protection of objection — giving preferential treatment to conservative religious believers in decisions that simultaneously diminish LGBTQ+ rights. Mahmoud has proven to be no exception to this trend and is best understood as promoting a liberty of conscience theory. Reading Mahmoud under this theoretical framework, it is evidently protective of parental rights that are conveyed as an objection to nontraditional and progressive ideas or actions. Mahmoud’s application stops there. In future cases involving an assertion of parental rights to maintain or assert nontraditional and progressive ideas or actions, the court is unlikely to apply Mahmoud.

Comparing Mahmoud and Kennedy v. Bremerton School District, the Supreme Court’s preferential protection of traditional and conservative conscientious parental liberties could not be clearer. Unlike Mahmoud, where nonreligious curriculum was at stake, in Kennedy the court addressed the issue of whether a high school football coach, praying in front of students,

amounts to religious coercion. Applying the Mahmoud “threat” test to Kennedy should surmount to an automatic trigger of strict scrutiny and a finding that parental rights were impeded on. Yet the outcome could not be more distinct. In Mahmoud, the majority relied on the premise that young children “are often ‘impressionable’ and ‘implicitly trust’ their teachers.” Yet, in Kennedy, this argument was rejected. Ultimately, the Kennedy court found that the coach’s visible prayer was within his freedom of exercise rights and that the student’s exposure to the prayer did not amount to religious coercion, rather it was incidental and should be tolerated. Further demonstrating the court’s special solicitude for conservative religious believers, Kennedy overlooked other religions within the community and the objections of those groups, consequently treating the football coach like a religious minority in need of protection.

Decided only nine days before Mahmoud, United States v. Skrmetti further demonstrates the indisputable reality that the Supreme Court gives preferential treatment to certain parental rights. Though Skrmetti was decided on equal protection grounds, the opinion is still relevant to the court’s application of parental rights doctrine. Skrmetti upheld a Tennessee law which prohibits medical providers from giving gender-affirming care to transgender minors. Skrmetti did not protect the parental rights of individuals who wanted to protect their transgender children’s gender-affirming medical care. Moreover, unlike the nearly automatic application of strict scrutiny in Mahmoud, Skrmetti subjected the Tennessee law to rational basis review. Alito’s concurring opinion in Skrmetti may shine light on why Mahmoud expanded parental rights, but Skrmetti overlooked them entirely. Yet, the conscientious liberty at stake in the two cases is telling.

The subjective nature of the Supreme Court’s application of parental rights and its inconsistent findings of coercion shows the court’s growing protection of religious objectors. Mahmoud aligns with such other cases where the court has held that these objectors need not comply with laws that burden conduct linked to their religious identities. Thus, future cases that the Supreme Court hears relating to gender rights, the implication of religious objection, and parental rights will vary in outcomes. Ultimately, the court’s decisions will rest on who is objecting, whose exercise of religion is burdened, and whether the burdening conduct is nontraditional and progressive.

Zoe Schacht attends Brooklyn Law School. “I am in my final year of law school and following graduation, will be working in the municipal civil litigation setting,” Zoe writes. “The First Amendment has been a lodestar for me and I plan to continue learning its principles and thinking expansively about its doctrine. In my free time I enjoy reading, doing yoga and cooking.”

“The subjective nature of the Supreme Court’s application of parental rights and its inconsistent findings of coercion shows the court’s growing protection of religious objectors.”

THIRD PLACE

The battle for curricular control

By Ashni Verma

Introduction

On June 27, 2025, the Supreme Court decided *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, granting parents in a Maryland school district the right to excuse their children from lessons that engage with storybooks about the LGBTQ+ community. This essay explores the development of hybrid parental rights claims and identifies strategies for schools to maintain their commitment to multicultural, inclusive curricula in the wake of *Mahmoud*.

I. Development of hybrid parental rights claims

Before *Mahmoud*, the principal Supreme Court case addressing the conflict between parents’ due process and religious freedom rights and the state’s interest in education was *Wisconsin v. Yoder*. There, a group of Amish parents challenged the state of Wisconsin’s mandatory school attendance rule, which required that children attend school until they turned 16 and threatened civil fines and criminal penalties for parents who refused to comply with the law. The parent-plaintiffs declined to send their children to school after the eighth grade because they believed that high school education would detract from their faith and way of life. For the highly secluded community, for which “salvation require[d] life in a church community separate and apart from the world and worldly influence,” any higher schooling would be inimical to their way of life. Not only would the Amish children experience psychological harm from compulsory high school attendance, but the Amish community as a whole would suffer as children became disillusioned with their religious teachings. In light of the unique harm that compulsory schooling would impose upon the Amish parents’ exercise of their faith, the court found that Wisconsin’s interest in imposing universal education, while admittedly high, was not compelling enough to fully upset the Amish faith and mode of life. Thus, the parents were allowed to exempt their children from school based on their religious beliefs.

Yoder created an uneasy precedent for



Ashni Verma

lower courts to interpret and apply. The decision is narrow, but not so narrow as to be inapplicable. In certain circumstances, parents were successful in using hybrid parental rights and Free Exercise claims to exempt their children from objectionable school requirements. Key to these successes was the element of compulsion to engage in overt actions inimical to one’s faith, with the threat of punitive action for failure to comply. However, circuit courts declined to apply this standard in several other cases related to religious apparel in sports, sex education, vaccination requirements, transgender students’ access to bathrooms, and reading materials. These cases underscored the difference between compulsion and “mere exposure.” While a case like *Yoder* required students to regularly participate in actions that conflicted with their religious beliefs, merely reading about topics that run contrary to one’s beliefs did not rise to this level.

II. Upsetting the status quo

In *Mahmoud v. Taylor*, the school board of Montgomery County, Md., approved a language arts curriculum that included, among other diverse perspectives, sever-

al elementary-age storybooks featuring LGBTQ+ characters. The school board directed teachers to incorporate these stories into their curricula as they would any other books and released guidance materials that directed teachers to “disrupt” the thinking of students when they expressed hurtful or negative comments about the LGBTQ+ community stories. While the school originally allowed parents to opt their children out of lessons that included these stories, they quickly disposed of that policy because accommodating the growing number of opt-outs created significant administrative burdens for teachers, while also undermining the purported goals of the school board to foster an environment of inclusion and acceptance.

In directing Montgomery County to honor parents’ religious opt-outs from LGBTQ+ storybooks, the Supreme Court adopted a very different view of *Yoder* than that of lower court precedents by crediting the threat of exposure to other beliefs as a sufficient justification for the opt-out.

Because the board specified that teachers should aim to disrupt students’ negative perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community, the court found that the curricula would “impose upon children a set of values and beliefs that are ‘hostile’ to their parents’ religious beliefs.”

A. Legal impacts of Mahmoud

On its face, it is possible that *Mahmoud* could remain limited to a certain set of circumstances — those where educators are directed to impart some normative value judgment on students that conflict with their parents’ religious beliefs. Under this view, *Mahmoud* stands for the protection of parents’ rights to resist compulsion, rather than an attack on LGBTQ+ rights. However, the court extends its holding not only to the normative lessons, but to books themselves, where such texts contain LGBTQ+ themes. Because the books at issue in *Mahmoud* were “clearly designed to present certain values and beliefs as things to be celebrated and certain contrary values and beliefs as things to be rejected,” the court argued that they pose a very real threat to religious families whose values do not align with what is taught in class. However, almost any children’s book will contain some sort of normative values statement, so what is the limiting factor? In her dissenting opinion, Justice Sonia Sotomayor warns that the majority grants parents the power to object to “exposure by another name.” By shifting the standard of a violation of the hybrid right from a compulsory disruption of a religious community’s way of life to something that merely communicates a value judgment at odds with one’s beliefs, *Mahmoud* endangers the entire line of cases built on *Yoder*. Already, the Supreme Court vacated a decision from the Second Circuit denying religious parents’ challenge to New York’s mandatory school vaccine law and required the circuit court to reconsider their decision in the wake of *Mahmoud*.

Without meaningful limiting principles, the legal standard set by *Mahmoud* is vulnerable to manipulation and politicization. For example, as the political right continues to attack the LGBTQ+ community from all sides, such actors could use the decision to argue that any sort of discussion of gender and sexuality that is at odds with conservative Christian values violates parents’ free speech rights. Even if educators

go to great lengths to present LGBTQ+ inclusive materials neutrally, “it is exactly the . . . tolerance furthered by the curriculum to which the parents [may object].” Any mention of the LGBTQ+ community in classrooms, whether it be a student discussing their family or a teacher discouraging bullying targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, could spur parental objections.

B. Practical effects

The expansiveness of the court’s decision challenges the substance and administration of inclusive education. Although parents who opt their children out of lessons that run contrary to their religious beliefs might have valid reasons for doing so, states and schools still possess meaningful interests in fostering social integration and cultural exposure. By opting students out of such education, parents deprive their children of the opportunity to learn about the inherent multiculturalism of American society. Furthermore, the act of removing a child from a classroom stigmatizes the subject matter for other students, who might perceive a negativity or wrongness in learning about the LGBTQ+ community when their peers leave the room for specific lessons.

Additionally, schools will struggle with the logistics of handling the influx of opt-out demands as a result of *Mahmoud*. When a student opts out, the school must reallocate resources to provide substitute supervision and lessons for that child. Given the high administrative burdens of managing these demands, it is quite possible that schools will simply dispose of their inclusive curricula in an attempt to sidestep the logistical nightmare of managing opt-outs.

Given these risks, advocacy groups have sought to emphasize several strategies to help educators maintain their commitments to inclusive education. Schools can formalize their opt-out policy through school district administration, rather than requiring teachers to engage in one-on-one conversations about individual objections. This strategy reduces individual liability for teachers who still wish to provide inclusive education to students while also strengthening the school district’s control over local policies and administration. Additionally, schools and educators can avoid jettisoning their inclusive curricula by engaging in coalition-building to find community allies who may counter the voices of dissenters who object to inclusive education. Despite the complexity of the post-*Mahmoud* legal landscape, the requirement to let students opt out does not preclude teachers from discussing controversial subjects, so long as the educators are well-protected. In sum, though schools must remain aware of the risks posed by this precedent, they can continue to support inclusive educational values through careful adherence to procedure and community engagement.

Conclusion

Mahmoud v. Taylor signified a marked departure from precedent that balanced parents’ rights with schools’ ability to direct curricula development. As a result, the rights of children to be exposed to ideas, as well as the ability of teachers to communicate freely with their students, are endangered. By engaging with the community of parents, students and teachers committed to diversity in education, educators can comply with this new precedent while promoting pluralistic values.

Ashni is a third-year student at New York University School of Law with a passion for civil rights and constitutional law. While in law school, Ashni has interned at Investor Advocates for Social Justice and the New York Civil Liberties Union’s Education Policy Center.

“*Mahmoud v. Taylor* signified a marked departure from precedent that balanced parents’ rights with schools’ ability to direct the development of curricula.

Honorable mentions



Wesley Harris

Wesley Harris is a 3L at Florida A&M College of Law and is passionate about utilizing the power of the law to combat systemic oppression and the violation of human rights, domestically and internationally.

Maya Gardner is a third-year student at the University of South Carolina Joseph F. Rice School of Law.



Maya Gardner

Maya works as a research assistant for her school’s Constitutional Law Center. Additionally, Maya’s student note, “Establishment Clause Jurisprudence and the Constitutional Limits on Religion in Public Schools,” was published in Volume 76, Book 3 of the South Carolina Law Review, for which she is a Notes and Comments editor.

Religion, real estate, death and taxes

By Barney Lane

Since the fall of the Twin Towers in 2001, and even before that, we have had reason to be concerned about religious extremists. I like to call them religious fanatics. Obviously, the one thing that all religious fanatics have in common is religion!

If the basis of your thinking is pure reason, critical thinking and science as best we know it, then all religious belief is fanatical. Religion is based on faith, which



Barney Lane

has nothing to do with facts, and, in most cases, unsubstantiated texts from the Bronze and Iron ages. Mohammed came in a little later in the year 610 CE when everyone still thought the Earth was flat.

We know that these periods of history were filled with myth and superstition and yet vast institutions are committed to analyzing and interpreting anonymous writings from those times and what they have to do with us today (like, nothing?!). They were written by men (certainly not women) of the human variety. In order to give them legitimacy, religious people claim that they were divinely inspired. That is some of the cleverest subterfuge ever invented in any age.

All monotheistic religions claim that theirs is the one true God. Likewise, polytheistic religions believe that their gods are the only real deal. All of that fails logically. What does stand the test of logic is that no one has a lock on God or gods and, better yet, that none exist at all. We pretty universally dismiss the Greek gods as being mythological. When will we have the sense to do so for the rest of the "ancient truths" and accept it all as mythology?

I make distinctions among the different religions, but I do not discriminate. They are all wacko, but there are degrees of wacko. Clearly, some religions are more removed from reality than others. I spend a lot of time disrespecting Christianity. That is simply because Christians are most prevalent here in the United States and have the most profound and direct effect on me, at least until some other wackos from abroad decide to set off some bombs here.

Christian sects fall on different parts of the wacko scale. Any group that puts faith healing over modern medicine automatically gets a high wacko rating. I don't mean that a positive attitude and even



"I already know about religion.
That's why I'm an atheist."

some sense of spirituality doesn't have a positive effect on one's health, but if you have cancer, I recommend a good oncologist over Jesus any day.

If you replace religion with science and logic, the basis of everything changes. Superstition allows fundamentalists to believe either that climate change doesn't exist or, worse yet, that at the 11th hour Jesus will come down and refreeze the polar ice caps and make everything hunky dory once again. This isn't hyperbole. People in Louisiana

vote against EPA regulations even though the petroleum industry has poisoned the soils in their neighborhoods and their waterways, making it the most toxic state in the union. The never-ending refrain in such places is "but I have my faith and my faith says that God will take care of me." The cancer rate in Louisiana is off the charts and, so far, there is no evidence of God interceding on their behalf. Religion blinds people so that they will vote against their own self-interest.

There was a 19th-century Christian idea that settlement stimulates rain ("Rain Follows the Plow"). Such white Christian hubris and superstition continues today. Climate change is happening before our eyes and the superstitious and arrogant descendants of those fools think that God will intercede. God did not intercede in the Dust Bowl crisis of the 1930s, unless

you consider the exodus to California a divine act. Except now, California is in an almost constant drought due to overdevelopment of both cities and agriculture.

So many of the things that we bicker about in our current culture and counterculture and subculture and cancel culture get a lot simpler when we turn to

science and back out the biblical bullshit. Science is evidence based, so you don't get to not believe in it in favor of what some anonymous person wrote 2,000 years ago and King James of England then tweaked to his liking. We could so easily put an end to all the contention about when life begins and whether or not a zygote is a human being. (Besides, most of us believe that life begins at 16, when you can drive.)

What the bible or any other ancient text has to say about sexuality, marriage, gender preference or really much of anything else should be irrelevant today.

"Four things you don't mess with: family, friends, faith and firearms." I didn't make this up. I really saw this on T-shirts in Texas. Your family is your family and if they are hyper-religious, it is difficult to be an apostate, but if you're young and want to have a world worth living in in your adulthood, you had better consider being an agent of change. Your friends you get to choose.

Choose wisely. If your friends have

wacky beliefs, try to educate them. If that is impossible, you're better off losing them. Faith is something that you believe that does not have any actual grounding in fact. Faith leads people to believe things that simply are not true and are not in their best interests. While we should respect everyone's right to have a certain faith, we are not required to respect their faith itself. In fact, if someone's faith is harmful to the world at large, it is up to us to make it clear that we do not respect their faith. And, if firearms rank equally with your family, friends and faith, then you are just a moron.

New York state has exempted property owned by religious institutions and used for religious purposes from real estate taxes since 1799. Many municipalities in that and other states are learning to regret such decisions in recent decades. Even as attendance at religious institutions is declining, the amount of real estate held by those institutions on a tax-free basis has increased.

That's because religion is big business and big business is thriving, even if religion is not. And, when one denomination leaves a plot of that tax-free real estate, often another takes its place, keeping it off the tax rolls. The net effect is that residential and commercial property taxes have to make up for what is not paid by the religions getting a free ride. Even in some of the wealthiest towns north of New York City, this has meant that seniors on fixed incomes can no longer afford to stay in the homes where they lived their lives and raised their children, due to the ever-increasing tax burden. The third largest landowner in New York City is the Catholic Church. (Columbia University and New York University are first and second).

As an atheist, I have a strong objection to any religious institution affecting my personal economy. That includes the measures that are currently being considered for public subsidy of religious schools. I do not wish to pay for the brainwashing of future generations.

Religious institutions have a right to exist, but they shouldn't have a right to a free ride. The money that funds their direct charitable outreach should be non-taxable. But, their operating expenses, their interest income and their profits should be taxable. That would put them on a level playing field with the average taxpayer. In 1970, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas wrote in dissent (Waltz v. Tax Commission of the City of New York) that a "tax exemption is a subsidy" and noted that James Madison, the main author of the U.S. Constitution, objected to any private citizen being forced to contribute "three pence" to support a church.

Organized religion has been the greatest source of intolerance and cause of suffering throughout history. The Roman Catholic Church probably has the lead. Organized religions do not tolerate anything that is "other," because it is a threat to their sovereignty. They are, therefore, by their very nature, anti-intellectual. They have done everything in their power to wipe out what isn't a product of their own belief system. In past ages, the church was able to do so militarily, and we are headed in that direction since January, in spite of our Constitution. Christian nationalists would like us to become a theocracy. That's not new. What's new is that it's being said aloud.

I'd also like to point out that there are two truly hopeless theocracies in today's world: Afghanistan and Oklahoma.

FFRF Member Barney Lane is retired from careers in broadcasting, real estate and education. Living in Colorado, he spends his time as a writer and wood sculptor.

“Religious institutions have a right to exist, but they shouldn't have a right to a free ride.”

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LETTERBOX

Doctrine of Original Sin is repugnant nonsense

Reading the entangled web of cruelties and absurdities in the bible, the Doctrine of Original Sin is perhaps the most pernicious and odious.

Lacking the urbane literary skill and linguistic sophistication of a Hemingway or Faulkner to tactfully pay the disrespect this callous and mendacious teaching deserves, let me put it this way: Is there a concept more repulsive or corrupt to any fair-minded individual that humankind should be held responsible in perpetuity for the behavior supposedly committed by two know-nothings in the primordial past?

Does anyone in the 21st century literally believe that a naked lady succumbed to the beguiling charms of a loquacious talking serpent in an enchanted garden, which, according to the bible, led to the downfall of man? Does any thinking person literally believe we're heirs to a biblical inherited curse?

"Anyone who teaches that a person can be guilty just by being born," wrote Robert Ingersoll, "is an exceedingly despicable, superstitious, ignorant and immoral human being. . . This doctrine blights humanity, soils the imagination of children, and covers every cradle with a curse." Simply put, it's one of the most cruel, unjust and preposterous theological principles ever conceived.

The Doctrine of Original Sin is a bronze age, barbaric, repugnant and offensive satchel-full of nonsense generated by superstition, fear and ignorance. To quote FFRF Co-President Dan Barker: "The whole concept is beneath the dignity of human beings and conflicts with the values of kindness and reason." That is to say, the entire scheme is an embarrassing disgrace to human intelligence.

Ingersoll said it best: "If you find someone who literally believes this bible story, strike their forehead and you will hear an echo, something is for rent."

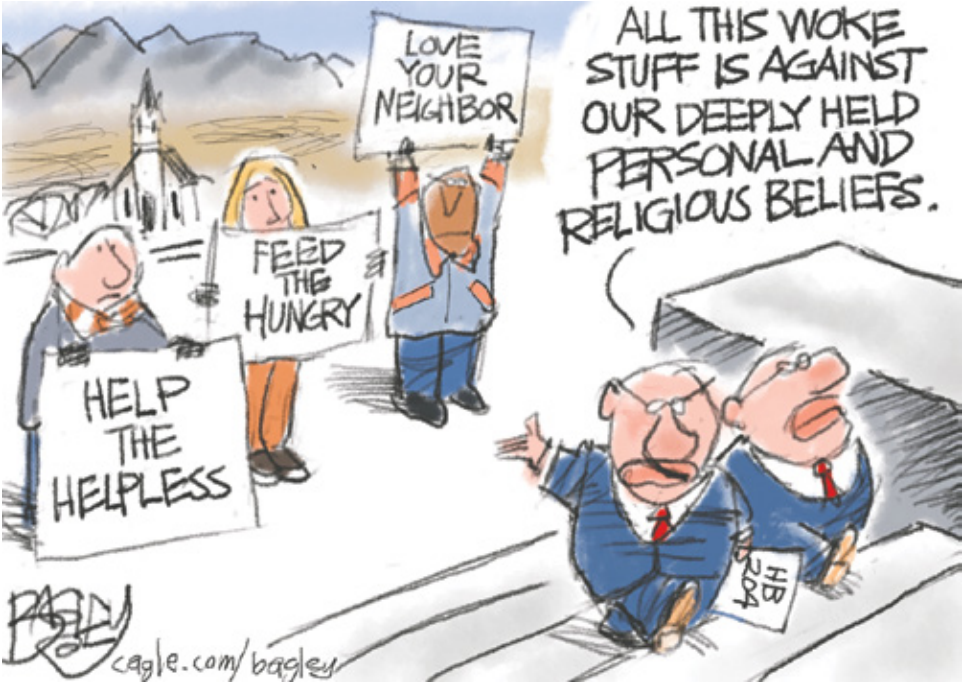
Florida

Thanks for taking on Lifewise Academy in Ohio

I want to send a thank you for your action regarding the Lifewise Academy at Elmwood in Bowling Green, Ohio. I have followed FFRF for years, and always wished we had an active freethought community in this town. But, in our small town, I never imagined we would be relevant to FFRF.

I don't have kids in school, but when I saw Lifewise advertise here, it truly bothered me. To see a local news article about your action on this issue in such a small town really means the world to me. I just wanted to send a personal message to say thanks for fighting for us.

Ohio



Gifting memberships will aid FFRF's cause

I first became an FFRF member in 2005 when membership totaled around 15,000 and I remember thinking how much good work was accomplished by this stellar organization. With present membership at more than 40,000, considerably more good work is being completed.

Jana, my brainy, beautiful, blasphemous bride, and I will be giving FFRF yearly memberships to friends every seven weeks or so for about 16 months and after that, one membership each month. If every member gifted 10 memberships, our ranks would total more than 400,000!

If there had been a religion/state watchdog building for each church, temple and mosque in the country, we might not find ourselves in this authoritarian religious dystopia which we now inhabit.

Texas

Who's willing to fight this war for Trump?

In my grandmother's farmhouse in Worthington, Ind., there was sheet music with a picture of a Victorian mother next to her son, dressed in a WWI outfit holding a bayonet, ready to head off to the "War to End all Wars." She was proud to send off her son to fight in a foreign land. The song was titled: "America, Here's My Boy."

Now that we are in 2026, would mothers be proud to send their child off to fight for Donald Trump, who "has been annointed by Jesus to light the signal fire in Iran to cause Armageddon and mark his return to Earth"?

The Congressional Freethought Caucus has requested that the Department of Defense's inspector general investigate whether "extreme religious rhetoric has metastasized into segments of the military chain of command in ways that contravene constitutional protections, departmental rules and standards, or professional mili-

tary norms. . . Justifying a war based on interpretations of biblical prophecies, and informing troops that they are risking their lives to advance a specific religious vision raises not only glaring constitutional concerns, but potential violations of Department of Defense regulations regarding religious neutrality and breaches of professional obligations and standards expected of military leadership."

Secretary Pete Hegseth has the Crusader tattoo "God wills it" and the Arabic slur "kafir" infidel on his body. He is trying to impose his end-times theology on the troops beneath him.

And, in case you haven't read the Book of Revelation lately, Jesus swings his giant sickle over the Earth, harvesting the "grapes of wrath" for the great wine press, which forms a "river of blood, 200 miles long and as deep as a horse's bridle." Does America want to send their young people to fight in a delusional battle to be slaughtered in a giant blood bath, all for a fake second coming, who never came in the first place? The book ends with "surely I am coming soon." Two thousand years of waiting is not "soon." This is sheer madness!

Jesus even has a sharp sword coming out of his mouth "with which to strike down the nations" and he "will rule with a "rod of iron." How's that for your supposed "god of love"?

That's where our "Secretary of War" Hegseth want to send your children.

Indiana

Biblical stories were commissioned by the rich

The only accepted official historical record of Jesus mentions his name as just one of the crowd listening to John the Baptist criticizing a woman who had her husband murdered so she could marry his brother and become queen.

Jesus was crucified shortly after, just as thousands of other common people were.

The bible writers were commissioned

to subdue the common people to not rebel when the rich and powerful enslaved and abused them. Only the rich could have afforded the scribes and writing materials to produce the many books that were fathered and published in the bible.

The benefits of the bible are all for the rich and powerful. The common people are promised paradise in the afterlife if they submit to the cruelties of the rich while they are alive.

Idaho

Tooth Fairy analogy falls apart under scrutiny

A letter writer in the March issue argues with my point (from the November 2025 Letterbox) about evidence, but he actually helps to make the point. Making up "evasions" about the Tooth Fairy is meaningless because those evasions are entirely the letter writer's creations. The story of the Tooth Fairy is that she exchanges money for teeth, period. No one else has claimed that she only does it for some children, or that she works through parents. She is, in fact, a meme that exists because parents do her "job," and exchanging money for teeth IS her job. If you are told that it is the Tooth Fairy that leaves the money, and you catch your parents doing it, you know that the story is not true. The Easter Bunny and Santa have the same problem. Children are told these entities have specific (and limited) duties, and if they catch their parents doing those duties, they know that the stories are not true.

The stories about God are much more nebulous. If you discover a non-miraculous explanation for a miracle, there's always another miracle to claim. No one said God only performed one miracle. If God doesn't answer your prayer, no one said he answers all prayers. It's impossible to argue that everything he supposedly does is done by people, but, like the Tooth Fairy, he is a meme, and as long as people believe in him, he "exists" as a meme. It is impossible to prove that God doesn't exist because the "proofs" offered for his existence are too nebulous to disprove — unlike the Tooth Fairy, who has only one job and either does it or doesn't do it. All of the "evasions" the letter writer offers for the Tooth Fairy don't work in her case, but they do show why we can't disprove the existence of God, which is exactly what I was arguing.

As I've said from the beginning, trying to disprove God's existence by saying there's no evidence he does exist is the same as trying to prove his existence by saying there's no evidence he doesn't. A lack of evidence is not proof of anything. It's just a lack of evidence — either way.

Colorado



ACTION FUND

Become an advocate!

Keep religion out of our laws and social policy



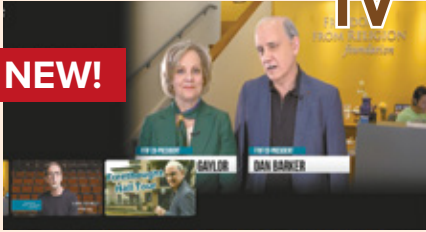
Sign up at FFRF Action Fund, FFRF's legislative arm. Receive action alerts about legislative issues affecting you and other freethinkers. Learn more: ffrfaction.org/join-us/

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Easy installation instructions at freethoughttv.ffrf.org

CHAPTER UPDATES

Upstate New York Freethinkers

Establishing sustainable secular communities requires more than just launching new groups; it demands a clear “success plan” for the future. The Upstate New York Freethinkers chapter is bridging the gap between student activism and lifelong engagement.

Leading this charge are Jacob Southworth, a student at Rochester Institute of Technology and Olivia Bishop-Utano at Onondaga Community College (OCC). After launching the OCC Secular Student Alliance (SSA), Jacob transferred and founded another campus chapter at RIT. Olivia is now president of the OCC SSA. She is collaborating with the philosophy and history clubs for a field trip to the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center and its Religious Freedom room.

Our chapter — thanks to generous donations — has provided Jacob and Olivia with FFRF gift memberships. We have also committed to sponsoring FFRF memberships for every new SSA



Olivia Bishop-Utano and Jacob Southworth

president in Upstate New York through one year after they graduate.

Beyond campus, Upstate New York Freethinkers is preparing for our 3rd Annual Chapter Gathering at the Albany Institute of History and Art (Capital District) on Sept. 20. For the latest updates, please visit unyft.org/gatherings.

For more information, please contact Upstate New York Freethinkers at info@unyft.org or 585-454-9921. Visit unyft.org/Donate to support our work.

Ozarks Chapter of FFRF



Members of the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF volunteered at the NWA Women’s Shelter in late January.

Wintertime in the Ozarks offers a unique blend of quiet, scenic beauty that provides our group opportunities to help the community. A dozen members of the Ozarks FFRF chapter came together on a bitterly cold January afternoon to support the Northwest Arkansas Women’s Shelter by cleaning,

sorting and reorganizing the nonprofit thrift store they operate.

In addition to our monthly business meetings, the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF took a field trip to Tulsa, Okla., on March 7 to watch Forrest Valkai, Erika “Gutsick Gibbon” and Seth Andrews perform for an audience of 300. Afterward, several members met with the Atheist Community of Tulsa for food and drinks.

For more information, please visit ozarksffrf.org or contact the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF at ozarksffrf@gmail.com.

Cryptogram answer

The skeptic has no illusions about life, nor a vain belief in the promise of immortality. Since this life here and now is all we can know, our most reasonable option is to live it fully.

— Paul Kurtz

Crossword answers

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IN MEMORIAM

Social justice activist John A. Mazzitello dies at 87

Lifetime Member John A. Mazzitello, 87, died in St. Cloud, Minn., on Dec. 1, 2025.

Born May 13, 1938, to Joseph and Lillian (Hietalahti) Mazzitello in St. Paul, Minn., John was equally proud of his Italian and Finnish heritage. After growing up in the Lake Como neighborhood, John studied and worked across the United States and the world, earning a master’s degree in social work and a master’s degree in fine arts. His life was characterized by a commitment to service and social justice. His jobs included high school teacher in Milwaukee, and social worker with AIDS patients in San Diego during the 1990s, as well as stints in Philadelphia, St. Louis, Rhode Island and Rome, Italy.

Returning to Minnesota, John worked for Hennepin County Social Services, the Veteran’s Administration, and Minnesota Correctional Facilities, devoting his considerable talents and energy to advocating for children, veterans, and the incarcerated. John stayed in the work force well past the usual retirement age. In fact, he retired at least three times, each time finding that there was still more he could do to serve the community. In 1998, he began sharing



John A. Mazzitello



Photo by Patrick Elliott

John Mazzitello kept this sign outside his home.

his life with his beloved husband, James (Jim) Swanson. Anyone in the presence of Jimmy and Johnny (nicknames only they could use for each other) was struck by their love for each other. Together with a series of adored Shelties, they created a home filled with British comedies, music, art, baking and — when entertaining — way too much food.

When John retired for the last time, he channeled his passion for social justice into participation in the Freedom From Religion Foundation, and left a generous provision for FFRF in his estate plans.

He also publicly protested against what he feared was the erosion of democracy in the United States. At age 87, he attended regular protests in St. Cloud, carrying his hand-painted sign: “RESIST! Like it’s 1938 in Germany. Reject Facism and Project 2025.” In between protests, he kept the sign by his front door to exhort his neighbors.

John’s commitment to working for a better future, person by person, through his social work clients, and systemically, through the political process, was motivated in part, by his love of his four grandchildren, who will each sadly miss their feisty grandpa who was always good for a political discussion fueled by an excess of sweets.

Scott Hunter was strong state/church separation supporter

Beyond After Life Member Scott A. Hunter, in his 90s, died in February in Arizona. There is no formal obituary.

“The secular community in Arizona and beyond mourns the loss of Scott Hunter, a relentless advocate for reason and longtime supporter of the movement for secular government,” writes Secular AZ in a memorial. “Scott was an indefatigable defender of the separation of church and state, dedicated to a vision of a world guided by evidence rather than dogma.”

“Scott was a decades-long member and Beyond Afterlife Member of the Freedom From Religion Foundation,” writes FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor. “He thought deeply about how to recruit younger freethinkers to ensure the health of the movement, and we utilized many of his suggestions. Just before his death, he had emailed us a suggestion about how to better help elderly freethinkers, which was printed in the March Letterbox.”

As a mentor and philanthropist, Scott’s influence spanned from local



Scott Hunter

Arizona initiatives to national organizations. His generosity empowered a generation of advocates to challenge the role of religion in public policy. As a long-time supporter of Secular AZ, Scott was instrumental in helping the group develop and grow its Secular Library and provide resources to the greater community.

In one of his final messages, Scott issued a characteristically bold challenge to the status quo: “In this 21st century, the masses should rebel and demand that gods be produced and the frauds be eliminated.”

Secular AZ writes: “Scott’s legacy lives on in the many activists he mentored and the organizations he helped sustain. He remains a reminder that one person’s conviction can make a difference. We celebrate his life by carrying his torch for an inclusive, secular future.”

Shop online @ ffrf.org/shop

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‘IN REASON WE TRUST’
Self inking stamp: \$20 postpaid

FFRF convention, Oct.15–18

Make way for Milwaukee!

Join the Freedom From Religion Foundation in its home state of Wisconsin for its 49th annual convention from Oct. 15–18 at the Baird Center, 400 W. Wisconsin Ave, Milwaukee.

General Schedule

Thursday, Oct. 15
FFRF will be offering early-bird workshops on Thursday afternoon in the Baird Center. Please indicate on your convention registration form if you are interested in attending these workshops.

Convention registration will open during a complimentary Early Bird Welcome Reception from 4–6 p.m. in the Crystal Ballroom at the convention hotel, the Hilton Milwaukee Downtown, 509 W. Wisconsin Ave. This will be the only event occurring in the Hilton Hotel. The remainder of the program will occur in the Baird Center, which adjoins the Hilton Milwaukee Hotel.

Friday, Oct. 16 — Saturday, Oct. 17
Registration will reopen on Friday at 8 a.m. in the Baird Center Ballroom foyer and registration will continue throughout the conference.

The formal convention programming begins in the Baird Center Ballroom on Friday at 9 a.m. and continues through Saturday evening.

Sunday, Oct. 18
On Sunday morning, the membership and State Representatives meetings will take place in the Baird Center Ballroom, ending around noon.

A tentative program schedule will be published soon. To see the list of 2026 national convention speakers, turn to Page 3 or visit the convention speakers page here: ffrf.us/con26speakers.

Registration

Registration for the convention is \$100 for FFRF members, \$105 for companions accompanying members, and \$160 for nonmembers (or save by joining FFRF when you register). High school students and younger may register for free, and college students may register at the discounted rate of just \$25. To register, complete and return the form on the right, or register online at ffrf.us/con26register.

T-shirt

Preorder your commemorative 2026 Convention Logo T-shirt when you register (either online or print). The T-shirts will be available for pick up at the convention.

Optional Group Meals

Three optional group meals will be offered this year: Friday dinner, the Saturday Non-Prayer Breakfast and Saturday dinner. Additionally, FFRF will offer three complimentary receptions: A Thursday afternoon reception (4–6 p.m.) including light hors d’oeuvres and a cash bar, a complimentary Friday morning continental breakfast, and a complimentary Friday evening dessert reception with hot beverages. The Hilton Milwaukee hotel also offers five in-house restaurants for your convenience.

Friday Dinner

Chicken: Citrus & herb-marinated airline chicken with oven-roasted tomato and onion jam, roasted garlic confit, fingerling potatoes and seasonal roasted vegetables with rosemary jus (GF). \$65

Pork: Roasted garlic-crusted pork tenderloin with Door County cherry glaze,



This is the logo that will appear on the special convention T-shirts, available to order on the registration form.

brown sugar-whipped sweet potatoes and charred asparagus (GF). \$65

Vegan/Veggie: Roasted eggplant & squash ratatouille with tomato and saffron purée, toasted pine nuts and aged balsamic (contains nuts, GF, V, VEG). \$65

Saturday Non-Prayer Breakfast
Regular: Fluffy scrambled egg bake with bacon, spinach and wild mushrooms; served with crispy fingerling potato hash and thick cut Applewood smoked bacon (GF). \$40

Vegan: Chickpea tostada. Blackened chickpea and tofu tinga tostada with refried beans, avocado, pico de gallo and micro cilantro; served with toasted breakfast potatoes (GF, V, VEG). \$40

Veggie: Egg white frittata. Feta cheese, spinach and oven-dried tomatoes; served with a side of sweet potato hash \$40 (GF, V).

Saturday Dinner
Chicken: Dijon roasted airline chicken breast with pretzel crust, whole grain mustard cream sauce, pickled mustard seed, garlic whipped Yukon potatoes and haricot vert tossed in a lemon vinaigrette (GF). \$65

Fish: Miso & honey-glazed salmon, with lemon grass-scented basmati and forbidden rice, tamari-glazed bok choy and stir fry vegetables (GF). \$65

Vegan/Veggie: Pan-seared roasted cauliflower steak with pecan and caper salsa over housemade lemon herb roasted garlic hummus and single estate olive oil (GF, V, VEG). \$65

Hotel Booking

FFRF’s discounted hotel room block will be at the Hilton Milwaukee, 509 W. Wisconsin Ave., which is connected to the Baird Center via ADA-accessible skywalk.

We encourage you to book your room soon. Reservations must be made on or before Tuesday, Sept. 22 (unless the block sells out before then), to receive FFRF’s discounted rate of \$229 plus taxes per night.

If you need an ADA-accessible room, please indicate your needs when making your reservation. Check-in time is 4 p.m., and check-out time is 11 a.m.

Book your room online or by phone:
Online: ffrf.us/con26reserve.
Phone: 800-774-1500. **State that you are with the Freedom From Religion Foundation** and provide our group code “90N” when booking.

Cancellation policy: One night’s room rate plus tax will be charged for all no-shows and for reservations canceled within 48 hours of arrival.

Find out more at ffrf.us/con26.
We look forward to seeing you in Milwaukee in October!

FFRF

National Convention

MILWAUKEE

OCTOBER 15–18, 2026

CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.us/con26

REGISTRATION FEES	Number Registering	Cost
Member	___	\$100 \$___
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)	___	\$105 \$___
Child (High school or under accompanying registrant)	___	Free \$___
College Student with ID	___	\$25 \$___
Non-member	___	\$160 \$___
☐ Or, I will join FFRF for \$40 (and save \$20)	___	\$140 \$___

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

No programming will occur during group meals. Meals are offered for socializing and convenience. FFRF does not make any money on the meals, and charges the hotel’s prices which includes a 23% service charge. Please specify your ADA needs and dietary requirements below.

Thursday, October 15th

Thursday Afternoon Workshops [must indicate to attend] ___ Free

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Evening Welcome Reception [must indicate to attend] ___ Free

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Friday, October 16th

Friday Dinner (all selections are gluten free) ___ \$65 \$___

Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Pork ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Pork ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

Saturday, October 17th

Saturday Nonprayer Breakfast (all selections are gluten free) ___ \$40 \$___

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

Saturday Dinner (all selections are gluten free) ___ \$65 \$___

Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

☐ I am adding a donation to sponsor student convention scholarships. \$___

Quantity

Cost

Optional Commemorative 2026 Convention Logo T-shirt (Cream)

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

Size(s)_____ ▶ Total \$_____

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

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

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

Name of Registrant 1

Pronouns (optional)

Name of Registrant 2

Pronouns (optional)

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

Address

City

State / ZIP

Phone*

Email*

Credit Card Number

Expiration Date / Security Code

Billing Name / Signature

*Contact information for in-house use only

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