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helps keep FFRF
in the public eye

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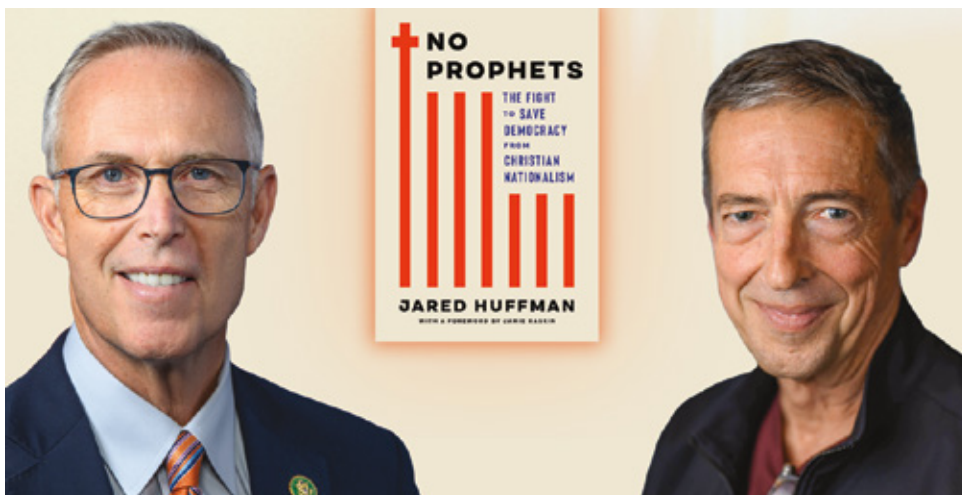
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Vol. 43 No. 8

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October 2026

Rep. Huffman, Reagan talk Christian nationalism



‘The Fight to Save Democracy’

On Aug. 15, FFRF held an online event with Rep. Jared Huffman, about his new book, “No Prophets: The Fight to Save Democracy from Christian Nationalism.” He was interviewed by Ron Reagan, an “unabashed atheist” and longtime FFRF supporter. (Both will be speaking at FFRF’s convention in Milwaukee in October.) The event was moderated by FFRF’s Mickey Dollens.

The following is a condensed and edited version of the full conversation. To watch the interview, go to ffrf.us/huffmanbook.

Mickey Dollens: Thank you for joining us from across the country for this special conversation hosted by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. I’m Mickey Dollens, FFRF’s regional government affairs man-

ager and state representative from Oklahoma’s 93rd House District.

Christian nationalism is no longer a fringe concern. Its influence shows up in our legislatures, our public schools, our courts, and throughout our federal government. At FFRF, confronting that threat and defending the constitutional principle that government must remain secular is central to our work.

That’s also the subject of a much-awaited, exciting new book by one of the nation’s most prominent advocates for the separation of state and church.

“No Prophets: The Fight to Save De-

See Democracy on page 8

Religious statues injunction upheld in Massachusetts

The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court on Aug. 20 in a landmark ruling upheld a preliminary injunction blocking the installation of two 10-foot-tall religious statues outside the Quincy public safety building entrance.

The court unanimously upheld the trial court’s determination that a group of Quincy residents and taxpayers are likely to succeed in their claim that the statues depicting St. Michael the Archangel and St. Florian violate the Massachusetts Constitution’s requirement of government neutrality toward religion. The injunction will remain in place while litigation proceeds in Norfolk Superior Court. The plaintiffs are represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and Cloherty & Steinberg LLP.

In its ruling, the court affirmed that installing the statues as the sole adornment on the municipal building “could be viewed by the public as endorsement of a particular religion, and the subordination of others,” especially because “they stand



See Statues on page 9

Gaylor testifies in support of Thomas Paine memorial



FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor on Sept. 2 testifies in front of a congressional subcommittee regarding a proposed Thomas Paine memorial in Washington, D.C. In the background, left, is Zeno Frudakis, the sculptor of the Paine statue. The bill passed on Sept. 15.

A House subcommittee heard testimony on Sept. 2 from FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor in support of a bill to finally erect a memorial to Thomas Paine in Washington, D.C.

On Sept. 15, the House Natural Resources Committee unanimously approved the bill. It now moves to the full House for consideration.

Reps. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., and Victoria Spartz, R-Ind., have co-sponsored HR 9600, the Common Sense 250 Act of 2026, to place the memorial in a location reserved for commemorative works of preeminent historical and lasting significance to the United States. In her capacity as a founding member and secretary of the Thomas Paine Memorial Association, Gaylor testified before the House Natural Resources Subcommittee on Federal Lands that Paine not only meets that criterion but asked, “Is there anyone who better meets that definition? Without Paine, there would be no United States of America — he named our very country.”

Gaylor’s testimony traced Paine’s role in the nation’s founding to soon after his arrival from England at Benjamin Franklin’s invitation in 1774. “Common Sense,” published 250 years ago this January, sold an estimated 500,000 copies when the 13 colonies held 2.5 million people. Paine relinquished the copyright and gave the proceeds to the Continental Army, then enlisted as a private in 1776 and marched with George Washington through that first winter campaign. The experience produced the first of the “Crisis Papers” (“These are the times that try men’s souls”) in 1776, which Washington ordered read aloud to soldiers to keep up morale.

“Is there a better or more meaningful way for Congress to commemorate our nation’s 250th anniversary than by ensuring this honor for the Revolution’s principal champion for independence?” Gaylor asked the subcommittee. “This memorial will honor our

See Thomas Paine on page 9

PR director keeps FFRF in public eye

Name: Sara Tetzloff
Where and when I was born: Central Wisconsin in the early '80s. I grew up on a farm in the bluffs, which was always full of adventure. . . and very little parental supervision.
Education: B.A. from UW-Madison, MBA from UW-Whitewater.
Family: My given family is shrinking, sadly, but my chosen family is growing! I have two kids I'm trying to shape into good humans, and a couple of pups with significantly lower expectations.
How I came to work at FFRF: I was perusing LinkedIn, as one does, and saw this really cool career opportunity, but the organization wasn't listed. When I had my screener interview, I was ecstatic to learn it was for FFRF! A few interviews later, I was thrilled to be offered the position.
What I do here: My title is marketing & PR director, but sometimes I feel like a professional plate spinner. If you see an FFRF billboard, podcast ad, social post, campaign, media story or logo out in the wild, there's a decent chance I've had my fingerprints on it. I've also helped the organization tackle strategic planning so we can continue our important work for years to come!
What I like best about it: I feel like I'm making an impact on issues I care deeply about. This job requires a lot of creative problem-solving, which I enjoy. I also really like managing a team of young professionals. I want people who work for me to leave better equipped for whatever they want to do next — even if "next" eventually takes them somewhere else.
What gets old about it: Vendor solicitations, because I'm terrible at saying no. Threats, for obvious reasons. Also, moderating comments from people on the wrong side of history.
I spend a lot of time thinking about: How FFRF can serve as many freethink-



Sara Tetzloff

ers as possible, not just through our legal work but through education and building community. I think a lot about whether I'm leaving the organizations, communities and people I care about stronger than I found them.

I spend little if any time thinking about: The Roman Empire . . . Oh, is that not what you meant? I also don't spend much time accepting "we've always done it this way" as an argument.

My religious upbringing was: Catholic. (I attended CCD classes and was confirmed.)

My doubts about religion started: Early on! Maybe as early as elementary school. I found the stories entertaining, but they always seemed like fiction to me. I never had a deep-seated fear or guilt of burning in hell. There wasn't really a crisis of faith because I'm not sure I ever had much faith to lose.

Things I like: Music of all kinds! I'm heavily involved in my community theater, whether it be on stage or behind the scenes. My next show is "Sister Act," which makes me feel a little rebellious! Apparently leaving Catholicism only to



Sara performs as Mrs. Teavee in "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" as part of the Sun Prairie (Wis.) Civic Theatre.

eventually work for FFRF and then voluntarily spend my evenings dressed as a nun is the character arc I was meant to have.

I love to give back to the community — I help every year with my local Pride Fest event and Joey's Song, a benefit concert for epilepsy research. I also like all the "granny hobbies" (e.g., crocheting, sewing, gardening, canning, baking, etc.). I enjoy dance, reading, movies and watching my favorite "marshmallow" TV series on repeat.

My favorite snacks are popcorn, chips & salsa and sparkling water, and I love a cold, crisp Diet Coke.

Things I smite: Cruelty masquerading as conviction, willful ignorance, bigotry — you know, the usual. And lotus seed pods. (I'm a tryphophobe to the max)

In my golden years: I'll do whatever I feel like doing, damn it. . . ideally with a passport, good friends, my family nearby and absolutely no one asking me to join a Zoom meeting.



We Dissent is a monthly podcast by secular women, who also happen to be powerhouse constitutional attorneys at major U.S. secular organizations, including FFRF.

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

Join us @ we-dissent.org



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Note to members

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

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

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

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

In order to do that, follow these simple steps:

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

Help carry forward FFRF's vital work into the future. Create a **WILL FOR FREE** using FFRF's trusted partner at FreeWill.



Create a Freethought Legacy Today.

FFRF FOREVER!

Plan for the future & protect the values you care about.



Last call!

Get ready for FFRF’s Milwaukee convention!

It’s finally time to pack your bags and make your way to Milwaukee for FFRF’s national convention from Oct. 15-18!

About 650 FFRF members have signed up for the convention at the Baird Center. (You can pre-register until Sept. 28 at ffrf.org/convention2026. You may also sign up at the door, although no group meals may be purchased at that time. You will also be on your own for finding lodging since the deadline has passed for the FFRF block of rooms at the Milwaukee Hilton.)

The conference begins on Thursday, Oct. 15, with “early-bird workshops” during the day, a complimentary reception afterwards and an opening-evening speech by Rep. Jared Huffman.

Other convention speakers on that Friday and Saturday include Percival Everett, Jennifer Welch, Kate Cohen, Jim Obergefell, Peter Isely, Randi Weingarten, Forrest Valkai and the “unabashed atheist” Ron Reagan, among several others.

The 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, the drawing for “clean” (pre-“In God We Trust”) currency and complimentary receptions.

We can’t wait to see you there!



FFRF’s 2026 national convention will be held at the Baird Center in downtown Milwaukee.

‘Underzealous’

FFRF’s new show highlights Gen-Z, millennial nonbelief

FFRF has a new show focusing on the experiences of Gen-Z and millennial atheists, agnostics and other nonreligious folks.

The show features casual discussion of the specific nonreligious beliefs and experiences of invited guests. Season One covers topics such as creating your own traditions to replace religious ones; the intersection of atheism and sex education; atheist views on the concepts of good and evil; finding nonreligious community; leaving “reddit atheism” — and more!

FFRF’s Digital Media Manager Rowan Hahn hosts the show that focuses on the lives and opinions of everyday people, and of course, some of FFRF’s staff.

The first few episodes are available on FFRF’s YouTube. The show is also available on FFRF’s app, FreethoughtTV. The first features Daniel, FFRF’s legal intake assistant, who talks about swapping traditions from his evangelical church with nonreligious ones, such as replacing prayer with meditation. The second episode features Key, who grew up in a small Texas town, and whose atheist beliefs and experiences there led to their strong support of comprehensive sex education.

Subsequent episodes will be premiering every other Wednesday.



Ark. families ask court to block Commandments law

FFRF and other groups, representing 10 Arkansas families, urged an appellate court on Sept. 22 to uphold an injunction that stops the implementation of a Ten Commandments state law.

Arkansas’ Act 573 requires displays of the Ten Commandments in every public school classroom and library. The attorneys for the multifaith and nonreligious families, including FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Sam Grover, argued before the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that the injunction is necessary to protect the religious freedom of these families under the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment.

Besides FFRF, the organizations representing the families in *Stinson v. Fayetteville School District No. 1* are the American Civil Liberties Union of Arkansas, the ACLU, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, with the law firm Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel.

The legal contingent issued the following statement:

“Arkansas families — not politicians — have the right to decide how and when their children engage with religion. Act 573 tramples families’ fundamental religious-freedom rights by forcing a government-selected version of the Ten Commandments on children for nearly every hour of the school day, throughout their entire public education. The district court correctly recognized that public schools exist to educate, not to impose the state’s preferred religious doctrine on children. We are proud to support these courageous families and will continue defending the constitutional promise of religious freedom for students and parents of every faith — and those who practice no religion at all.”

FFRF: Impeach Hegseth

FFRF is denouncing Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s latest effort to transform the U.S. military into a vehicle for his brand of Christian nationalism.

Hegseth kicked off what the Pentagon is calling the “Send Me Tour” during a visit in mid-September to Texas A&M University, where he addressed the university’s Corps of Cadets.

“This is our first stop on what we are calling the SEND ME TOUR,” Hegseth told the cadets. “If you know your Book of Isaiah, Chapter 6, Verse 8, the Lord said, ‘Whom shall I send?’ Isaiah says, ‘Lord, I AM HERE. SEND ME.’”

Hegseth then explicitly connected the biblical passage to military service.

“For 250 years of this country, there have been men and women who raised their right hand and said, ‘SEND ME,’” Hegseth stated, before referring to Americans fighting the Redcoats, communists and “Islamists.”

FFRF emphasizes there is something deeply wrong with the nation’s highest-ranking defense official using the machinery and prestige of the U.S. armed forces to recast military service as answering a biblical call from God.

“Hegseth seems to have forgotten that he oversees the U.S. military — not a Christian crusade,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

FFRF points out that a biblical deity is not sending service members into battle; they signed up to serve their secular country. FFRF also points out that 18 percent of active military members are atheist/agnostic, and another 32 percent have no religious affiliation, according to research, putting the “Nones” overall at half of current military members!

The “Send Me Tour” is not an isolated incident, but only the latest in a pattern of Hegseth misusing his government position to promote an explicitly Christian conception of the United States and its military.

Freethought Today Crossword

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

Answers on page 21Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

Freethought Today Cryptogram

L Z D T E H A R D J I U L Z L H Y G O ' K I H E R Y U K L Z G L

D P D E O H V D A D R U D P D K L Z D O Z G P D L Z D E U Q

Z L L H D M T E D K K L Z D U E H T U V U H V G V Y Z G P D

H L Z D E K R U K L D V L H U L.

— A E U G V B H M

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: O => Y. 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.

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

Freethought Now — *blog*
freethoughtnow.org

Freethought Radio — *weekly show*
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Secular Spotlight — *YouTube show*
ffrf.us/youtube

We Dissent — *monthly legal podcast*
wedissent.org



Spooky



Lifetime Members David and Susan Lofers posed for this photo outside the decorated-for-Halloween Chaffee Art Center in Rutland, Vt. “One of these tombstones in particular resonated with us [despite the misspelled ‘atheist’] and might be relatable to readers of FFRF,” they wrote.

IN THE NEWS

Michigan city sued over Muslim holiday displays

A federal lawsuit filed Sept. 17 alleges the city of Dearborn, Mich., spent thousands of taxpayer dollars on public displays celebrating Muslim holidays while ignoring a Christian resident’s repeated requests for Easter and Passover recognition.

The lawsuit by Margot Cleveland, a journalist for The Federalist, accused the city and its mayor, Democrat Abdullah Hammoud, of favoring the Muslim faith over other religious beliefs in a city with a population of over 100,000 people that is majority Arab American.

The city responded by saying it “has a longstanding commitment to serving all residents fairly and equitably, regardless of faith or background.”

“Our city has increasingly come under attack precisely because of its welcoming nature and the diversity of the people who proudly call Dearborn home,” the statement said. “That will not change who we are. Dearborn will continue to uphold the rights and dignity of every resident and remain a city where everyone is treated with fairness, respect, and equal protection under the law.”

The lawsuit sought unspecified damages and asked a judge to find that the city had violated the Constitution and order it to comply with the First Amendment and the Fourteenth Amendment.

According to the lawsuit, the city of Dearborn last year spent \$1,500 of public money on Ramadan banners and \$5,000 on a crescent-moon symbol displayed in its Peace Park while its police department sold Ramadan-themed shirts bearing the official department emblem.

Yet, the lawsuit said, the city failed to mark the approach of the Christian holiday of Easter and the Jewish holiday of Passover in similar fashion. When Cleveland complained and asked that other religious holidays be honored, she was repeatedly ignored, the lawsuit said.

LifeWise expands across Northwest public schools

A controversial off-campus Christian education program for public school students, which has sparked conversation about the intersection of church and state, is gaining traction across the Pacific Northwest.

The national program, LifeWise Academy, is growing especially fast in Washington, now offered in 14 schools with teams working to establish the program in 26 other school districts, said LifeWise state director Alise Morrissey. And local community members — 50 local signatures are required as the first step to launch the program — have shown interest in establishing it in 245 of the estimated 295 school districts.

The bible-based curriculum, which officials said is open to all regardless of faith, takes children out of class during the school day for religious education. Critics argue it incentivizes children to recruit others to its classes and has elicited worry about the proper separation between church and state.

Last August, LifeWise estimated it would serve nearly 100,000 students across 1,100 schools in 34 states during the 2025-2026 school year. The program has grown exponentially since it launched its first pilot program in 2019.

No Paine, no gain



FFRF Lifetime Member Margaret Downey, who is president of the Thomas Paine Memorial Association working to erect a monument to Paine in Washington, D.C., is pictured giving SNL alum, comedian (“Letting Go of God”) and actress Julia Sweeney a Paine bobblehead in appreciation of Julia’s volunteer work for the association. You can purchase your own Paine bobblehead (complete with a beautiful keepsake box) from FFRF. All proceeds will go to the Paine association to aid in the long overdue memorial in D.C. for this forgotten Founder, intellectual revolutionary, American Revolution pamphleteer and visionary and author of “The Age of Reason.” Check out ffrf.org/shop under “Gifts & Accessories.”

Satanic Temple sues Iowa over Capitol ban

The ACLU of Iowa filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of The Satanic Temple Aug. 13 alleging the state has blocked the temple’s rights to free speech, nondiscrimination and religious exercise.

The lawsuit, filed in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Iowa, stems from the state’s repeated refusal to grant permission for the group to stage what the ACLU of Iowa calls “a family-friendly winter holiday event” in the Iowa Capitol rotunda in the manner of other religious and civic groups.

The lawsuit asks the court to declare that state officials’ denials have violated The Satanic Temple’s constitutional rights under the First and 14th Amendments, as well as their rights under the Iowa Civil Rights Act and Iowa Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

It seeks a court order requiring the Iowa Department of Administrative Services specifically to allow The Satanic Temple to host a holiday event at the Capitol this December, as well as unspecified damages for alleged past violations.

The state of Iowa has yet to file a response to the lawsuit.

Texas Lt. Gov.: Punish schools for lewd books

Texas Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick on Aug. 19 vowed to pass legislation punishing public schools that do not remove books with graphic content from their shelves by knocking them down in the state’s annual school performance ratings, which the state uses to seize control of underperforming districts.

Patrick said school boards and administrators have not been following a 2025 law aimed at weeding out lewd books from the shelves in Texas’ more than 9,000 campuses attended by some 5.5 million schoolchildren.

The law from last year, Senate Bill 13, granted school boards the authority to approve and remove books based on complaints they receive, such as those from parents and activist groups. Before, those powers largely belonged to school librarians.

Patrick confirmed that schools could be docked an entire letter grade — going from an “A” to a “B” rating, for example — if they were found to have a single book on their library shelves that should not be there.

Court: Dad can restrict child’s church attendance

The Maine Supreme Judicial Court ruled on Sept. 1 that a Portland District Court judge was correct in giving a father the power to decide whether his daughter should not attend an evangelical church following a clash with the girl’s mother over her religious upbringing.

The decision keeps in place the lower court’s ruling on a 2024 dispute between Matthew Bradeen and Emily Bickford regarding the religious upbringing of their daughter, who was then 11 years old. Bickford had been bringing her daughter to multiple services a week at Calvary Chapel Greater Portland.

Bradeen argued the church was a “dangerous and harmful environment” that had caused his daughter to suffer from anxiety. He said she had a panic attack after hearing the church’s teachings

on the rapture, a belief that Christians will join God at the end of the world and nonbelievers will be left behind.

The lower court ruled in his favor, saying some of the church’s language was “psychologically damaging the child” because of how it characterized her father, and the state’s high court affirmed this decision.

Court: Pastor can’t block recording about abuse

Recorded statements of a Phoenix pastor admitting to kissing and touching a child can be used as evidence in the pastor’s criminal case, the Arizona Supreme Court has ruled.

On Aug. 12, the high court released its decision regarding a case involving Mario Rodriguez-Ramirez, who was arrested in 2021 for allegedly abusing a child.

Before his arrest, Rodriguez-Ramirez allegedly told another pastor he had secretly watched a child shower, as well as hugged, touched and kissed the girl. The other pastor recorded the conversation without Rodriguez-Ramirez’s knowledge or consent. The other pastor shared the recording with the child’s family and the family subsequently contacted law enforcement, court records show

The unanimous opinion issued rejected Rodriguez-Ramirez’s argument that a recording of him should remain confidential because of Arizona’s “clergy-penitent privilege.” The privilege protects someone who confesses to clergy by allowing the confessor to refuse to disclose confidential information to law enforcement and the courts — and by preventing clergy from disclosing it, too.

The Supreme Court justices disagreed with the defendant’s argument, ruling that the statements made failed to meet the legal requirements for a protected confession.

Thousands of churches in Europe to be abandoned

There are about 20,000 churches across Germany that are expected to be abandoned in the next five to 10 years and thousands more across Western Europe are expected to become vacant in the coming years as their societies’ connection to Christianity wanes.

There is no central plan for what to do with the buildings, but secular cultural organizations, artists, preservationists and city planners are looking for ways to repurpose them for the benefit of their cities and towns — whether as health care centers, bookstores or spaces for the arts.

“Every day, another church is sold,” said Lilian Grootswagers-Theuns, the president of the advisory board for Future for Religious Heritage, a Belgium-based nonprofit network that focuses on empty religious buildings. She told the New York Times that “This is happening everywhere in Europe — in Germany, Sweden, Spain and Italy.”

“It’s already going very fast,” she said. “But now we’re going fast-forward. Now, there’s a tsunami coming.”

Churches, once central to European cultural life, are typically situated in the heart of a city and built to last. “Before you even had the nations, you had a European tradition going back to the fourth century of having a church for each city, each village,” said Barbara Welzel, a professor at TU Dortmund University in Germany.

FFRF VICTORIES

Illinois district removes religious Facebook post

The Brussels CUSD 42 school district in Illinois removed an explicitly Christian Easter message from the district’s official Facebook page after FFRF intervened.

A concerned community member informed FFRF that the school district posted on Facebook an Easter message that states, “Happy Easter to our Brussels CUSD school community! This season of renewal reminds us of the hope, strength and promise found in new beginnings. As we reflect on the meaning of this time, we are grateful for the students, families, staff and community members who make our school such a supportive and caring place.”

The post included a praying hands emoji, as well as a photo which included imagery of Christian crosses and the tomb from which Christians believe Jesus emerged on Easter Sunday.

“The district should strive to remain welcoming and inclusive of all students and families in all aspects, including its official social media accounts, regardless of which religion students and families do or do not believe in,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote to the district.

After receiving FFRF’s letter, the district removed the post, according to Superintendent Pam Long in an email.

FFRF ends Georgia school district’s prayer walks

FFRF has successfully halted a Georgia public school district’s promotion of Christian “prayer walks.”

A local student informed FFRF that Laurens County Schools had organized and promoted a “prayer walk” every year before the start of school. Per a promotional post from the district’s official Facebook account, the 2026 devotional gatherings occurred on Aug. 5 and 6 at each of the district’s schools. The flyer for the events invited students and families to “join us for a time of WORSHIP and PRAYER as we walk the halls of our campus and each school to pray over the staff and students who will enter these buildings.”

The student who contacted FFRF explained the alienating effect of the district’s religious promotion: “I go to this school district because it is public, free, and doesn’t/shouldn’t officially endorse

any religion. I constantly feel uncomfortable because I follow a spiritual path different from everybody else. ... I just wish I could get my education without having religion shoved down my throat.”

“The district displayed blatant favoritism toward religion over nonreligion and Christianity over all other faiths by using official social media to invite the entire school community to participate in school-sponsored Christian prayer walks through each of the District’s schools,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to Superintendent Otha Hall.

Thankfully, the district’s legal representative confirmed that the district has taken corrective action.

“The social media post referenced in your letter has been removed,” Aparish Paul recently responded. “Additionally, district administration has reviewed with school administrators issues and obligations arising from the Establishment Clause, including an appearance of endorsing or promoting religion or religious activity.”

Religious social media post taken down in Kan.

Smoky Valley Public Schools in Kansas has complied with FFRF’s request to remove a religious reference from a post on the district’s official Facebook account.

A community member reported that on Aug. 4, the official Smokey Valley USD 400 Facebook account shared a post referencing biblical scripture. The post, which was celebrating a new funding increase, stated in part, “Scripture reminds us in Psalm 127:1, ‘Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain.’ We recognize that this blessing is not ours alone, but a reflection of God’s grace working through a unified and faithful community. We are truly blessed beyond words.”

The person who contacted FFRF further explained that, “Although I’m happy [the district] will receive additional funding, I was shocked to see the religious sentiment from the official USD 400 Facebook page.”

FFRF wrote to the district, requesting that it remove or edit the post to ensure that it refrains from promoting religion on official social media in the future.

“While it is understandable that the district wished to celebrate increased funding via social media announcement, referenc-

ing religion in said announcement needlessly marginalizes students and families who are nonreligious, as well as those who belong to minority faiths,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

After receiving the letter, the district Superintendent Quentin Breese confirmed that proper action had been taken. “As requested, the post has been edited,” he wrote in an email.

Ga. superintendent won’t sermonize at work events

FFRF has made certain that future staff events in the Douglas County School System in Douglasville, Ga., will not be treated like church.

FFRF received reports from numerous school district employees regarding proselytizing that took place at the mandatory July 28 convocation. Reports, photographs and a video provided to FFRF show Superintendent Trent North sermonizing employees in his official capacity throughout the convocation. FFRF was told that during the multihour event, North made “numerous remarks about God” and said that he believes God sent him to “save Douglas County Schools.” He reportedly preached to staff, quoted bible verses, told employees that “[you] need to learn to trust the Lord,” and that “we don’t need church just on a Sunday, we need to teach our students to worship any day of the week.”

Gospel singers also performed religious songs throughout the convocation that were reportedly explicitly Christian. FFRF’s complainants stated that North would sermonize between gospel songs to emphasize the religious points being made.

One employee stated that as the convocation progressed, it “became increasingly more Christian and religious” and that North’s remarks over the course of the event reminded them of a pastor. They “tried to tune it out” but “became increasingly more uncomfortable.”

FFRF wrote to the district asking it to put a stop to the proselytizing and religious coercion of employees.

“In this case, [North], and thus DCSS, displayed clear favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity over all other faiths, by preaching to employees in [North’s] official capacity during the convocation,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to North.

FFRF is pleased to report that the district has changed course to be more inclusive.

“I discussed and explained with the superintendent the principle of separation of church and state specifically addressing the First Amendment as it relates to Free Exercise Clause and the perception of promoting or inhibiting a particular religion during staff meetings,” the district’s legal representative responded. “I am confident that the superintendent is now cognizant of this matter and has assured me this will not occur again.”

Okla. school district to cancel prayer walk

FFRF has convinced the Muskogee Public Schools system in Oklahoma to cancel a proposed “prayer walk” at a district middle school.

A district parent had informed FFRF that on Aug. 12, Muskogee 6th and 7th Grade Academy was planning to host a school-sponsored “prayer walk.” The academy distributed a flyer to parents promoting the event and inviting the community to gather at the school at 11 a.m. on that day for the prayer walk. An academy employee also sent parents an official message inviting them to “join us as we pray for our students, staff and families for what we know will be an amazing school year!”

FFRF insisted the district investigate the situation and ensure that the school refrain from organizing and promoting religious events going forward.

“Here, the academy is displaying blatant favoritism toward religion over nonreligion by organizing, promoting and encouraging student and family attendance at an on-campus prayer walk,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

Superintendent Jarod Mendenhall responded via email confirming that the district took corrective action.

“After reviewing the circumstances, the district has directed that the prayer walk be canceled immediately,” he wrote. “We have also directed that any social media posts promoting the event be removed and that the school communicate with parents regarding the cancellation.”

Mendenhall also verified that future school-sponsored activities would remain in compliance with the First Amendment and that the district would not organize or promote religious activities.

THEY SAID WHAT?

You could take everything from me, but you can’t take my God. I’m willing to be martyred for the faith.

Pastor Sarah Lucas of Foundations For Nations Church, located in the Wind River Indian Reservation in Wyoming, after disparaging the Northern Arapaho Tribe members and stating that Jesus and Christianity are the only way. “He’s enough,” she had said. “It’s not Jesus plus. It’s Jesus everything. He’s everything.” The tribe wants Lucas off the reservation for her remarks. “Our traditions deserve the same dignity and respect as any other faith,” said tribe member Christian Wassana.

The Friendly Atheist, 7-20-26

If Kamala [Harris] had won the presidency, there would have been basically zero evangelicals in the White House administration. . . Our vision of what the intersection of theology and politics should be, our theopolitical vision, is closer to getting a hearing.

Doug Wilson, the extreme pastor who believes the United States should be a Christian theocracy and that women shouldn’t be allowed to vote, in a wide-ranging interview with NPR.

NPR, 7-7-26



Sean Duffy

My job is to get you into heaven, not Harvard.

Secretary of Transportation Sean Duffy, talking about how he doesn’t want his daughter to attend Harvard University because of its “woke” background and policies.

New York Times, 8-25-26

Oh, it’s just “Obey God.”

Jennifer Hegseth, wife of Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, about the only Hegseth family rule. It has recently been

divulged that she breaks security protocol by attending many Pentagon meetings. She and her family attend Christ Church Washington D.C., which is part of Doug Wilson’s Community of Reformed Evangelical Churches, which claim the U.S. is a Christian nation and advocate that only the head of household should vote. Jennifer, who had an 18-year career at Fox News, met Pete there when he joined Fox as a contributor in 2014. Pete, on his second marriage with children, Jennifer in her first marriage with children, began an affair that led to divorces and their current marriage.

New York Times, 8-23-26

America needs to shut down all mosques and ban Islam. Bet you won’t repost this.

Dave Ament, mayor of New Berlin, Wis., in an Aug. 16 Facebook post he made private after an outcry. He also shared on social media text that said, “If you vote for a Muslim for elected office

in this country, you are a TRAITOR. You can’t convince me otherwise.”

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, 8-25-26

Every single Muslim holding public office in America is a Trojan horse, and a threat to both national security and our republic. We refuse to be silent.

Rep. Nancy Mace, seemingly responding to U.S. Senate candidate Abdul El-Sayed’s Democratic primary victory in Michigan. Mace was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Theocrat of the Week” on Aug. 14.

X, 8-7-26

I’m trying to focus on doing as much of God’s work as possible right now. And if that leads to the end times, OK.

Vice President JD Vance, in an interview with podcaster and evangelical Christian influencer Bryce Crawford. Vance was named FFRF Action Fund “Theocrat of the Week” on Sept. 11.

YouTube, 9-6-26

Supreme Court urged to hear Texas Commandments case

More than two dozen Texas families are asking the U.S. Supreme Court to hear their challenge to a state law that requires public schools to post a Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in every classroom.

The nonreligious, Unitarian Universalist, Christian, Jewish, Hindu and Bahá'í families challenging the Texas law attend 22 school districts across the state and are represented by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union of Texas, the ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, with Simpson Thacher & Bartlett LLP serving as pro bono counsel.

The request urges the court to protect students' and parents' religious freedom by blocking Texas Senate Bill 10 (SB 10),

ensuring that families — not politicians — have the right to decide what role religion plays in their lives. The petition seeks review of lower court rulings in two separate but similar cases: *Nathan v. Alamo Heights Independent School District* and *Cribbs Ringer v. Comal Independent School District*.

Under SB 10, Texas public schools must permanently display a state-mandated version of the Ten Commandments, drawn from the Protestant King James Bible, in a “conspicuous” place in each classroom, from kindergarten through 12th grade. The families challenging SB 10 object to the law because the displays will pressure children to conform to the state’s favored religious beliefs and interfere with parents’ right to guide their children’s religious instruction.

The Supreme Court filing, a joint petition for a writ of certiorari in both cases, follows an April decision by the en banc 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals allowing the state-selected version of the Ten Commandments to go up in the plaintiffs’ classrooms. By a narrowly decided vote, the 5th Circuit ruled that SB 10 does not violate either the Establishment or Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment — despite a 1980 Supreme Court case striking down a nearly identical Kentucky law.

“By requiring displays of religious doctrine in every classroom, the state is interfering with our family’s decisions about how our children engage with religion,” says plaintiff Nichole Manning, a Dallas-area atheist who is raising her children in a nonreligious tradition that

gives them the space and autonomy to develop their own beliefs about religion. “As a parent, I intentionally choose to have my children attend public school because I prefer an educational environment without any religious affiliation. In a diverse public school environment, all students should be treated with equal respect, regardless of their religious beliefs, or lack thereof.”

“The First Commandment, dictating which god must be worshipped, is the antithesis of our First Amendment,” says Annie Laurie Gaylor, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. “It is not the government’s role to daily expose young children to a coercive display of one religion’s set of religious edicts in our public schools. Our public schools exist to educate, not to proselytize.”

FFRF ON THE ROAD



Photo by Patrick Horst

FFRF Attorney Chris Line speaks at the Kentucky Freethought Convention in Lexington, Ky., on Sept. 12. His presentation, “The Christian Nationalist Playbook: How We Defend Our Freedoms and Win,” examined the Christian nationalist movement and FFRF’s ongoing work to defend the separation of state and church.



FFRF Legal Director Patrick Elliott has a little fun standing behind the “A Masterpiece of Evolution” photo op during a Minnesota Atheists Meetup in Bloomington, Minn., on Aug. 23. The event was titled, “Apostate’s Picnic,” and included a “debaptism ceremony” performed by Secular Celebrant Steve Adams. Patrick spoke to the group about FFRF’s most recent legal actions and his personal journey to atheism.



At the Levy Senior Center in Evanston, Ill., FFRF Attorney Chris Line gave a talk Aug. 24 on state/church separation and the growing threat of Christian nationalism. “I spoke to an eager and impressively knowledgeable group of seniors about the challenges facing the separation of religion and government, the work FFRF is doing to defend this foundational principle, and what we can all do to push back against Christian nationalism,” Chris writes. “The audience was highly engaged, with thoughtful questions and a lively discussion afterward.”



FFRF Action Fund attorneys Chris Line and Ryan Jayne traveled to Oklahoma City, where they tabled at the Oklahoma State School Boards Association’s Education Leadership Conference.

Democracy

Continued from page 1

mocracy from Christian Nationalism,” has arrived in bookstores. We’re especially pleased that the book’s author, U.S. Rep. Jared Huffman, chose FFRF and our members and supporters for this special conversation ahead of its release.

Rep. Huffman represents California’s 2nd Congressional District and the U.S. House of Representatives. He is co-founder and co-chair of the Congressional Free-thought Caucus, which promotes public policy based on reason, science and moral values while protecting the secular character of our government.

Interviewing Rep. Jared Huffman today is someone who probably needs very little introduction to an FFRF audience. Ron Reagan is a broadcaster, author and provides political and news commentary on Substack at ronpreagan.substack.com.

He is the familiar face and voice behind FFRF’s iconic “unabashed atheist” TV commercial. Millions of Americans have heard Ron declare that he’s not afraid of burning in hell, helping FFRF bring free-thought and nonbelief into living rooms across the country. Ron has also been an outspoken advocate for secularism, reason and the separation of state and church for many years.

The conversation is yours.

Ron Reagan: Thank you, Mickey, and Rep. Jared Huffman, thank you so much for joining us, and congratulations on the book. We’re going to be talking a lot about that, of course, but I wanted to start out with just a little bit of your personal story, how you moved from believer to nonbeliever, and in particular, in the context of a political career. That’s a very daring thing. In 2017, you came out as a nonbeliever. Can you tell us a little about that?

Huffman: Yeah, I came out when I was already a sitting member of Congress, so that was pretty unusual, but the long odyssey that led me from being a devout Christian to being a public humanist in Congress. Started in Independence, Mo. I grew up there. That was the world headquarters of a branch of the Mormon Church called the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It’s now called the Community of Christ. And I was very religious. It was a lot of my worldview until I was in my early 20s. I was ordained into the priesthood of that church, but as a student at UC Santa Barbara, I had some events in my life, including the death of my dad, that just led me to start questioning. Not so much the moral framework I had grown up with or the basic principles of the gospel, but the supernatural stuff, the existence of an intercessory God, and all of these other things that I had taken on faith. And it stopped working for me. So, that’s a hard thing for people who grow up deeply religious, and I spent many years kind of drifting and seeking and trying to figure this stuff out, and ultimately came to realize that all of the good stuff I liked about the religion I grew up with was just the universal values that exist from all faith perspectives, and with an awful lot of nonbelievers. Just be good people and live life here and now, in this only planet that we have, and that’s kind of humanism. So, that is the label I came to embrace, and that makes me a bit of an oddball in national politics.

Reagan: I’ll bow publicly, but I suspect that there are many members of Congress, many people in the government, who are not religious but who just can’t take the brave step that you did.

Huffman: Yes, there are many, actually. So, I don’t know if it quite mirrors the data on the population writ large, where a little over 30 percent of folks are nonreligious.



Rep. Jared Huffman speaks about Christian nationalism during FFRF’s online event on Aug. 15. View the event on FFRF’s YouTube channel.

But it’s probably close to that in the Democratic caucus, at least. The Republicans are kind of a Christian monolith, right? You have to be, because Christian nationalism is so fused into their party and their political identity these days. But, I think we all know many of them are fakers, and I would bet that a lot of them don’t really believe.

Reagan: Let’s jump into Jan. 6, which was a big moment, I think, for you. There’s a quote from Sinclair Lewis: “When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the flag and carrying a cross.” I have to confess that before I read your book, I didn’t think of Jan. 6 as a religious event. I saw it as a sort of demented, quasi-political event inspired by this traitor who’s sitting in the White House right now. But you saw it differently. You picked up on the signs that this actually was a religious event as well. Tell us about that.

Huffman: Yeah. That’s why I opened the book with Jan. 6 as it happened. I did observe all of these symbols, and these practices of religious worship, the blowing of shofars — these were central elements of the Jan. 6th insurrection. But, in real time, I don’t think even I appreciated just how steeped in Christian nationalism this coup was. This was a Christian coup. But most of the country kind of looked away and didn’t see the religion in the insurrection. As I delved into it more after Jan. 6, I came to believe, yes, this was a lot about Trump. But it was perhaps even more so about this Christian nationalist movement. This was a very religious event.

Reagan: You wrote that Jan. 6th should have been a national wake-up call. Instead, America, including many of your colleagues in Congress, whom the mob wanted to kill, went back to sleep. Why did the Jan. 6 Commission ignore the Christian nationalist element?

Huffman: This is really an untold story. It comes down to one person — Liz Cheney. There was a bipartisan select committee tasked with telling the complete story of this insurrection, how it happened, who planned it, how it unfolded, really preserving that for history, and even for the Department of Justice, so that there could be accountability. There were criminal referrals that came out of the select committee’s investigation and report. But in that 845-page comprehensive report, nothing about Christian nationalism, and that was not an accident. In fact, the evidence was everywhere. There were witnesses who talked about it, there were depositions, there was all sorts of documentary and photographic and video evidence. And

the staff team that prepared the draft of that report talked about all of it, and really, Christian nationalism was a significant part of what they had written up. Liz Cheney vetoed it and ordered all of it erased. She did not want to offend conservative Christians, and there was pushback, even from the other Republican, Adam Kinzinger, himself an evangelical, but she wouldn’t budge. She wasn’t having it, and so it was a great disservice, I believe, to the country. We missed an opportunity to name and confront this movement at a time when we could still, perhaps, knock it down and put it in its place, but they were allowed to just move right on, and today they are bigger and stronger than ever.

Reagan: We tend to think of Liz Cheney as sort of a hero, like Adam Kinzinger on the right, somebody who stood up to President Trump and ultimately sacrificed her political career. So, I’m sort of surprised to hear that she wasn’t willing to go to the mat there. Is this about her personal belief, or did she . . .

Huffman: It says something that she didn’t want to pick a fight with conservative Christians. That sort of speaks to just how deeply ingrained this movement is in Republican politics right now. But it also speaks to what I call Christian privilege. Basically, our cultural reflex to not scrutinize, much less criticize anything that purports to be Christian. We have a bible-sized blind spot when it comes to Christian extremism and Christian violence. We’re pretty good at calling out Muslims. But when it comes to Christians, we look away.

Reagan: Yeah. Sam Harris has written about this, too, and originally, one of his big points was that, look, we argue about everything in our country, but religion gets this special dispensation whereby you can’t question that. Moving on to this idea of Christian nationalism as being not just a religious movement, but a political movement. What are the mechanisms behind this? What enables this movement to exist as it does in D.C.?

Huffman: Yeah, I think the superpower for this movement is the way they have fused very intense and authentic, for many of them, religious belief that gives them a passion and an intensity, but right into the machine of Republican politics. The truth is, these huge, radical pastors, these self-declared prophets — that’s why I called the book “No Prophets” — with millions of followers, they can activate folks across the political landscape on a moment’s notice. Folks that will show up and do the things they ask them to do, because this is their

religious duty. And there’s nothing else like that in American politics. It is a huge part of their power, and, of course, Trump figured that out and locked these guys into the MAGA movement. He placed a huge bet on what had previously been seen as this fringe group of prophetic Christians, mostly evangelicals, charismatic evangelicals, but they were on the rise for years and years as the rest of Christianity kind of shrank and people were leaving churches.

Reagan: I can’t believe that any of these people, though, are actually fooled into thinking that Donald Trump is really one of them. How does the sort of prophetic tradition play into this? What sort of a figure do they see him being?

Huffman: Yeah, most of us would scratch our heads and just be incredulous that anyone would see Donald Trump as a quasi-religious figure, but they do. They really do. And it does go back to that 2016 campaign, and a relationship that Donald Trump had with one of these prophetic Christians, Paula White, who, at the time, was kind of a rock star in evangelical Christianity. She had a show, the “Paula White Show,” like the “Oprah” of Christianity. Trump loved her because he saw that she was platinum blonde and very telegenic and charismatic, so they became fast friends, and she opened the door to this group of prophets known as the New Apostolic Reformation. It was a low point for this movement, because the Obergefell decision had just come down earlier from the Supreme Court. This is, of course, legalizing same-sex marriage. They were devastated by that, and they wanted a bully, basically, something new to take Republicans to a stronger fight for a conservative Supreme Court. Paula White convinced them that Donald Trump was their guy. And they came up with this prophecy, that Donald Trump was being chosen by God as the new King Cyrus — Cyrus being a pagan figure in the bible who liberated the Jews in a very unlikely way. So, to us on the outside, it looks insane, it looks like madness, looks like no one could seriously believe it. But, if you are steeped in this religious belief, and all of the prophets that you follow are telling you, this is it, God is doing it again, and we need to get on board, you do what they say, and that’s what happened. It’s a big part of how Donald Trump became president.

Reagan: You do wonder how they get away with it. How is it that they aren’t being called out for this sort of stuff? Why aren’t more Democrats more in their face about this?

No Prophets: The Fight to Save Democracy from Christian Nationalism

By Rep. Jared Huffman

A behind-the-scenes look at the shocking extent of Christian nationalism’s reach in our government — and the fight to defend church/state separation.

— 240 Pages HB \$29.00

ffrf.org/shop

Huffman: I think most Democrats don't want to pick a fight with any aspect of Christianity. You're immediately going to be branded anti-religious or anti-Christian. And I have a little bit of acquired immunity to that kind of backlash. As the open infidel in Congress that I am, they've already called me every name in the book, and so I've sort of seen it. I feel somewhat liberated to just tackle this stuff head on and call it as I see it. I try to do it respectfully. I try to make it clear I really have no quarrel with religion or Christianity. I've got plenty of Christians who are my allies in this fight and who agree with me. But we've, back to your point about Sam Harris, we've really got to start talking about this stuff and stop looking away and stop pulling back and walking on eggshells, because they're trying to topple our government and take away our rights. They are increasingly embracing violence as a legitimate means to their end. And there's — you're not going to be able to avoid this — this reckoning. It's happening whether you like it or not.

Reagan: Well, I guess if you feel that God's on your side, or you're on God's side, then pretty much anything is justified, and of course, the bible itself is filled with all kinds of violence perpetrated against people who aren't on the right God's side, so I guess Jan. 6 was just sort of a warm-up, maybe, that they could go farther.

Huffman: Yeah, kind of tying it back to the bible, Jan. 6 was what they call a Jericho March. And, back in my days as a practicing Christian, I remember the story of Jericho being this great example of how Joshua showed great faith and did exactly what God told him to do, circling the Canaanite city of Jericho and blowing shofars and saying things just the right way, and a



Photo by Shutterstock

The Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol had a strong backdrop of Christian nationalism, Rep. Jared Huffman pointed out. "This was a Christian coup. . . This was a very religious event."

miracle happened, the walls came down. Christians celebrate the Battle of Jericho as this great validation of just having faith and doing what God tells you to do. But, if you read the rest of the book of Jericho, Joshua was ordered to go in and kill everyone in that town, to annihilate them, and kill all their animals, and plunder all of their treasure, and then burn the place and torch it on the way up. So, it's dark, and it's violent, and evangelicals have these Jericho marches today, where they will bring out their shofars and circle courthouses, for example, and try to recreate the Battle of Jericho to try to pressure judges or political officials or others to do what they want them to do. And that is what they did on Jan. 6. It was a gigantic Jericho march.

Reagan: We've talked about how Christian nationalism is woven into the government now, particularly on the Republican side, but I would assume that most Americans still think of this as a sort of fringe movement.

Huffman: It is big, and it's really powerful. These folks are populating the Trump administration at the highest level. You could argue right now that Russell Vogt is the most powerful guy in Washington. He's the head of OMB, of course, and he is steeped in this radical belief system and in Christian nationalism. He's no friend of democracy, or pluralism, or any of our shared values. He hates separation of church and state. And these folks are open about this.

They have spoken about it, they have written about it. So, yeah, you can't just write it off. It is deeply entrenched throughout our government right now, and that's why we've kind of got to hurry up and come to terms with that and understand what we're up against.

Reagan: Any authoritarian or cigarette manufacturer or fast food person knows that you've got to get people young. Nobody's gonna start smoking a cigarette when they're 30 years old. So, they want to get into the schools. They want to change the science curriculum. They want to dumb America down, it seems to me. How organized is that, and what's that about?

Huffman: Yeah, you're taking me into the chapter that I called "The Dumbing of America," and it is very much a part of this Christian nationalist movement. They don't like secular education, they don't like science, they don't like higher education. They hate universities, of course, because these are all institutions steeped in inquiry, and peer review, and scrutiny and rationalism. That doesn't sit well with a very fragile and rigid biblical worldview, where you're supposed to believe the literal words of Genesis about how the Earth was created, and the roles of the genders, and all of these different things that they are just absolute about in their beliefs.

Dollens: Thank you both so much for this terrific conversation, and Rep. Huffman, congratulations again on "No Prophets." Thank you for not only joining us today, but for using your position in Congress to stand up for the constitutional separation of state and church. Ron, as always, thank you for being such an extraordinary voice for FFRF and for freethought.

Thomas Paine

Continued from page 1

founding heritage and be an enduring monument to patriotism and our nation's ideals."

Rep. Jared Huffman, co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus and ranking Democrat on the Natural Resources Committee, commended Gaylor on her testimony.

"Ms. Gaylor, you did a great job of reminding us just what a towering figure Thomas Paine was to the American Revolution and to the founding of our country," he said.

Bill co-sponsor Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., spoke passionately about the Revolutionary War hero.

"You know, Napoleon said that a statue of gold should be erected to Tom Paine in every country of the world because he was the original champion of freedom and demo-

cratic self-government," Raskin stated. "I would just urge the committee to codify the recommendation of the commission so we can move this quickly."

Demonstrating the bipartisan nature of the proceedings, a GOP member of Congress joined in the praise.

"I have a Thomas Paine quote hanging on my wall, and I really appreciate the work you're doing to memorialize someone who was so important to our founding on the 250th anniversary of our founding," Rep. Celeste Maloy, R-Utah, remarked.

Congress in late 2022 already

granted the Thomas Paine Memorial Association permission to erect the memorial. Once Congress approves the Common Sense 250 Act of 2026 to

situate it in Area 1, the project goes before the Arts Commission to approve the design concept. Renowned sculptor Zenos Frudakis is commissioned to sculpt the memorial.

Two and a half centuries after "Common Sense" made the case for independence, the capital Paine helped bring into being still has no concrete tribute to him. HR 9600 would rectify that omission and finally grant this Founder his due — a fitting conclusion for America's 250th birthday.

“Is there a better or more meaningful way for Congress to commemorate our nation’s 250th anniversary than by ensuring this honor for the Revolution’s principal champion for independence?”
— Annie Laurie Gaylor



Sculptor Zeno Frudakis looks over his prototype of the Thomas Paine statue.

Statues

Continued from page 1

tall and alone, adorned with Catholic iconography" and are not long-standing historic monuments. The justices affirmed on this record the trial judge's conclusion that "the statues' primary effect will be to advance a religious message," even if they also serve a secular purpose as symbols of courage for first responders.

Finally, the justices ruled that the public interest weighs strongly in favor of maintaining the preliminary injunction, because if the statues were to be installed while the litigation continued, "the plaintiffs and other members of the public would have to confront

them regularly, experiencing feelings of subordination given their own religious beliefs or nonbeliefs."

"I'm thrilled with this ruling and I'm relieved that these statues will not be installed while we pursue our case against the city," says Claire Fitzmaurice, a resident of Quincy and a plaintiff. "As a Unitarian Universalist, I cherish the principle of religious pluralism. I believe that Quincy should be a place where we welcome people from all faiths and backgrounds. To have these imposing religious statues looming over the entrance of the public safety building would fly in the face of that pluralistic ideal — especially as our city continues to grow more diverse. I look forward to our next day in court."

"The court's wise decision casts doubt on the profoundly un-American idea that Quincy's city government can spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on massive religious statuary and then affix it to the front of the public safety building, where it would loom above citizens using the main entrance," says David Reich, a resident of Quincy and a plaintiff.

The plaintiffs in Fitzmaurice v. City of Quincy filed their lawsuit in May 2025 after local media revealed Mayor Thomas P. Koch's plan to install the statues, which had been commissioned in secret nearly a year and a half earlier. The estimated cost to taxpayers is at least \$850,000. None of these details had previously been disclosed either to the public or to the full Quincy City

Council. Despite significant opposition from constituents — including an online petition with over 1,600 signatures and a statement from 19 local faith leaders — the mayor pressed forward with his plan. In October 2025, the Norfolk Superior Court denied the city's motion to dismiss the lawsuit and issued a preliminary injunction blocking the planned installation.

"We are delighted by the ruling, which concludes that a government may not give special preference to religion," FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor said. "The Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court has wisely upheld the trial court's preliminary injunction, affirming that sectarian religious statues cannot be imposed on the people of Quincy."

Glorious Gloria Steinem’s legacy lives on

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

Gloria Steinem, the world’s most famous feminist, died Sept. 2 at age 92. Even if she was less well known as a freethinking humanist, she was delightfully irreverent.

Gloria Steinem was a compelling, infinitely thoughtful, rational writer and speaker. Her public speaking had no artifice, but somehow she was mesmerizing. Listeners were always rewarded with “aha” moments and gently humorous quips.

Gloria accepted FFRF’s Forward Award, reserved for very special individuals whose lives and achievements are moving society forward, at our 2021 convention in Boston, when she was 87 years old. No one better embodied the concept of moving society forward than Gloria Steinem. She was the face of the women’s movement from the late 1960s until her death last month.

Gloria asked to be interviewed rather than give a speech. We had a terrible moment and a few hours of panic after her staff contacted us the night before her scheduled speech to report she’d taken a fall, was bruised and recovering, but couldn’t fly in from New York City. Our IT director and video director saved the day by scrambling hard to find the right equipment and set up a remote connection in half a day. There, Gloria was live on the big screen — and yet it still felt intimate.

As I told the audience, it was my second time interviewing her. The first had taken place 41 years before, when I’d just launched a feminist newspaper right out of college. I displayed photographs showing us together and told her I wanted to ask her some of the same questions I’d asked back in 1980. (She was already warning about extremists and pointing out that Hitler’s first official act was closing Germany’s abortion clinics.) Gloria even gave me her autograph — on a check — becoming one of my newspaper’s very first subscribers. My mother urged me to frame it, not cash it. I didn’t listen, but I took the precaution of photocopying it and we showed an image of that check too during the presentation. That was the story of her life: seeding activism. I was but one lucky recipient among thousands and thousands she helped and encouraged.

One question I’d asked her in 1980 was: “When are you going to write a book?” She’d laughed then and replied that she had enough material for at least a couple of tomes. Soon she published that first book and didn’t stop. A relatively recent work of hers, “My Life on the Road” (2015), is one of my favorites. At the convention, we had her newest book, an irreverent twist on a biblical phrase: “The Truth Will Set You Free, But First It Will Piss You Off!,” full of her wise, comforting, quotable, outrageous, laugh-out-loud aphorisms. I didn’t know until I started reading her obituaries that she has a just-published memoir, “An Unexpected



Photo by Chris Line

Gloria Steinem speaks remotely to FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor at FFRF’s 2021 convention in Boston.

ed Life.” I can’t wait to read it.

One line from her book of quotes that got a big laugh at that convention was: “I’m at an age where remembering something right away is as good as an orgasm.” Always on the road, she joked that she had been in more hotel rooms than the Gideon Bible.

One of the most famous quotes associated with Gloria — “If men got pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament” — she had to beg off being given credit for. It turned out to be the quip of an Irish-American woman taxi driver she and her sister agitator, the great Florynce Kennedy, had a chance conversation with. I can’t count how many times I’ve penned that aphorism on protest signs I carried at abortion rallies, where it always gets laughs.

As for Gloria’s freethought views, she wrote that when someone asked if she believed in God, she would say, “No, I believe in people.” She said she’d like to do a TED Talk someday about the harm of monotheism.

During the first 1980 interview, she told me, “It’s an incredible con job when you think of it, to believe something now in exchange for life after death. Even corporations with all their reward systems don’t try to make it posthumous.” She also told me back then how touched she once was, to arrive at a Texas site to give a speech and see people holding signs saying: “Gloria Steinem is a humanist.” She

only belatedly realized that was supposed to be an insult.

Here are some of Gloria’s other views on religion (most of these found in her book of quotes):

“Nothing is more dangerous than someone who believes life after death is better than life.”

“Religion is just a form of politics you can’t criticize.”

“Use laughter as a guide — stay away from places where you’re not allowed to laugh, even religious ones.” She called laughter “the best resistance.”

I was a teenager when Ms. debuted in 1971. It’s not an exaggeration to say that the magazine she imagined and co-founded changed the trajectory of my life — and of so many others. My mother and I eagerly awaited each new groundbreaking, consciousness-raising issue.

Gloria was there, forwarding and fomenting the movement from the beginning, helping to form the National Women’s Political Caucus, Voters for Choice and many other campaigns. She was on the ground floor as an activist, organizer and spokeswoman, practicing intersectionality before the word was coined. Admirably, she was also an eager political activist, always campaigning for and raising funds for feminist, pro-choice candidates.

In re-interviewing Gloria in 2021, I avoided some of the bleaker parts of her childhood. The public saw not only a dedicated activist but a chic, trendsetting, confident, cosmopolitan woman, with a celebrity social life. So, it came as a shock when I first read an article in which she opened up about being abandoned as a child to take care of her severely mentally ill mother, and how this intrepid youngster would wait til all the dishes were dirty, then wash them in the bathtub! How she planned to tap-dance her way out of Toledo, until her older sister made sure she was rescued and sent to Smith College, where her star quality first shone. Nor did I ask about her self-denial, keeping an apartment where she never unpacked or had much furniture — or even stocked food. How she only started thinking about her financial security until late in her life. The public-facing woman, always there for everyone else in need, poignantly put the cause and others before herself.

But my interview did touch on how she very movingly dedicated her book “My Life on the Road” to a London physician who, in 1957, made it possible for her at age 22 to abort a problem pregnancy. It was the fight for abortion rights that awakened Gloria’s feminist passion. We spoke before Roe was overturned, but we discussed that possibility.

Gloria’s always comforting, always sage advice lives on: “Voting isn’t the most we can do, it’s the least. . . If you don’t vote, you don’t count.”

When Gloria was asked, “What should I do? What should we do?” her firm reply was: “Don’t worry about what you should do. Just do whatever you can.”

Those are words for the rest of us to live by.

Annie Laurie Gaylor is co-president of FFRF.

Farewell to feminist activist Robin Morgan

By Annie Laurie Gaylor

This is a condensed version of the column that appears on Freethought Now.org.

When I heard the news that Gloria Steinem had died, my thoughts immediately turned to Robin Morgan, Steinem’s sister rabble-rouser, wondering how Robin was taking the loss.

Then I opened my New York Times only to sadly learn that Robin herself died three days later, on Sept. 5. This striking propinquity reminded me of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson poignantly dying on the same day (July 4, 1826), thinking of each other.

Both were feminist icons, firm friends and helped change the world. Robin, like Steinem, was not religious, but was much more outspoken on that subject. Like Steinem, Robin also accepted a much-deserved award from the Freedom From Religion Foundation, in Robin’s case, our “Freethought Heroine” Award at our annual 2005 convention in Orlando, Fla.

Robin’s greatest claim to fame



Photo By Brent Nicastro

FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor presents Robin Morgan with the “Freethought Heroine” Award at FFRF’s 2005 convention in Orlando, Fla.

was co-founding the tongue-in-cheek Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, which created a firestorm by daring to picket “Miss America” in 1968. The myth that “bras were burned” began after feminist protesters on the Atlantic City boardwalk famously threw symbols of women’s subjugation — girdles, bras, hair curlers, mops, etc. — into

trash bins, then unfurled a large banner reading, “Women’s Liberation,” inside the pageant hall. They made international news and they made history. No one alive and sentient at the time, including myself at age 12, ever forgot those astonishing images!

When Ms. published her 2004 essay, “Fighting Words for a Secular America,” she not only summarized the Founders’ views on state/church separation and raised the alarm about the growing political power of the religious right, but, thrillingly to us, gave a shoutout in a sidebar to FFRF itself and mentioned our website! My mother, Anne Gaylor, FFRF president emeritus, had also caught Robin on C-SPAN likewise talking up separation of state and church, and once again praising FFRF by name.

What else could we do but invite her to our convention?

What I said in introducing her back in 2005 is my epitaph for her: “Robin, we are enchanted to have found in you — a famous feminist, journalist, editor, lecturer, organizer and activist — and a kindred non-spirit.”

FCA lawsuit misrepresents FFRF’s efforts in N.J.

FFRF says a federal lawsuit distorts its endeavors to ensure that religious clubs in a New Jersey public school district remain student-led as per federal law.

The Fellowship of Christian Athletes, represented by the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, filed suit Aug. 11 in the U.S. District Court for the District of New Jersey against the Hopewell Valley Regional School District and New Jersey education officials. The lawsuit challenges restrictions the district recently imposed on outside adults attending religious student clubs.

Becket, a law firm named for a Catholic saint and that demonstrates hostility to the constitutional principle of separation between state and church, has publicly blamed FFRF for the dispute. It claims that “an atheist advocacy group didn’t

like that Christian kids were choosing to learn about faith, life and sports from trusted mentors.”

“That’s a convenient culture war trope, but it isn’t what happened,” says FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. “FFRF has never sought to prevent Christian students from forming their own religious clubs in compliance with the federal Equal Access Act.”

This law requires public schools that permit noncurriculum student clubs to allow student clubs on religion or politics, with the stipulation that they must be student initiated and run. It expressly provides that “nonschool persons may not direct, conduct, control or regularly attend activities of student groups.”

FFRF’s letter of March 13, 2025, asked

the district to investigate reports that outside adults were regularly attending and participating in meetings of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes club at Timberlane Middle School and to ensure that the club remained student-initiated and student-led.

The fellowship’s own lawsuit acknowledges that FFRF asked the district to make certain that outside adults did not “regularly lead, attend or participate” in religious student clubs. It further acknowledges that the district subsequently “went even further than FFRF demanded” by allegedly prohibiting all outside individuals from attending religious club meetings.

“Becket is trying to turn a straightforward request that a public school follow federal law into a story about atheists at-

tacking Christian students,” adds FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler. “There is an important legal distinction between students exercising their own religious freedom and representatives of an outside Christian ministry regularly leading public school students in religious activities.”

In its legal complaint, the Christian group describes its “huddle ministry” as a critical component of its religious mission and states that its presence on public school campuses is “essential.”

FFRF notes an obvious distinction between an occasional guest speaker invited to give a presentation to a student club and representatives of an outside religious ministry regularly attending or running its affiliated club.

FFRF files brief over school funding with Supreme Court

FFRF has filed a friend-of-the-court brief before the U.S. Supreme Court to refute a specious argument by a Catholic church that seeks to discriminate in a publicly funded preschool program.

Colorado voters overwhelmingly approved creating a fund for a statewide, voluntary, universal preschool program in 2020. In 2022, the state adopted the Early Childhood Act, which established rules for the program, including a nondiscrimination requirement. St. Mary Catholic Parish in Littleton, Colo., is arguing that the nondiscrimination requirement “excludes” it from the program because it forbids discrimination against LGBTQ 4-year-olds or 4-year-olds with LGBTQ parents in accordance with Catholic doctrine. The church contends that the nondiscrimination requirement is not a neutral and generally applicable law because preschools are allowed to prioritize seats for children with disabilities and low-income children. This, it says, is an exemption to the requirement that undermines the state’s nondiscrimination interests comparable to their desire to discriminate against LGBTQ parents and children. The Trump administration has filed a brief backing the church.

FFRF asserts that the church’s argument fundamentally and deliberately misconstrues disability and income nondiscrimination. Nondiscrimination law reflects the reality that to treat people with disabilities and those who are low-income exactly the same as others often perpetuates inequality rather than resolving it. Ensuring actual equality for people with disabilities and those who are low-income is not an “exemption” from nondiscrimination requirements, but instead is fully aligned with the legal landscape.

“To argue that ensuring equality for preschool students with disabilities or

students whose families are low-income is comparable to LGBTQ discrimination is like comparing apples and durians,” FFRF’s brief states. “One is a popular air freshener scent while the other would quickly empty a room.”

FFRF’s brief points out that mandating religious exemptions whenever any secular exemption is allowed would create a chaotic system and would require lawmaking to a degree that legislatures are not prepared to handle. The First Amendment’s Free Exercise Clause does not give an individual the ability to avoid compliance with a “valid and neutral law of general applicability.” The fact that Colorado allows preschools to prioritize serving low-income preschoolers and preschoolers with disabilities does not undermine Colorado’s interests in nondiscrimination.

“Americans with disabilities have fought long and hard to be able to participate as full members of society,” FFRF’s brief asserts. “Petitioners’ argument threatens to callously use those efforts towards inclusion to instead nullify anti-discrimination laws across the country.”

States have historically required nondiscrimination requirements for private organizations to participate in public funding programs. The petitioners complain that the nondiscrimination requirement at issue in this legislation was “targeted” to burden their religion. In reality, most public funding programs have strings attached to ensure they achieve their goals.

People acting in bad faith use religion as a cloak. Questionable religious exemption claims are still asserted against laws across the country. Religious exemption claims have been made in the last 20 years against such things as minimum wage laws, and workplace harassment laws.



Photo by Chris Line

Plaintiffs Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-presidents, with co-plaintiff David Peterson, FFRF member, stand in front of Pres House, headquarters for the church that owns an expensive student housing complex that is exempted by state statute from paying taxes in Madison, Wis.

FFRF gets good ruling in tax case

FFRF hailed a ruling Sept. 8 that allows its hometown case against unconstitutional church property tax exemptions to move forward.

This is the second time a Dane County, Wis., judge has ruled that FFRF and its three Madison residents may proceed in the lawsuit challenging an unconstitutional state property tax exemption unduly benefiting commercial rental properties owned by two local religious organizations.

The property tax exemption was created and later amended to benefit specific church-owned rental properties to the tune of hundreds of thousands of dollars annually. The Pres House and Lumen House Apartments, both serving primarily student renters and owned by two of the defendants, are explicitly exempted from paying their share of taxes. Removing these large, extremely profitable rental properties from the tax rolls forces other property taxpayers to make up the difference.

A judge in February denied an earlier round of motions asking the court to toss out the case. The defendants filed a second round of motions seeking dismissal, which the court has once again denied.

“Plaintiffs’ action is not time-barred,” Judge Stephen Ehrlke said in his order.

FFRF and its three local plaintiff property owners contend that the tax exemption is unconstitutional under the Wisconsin Constitution for several reasons. The exemption undeniably harms all property taxpayers in Madison, including plaintiffs Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker and local resident David Peterson, by forcing them and all other Madison property taxpayers to pay higher property taxes to make up for the unlawful omission of these properties from the tax rolls. The exemption also harms plaintiff FFRF by favoring rental properties owned by two religious organizations to the exclusion of all other nonprofits.

FFRF, other groups seek records from Tennessee schools

Leading secular groups have requested from five Tennessee school districts all public records related to their recently announced plans to display the Ten Commandments in schools.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Civil Liberties Union of Tennessee, ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State have asked for records from Blount County School District, Rutherford County Schools, Washington County Schools, White County Schools and Wilson County Schools. These include all

school-district emails and other communications, as well as all board documents, regarding the display of the Ten Commandments. The letters also seek, pursuant to Tennessee’s Public Records Act, all proposed or approved display designs. The records will shed light on the implementation of a new state law that authorizes local boards of education to post the Ten Commandments in a “prominent” location in school buildings.

The letters follow recent votes by the districts’ boards of education requiring their schools to post the religious rules.

A Tennessee law enacted earlier this year, House Bill 47, provides that boards may “allow” schools to display the Ten Commandments in “a prominent location.” The statute defines “prominent location” as a “school entryway, cafeteria, or common area where students are likely to see the display.” Under the law, displays must include “text in a font size that is no smaller than [at] least twenty-six (26) point, and in a style and manner that is easy for students to see and read.”

FFRF and the other groups issued the following joint statement regarding the

requests for public records:

“Forcing biblical scripture on public-school children violates families’ religious freedom. Families and faith communities, not the government, get to decide what role religious doctrine and belief play in their lives. We are committed to protecting students’ and parents’ constitutional rights and are launching an investigation of every school district that foolishly accepts the state’s invitation to trample those rights. We urge families who will be affected by these religious displays to contact our organizations.”

2026 college student essay contest winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 12 winners and eight honorable mentions of the 2026 Kenneth L. Proulx Memorial Essay Contest for Ongoing College Students. FFRF has paid out a total of \$18,450 in award money to this year’s college contest winners.

Currently enrolled college students (up to age 24) wrote on the topic of “Why President Trump is wrong that ‘you just can’t have a great country if you don’t have religion.’”

This contest is named for Kenneth L. Proulx, one of FFRF’s most generous benefactors, who died in 2019.

The \$1,000 prize for sixth place in the ongoing college competition is generously endowed by actor and FFRF Lifetime Member Mr. Madison Arnold. Madison, who is 90, has given a \$30,000 endowment as a living bequest, what he calls a “pre-quest.”

Essay contest winners, their ages, the colleges or universities they are attending and the award amounts are listed below. (FFRF seeks to distribute essay scholarship monies to a higher number of students, so ties are not regarded in the typical fashion, meaning there are often more than 10 winners among the top 10.)



Katherine Chow, 19, New York University.
Mason Gutierrez, 19, Northern Arizona University.
Rowen Hamilton, 21, University of Texas.
Jeremiah Jefferson, 20, College of Wooster.
Olayide Ogunse, 20, Minnesota State University, Mankato
Sapien Saldivar, 20, University of Texas.
Aimee Vega, 20, Purdue University.

- FIRST PLACE**
Artem Khaiet, 21, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, \$3,500.
- SECOND PLACE**
Astrid Jepson, 21, UCLA, \$3,000.
- THIRD PLACE**
Alexander Safranek, 19, Bradley University, \$2,500.
- FOURTH PLACE**
Hendrick Ventura Andeliz, 24, American Military University, \$2,000.
- FIFTH PLACE**
Natalie Sowers, 19, Allegheny College, \$1,500.
- SIXTH PLACE (tie)**
(MR. MADISON ARNOLD AWARD)
Whitney Brown, 19, Hutchinson Community College, \$1,000.
- Aaron Love**, 19, University of Kentucky, \$1,000.
- SEVENTH PLACE**
Sean-Patrick Dulcio, 20, Florida A&M University, \$750.
- EIGHTH PLACE**
Ava Jackson, 19, Howard University, \$500.
- NINTH PLACE (tie)**
Amelia Keefe, 20, University of Central Florida, \$400.
Anh Nguyen, 20, Georgia Tech, \$400.
- TENTH PLACE**
Kevin Xiong, 21, Baylor University, \$300.
- HONORABLE MENTIONS (\$200 each)**
Alfred Conway, 19, George Mason University.

FFRF thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this and FFRF’s other student essays competitions. We also would like to thank our volunteer and staff judges, including: Dan Barker, Anne Bendixen, Craig Crispin, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Susan Gould, Robert Holley, Sammi Lawrence, David Malcolm, Andrea Osburne, Rose Mary Sheldon, PJ Slinger, Jennifer Vines and Matthew Woodruff.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to college students since 1979, high school students since 1994, grad students since 2010, one explicitly for students of color/first in the family since 2016 and a fifth contest for law students since 2019.

FIRST PLACE

God is not a prerequisite for greatness

FFRF awarded Artem \$3,500.

By Artem Khaiet

“As I have often said, to be a great nation you must have religion and you must have God,” President Trump declared in a Good Friday message delivered from the Resolute Desk this past April. And more bluntly, when speaking about his “America Prays” initiative, he insisted: “If a country doesn’t have religion, doesn’t have faith, doesn’t have God, it’s gonna be very hard to be a good country.” He even suggested, in a moment of striking theological candor, that without belief in divine reward and punishment, “there’s no reason to be good.”

I am a Ukrainian Jewish immigrant, and I have heard this argument before. I did not come to America to hear it again.

I grew up in a country that Russia has spent years trying to swallow whole, and part of the ideological digestion has always involved religion. Patriarch Kirill, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, has framed the conflict in Ukraine as a metaphysical struggle, positioning Russia as a spiritual and holy nation in opposition to what he calls the sinful and devilish West. The Russian Orthodox Church has framed the slaughter and destruction of the full-scale invasion as a “holy war for all Russians” and a struggle against the “moral decay” of the “satanic” West. This is what happens when a state decides it must have religion to be great. It gets a church that blesses soldiers and calls mass murder divine mission.

I left Ukraine in part to escape the long reach of a Russia that had decided Orthodox Christianity was the soul of civilization, and that those who did not fit that vision were problems to be solved. As a secular Jew, I was never inside Russia’s Orthodox imagination of what a proper



Artem Khaiet

citizen looked like, and I was never meant to be. Religious nationalism, wherever it plants its flag, has always required an other, someone who falls outside the circle of the sanctified. For Jews in Eastern Europe, that role is not new.

So, when I hear the American president making the same category of argument, the same conflation of national greatness with religious identity, I feel the specific dread of intolerance, not just political disagreement. Christian nationalism is antithetical to the constitutional ideal that belonging in American society is not predicated on what faith one practices or whether someone is religious at all. When a sitting president declares that religion is the

precondition for national goodness, he is signaling which Americans are real Americans, and which are not quite good enough.

Trump’s claim is also, simply, false. The evidence against it is overwhelming and embarrassing. The world’s happiest countries, including Finland, Denmark, Iceland and Sweden, which occupy the top ranks of the World Happiness Report, are consistently among the most secular nations on Earth. Countries with higher levels of secularization tend to perform better across indicators such as prosperity, equality, education, life expectancy and democratic freedoms, while also often reporting lower crime rates.

On the other hand, nations with the highest rates of religiosity tend to be the most problem-ridden, with high violent crime, infant mortality, poverty and corruption rates. These are consistent patterns across the world. Religion is not the guarantor of national goodness. From the Inquisition to the Crusades to Patriarch Kirill blessing

soldiers headed into Ukraine, religion has often produced the exact opposite effect. The reason most ethical humans in secular societies act decently every day, without divine incentive structures, is the plain fact that cruelty produces suffering and that they would like to produce less of it.

America’s founders understood something Trump does not seem to: that a nation founded on freedom of conscience cannot make religion a prerequisite for belonging. I crossed an ocean partly to live inside that principle. I would prefer not to watch it erode from the Resolute Desk.

Artem, 21, is a senior at University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign majoring in computer science.

“Originally from Ukraine and a first-generation college student, I earned my Associate of Engineering Science degree at Harper College before transferring,” Artem writes. “In my free time, I enjoy building technical projects, exploring ways to use technology for social impact, and mentoring or supporting fellow students.”

“Religious nationalism, wherever it plants its flag, has always required an other, someone who falls outside the circle of the sanctified.”

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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SECOND PLACE

The wall, not the altar

FFRF awarded Astrid \$3,000.

By Astrid Jepson

I was watching television when I first understood that some of my fellow citizens did not believe people like me belonged here at all. It was Jan. 6, 2021. Beneath the flags and the smoke were wooden crosses, “Jesus Saves” banners, and a man in face paint leading a prayer on the floor of the Senate, thanking God that “patriots” had retaken the chamber for a nation that was theirs and not their enemies’. I am one of those enemies. I have never believed in God, and I do not think the country is worse for people like me. I think it is better.

It is fashionable to call that day a perversion of faith; the hijacking of an otherwise gentle religion. I don’t believe that. What stormed the Capitol was not a distortion of religion’s logic, but its oldest ambition laid bare: the conviction that one people, holding one truth from one God, should rule everyone else.

I grew up around belief, and proximity has only sharpened my conviction that it has no business near the levers of power.

Four years later, the president handed that movement its motto. At the National Prayer Breakfast in February 2026, Pres-



Astrid Jepson

ident Trump said, “You just can’t have a great country if you don’t have religion,” and he has said it for years, insisting that a great nation needs God. He has it exactly backwards.

Whatever greatness this country can claim, it owes not to religion but to the wall built to hold religion off. The founders did not raise an altar; they raised that wall. The Constitution never mentions God and forbids any “religious test” for office. The First Amendment bars an es-

tablishment of religion. In 1797, a Senate full of founders unanimously ratified a treaty, signed by President John Adams, declaring that the government of the United States is “not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” Thomas Jefferson named the achievement “a wall of separation between church and state.” They feared the very spectacle I watched on that screen, and they built their republic to prevent it.

As a moral compass, religion is worthless: Scripture has been quoted to defend slavery and to abolish it, to bless wars and to damn them, bending to whoever holds the pulpit. A book that can sanctify anything is a foundation for nothing.

Trump’s claim is not only false; it is dangerous. In “Rebellion,” the historian Robert Kagan argues that the radical American idea — that your rights, including the right to believe in no god at all, are yours by birth and not by permission — was never inevitable. It has always been hunted by an antiliberal, theocratic countertradition that wants

the country to belong to one people and one faith, and that erupts, generation after generation, whenever the promise of equality starts to feel like a threat. Trump’s sentence is the newest war cry of that very old rebellion, and Jan. 6 is what waits at the end of it.

So, let me say it with more humility than the president can manage: I do not need this country to be mine.

I ask only to share it, as fully and as unconditionally as anyone who kneels. But I will not accept the lie he is selling — a nation is not made great by God. It is made great by its refusal to let God (or any of its self-appointed enforcers) rule the people who do not believe.

Astrid, 21, attends UCLA and is majoring in economics and minoring in philosophy.

“I am interning for a political campaign in Los Angeles while studying for the LSAT,” Astrid writes. “I am half Norwegian, and, before law school, I plan to spend a gap year (or several) working and studying in Scandinavia. My ultimate goal is a career in diplomacy.”

“Whatever greatness this country can claim, it owes not to religion but to the wall built to hold religion off. The founders did not raise an altar; they raised that wall.”

THIRD PLACE

Make America democratic again

FFRF awarded Alexander \$2,500.

By Alexander Safranek

When I was a child, my alarm clock was the sound of the call to prayer echoing and reverberating off the tall futuristic buildings of the Middle Eastern nation I called home. The Middle East is a place where religion is woven into every aspect of the culture, so that it is illegal to express self-identity or rebuke the teachings of the Quran. Religion was law and law was religion, flowing into each other like the confluence of two powerful rivers.

I remember comments and questions and concerns my family would receive from relatives, friends and strangers with unsolicited opinions, probing and condemning my parents’ choice of raising American kids in a place that has “no separation of

church and state” that “treats women so poorly,” that “doesn’t allow for freedom of religion.” What my parents understood was that, at least, in the Middle East, the expectations and rules were clear. I would argue that this is better than in the United States where religious freedom is more deceptive.

Religion is something that is and should be completely personal. The

United States disguises itself as accepting of all, believers and non-believers. It touts that religion is a personal issue and will not interfere with your secular life, but if you take

a closer look at the United States, we are not a country with freedom of religion and separation of church and state. Our national currency has “In God We Trust” printed on it, and our Pledge of Allegiance proclaims “one nation, under God.” We have a president that regularly states things like “Faith is more powerful than govern-

“In terms of greatness, it is our democracy and civil liberties that make our country great, not the amount of religion we have.”



Alexander Safranek

ment” and “We have to have religion, and it suffered greatly over the last few years, but it’s coming back. It’s coming back strong.” If church and state are separate, then why are governmental institutions and figureheads espousing religion and God?

In response to Trump saying “you just can’t have a great country if you don’t have religion,” I believe the opposite. Great countries exist around the world that do not impose religion on their citizens. In fact, research shows that the countries with the happiest, safest and least corrupt statistics in the world, namely the Scandinavian countries, are highly secular. In terms of greatness, it is our democracy and civil liberties that make our country great, not the amount of religion we have.

Religion historically has been the root cause of humanitarian tragedies from the Crusades to the Salem Witch Trials to 9/11. Therefore, we

must strive for democratic ideals and not religious beliefs in moving our country forward. Studies show that as separation of religion and state increases, the level of democracy also increases.

My journey of freedom from religion started as the son of a church secretary, meaning my butt was in a pew every Sunday morning (granted, it was a very liberal pew), to an expat living in the Middle East, and finally to an atheist teenager who realizes that all religion ever seems to do is cause divisiveness and conflict among people. When I think about what makes this country great, it is not religion but the freedom for me to pursue happiness and to be who I want to be regardless of my religious beliefs or lack thereof.

I firmly believe that if Americans didn’t have the barrier of religion segregating us, we could truly be a “great” country. Religion does not make our country great, it makes us fractured. Since our current president is so fond of walls, he should look back at Thomas Jefferson’s views which state: “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state.”

Alex, 19, attends Bradley University with plans to major in game design and psychology.

“Some of my interests include gaming and tabletop role-playing games such as Dungeons & Dragons,” Alex writes. “I enjoy giving back to the community through volunteer work with my fraternity, Theta Xi. We have volunteered with Habitat for Humanity and the local zoo.”

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FOURTH PLACE

A country doesn't need religion to be great

FFRF awarded Hendrick \$2,000.

By Hendrick Ventura Andeliz

I strongly disagreed when I heard former President Donald Trump say, “You just can’t have a great country if you don’t have religion.” As a non-believer, I can also confidently say that the statement is misguided when viewed from a wider lens. I believe that morality can be achieved without the structure of religion and that a great country must represent values like freedom, equality and civility, not religion.

To add more insight into my disagreement with Trump’s statement, I would cite the successful examples of Sweden and Denmark. Both countries are praised for their education systems, low crime rates, and even the highest rankings in health care and quality of life. A majority of people living in Sweden and Denmark are nonreligious, and it would be hard to argue that religion is what has built their societies into the great examples that they are.

Trump’s statements are insensitive to a core value on which America is based: religious tolerance. America was never intended to be a one-religion country. The First Amendment not only allows



Hendrick Ventura Andeliz

a person to hold a belief, but also the right to have no belief. This freedom is one of the reasons America has built a great international reputation. When politicians believe that religion is a prerequisite to make a country great, it makes nonreligious people feel like they are less American. Nonreligious people can be equally as patriotic and moral as religious people.

Nonreligious people’s sense of value and virtue should not be marginal-

ized. I, along with many others, can be a caring and responsible person, but I believe the virtue is not a prerequisite for religion. Morality is subjective and doesn’t belong to any one religion. A person can develop the ability to be moral and to grasp right and wrong through life experiences and a caring, compassionate attitude toward others. These are important to be perceived as a moral society.

If religion alone were the answer to a good society, history would be very different. History is filled with terrible acts of violence and discrimination that used religion as a justification. The opposite of this, the advancement of equal rights and of an advanced society, has resulted from people not accepting religion as the ultimate authority and who challenged religion as a source of control. Promoting one religion as the dominant belief is not the answer to being great. Respecting all beliefs and encouraging independent thinking is the answer.

A country is at its best when its peo-

“Religious nationalism, wherever it plants its flag, has always required an other, someone who falls outside the circle of the sanctified.”

ple feel a sense of belonging. Christians, Muslims, Jews, atheists and every other group of people should feel equal. No one should ever feel like they are less than because they are not religious. A great country does not measure its greatness by the religion of its people, but by the amount of freedom and opportunity it provides its people. I think that the greatness of a country does not come from the people’s religion. Freedom, fairness and respect unite a country.

Hendrick, 24, attends American Military University and is majoring in criminal justice.

“Through my experience in structured, team-oriented environments, I have developed solid leadership skills, accountability, and the ability to perform effectively under pressure,” Hendrick writes. “I have a strong appreciation for travel and cultural exploration, and I maintain close ties with my family in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and Santiago de los Caballeros in the Dominican Republic, all of which have helped shape my perspective and sense of purpose.”

FIFTH PLACE

False prophet to the nation

FFRF awarded Natalie \$1,500.

By Natalie Sowers

“You must not worship any other gods except me. You must not make any idols. Don’t worship or serve idols of any kind, because I, the Lord, am your God.” So saith The Ten Commandments in Exodus:20:1, handpicked and hand-blessed in order to guide Moses and the now-fled Israelites on their journey forward. But, now, in an era of reality TV, media sensationalism and the birth of the president as an online icon, we find ourselves worshipping at the altar of a golden calf — a symbol of religion, state and media, all inexorably combined.

In this, we find our current president, Donald Trump, who posits that, “We have to bring back religion in America. . . Bring it back stronger than ever before.” So saith The Good Lord, so saith The President, so saith The False Idol.

Religion is a fallible medium. Ask anyone who was raised Catholic and they’ll exposit endlessly on how the Protestants, Methodists, Orthodox or any other of the tens of thousands of nominations had some “good ideas,” but didn’t quite hit the mark, not in the same way their sect has. This is to say nothing about any religions that aren’t even Christian in nature. In a wealth of religious text and scholarship, how

“If a nation cannot be great without religion, then why does it have to rely on a man who will not practice what he preaches? Why does it need a false idol to bring about its own word?”

does the state decide which one it will embody and represent? How can it define that for its population, which will never fully embody the religion it seeks to uphold? What about the dissenters, the heretics, the nonreligious, the differently religious?

In practice, the state action toward that group is far more insidious: It is the elimination of it. The removal of the opposition, the spread of “The Good Word,” the conversion of the nonbeliever. What then happens when you combine that ideology with the prosecutorial power of the state? The long arm of the law? Will the suffering of the agnostic or the atheist, a minority in this Christian-based country, bring about a successful state? Does God’s blessing to the nation necessitate a tithe in blood and suffering?

“I think I’m not maybe heaven bound.”

Trump’s words echo in response to this idea. In a religious nation, in a nation which has stained itself in the removal of its smallest groups, even its leader is not heaven bound. Trump has taken on a near biblical level of fame through his use of the media, melding his prior embodiments of TV personality and God-fearing man into his role as the president, seeking to combine all three into one cult of personality. In this, he shatters his own argument. If a nation cannot be great without religion, then why does it have to rely on a man who will not practice what he



Natalie Sowers

preaches? Why does it need a false idol to bring about its own word?

Personally, I find this topic difficult to write about. I have been raised nonreligious all of my life, sans a short stint in a Catholic preschool, and with it have always felt some friction among my peers. I never struggled to connect, per se, but whenever I approached a re-

ligious family, there was always that air of confusion, curiosity or, perhaps, mild disgust. No, I did not spend my Sundays in the church. No, I did not pray before dinner. No, I had never been baptized and no, I would not like to be now. As such, I find it alarming how quickly the world seems to have pivoted from worshipping God into worshipping man. In fact, I find myself quite afraid of what the future may hold. It’s a dangerous world for a skeptic, especially when faced with those whose belief outstrips their empathy.

Still, I, and I alone, choose what I worship. I bend no knee, and I praise no lord, no president, no false idol.

Natalie, 18, attends Allegheny College with plans to major in psychology and neuroscience.

“I enjoy reading and writing, and am working on a passion project alongside my friends, which I hope to publish soon,” she writes. “I’ve worked since I was 15 and enjoy working alongside my dear friend Jack, as we share the workplace. I plan to pursue a master’s degree in neuroscience, and am looking to learn more about the mind and the mechanical drive behind the brain.”

Your weekly antidote to the Religious Right

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SIXTH PLACE (tie)

Liberty is America’s true strength

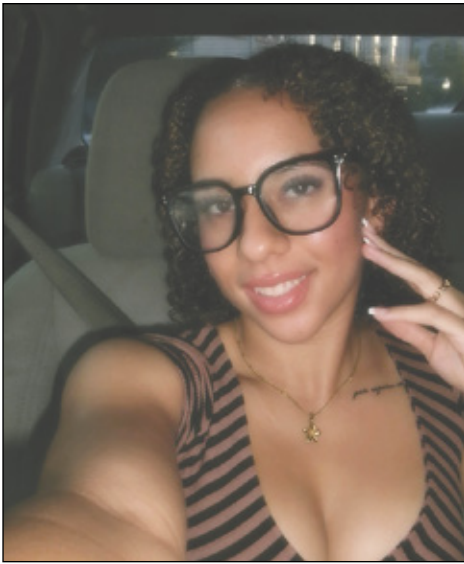
FFRF awarded Whitney \$1,000.

By Whitney Brown

I have spent most of my life being raised in the church and I value the guidance and peace that Christianity brings to my life. Yet my faith is one of the main reasons I believe that President Trump is wrong when he says that a country cannot be great without religion. America’s greatness has never come from our government’s ability to favor one way of thinking over another. I think America is great because of its commitment to life and liberty for all people. By claiming that religion is a necessity for a country’s success, Trump’s statement undermines the principle of religious freedom that has defined the United States since its founding.

The strongest argument against Trump’s statement can be found in the Constitution itself. As the framework of the United States government, it establishes that religious freedom, not religious preference, is a foundational American value. The First Amendment states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” and Article VI states, “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

These clauses show that the Founders saw the dangers of combining religious ideals with political power. Having witnessed the consequences of religious persecution, they created a system that protects the right not only to practice re-



Whitney Brown

ligion, but also the right to practice none at all. If religion were truly necessary for national greatness, the Founders would have written it into the Constitution. Instead, they did the opposite by ensuring that Americans would be judged by their character and achievements rather than their religious beliefs.

Although religion can influence people’s lives, it does not mean that it is the reason for a country’s greatness. Many people credit their faith and spirituality for providing happiness, purpose and success in their lives. However, that does not mean religion is responsible for a nation’s prosperity. This is a case where correlation does not equal causation. Just because religion is beneficial for some people does not mean it contributes to a nation’s success. Stronger in-

dicators of success include institutional stability, technological innovation, human rights and economic opportunity.

Take Sweden, for example. Although it is considered one of the least religious countries in the world, it consistently ranks high in happiness and quality-of-life measures. Sweden’s success demonstrates that national prosperity is not dependent on religion, but rather on individual freedoms and institutional stability.

History is not the only place where we find warnings about government involvement in religion. Literature also explores the dangers that can arise when combining religion and political power. One of my favorite books, “The Handmaid’s Tale” by Margaret Atwood, shows how political leaders use religion to justify their actions and restrict the freedoms of their citizens. While this story is fictional, debates over efforts to place bibles and the Ten Commandments in public schools show why a neutral government is so vital. Students come from a variety of faiths and backgrounds, and public schools should seek to serve them equally rather than promote one religious tradition over another.

As a Christian, I would not want to be forced to follow another religion’s teachings or beliefs, and for that same reason, I do not believe students of oth-

er faiths should be forced to conform to the teachings of Christianity. Likewise, students who do not practice religion at all should be able to receive an education free from religious favoritism.

Ultimately, Trump’s statement contradicts the very principles that helped shape the United States. The Founders understood that government should protect religious freedom and maintain

a strong separation between church and state. America has remained strong not because every citizen shares the same ideals, but because every citizen has the right to hold different ones. That commitment to liberty is what

America is known for, and ultimately, it is what makes our nation great.

Whitney, 19, attends Hutchinson Community College where she intends on majoring in sports management.

“I’m a motivated college student-athlete pursuing a degree in sports administration with a strong background in leadership, volunteer service, teamwork and communication,” Whitney writes. “In high school, I participated in numerous clubs and volunteer groups including Student Council, SALT (Student Athlete Leadership), Black Girls Excellence, Promotion of Black Students, and Mental Health Club. I also was given the privilege of delivering my graduation speech my senior year of high school and it changed my life.”

“America has remained strong not because every citizen shares the same ideals, but because every citizen has the right to hold different ones.”

SIXTH PLACE (tie)

America’s strength doesn’t come from religion

FFRF awarded Aaron \$1,000.

By Aaron Love

When I first heard President Trump say that you just cannot have a great country if you do not have religion, it did not sit right with me. Not because I am against religion. I grew up in church, and my faith community shaped a lot of who I am. But the idea that a country cannot be great without religion feels too small for a world as big and diverse as ours. It leaves out too many people who contribute to our society every day, whether they are religious, spiritual, questioning or not religious at all.

As a 19-year-old college student, I am surrounded by people from every background. Some of my closest friends are Muslim, Christian, atheist, agnostic or still figuring out what they believe. What I have learned is that greatness does not come from everyone believing the same thing. It comes from people respecting each other enough to live together, work together and build something bigger than themselves. You do not need religion to care about people. You do not need religion to want jus-

tice, fairness or equality. Those values come from humanity, not faith.

When Trump said that line, it felt like he was saying that people who are not religious do not matter as much or cannot contribute to the country’s success. But that is not true. Some of the most influential scientists and thinkers in history were not religious, including Albert Einstein, who openly described himself as nonreligious, and Marie Curie, who was agnostic. Their work changed the

world because of curiosity and compassion, not because of religion.

Studies also show that nonreligious Americans volunteer and donate at similar rates as religious Americans. Honestly, when I look at the problems we face today, like health disparities, climate change, poverty and discrimination, these issues do not get solved by religion. They get solved by people working together, using knowledge, empathy and creativity. You do not have to pray to care about someone’s health. You do not have to go to church to want clean water for every community. You do not have to follow a religion to believe that every person deserves dignity.

Research from the Pew Research Center shows that the United States is



Aaron Love

becoming more religiously diverse and more religiously unaffiliated, yet still remains one of the most charitable and civically engaged countries in the world.

I also think about the people who feel pushed out when leaders say things like that. What about the kid who is questioning their beliefs? What about the student who grew up without religion but still wants to serve their community? What about the immigrant who practices a faith most Americans do not understand? Are they less American? Less capable of helping build a great country? Of course not.

Greatness comes from diversity of

thought, belief and experience. It comes from people being free to believe or not believe without being judged for it. That freedom is one of the founding principles of this country. The First Amendment protects both freedom of religion and freedom from religion, which means the government cannot favor one belief system over another. If anything, forcing religion into the definition of greatness goes against what America is supposed to stand for.

For me, faith is personal. It guides me, but I do not expect it to guide everyone else. I do not think a country needs one belief system to be strong. What it needs is people who care about each other, who are willing to listen, and who want to make life better for the next generation. So, when Trump says you cannot have a great country without religion, I think he is missing the bigger picture. A great country is not built on one belief. It is built on the freedom for all beliefs.

Aaron, 19, attends the University of Kentucky and plans to major in Agricultural and Medical Biotechnology.

“I grew up in Georgia in a close family that taught me the importance of giving back, which is why I volunteer at a food bank and mentor younger fencers at my local club,” Aaron writes. “I also served as a page at the Georgia State Capitol, where I learned how policy affects real people and why young voices matter.”

“You do not need religion to want justice, fairness or equality. Those values come from humanity, not faith.”

SEVENTH PLACE

Greatness does not require religion

FFRF awarded Sean-Patrick \$750.

By Sean-Patrick Dulcio

I was frustrated when President Trump stated, “You cannot have a great country without religion.” As a nonbeliever, his comments made me feel left out. Comments from leaders about believing in God are often interpreted as if being able to make good moral decisions, being patriotic and making positive contributions to our communities are mostly reserved for believers. I completely disagree with that point of view. The history of the United States, current U.S. society and the principles of the United States Constitution clearly show that the greatness of a nation depends upon its freedoms, equalities and sense of social responsibility — not on religion.

Trump continues to associate success of nations with religion. At a 2024 presidential campaign rally, he said, “You simply can’t be happy without religion — just believe.” Although some people find comfort and purpose through their beliefs, suggesting that happiness or national success depend on believing is dismissive of tens of millions of compassionate, ethically driven and contributing citizens who do not follow religious teachings. Morality belongs to no one faith or to no faith at all. Honesty, compassion and respect can also come from



Sean-Patrick Dulcio

many sources, including family, education and experiences throughout life.

In fact, many of the most powerful nations in the world are also those with lower levels of religiosity. Countries like Japan, Denmark, Norway and Sweden have all been ranked highly in areas of quality of life, education, health care and personal safety, yet they have large numbers of nonreligious citizens. These countries demonstrate that social trust, well-functioning institutions and respect for human rights can be greater contributors to a nation’s success than religion.

Trump’s comments regarding his

view of faith and patriotism also create confusion about the limits of faith in relation to the government. The founding of the United States was based upon the concept of religious freedom, therefore, there exists the right to choose whether or not to have a faith. The First Amendment prohibits the government from giving preference to one religion over another.

In describing this concept, Thomas Jefferson referred to it as “a wall of separation between church and state.” When political leaders suggest that being a good citizen or being “great” requires belief in God, then it can create divisions among the people who do not believe. Hearing Trump make these types of comments makes me as a nonbeliever feel as if my values and contributions mean nothing. I am hard working, I am committed to my community, I treat others with kindness and respect and I try to be ethical. None of those things require a faith system. To say so would continue the unnecessary divisions in our society at a time when we are already divided enough.

“While faith has been an essential element in many people’s lives and in much of America’s history, no faith system should ever be seen as a prerequisite for citizenship or for being morally responsible.”

One of the greatest strengths of America is that it is made up of individuals from different cultures, backgrounds and belief systems. There are Christians, Muslims, Jews, atheists, agnostic, etc., all coexisting within the same constitutional framework. While faith has been an essential element in many people’s lives and in much of America’s history, no faith system should ever be seen as a prerequisite for citizenship or for being morally responsible. A country that is truly great will protect the freedoms of conscience for every individual, no matter what they may believe.

Sean-Patrick, 20, attends Florida A&M University with plans to major in accounting.

“I used to play football in high school, where I learned important qualities like discipline, diligence, consistency and teamwork,” he writes. “I come from a family-oriented background with a lot of support from my mom, dad, sister, aunts, and cousins. I became a member of Progressive Black Men Inc., which works to improve the image of Black men through volunteering and uplifting the community.”

EIGHTH PLACE

Religion is not a failsafe

FFRF awarded Ava \$500.

By Ava Jackson

At the National Prayer Breakfast, President Trump declared, “To be a great nation, you have to have religion. You have to have faith. You have to have God.” His claim reflects not truth, but rather a Christian nationalist sentiment where religion is used to disguise and excuse, oftentimes, immoral acts. Overall, his statement is undoubtedly wrong and does nothing more than showcase the shallowness of his words, actions and ideas.

Trump himself proves that even when subscribing to a religion, you can still commit wrongdoings and have moral failings. Religion has never been a failsafe against bad occurrences, and it is incorrect to claim that religion alone will provide success for a nation. When considering what makes a good country, what would Trump even consider the baseline? Low unemployment? Lower cost of living? Affordable housing and health care? Whatever the qualifications may be, it is practically impossible to say that the United States, currently being run by Christian nationalists who want to impose their will on the people, meets them.

What makes a country is not a dogmatic belief but rather qualified leadership and policy that helps the people, reflecting that the public servants

“Why does one need the fear of hell and eternal punishment to motivate one to be a good person and help others?”

are doing their jobs — serving their constituents.

Slavery was justified through religion. Was the United States a good country then? Most forms of imperialism in African countries were associated with Christianity. Desmond Tutu said, “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the bible, and we had the land. They said, ‘Let us pray.’ We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the bible and they had the land.”

Were countries like Belgium, France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands and so many more “good countries,” when we consider the historic presence of religion, yet consistent absence of morality when committing atrocities against the people of Africa? Outside of history and the blatant hypocrisy of the statement, it raises the question of the true character of Trump and anyone who believes the sentiment above.

Following the National Prayer Breakfast, the president said that “There is no reason to be good” other than to prove yourself to God. This makes me wonder if there were no organized religion at all, would any of these self-proclaimed Christian nationalists be good people, and even want to contribute to making a good country? Why does one need the fear of hell and eternal punishment to motivate one to be a good person and help others? If there was no other rea-



Ava Jackson

son to be good, then why are atheists or agnostics able to withhold from destroying others’ livelihoods as Trump is doing, even with the supposed presence of religion?

Regardless of what Trump says, it’s clear that it rarely reflects the reality of the majority of Americans he addresses. His statements about religion are thinly veiled sentiments of alt-right ideas and conservatism that aim at transforming the country back into a nation run by white male Christian nationalists, where anyone who does not fit that mold or disagrees suffers at the hands of people who use scripture to justify it.

Ava, 19, attends Howard University and is majoring in history.

“I enjoy playing the violin in the university’s orchestra, as well as the piano and guitar,” Ava writes. “As a member of the organization Black Girls Vote, I have a passion for civic engagement. I have a background in STEM research, as I worked at St. Jude Children’s Hospital, where I studied sickle cell anemia and beta thalassemia during the summer of 2024. I work at the Black Press Archives, where I survey and catalogue Black-run newspapers for the means of digitization.”



FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION
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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 more than 40,000 members.

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NINTH PLACE (tie)

This country is great in spite of religion

FFRF awarded Amelia \$400.

By Amelia Keefe

President Trump has used religion as a tool to grow his conservative Christian base. “As I have often said, to be a great nation, you must have religion, and you must have God,” Trump said. To this comment, I’d like to ask: Which religion and which God? Of course, this is rhetorical. All of us know that only the Judeo-Christian God counts and the only valid religion is Christianity. The rest are clearly made up. It is this absurdly limited view of American society that allows hate to flourish.

Far from making America a great nation, this obsession with religion and God makes America weaker and more divided all in the name of an imaginary man in the sky.

Indialantic Elementary School was the place where I happily spent my grade-school years. It was also the place where my peers and I witnessed the formation of an actual hate group. This group formed from the ground up by a mom that I regularly saw at playdates and birthday parties, a mom who was very active in our school PTO and who somehow gained a platform that has done untold harm in the name of “parents’ rights” and “Christian nationalism.”

This hate group started as something



Amelia Keefe

called “Opt-Out Brevard,” as this mom did not want her kids taking required standardized tests, and eventually morphed into what you now know as “Moms for Liberty.” This extremist group now has over 130,000 members spread out over 310 chapters in 48 states. Moms for Liberty grew so fast due to a massive amount of funding from the Heritage Foundation. This conservative Christian organization promotes “American Family Values,” which is code for censorship, homophobia, transphobia, racism and misogyny. This group has championed book bans, something that horrifies me because I love to read.

The irony is not lost on me that I am the six-time Reading Counts annual points champion of the same elementary school where this evil woman honed her book-banning skills. Hiding under the guise of “family values,” Moms for Liberty has fought against transgender athletes and against allowing trans people to use the restroom aligned with their gender identity. It championed the “Don’t Say Gay” movement in Florida. Their religious beliefs should not dictate the rights of other human beings.

I have a person dear to me who was assigned male at birth. She has always been a girl since the first moment she could express herself. It makes me sick to think that bullies like Moms for Liberty are championing policies forcing her to have to use the boys bathroom at school. She can’t play sports aligned with her gender identity. She is treated as an “other” under the cover of religion and family values instead of being recognized for the girl that she is. She is an actual child and grown women are bullying her and her transgender peers for existing.

I do not see how it makes our country great to marginalize people who don’t fit the conservative Christian mold of

the ideal American.

As freethinkers, I believe that it is our duty to fight back against the encroachment of religion into state matters. Moms for Liberty does not deserve a seat on our school boards and should not be allowed to ban books or to try to ban the existence of gay and trans people. President Trump is wrong. If we want America to be great again, we need to take our country back, and that means getting religion out of state matters.

Amelia, 20, attends the University of Central Florida with plans to double major in interdisciplinary sustainability and theme park and attraction management.

“I do not see how it makes our country great to marginalize people who don’t fit the conservative Christian mold of the ideal American.”

“I have already completed an undergraduate certificate in Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which is something that I became very interested in while doing my ongoing Science Research project at Melbourne High School,” Amelia writes. “I am also a member of the UCF Burnett Honors college and a member of the UCF Solar Knights vehicle design team. My career goal is to use my GIS certification to map invasive species in and around critical watersheds. Wherever I work, I want to prioritize the health of our fragile Florida ecosystem through my work and research in GIS.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

The choir bells do not ring for all of us

FFRF awarded Anh \$400.

By Anh Nguyen

You were born in the summer of 1946 in Queens, N.Y., in Jamaica Hospital, to a wealthy businessman and a Scottish immigrant, both of whom practiced Presbyterian Christianity. You went from Fordham University to the University of Pennsylvania at Wharton, where you studied economics like every great man before you, and graduated without honors. You then grew up and married three times and had five children. Now, you are the president.

All in all, you have lived the American dream. And you are reshaping it:

“Is Trump’s religion truly bringing greatness if women cannot make health care choices regarding their own bodies?”

“We have to bring back our religion. We have to bring back Christianity in this country.” It is a great dream, is it not?

But how much of that dream belongs to the people of America?

And I don’t mean the rich and privileged, I mean the people who toil and struggle to survive. If religion were so great, would they not be dreaming the American Dream every morning? The nation is no more than the sum of its parts, its people.

And religion in America does not favor those without deep pockets. If a girl or a woman were pregnant and did not want a child, if they happen to live in many states, they would either have to get a pregnancy test and abortion within an incredibly tight window (in which the pregnancy may not even be detected) or go to a different state — neither of which are truly viable options for many people.

The overturning of Roe v. Wade was overwhelmingly sought by a majority Christian-conservative panel of justices, of which Trump appointed three — all of whom voted against Roe v. Wade. He thanked these judges for “the wisdom and the courage they showed on this long-term, very contentious issue.” Is Trump’s religion truly bringing greatness if women cannot make health care choices regarding their own bodies?



Anh Nguyen

and more homeless people, homeless veterans — people who fought for our country — are left to fend for themselves on the streets? This country was founded on the liberty and freedom of the people from tyrannical forces, with a promise that they could choose the life they live. The First Amendment proclaims, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.” The law demands the government has no hold on the existence of religion, or lack thereof.

And if the volume of the choir bells and number of the crosses holding up the stage of America were any metric of “greatness,” then do me a favor: Find a college-aged teenager who wants something real for herself, who’s raising a child she cannot afford, working two jobs she cannot handle because her state did not allow her to be rid of a pregnancy that was forced upon her. Or, find a veteran unclothed on the street, shivering and frightened by the dull ringing hammered into his ears by the gunfire from decades ago, an ocean away. Please, by all means, tell them how great the country that they live in is. And, tell them, for me, how religion will be their saving grace.

Ahn, 20, attends Georgia Tech with plans to major in mathematics and computer science.

“I am gunning to work in robotics engineering and eventually get a PhD in math,” Ahn writes. “I really like writing, lifting, futsal and rugby. I also really like Hogwarts-y places.”

American Infidel: Robert G. Ingersoll

By Orvin Larson

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

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TENTH PLACE

The compassion we feel

FFRF awarded Kevin \$300.

By Kevin Xiong

I know what compassion is. Compassion asks somebody to do something good for which they do not stand to gain from it. Donald Trump has stated that “We will be . . . compassionate to all, but our greatest compassion must be for our American citizens,” but I do not feel the compassion he refers to.

Trump’s statement stating “You just can’t have a great country if you don’t have religion” is true for legitimizing his branding, power and the influence of religion in the United States. However, his vision for a “great country” is morally wrong as it breaks the social contract between political leaders and individuals. Elected officials are expected to display compassion in office by serving the good of their constituents, within the bounds of the Constitution. However, Trump’s actions have empirically revealed a propensity toward a self-serving vision, aided by religiosity. Trump benefits from two sets of voters — those who are white Protestants and voters without a four-year college degree. Pub-

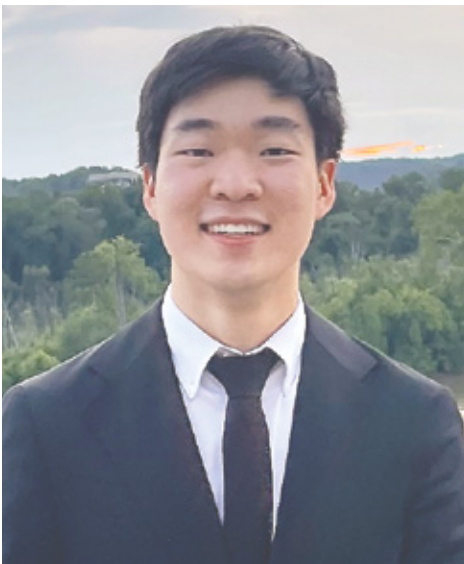
“Trump’s actions have empirically revealed a propensity toward a self-serving vision, aided by religiosity.”

lic schools are a key factor in informing both the moral and civic knowledge of the electorate.

I grew up in Texas, where I had to stand up to recite the Pledge of Allegiance and pledge to the Texas State Flag at the beginning of each school day. The pledges both include a mention of God, something that is increasingly prevalent in the state. Texas Senate Bill 10, which requires public schools to display the Ten Commandments, and the adoption of Texas Bluebonnet Learning curriculum, a curriculum that drew concern for favoring Christianity over other faith traditions.

How can the separation of church and state be maintained if exposure to religious education is associated with higher adult religiosity? Trump stands to benefit from an ingroup of people who are not affected by the deterioration of the separation of church and state. Such an ingroup is more likely to agree with Trump’s vision of a “great country” as it strengthens an idea of a religious America.

Americans should not allow the social contract between governments and citizens to deteriorate. If Trump’s rhetoric



Kevin Xiong

and policy actions only benefit people who support him, it challenges the idea of a great country as it excludes people from the social contract. France exists as a successful democracy, with both a social contract and the separation of church and state. It has a high quality of life, access to health care and education, and lower rates of religious practice than the United States. If religion were a key to having a “great country,” why do other secular democracies not have an official state religion?

To me, Trump’s comments about Christianity in the United States feel

like a direct attack on my identity — an atheist, a person of color, a second-generation immigrant . . . an outgroup. The promise of the American dream has been about freedom and opportunity to pursue a better life, but Trump seeks to pull the rug out from under people who are trying to achieve such a dream.

A self-serving government leader does not uphold the ideals of a “great country.” Rather than showing compassion, giving opportunities, and supporting people who were not the beneficiaries of privilege, he attacks people who are different from him. Trump’s claims of anti-Christian bias, anti-DEI and anti-immigrant speech shift the onus of compassion to outgroups, creating adversity that people strive to overcome.

Compassion presumes a minimum standard of a government that does not ascribe a religion to itself or its citizens. Compassion expects that religion does not benefit the people in power. I know what compassion is, but I do not feel it.

Kevin, 21, attends Baylor University with plan to major in music education.

“I started my academic career at the University of Texas at Austin, and the shift to Baylor University has increased the importance of secular advocacy,” he writes. “I am interested in topics such as public policy, anthropology, gender studies and Asian American studies. I enjoy listening to memoirs on audiobook, board games and baking.”

2026 college student essay honorable mentions

Alfred Conway

Because faith lacks realism, it warrants boundless power to justify unscrupulous actions and sow division. Conservative ideals have been politically manipulated via religious rationale to dredge up antiquated views that have stifled the progress of our nation. . . The Founders of this nation knew that religion could easily be taken to an extreme. They fundamentally grasped this concept which moved them to establish limits on the power of these institutions.

Alfred, 19, attends George Mason University and is majoring in marketing.



Alfred Conway

Mason Gutierrez

There are countries today that lack a dominating religious belief that succeed nonetheless. Countries like Singapore, Japan and the United Kingdom don’t have a focus on religion, but here’s the kicker: Their education and economy outperform every other country in the world. . . America is made up of many different groups and people, and forcing everyone to be the same never works. However, diversity allows the country to be strong.

Mason, 19, attends Northern Arizona University and is majoring in mechanical engineering.

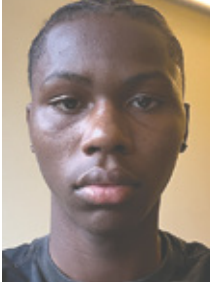


Mason Gutierrez

Jeremiah Jefferson

In a classical experiment, called “The Good Samaritan Study,” researchers observed whether religion determined if participants would stop and help someone injured and in need. The conclusion of the study was that “religiosity played no role in helping behavior, even when participants were on their way to deliver a talk on the parable of the good Samaritan.” This supports the idea that morality is not dependent on religion.

Jeremiah, 20, attends College of Wooster and is majoring in business economics.

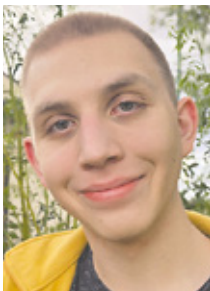


Jeremiah Jefferson

Sapien Saldivar

The Trump quote that really bothered me most: “And you’re all believers. I think, Paula [White], you wouldn’t have invited people that — is there an atheist in the room? Any atheists? I don’t think so. I wouldn’t want to raise my hand if I were you. I’d be in big trouble now.”

“I wouldn’t want to raise my hand if I were you. I’d be in big trouble now.” That is almost a textbook example of religious persecution. You can’t have a great country where that is a prevailing philosophy. Sapien, 20, attends University of Texas and is majoring in computer science.



Sapien Saldivar

Katherine Chow

More than once has President Trump tried to promote the idea of religion and God on not just Americans, but our government. These seemingly harmless words by Trump pose an extreme threat to our government and lives as American citizens. . . Trump’s stance on religion is extremely threatening to our governmental systems. Pro-Christian ideologies can already be seen within our new policies regarding limiting abortion access and appointing Christian judicial nominees that uphold “traditional” Christian values. .

Katherine, 19, attends New York University and is majoring in biology.



Katherine Chow

Rowen Hamilton

President Trump’s comments are untenable, unacceptable and un-American. Now, more than ever, I believe that division and hate cannot beckon us away from confronting our shared future. We must recognize that our love for the rights of all people is the grounding principle of our collective prosperity. During the American Revolution, John Dickinson made the choice clear: United we stand or divided we fall. As pioneers of freedom and opportunity, we owe the blessings of liberty to both theists and atheists alike.

Rowen, 21, attends the University of Texas and is majoring in government.



Rowen Hamilton

Layide Ogunse

Trump’s claim is proven wrong when you look at some of the most prosperous countries of today. Countries with the least religious affiliation constantly rank the highest in happiness, health care, education and quality of life, with a large majority of their populace abstaining from religious practices. Their success as a country isn’t due to their religious inclusion in their government but the nation’s focus on effective institutions, civic responsibility, education and human rights.

Layide, 20, attends Minnesota State University, Mankato and is majoring in education.



Layide Ogunse

Aimee Vega

The extreme biases that nonreligious people are “less moral” leads to civil rights violations and discriminatory actions that hide behind religious morality. . . . As an ethnic minority and a woman, I find it appalling that my reproductive rights are being stripped away, my community is under the threat of deportation and we are the objects of prejudice based purely on appearance. I believe using morality based on religion disrespects itself and its core beliefs of love.

Aimee, 20, attends Purdue University and is majoring in aerospace engineering.



Aimee Vega

2026 Forward Freethought scholarship winners

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

BSLA is the first secular humanist/atheist organization to specifically address college pipelining for youth of color through its ongoing scholarship, college and K-12 youth leadership partnerships. FFRF has proudly partnered with BSLA for 13 years to provide tuition grants, gradually increasing the funding and number of scholarships.

The following are the 2026 First in the Family Forward Freethought scholarship winners and the college they are attending. Each of them was awarded \$5,000.

Heather Buckner, University of California, Berkeley

Blessings Coly, University of North Carolina-A&T

Kaylla Da Costa, University of Massachusetts

Daniel Sierra, University of California, Berkeley

Mariah Slade, University of North Carolina-A&T

Kelan Speed, University of Texas-San Antonio

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

Heather Buckner

I identify as secular and as a freethinker because I believe morality is something we are responsible for practicing, not something we can outsource. To me, being secular does not mean being without values. It means choosing values deliberately: compassion, reason, fairness, curiosity, and responsibility to other people.



Heather Buckner

My deepest sense of purpose has always come from human effort. People solve problems. People build systems. People choose whether to include or exclude others. People decide whether a classroom, team or community becomes more humane. That is why secular humanism makes sense to me. It asks us to look honestly at the world, use evidence and empathy, and then do the work ourselves.

The humanist issue I care most about is who gets included in opportunity. I grew up as the only African American student in my elementary school, often told in small ways that I did not quite belong. My father passed away when I was

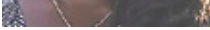
young, and I was raised by my single mother. Those years taught me that belonging is not given evenly. Some kids walk into a room already certain they are welcome. Others spend years learning how to take up space.

It is easy to say every child has dignity and potential. It is harder to ask why so many children spend their childhoods being moved, doubted, or overlooked, and to do something about it. The kids I mentored were as smart as any students I have met. What they did not always have was someone who showed up, learned their names, and treated their questions as worth answering.

Humanism, for me, is that showing up. It is the belief that fairness is not an abstract value but a practice that has to happen on a Tuesday at four o'clock, every Tuesday, with whoever walks in the door.

Blessings Coly

My values are rooted in how I treat people. I believe that kindness, empathy, and respect should not depend on religious affiliation but on the choices we make every day.



Blessings Coly

Going to church on Sunday or attending a mosque does not automatically make someone a good person, but their character is built through their actions. It is our responsibility to care for others, stand against unfair treatment, and create spaces where people feel respected and valued regardless of who they are or where they come from. I am passionate about fairness, equal opportunity and creating environments where people, especially young people, feel supported rather than judged. I have seen firsthand how easy it is for people to feel overlooked, unheard, or limited by circumstances outside of their control.

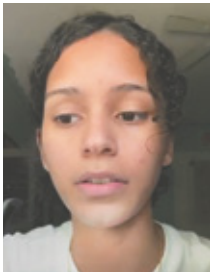
One of the humanist issues I am most passionate about is expanding opportunities for young people, particularly those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. As a first-generation college student, I understand how difficult it can be to navigate systems that were not designed with someone like me in mind. I have experienced financial hardship, uncertainty, and barriers that could have easily limited my future. However, I have also experienced the power of support, mentorship and community. I believe every young person deserves access to the resources and opportunities needed to reach

their full potential.

I want to continue creating opportunities for others, serving my community, and leading with the belief that every person deserves dignity, respect and the chance to succeed.

Kaylla Da Costa

I grew up in Brazil, a country where religion is woven into almost every part of daily life. From my earliest memories, I was surrounded by people who insisted that God was watching, guiding, protecting, and that if I didn't feel that presence, something was wrong with me. I remember sitting in crowded church services, trying to force myself to feel what everyone else claimed to feel, and instead feeling only guilt and confusion. I was told to believe in a God who would save us, yet I watched people around me struggle with poverty, violence and injustice that no prayer seemed to touch.



Kaylla Da Costa

By the time I moved to the United States at 13, part of me was left behind. I felt dislocated, like an intruder, but I also felt a huge sense of relief. Here, I wasn't surrounded by constant religious pressure, and for the first time, I could question what I had been taught. I began to notice a quiet but profound truth: the people who stepped forward to help were not acting out of divine mandate, but out of deliberate, human choice. Teachers who stayed after school to help me with English, neighbors who offered rides, volunteers who supported immigrant families, none of that came from divine intervention. It came from human beings deciding to care. That realization, as simple as it is, shaped my belief and understanding that progress is created by people choosing compassion. My commitment to humanism comes from understanding that justice is not promised; it is created through the choices we make every day. From the understanding that we only have each other, and that is reason enough to do good.

Humanism demands equity regardless of sex, race, gender, ethnicity, and color. These struggles tie back to humanism, and how equity is crucial to human development. Through my organizing and public advocacy, I have been able to prove my belief in humanism.

Daniel Sierra

As an agnostic, I have chosen to not believe in the mainstream religions. I align with Karl Marx's assertion that "Religion is the opium of the people." Marx is not saying religion is flawed or corrupt, but instead



Daniel Sierra

that it often functions as a coping mechanism for systemic evils like capitalism, poverty and disease. Yes, even capitalism. Yet, they are also used to justify these very same injustices: wars, genocides, racism, colorism, oppression of women, slavery. If religious texts can be twisted into defending any forms of oppression, then these religions look to be very dangerous toward the development of humanity.

I am a humanist both in text and in action. From Palestine to Los Angeles, my fight has always been for liberation from oppressive systems and governments. I carry both the vocalization of my humanism and the experience. Notably, I show this through my efforts for civil rights and equity through the public education system in Los Angeles. With my work, alongside student-led organizations such as Students Deserve, I have been able to mobilize hundreds of students through walkouts, public comments at Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) board, sit-ins at the LAUSD Headquarters, helping labor unions, and direct actions.

My humanism has driven me to defend institutional reparations. The Black Student Achievement Plan (BSAP) of LAUSD is a program that helps Black students through academics, attendance, and resources.

Humanism demands equity regardless of sex, race, gender, ethnicity, and color. These struggles tie back to humanism, and how equity is crucial to human development. Through my organizing and public advocacy, I have been able to prove my belief in humanism.

Mariah Slade

I identify as secular and as a humanist because my understanding of right and wrong has never come from religion, but from what I have seen people go through and how we choose to respond to it. Growing up in a single-parent, low-income household, I learned early that people are not given equal starting points, and that reality shaped how I think about fairness and responsibility. When things like school processes, financial aid information, or medical forms became overwhelming in my household, I was often the one sitting at the table trying to make sense of it all. I would read through everything line by line, rewrite it in simpler terms, and explain it until it was clear. In those moments, I started to understand how easily people can be shut out of opportuni-



Mariah Slade

ties, not because they are not capable, but because systems are not built with them in mind.

During high school, I tried to create a different kind of space in the ways I showed up for others. Through peer tutoring in math and science, I worked one-on-one with students who were struggling, often sitting with them after class and going through problems step by step until it finally clicked. I remember one student who had already decided they were going to fail.

They barely spoke at first and kept saying they were "just not good at math." Instead of rushing, I slowed everything down and rewrote each problem in a way that made it easier to follow. The moment they solved one on their own, their entire attitude shifted. They started asking questions, then answering them in class, and eventually passing tests they thought were impossible. That moment mattered to me because it showed how much confidence can change when someone feels supported instead of judged.

Kelan Speed

For a long while, I believed that if I read enough books, thought deeply enough or found the right philosophy, uncertainty would eventually disappear. I turned to literature, theology, political theory and philosophy searching for answers to questions that seemed impossible to avoid. Who are we? Why do we suffer? What gives life value?

Kelan Speed

The older I have become, the less certain I am that there is a final answer waiting at the end of that road. What I have become certain of is something much smaller. People are hungry, often lonely, and in desperate pursuit of opportunities they never had a chance to attain. All in the face of our suffering.

I have always admired philosophies that begin with the world as it exists rather than the world as we wish it to be. Human beings are imperfect. We are biased, emotional and often irrational. Yet we are also capable of extraordinary compassion. We build schools, libraries, hospitals, charities and communities not because we are forced to, but because we recognize ourselves in one another.

What appeals to me about secular humanism is not certainty, but responsibility. It asks us to confront problems directly. It refuses to assume that justice, equality or progress will simply arrive on their own. Instead, it places those responsibilities in human hands, and that conviction is the core of my belief.

LETTERBOX

Dossey’s powerful column really hit the mark

I just want to thank Daniel Dossey for the most powerful article about leaving Christianity that I have ever read. He words it so beautifully and so accurately that I felt every word. I, too, grew up in a very conservative, religious background, and although my pathway after leaving was very different, the feelings and the considerations articulated by Daniel hit the mark exactly. Amazing writer, amazing insight. Thank you, Daniel.

Oregon

Here’s a secular version of the Nicene Creed

Every 7-year-old from a Catholic family is made to memorize the Nicene Creed, which has been an anchor document for the Catholic Church since the Council of Nicea in 325 CE.

The Nicene Creed has been extremely useful for unifying the Church and giving people an easy point of reference that was worked out by the clerics. It asserts belief in God, the Jesus story as specified, the inclusion of a Holy Spirit into a trinity, and the belief that the Catholic Church is the one and only true church.

I looked around and was surprised to find that there is no “Secular Creed” to express the beliefs of those who take a more scientific approach to the questions of existence. So, I wrote one.

My secular creed is approximately the same length as the Nicene Creed, and I open it up for commentary. I feel that there are other things that can be included or further articulated, but I also don’t want to bloat the document unnecessarily. Like the Nicene Creed, I want it to be a handy reference that is easy to follow.

The Secular Creed

I believe in the unintelligent design of the universe.

And that there is no consciousness monitoring our every thought and action.

Except ourselves and those around us. I believe that randomness has no choice. But to eventually create life, because with so many combinations of circumstance,

It could not avoid eventually doing so. I believe that once replicating life was formed,

It accelerated the process of evolution, Favoring those forms of life, That continued to live and replicate. I believe that humankind

Is a very evolved product of this evolution.

And that mathematics tells us That somewhere out there Even more evolved life forms exist. I believe that the vastness of the universe Is more than humankind can comprehend.

Yet we still have a driving need For an explanation of things That is within our grasp. Whether or not that explanation Agrees with what is out there I believe that

While we know that we don’t have the answers,

There is a great temptation To transfer our trust To someone who says they do.

Good words, good deeds



FFRF Member Greg Uhl shows off a few books he purchased for his “Little Free Library seeding spree.” The books he has donated to the little libraries included some of the books in the “Stardust” series by Bailey Harris. Greg is the nephew of the late Diane and Stephen Uhl, major FFRF benefactors.

Someone who can help us to deny death.

Someone who can assure us That they make sense of it all.

It is my belief That the observations that I make The things that I figure out for myself Are the most reliable

And far and away For my purposes The most economical.

California

Epicurus surprisingly not mentioned in Loftus column

The essay attacking theodicy by John Loftus in the September issue was interesting. However, I was surprised that he made no mention of the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who first drew attention to the logical contradiction between an all-powerful and all-loving god. The argument put forth by Loftus is, in fact, part of a long philosophical tradition. As pointed out in the bible, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

Wisconsin

‘Biblical truth’ is a far cry from actual truth

Ken Paxton of Texas has anchored his Senate campaign in “defending biblical truths,” claiming the country must be Judeo-Christian. If he is so staunch in doing this, I wonder how he would defend the following “biblical truth”?

In the biblical creation story, it says God creates light, and then “saw that the light was good.” God creates the seas and then saw that it was good. God creates animals and then saw it was good.

If he is supposed to be all-knowing and all-powerful, the text should have read: “God creates light/seas/animals/etc. because it was good.”

It’s as if God had to first create something and then figure out if it actually was good. “My goodness, I created such and such and, whoopsie, it actually was good. Well, what do you know!”

That kills the myth right there.

Is this the “biblical truth” endorsed by Paxton and Trump?

Indiana

Some thoughts on the evolution of morality

Morality evolves. There was a time when we regarded genocide, misogyny, slavery and cruelty as part of life.

Genocide is well documented in history and in the bible (Numbers 31 is a quintessential example).

As for misogyny, women were not viable members of a population. They could not own property, vote, establish credit, resist their husbands, start a business, run for office, etc. That’s half of the population!

Slavery was a part of life in most societies, including ours. Cruelty was accepted as a necessary part of life. We burned people at the stake, drowned women we accused of being witches, buried people up to their necks and stoned them, nailed people to trees, put people in stocks, immobilizing their necks and wrists in a position that was uncomfortable at best in order to humiliate them in public.

But, we have improved. Even though today there are instances of each of the items above, they are not official policy of most governments and they are viewed as immoral by most of us.

Genocide is basically gone. (At least those governments that practice it feel obliged to deny what it is when it does occur.) For the most part, women are free and unrestrained in the Western world. The glass ceiling still exists to some extent, but it has been defeated by many. Slavery is ended here and Jim Crow practices have been officially overcome. Cruel practices are no more.

So, how did we get here? In 1215, England accepted the Magna Carta, which introduced the rule of law. Kings ostensibly could no longer establish arbitrary rules. Laws were written and everyone was required to abide by them. An individual charged with a crime was entitled to a fair trial by his or her equals. That helped shape the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights. The Founding Fathers pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor to create a nation of the people, by the people and for the people. Because what they were doing was treason in Britain, they would have been executed had they failed, so it was literally their lives and fortunes at stake.

In recent decades, women have achieved full rights. We ended slavery and eventually ended the Jim Crow laws. People of color have achieved equality under the law, even if ostensibly they may have not. In recent decades, we have stopped blatant use of racial and ethical terms of denigration. Ethnic jokes were part of my experience when I was a kid, they are not now. To a great extent, we provide for people with limitations.

Unfortunately, with the election of Donald Trump, evolution of morality and civility has been interrupted. We are facing a moral crisis now with Trump attempting to overturn the rule of law by his actions, his weaponization of the Department of Justice and the Supreme Court and his domination of the complicit MAGA base. Sacred honor doesn’t seem to be a part of that. It is not clear whether morality and civility will be restored when this is all over.

Maryland

I’m 80 and living simply as a pacifist atheist

I am an 80-year-old longtime activist. I am openly gay, polyamorous, vegan and a living-simply enthusiast.

I was a sincere Christian preacher in the 1960s in Virginia and Illinois. After a long journey away from religion, I am now a sincere atheist. My main reason for no longer believing in a fair, loving parent God is that hundreds of millions of people for thousands of years have begged God desperately for help from slavery, starvation, floods, fires, pain, torture, rape, war . . . and received no help!

I know it’s terrifying for anyone strongly devoted to any religion to realize there is no fair, loving parent God.

I did two years of community service as a conscientious objector during the Vietnam War. I refused to go murder and die!

As a person opposed to all war, I did not want to pay federal taxes to train and equip young people, mostly low-income and people of color, to become professional hired killers to murder on command.

So, for 47 years now, I have paid no federal income tax — not one bloody penny! I enjoy living simply below the U.S. federal income taxable level and below the poverty level.

New Mexico

God couldn’t exist in this universe before Big Bang

Many religious people believe that God exists and has been around for trillions and trillions of years.

The Big Bang created our universe about 13.4 billion years ago. It created the atoms that resulted in the stars and everything else, including the Earth and all of humanity. It’s very difficult to understand that space did not exist before the Big Bang. No matter how great and powerful humans think God is, it could not have existed in our universe before the Big Bang because the universe did not yet exist.

Nevada

CHAPTER UPDATES

Salt Lake Chapter of FFRF



Vikki Deakin gives a talk on Thomas Paine to Salt Lake City chapter members and friends.

The Salt Lake City chapter hosted its second annual lecture on July 29 in celebration of the 250th anniversary of America’s independence. The theme was Thomas Paine. Salt Lake City chapter members enjoyed an in-depth discussion led by Vikki Deakin, a professor of history at Weber State

University who is the author of a book on Thomas Paine. Deakin spoke about Paine’s radical thinking and how his beliefs strongly influenced his advocacy for separation of church and state. We were joined by several members of Salt Lake Oasis, who co-sponsored the event.

Upstate New York Freethinkers

The Upstate New York Freethinkers chapter works closely with American Humanist Association (AHA) chapters and the Secular Student Alliance (SSA) to mentor freethinking students across Upstate New York — supporting groups at RIT, Onondaga Community College and a new SSA chapter at SUNY Cobleskill. Building vibrant secular student communities begins with personal connections, starting at informal campus game nights. From that foundation, the Secular Student Alliance

at Rochester Institute of Technology, led by President AJ Keeney, is driving civic engagement. The group is collaborating on nonpartisan voter registration tabling with RIT’s ROAR the Vote. Upstate New York Freethinkers counts on generous donations to provide ongoing FFRF student gift memberships to regional SSA presidents, like AJ, through college and post-graduation, building a long-term FFRF leadership pipeline. Contact info@unyfl.org or 585-454-9921.

OVERHEARD

You have the folks who believe this is a Christian nation, that if your family is not this set of European nations, that you should not be welcomed here.

Abdullah H. Hammoud, mayor of Dearborn, Mich., commenting on “Christian crusader” Jake Lang, who held a “Christian Crusade” rally in the majority Arab American city, billed online as a “pig roast.” Hundreds of supporters, including a group of

neo-Nazis bearing a swastika flag, attended, along with counterprotesters.

New York Times, 8-23-26

There is one essential truth. There is no immortality.

Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, who served on the Obama administration as a health policy adviser. He was quoting his Greek mother, Calliope Emanuel, who in turn was quoting a popular Greek song of the 1980s.

New York Times, 8-24-26

People aren’t objects, avatars or paper dolls. We are not just tools for a patriar-

Crossword answers

S	L	A	G		L	O	B		L	O	T	H		
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— Brian Cox

Ozarks Chapter of FFRF



Ozarks chapter of FFRF members gather with “The Friendly Atheist” Hemant Mehta, third from right, after he spoke to the group.

The Ozarks chapter had an overflow crowd show up to see “The Friendly Atheist” Hemant Mehta, the second guest in our 2026 Secular Speaker Series. More than 75 people from Texas, Oklahoma, Missouri and Arkansas joined us to hear Hemant speak about the role Christian women play in perpetuating Christian nationalist ideology.

Sam McGuire of American Atheists spoke on Sept. 26, and Fish Stark of the American Humanist Association will speak Oct. 22 to wrap up our 2026 series.

Visit ozarksFFRF.org for more information and tickets. We hope to see you there!

FFRF-East Tennessee

With Tennessee being a test state for implementation of Project 2025, the East Tennessee Chapter of FFRF has been busy fielding complaints about state/church separation, especially in the local school systems. Blount County is one of the school districts at the forefront of statewide efforts to post the Ten Commandments in all schools. Chapter President Aleta Ledendecker has spoken out at Blount County Board of Education meetings against posting the commandments, and against offering a Christian prayer at the beginning of those meetings. Leden-

decker was also interviewed by local TV station WVLt regarding her efforts to stop approval of the new policy to post the Ten Commandments.

The chapter also provided a \$1,000 scholarship to a Tennessee student through the Secular Student Alliance program.

On Oct. 11, FFRF-East Tennessee will be hosting Bradley Onishi for his book tour of “American Caesar: How Theocrats and Tech Lords are Turning America into a Monarchy.” For more information, visit ffrfetc.org.

FFRF Pikes Peak Region



The FFRF Pikes Peak Region chapter engaged with thousands of visitors who attended three separate regional Pride events in Woodland Park, Colorado Springs and Pueblo in June and August. The chapter staffed booths at each event to show support for the LGBTQ+ community and to continue secular outreach and visibility in the region.

chal agenda, either as breeders, soldiers or patriots. . . I like to imagine that one day, Charlie Kirk would have discovered his religious trauma, caused by grooming, objectification, a foreclosed future and the pressure to shine up the harsh realities of the idealism he was paid to promote. Maybe he would have deconstructed his previous beliefs and grown into a well-rounded human being after all, instead of living and dying as a paper poster boy for the patriarchy.

Tia Levings, author of “A Well-Trained Wife: My Escape from Christian Patriarchy” and “I Belong to Me: A Survivor’s Guide to Recovery and Hope after Religious Trauma,” in her column, “Sainting Charlie Kirk serves the MAGA movement. It doesn’t serve the girls who believe it.”

Religion News Service, 9-3-26

One of the reasons people favor secularism is because it actually protects all religions.

British-American broadcaster Mehdi Hasan, who hosted Doug Wilson, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth’s pastor,

in a “Mehdi Unfiltered” interview to confront the pastor’s dangerous views. Hasan was named FFRF Action Fund’s “Secularist of the Week” on Sept. 11.

YouTube, 9-3-26

This is not faith. This is blasphemy baptized in nationalism. . . If the government is acting as a Christian nationalist organization as opposed to one representing the Constitution and all Americans, there is a problem.

John Whitehead, in the article, “Why a lawyer who launched the Christian legal movement believes it’s gone astray.”

Washington Post, 9-14-26

I’m trying to protect our democracy. And I believe that the wall of separation between church and state is perhaps the most important pillar of protecting us from religious tyranny.

Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., in an interview with Katherine Stewart as he promotes his new book “No Prophets: The Fight to Save Democracy from Christian Nationalism.”

Religion News Service, 8-19-26

Great American Freethought Songbook



FFRF Co-President Dan Barker plays piano while vocalist Darcie Johnston sings the Cole Porter song “Let’s Do It” at the fifth in a seven-month series highlighting Great American Songbook musicians who — surprisingly — were not religious.



Photos by Chris Line

FFRF’s Outreach Coordinator Charis Hoard waits outside Freethought Hall on Aug. 24 to welcome guests to the “Great American Freethought Songbook.”



Henry Mongrain chats with another guest prior to the start of the show. Thanks to FFRF Events Manager Sadie Pattinson for coordinating details of the evening.



Audience members listen to songs performed by Dan and Darcie. If you missed earlier “Songbook” installments, you may watch them on YouTube or look for them in Freethought TV’s archive.



Dan Barker gives some details about the history of freethinker Cole Porter and his songs. All of the concerts, which stream live on multiple platforms, can be watched on FFRF’s YouTube channel or the free app for smart TVs: Free-thought TV.



Darcie Johnston sings one of Cole Porter’s classic songs. The seven-month concert series celebrates major figures of the Great American Songbook. Richard and Mary Rodgers were featured in September. Watch the finale, a medley of other freethinking “Songbook” composers, on Nov. 9 at 7 p.m. Central via FFRF’s Facebook page, YouTube channel or Freethought TV.