

FREETHOUGHT TODAY



**FFRF development
director is humans
rights advocate**

PAGE 2



**Horrendous suffering
effectively
refutes God**

PAGE 10



**First in the Family
essay winners
announced**

PAGES 12-18

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September 2026

Missouri fire dept. removes Christian flag

The fire department in Diamond, Mo., quickly removed a Christian flag from outside its fire station after the Freedom From Religion Foundation raised constitutional concerns.

The department confirmed that the flag had been taken down following FFRF's recent complaint and later stated publicly that it has done so "in compliance with constitutional law."

FFRF wrote to Fire Chief Rebecca Dunn recently after receiving a report that the department was flying a Christian flag

outside its fire station alongside the American flag and the department's own flag. Since the department selects and controls which flags are displayed on public property, FFRF explained that the display constituted impermissible government speech by conveying official favoritism toward Christianity over all other religions and nonreligion.

"The Fire Department knows that citizens interact with and rely on firefighters during some of the most urgent and vul-

nerable times of their lives," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote. "Minority religious and nonreligious citizens should not be made to feel like outsiders in their own community because the Fire Department flies a Christian flag outside of its building."

FFRF noted that the Christian flag has increasingly become associated with the Christian nationalist movement, including its prominent display during the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol. Gov-

ernment entities must avoid displaying symbols that communicate religious or ideological favoritism.

FFRF appreciates the prompt remedy of this major constitutional violation.

"Fire departments exist to protect every member of the community equally," FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor says. "Flying a Christian flag from a government facility sends the chilling and unacceptable message that Christians are favored insiders while everyone else is an outsider."

**For more FFRF victories,
see pages 6-7.**

2026 Congressional Reason Reception

'Protecting democracy, liberty, progress, justice'

Members of Congress, national secular leaders and advocates gathered July 21 on Capitol Hill to celebrate reason, constitutional democracy and the growing visibility of nonreligious Americans in public life.

"Every year, some of the most reasonable people I know assemble to highlight the essential role that reason plays in protecting democracy, liberty, progress and justice for all," Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., said of the third annual Congressional Reason Reception.

The Freedom From Religion Foundation, American Humanist Association and the Secular Coalition for America hosted the evening filled with wit and humor. Several members of Congress and leaders of the secular movement took turns speaking at the dais, with Mary L. Trump, the president's niece, concluding the event as the keynote speaker. (See her speech beginning on this page).

The reception served as a celebration of reason and joy in public life, a secular alternative to the dour and sanctimonious National Prayer Breakfast as debates over Christian nationalism, religious exemptions and the separation of church and state continue to shape national politics.

"Our country was founded on freedom of religion and church/state separation," said Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus. "No wannabe king or theocratic sycophant hellbent on controlling people through religious extremism will change that. Folks from all walks of faith — or none at all — came together to celebrate something far more American: a government run by reason, freedom of conscience and the Constitution. That's what the Reason Reception is all about. No matter how hard Christian nationalists fight to overturn democracy and force their extremism on the American people, we will be here defending church/state separation and our fundamental rights."

The reception also recognized author and journalist Katherine Stewart as the recipient of the Age of Reason Award and National Women's Law Center Director of Nominations & Democracy Allison Gill as recipient of the Common Sense Award.

The Congressional Reason Reception coincides with the growing strength of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, which now includes 37 members, and reflects a secular movement that continues to gain ground on Capitol Hill.

"This country belongs to all of us, believers and nonbelievers alike, and no one needs to bow their head to belong here," said FFRF's Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor.



Photo by Chris Line

Rep. Jared Huffman hosts Mary L. Trump and others, including FFRF Co-Presidents Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, in his Capitol office prior to the Congressional Reason Reception on July 21. For more photos from the event, see page 9. (View the Reason Reception on YouTube or FFRF TV.)

Reason, ethics worth defending

By Mary L. Trump

A few weeks ago, I had the great honor of delivering the keynote address at the Reason Reception hosted by the Congressional Freethought Caucus in the House and sponsored by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the American Humanist Association and the Secular Coalition for America. It was an extraordinary event, and I was deeply honored to be part of it. I wanted to share those remarks with you because I think they speak to something much larger than the political moment we currently find ourselves in. They speak to the role reason, democracy and our shared humanity must play if we are going to find our way through it.

I began with what, admittedly, was an easy joke. Donald has one about "Two Corinthians." Two Corinthians walk into a bar. That's the entire joke because he has never

read it.

He has not read the bible. He has not read the Constitution. And, with all due respect, he could never be a member of the Freethought Caucus. Not simply because he is irreligious, although he certainly is, but because he has no capacity whatsoever for reason.

Once I got that out of the way, I talked about a moment that has stayed with me for years.

Back in 2008, during one of the Democratic primary debates between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, one of the moderators asked both candidates to name their favorite bible verse. I remember immediately feeling my heart sink. When both candidates answered the question without hesitation, I felt even more discouraged because, on the one hand, it felt complicit, and on the other, it represented such a profound missed opportunity.

See Trump speech on page 8

FFRF development director is a human rights advocate

Name: Angela West Blank.

Where and when I was born: Macomb, Ill. (in the region of “Forgottonia”). It’s fitting that I was born there, as the name “Forgottonia” represents a protest of inequalities in that area of the state — and I’ve spent the better part of my career fighting against inequality. (I was raised in the Quad Cities, spent 20 years in Chicago, and moved to Wisconsin in 2007.)

Examples: In the mid-1990s, I served as president of the Chicago Chapter of the National Organization for Women, where I started the organization’s first Economic Justice Committee. I also acted as development director for the Chicago Coalition to End Homelessness and as executive director for Literacy Volunteers of Western Cook County.

Education: B.S. in business administration and marketing from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and an M.A. in International Studies from DePaul University.

Family: I am married to Steve Blank, a marriage and family therapist. We have a son, Lew, who works remotely in Madison as communications manager for Data for Progress, based in Washington, D.C.

How I came to work at FFRF: I care deeply about human rights. The rise in

Christian nationalism and its prominence in the Trump administration and our local communities has led to such egregious levels of discrimination against immigrants, women, people of color and LGBTQIA+ individuals and groups that the nation I love has become almost unrecognizable. I am saddened and infuriated, but, at the same time, I believe strongly in the power of people to effect positive change in their communities. There is hope.

I also strongly agree with FFRF that the first to speak out for prison reform, humane treatment for the mentally ill, the abolition of capital punishment, women’s right to vote, death with dignity for the terminally ill, an end to slavery, and the right to choose contraception, sterilization and abortion were freethinkers. I am a freethinker and am proud to play a role in supporting our mission at this critical time.

I will be attending the convention in Milwaukee and am excited about meeting our members and supporters.

What I do here: I’m the organization’s first director of development. I am in charge of strategic fundraising leadership, donor and estate planning cultivation and stewardship, and development operations and team management.

What my goals for this job are: My job is to build the current development program and to give our members and supporters opportunities to support our crucial work to protect and promote free-thought and our First Amendment. Importantly, I’m looking forward to getting to know our members, what they care about most, and how they want to leave a legacy for future generations.

I spend a lot of time thinking about: Democracy. Human rights. Freethought. The future of our nation.



Angela West Blank

I spend little if any time thinking about: How I compare to others — especially on social media.

My religious upbringing was: My parents were union teachers. My family attended the local Methodist church until my brother and I were confirmed. In confirmation class, I remember our pastor turning red in the face when I brought up the contradictions I noticed in the bible and when I objected to how women were treated in its pages. His response was that I just had to “have faith.” My parents also objected to how wealthy congregants were given special treatment, while they were asked to teach Sunday school (i.e., work on their days off). Since then, I’ve never joined a church, though when my son was young, our family attended Third Unitarian Church in Chicago, where the pastor was an atheist.

Things I like: Running, biking, hiking and adventure racing with my son. Films: art, comedy and mystery. I almost always know “whodunnit” within the first 30 minutes. Music: Motown, jazz and disco (because it’s funny and so danceable). Food: Barbecue, ice cream, popcorn. Sports! My husband, son and two collies.

Things I smite: Fascism. Inequity. Unfairness. Hypocrisy. Racism.

In my golden years: I kind of think I’m already in my golden years! At any rate, I want to do things that are meaningful to me, like working with FFRF. I want to spend time with my family and connect with people I know and meet along the way (in positive ways). Life is short, so let’s make it count. Carpe diem!

Editor’s note: If you are considering FFRF in your estate planning or would like to make a donation to FFRF, send an email to developmentdirector@ffrf.org or call 608-256-8900.



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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The only freethought newspaper in the United States

Freethought Today Cryptogram

O CTJF UWHOWQW OJ IWXQWJ XJC IWHH. O

CTJF RJTD OG O UWHOWQW OJ LTC. XHH O RJTD OK

FIXF XK XJ OJCOQOCPXH, O DTJF XHHTD FIOK

HOGW — FIW TJHZ FIOJL O RJTD FT WYOKF — FT

UW DXKFWC. —LW TSLW EHTTJWZ

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

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

FFRF convention — Milwaukee, Wis., Oct. 15-17

The schedule is set! Join us in Milwaukee!

The Freedom From Religion Foundation’s 2026 convention is set for the city of the Brewers, Bucks, Harley-Davidson, and, of course, beer.

FFRF will be hosting its 49th annual convention in Milwaukee, located on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan, at the Baird Convention Center from Thursday, Oct. 15, to Sunday morning, Oct. 18. Register online at ffrf.us/con26register.

The conference kicks off Thursday, Oct. 15, with “early-bird workshops,” a complimentary reception and an opening-evening speech by Rep. Jared Huffman. And, as always, the convention is followed by the



Jared Huffman

annual meetings of the membership and state representatives on Sunday morning, Oct. 18. FFRF offers a discounted room block at the Hilton Milwaukee Hotel, 509 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee, of \$229 plus tax per night. Book your room online: ffrf.us/con26reservations or phone 800-774-1500 noting you’re with the Freedom From Religion Foundation and providing the group code “90N.”

The line-up of speakers includes: Rep. Huffman, a U.S. congressman representing California’s 2nd District, who will be speaking about and signing copies of his timely new book, “No Prophets: The Fight to Save Democracy from Christian Nationalism.”



Percival Everett



Jennifer Welch

Percival Everett, an atheist and author of the powerful book “James,” which won the 2025 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction and is a retelling of “Huckleberry Finn” from the point of view of the enslaved James (not “Jim”). The distinguished professor of English at USC will receive FFRF’s Emperor Has No Clothes Award.

Jennifer Welch, an atheist who co-hosts the “I’ve Had It” podcast, which reaches

over 3 million listeners a month and has 150 million+ monthly views on its YouTube Channel, will speak on “I’ve had it with Christian nationalism.”



Jim Obergefell



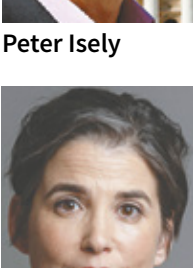
Gigi Cervantes



Johnnie Cotton



Peter Isely



Kate Cohen

(And Maybe You Should Too),” is a previous recipient of FFRF’s Freethought Heroine Award.

Jim Obergefell, the lead plaintiff in Obergefell vs. Hodges — the 2015 Supreme Court decision that legalized marriage equality — and an atheist, will receive FFRF’s Forward Award and statuette reserved for individuals who have moved society forward.

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

The Clarence Darrow Award and statuette will be presented to Milwaukee’s Peter Isely, a survivor of childhood sexual assault by a Roman Catholic priest, and co-founder of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP).

Kate Cohen, author of “We of Little Faith: Why I Stopped Pretending to Believe (And Maybe You Should Too),” is a previous recipient of FFRF’s Freethought Her-

oine Award.

The Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award, now at \$75,000, will be awarded to the Secular Coalition for America’s Education Fund and be accepted by SCA Executive Director Steven Emmert.



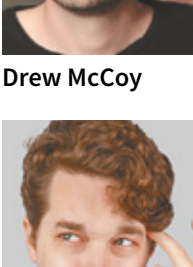
Steve Emmert



Maya Wiley



Randi Weingarten



Drew McCoy



Forrest Valkai

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

Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, a union of 1.8 million individuals, will be speaking and signing copies of her new book, “Why Fascists Fear Teachers.”

Other speakers will include Drew McCoy, creator of the popular “Genetically Modified Skeptic” YouTube channel, with over 850,000 subscribers.

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

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

of Britain activist Maryam Namazie will accept the award on behalf of Betty.

The conference will end with an after-dinner keynote address by Ron Reagan, known for his fearless political commentary and his independent views.

The Godless Gospel singing group, which performs songs with nonreligious and humanistic messages, such as “I Believe in Honesty” and “Let’s All Give Thanks,” began in 2022 as a collaboration between artistic producer Andre Forbes and FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. This year, the group will include Cynthia McDonald, Mandisa Thomas, Aaron Hill, Heather Kinley, Prince Chappelle and Candace Gorham.

FFRF is also pleased to announce the convention will be screening filmmaker and FFRF Board Member Jeremiah Camara’s latest movie, “Americaste: The

Cast Behind the Curtain,” a 75-minute documentary.

FFRF will be offering a variety of “early-bird” workshops on Thursday afternoon, Oct. 15, including the popular “Ask an Attorney” panel where FFRF legal eagles will take your questions on state/church issues and concerns, and an interactive panel to practice lobbying with FFRF Regional Governmental Affairs Manager Mickey Dolens, a seated state legislator in Oklahoma, and other FFRF legislative team members.

Drew McCoy, who is speaking at the conference, will host a workshop, “The True Opposite of Church,” about the value of organizing for secularism, followed by an activity to help attendees get to know each other.

The annual conference will include the usual executive, legal and legislative reports, student essay winners, sales tables, the NonPrayer Breakfast, the drawing for “clean” (pre-“In God We Trust”) currency and several optional group meals and complimentary receptions.

Sign up today at ffrf.us/con26.

2026 Convention Schedule*

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15

- 1-4:00 pm Workshops
Drew McCoy, FFRF Legal Team, Legislative Team, Chapters
- 4-6:00 pm Registration opens
Thursday Evening Welcome Reception (Hilton Hotel, Crystal Ballroom)
- 4-6:00 pm Dinner on your own
- 7:30 pm Rep. Jared Huffman, “No Prophets: The Fight to Save Democracy from Christian Nationalism,” followed by book signing (Baird Center Ballroom)

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 16

- 8:00 am Registration re-opens
Complimentary continental breakfast
- Sales tables open
- 9:00 am Welcome
Chapter Welcome
Report from Co-Presidents
- 10:00 am Civil Rights Heroine & Hero
Gigi Cervantes
Johnnie Cotton, “Schools in Distress”

- 10:20 am Henry Zumach Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award
Secular Coalition for America Education Fund. Acceptance by Steven Emmert, SCA Executive Director
- 10:40 am BREAK
- 11:00 am Kate Cohen, author, “We of Little Faith”
- 11:30 am Maya Wiley, Executive Director, Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights
- Noon Book signing
- Noon-2:00 pm Lunch on your own
- 2:00 pm Legal Reports
FFRF Legal Team
- 3:00 pm Legislative Report
FFRF Legislative Team
- 3:30-4:00 pm BREAK
- 4:00 pm Randi Weingarten, Executive Director, AFT
- 5:00 pm Book signing

- 5:30 pm Dinner (ticketed, plated)
- 7:30 pm Godless Gospel Concert
- 8:00 pm Emperor Has No Clothes Award
Jennifer Weingarten, “I’ve Had it with Christian Nationalism”
- 9 pm Book signing
Complimentary Dessert and Hot Beverages
- 9:30 pm Film viewing
Jeremiah Camara’s “Americaste: The Cast Behind the Curtain”
- SATURDAY, OCTOBER 17
- 8 am Nonprayer Breakfast (ticketed, plated)
- 9:00 am Ballroom, sales re-open
- 9:30 am Student essay winners
- 10:00 am Avijit Roy Courage Award
Maryam Namazie on behalf of Ibtissame (Betty) Lachgar
- 10:30 am Darrow Award
Peter Isely
- 11:00 am Forward Award

- Jim Obergefell
- 11:40 am Book signing
- Noon-2:00 pm Lunch on your own
- 2:00 pm Drew McCoy, “Don’t Debate Dogma”
- 2:30 pm Forrest Valkai, “How to Teach Evolution to a Creationist”
- 3:15 pm BREAK
- 3:30 pm Emperor Has No Clothes Award
Percival Everett
- 4:30 pm Book signing
- 6:00 pm Dinner
- 8:00 pm Drawing for Clean Money
- 8:30 pm Keynote
Ron Reagan
- SUNDAY, OCTOBER 18
- 9:00 am Noon Membership and State Representatives meetings
- ADJOURN BY NOON
- *Schedule is subject to change

Across

1. Source of pressure?

5. Be off

8. “The Nutcracker” step

11. *Freethinking Eric _____, creator of Tony-winning “Spamalot”

12. Fencer’s weapon

13. *Atheist Sigmund Freud’s field, for short

15. Center of authority

16. No way!

17. Like haunted house

18. *Annie Laurie’s mother

20. Got “A+”

21. Visible radiation

22. French vineyard

23. Peace, in Hebrew

26. Ship’s stabilizer

30. Pecking mother

31. Certain primate

34. “With the bow,” music term

35. Like Huck Finn’s dad, e.g.

37. Brown truck delivery company, acr.

38. Better than good

39. River islet

40. Isthmus, pl.

42. A in IPA

43. Secretive way of moving

45. *Scarlet “A” to atheists and agnostics, e.g.

47. Not solid or liquid

48. King Tut or Vladimir Lenin, e.g.

50. “The Parent Trap” child

52. *_____ Relief, former FFRF humanitarian committee

56. 100 centimes

57. Up it in poker

58. Division word

59. Dam

60. *Irreverent Gene Wilder’s and Richard Pryor’s movie “_____ Crazy”

61. Word type

62. Tiny guitar, for short

63. Yes, archaic

64. “National Velvet” author

Down

1. Leaning Tower city

2. *Freethinking John Steinbeck’s “East of _____”

3. Flair

4. Make a remake

5. Historical period

6. Move a plant

7. Film unit, in the olden days

8. Combustible heap

9. Opposite of base

10. Pronoun

12. *Freethinking Alan Turing was instrumental in “breaking” the _____ machine

13. Oyster gem

14. *_____ Student Alliance, educational nonprofit organization

19. Weeping queen of Greek mythology

22. Soda pop container

23. Iranian monarchs

24. Serf

25. Foot/leg connection

26. Silly talk

27. Like a photo taken from a plane

28. On a _____ of 1 to 10

29. Native American emblem

32. *President who established Office of Faith-Based and Community Partnerships

33. Choose

36. *Freethought Radio intro song

38. *”_____ Shelter” song by freethinking Mick Jagger of the Rolling Stones

40. It is

41. *FFRF’s dues payer, e.g.

44. Knight’s weapon

46. Reference to the writer

48. *_____ Python, #11 Across’ creation

49. Loosen laces

50. Major bike maker

51. Not quite a curl

52. Aeronautics and space org.

53. Aware of a secret (2 words)

54. Tiny purse

55. Affectionate, with “of”

56. Winter bug

Freethought Today Crossword

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Answers on page 20

Puzzle courtesy of Katya Maes for FFRF

CHAPTER UPDATES

Upstate New York Freethinkers

Only in its third year, Upstate New York Freethinkers is already one of FFRF’s largest chapters, serving seven regions and 13 cities. With Pride season concluded, we are already planning chapter participation in 2027.

On the third weekend of September, ww will join American Humanist Association sponsors and atheist partners at our 3rd Annual Freethinkers Gathering in Albany. All are welcome for Saturday’s optional dinner, Sunday’s hot buffet and a museum program featuring speaker Jeff Ingersoll and keynotes David Hoffman and FFRF Governmental Affairs Director Mark Dann, with author/columnist Kate Cohen introducing them. Get tickets (\$85) before they sell out: [unyft.org/GO](#).

Expanding pilot meetups beyond Western New York, a new Watertown café connection will open up North

Upstate New York Freethinkers members joined with Secular Humanists of Rochester at the Pride Parade and Atheist Community of Rochester at the Rainbow Seniors Pride Picnic.

Country gatherings. RSVP or host a café: [unyft.org/REGIONS](#). To contribute, go to [unyft.org/DONATE](#). Contact at [info@unyft.org](#) or 585-454-9921.

Ozarks Chapter

The Ozarks Chapter of FFRF was proud to kick off its 2026 Secular Speaker Series on July 18 with FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Sam Grover.

Attendees learned how Christian nationalism is shaping public policy in Arkansas and how FFRF is fighting back through litigation to defend the constitutional separation of church and state. The program also featured three plaintiffs who shared their personal experiences and explained why they chose to speak out against the introduction of religion into Arkansas public schools.

Members of the Ozarks Chapter of FFRF joined FFRF Senior Litigation Counsel Sam Grover (center, seated) at Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark.

Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers

Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers joined other area organizations to sponsor the Unfinished Freedom Music Festival hosted by several Indivisible groups in the area. GRAF collaborated with Christians Against Christian Nationalism-MN and HumanistsMN to promote our organizations.

Grand Rapids Area Freethinkers members Drew Davis, Julie Legg, Tom Legg and Tom Chase helped work their table at Unfinished Freedom Music Festival on June 28.

San Francisco Bay Chapter

Every Wednesday, 1,300 people receive bags of groceries from Sunnyvale Community Services (SCS), whose mission is to prevent homelessness and hunger in their community. Three times a week, unhoused people come to gather food and toiletries.

The San Francisco Bay Chapter’s 2026 Charitable Grant of \$1,000 has gone to support SCS and its 52 employees and 500 volunteers who provide these humanitarian services.

Like FFRF, Sunnyvale Community Services has earned a perfect four-star rating on Charity Navigator. We’re delighted to support the critical work of this well-run organization with this year’s generous grant from FFRF.

Dana Treadwell presents the SF Bay Chapter’s charitable grant check to Emily at Sunnyvale Community Services.

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*
[ffrf.org/radio](#)

FFRF press releases
[ffrf.org/releases](#)

Legislative action alerts
Check out FFRF Action Fund, our advocacy affiliate
[ffrfactionfund.org](#)

Secular Spotlight — *YouTube show*
[ffrf.us/youtube](#)

We Dissent — *monthly legal podcast*
[wedissent.org](#)

IN THE NEWS

Ariz. churches not bound to report abuse confessions

The Arizona State Supreme Court unanimously ruled July 30 that church leaders do not need to report to authorities cases of sexual abuse disclosed during confessions.

The lawsuit was brought against a man who confessed to Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints bishops to sexually abusing his daughter.

“We hold that the First Amendment generally prohibits fact finders from inquiring into a clergy member’s application of his particular religious doctrine — absent fraud or collusion for secular purposes — in determining whether reporting should be withheld if ‘reasonable and necessary,’” wrote Vice Chief Justice John Lopez in the court’s opinion.

The Mormon Church praised the ruling, saying it affirmed the confidential nature of religious confession.

The ruling sends the case back to lower courts and reverses a July 2025 decision of the state’s Court of Appeals. Arizona’s reporting statute compels anyone who reasonably believes a minor has been the victim of abuse to immediately report it. But the statute exempts clergy who deem it necessary to not report it for religious reasons.

Greg Locke’s congregation down to just hundreds

Christian nationalist and Tennessee Pastor Greg Locke, who is under federal investigation for allegedly misappropriating church funds, says his “tent” church, which drew up to 3,000 people in its heyday, is now down to a few hundred in the wake of his ongoing challenges.

Despite the loss of in-person worshippers at his Global Vision Bible Church in Lebanon, Locke said he’s been experiencing “freedom.”

In a Facebook post, he alluded to the challenges facing his ministry, including the nearly two-year federal investigation into alleged financial mismanagement that culminated in a pre-dawn raid of his home by up to 60 FBI and IRS agents on July 12.

Atheists only 0.07% of federal prison population

Self-described atheists make up less than one-tenth of a percent of the federal prison population, according to statistics from the Federal Bureau of Prisons.

Hemant Mehta, “The Friendly Atheist,” filed a Freedom of Information Act request and found that of the 153,834 people in the U.S. federal prison system as of May 30, only 101 identify themselves as atheist, which amounts to 0.066 percent.

Mehta points out that he has made “similar requests in the past and the numbers have been roughly the same each time, though this year’s numbers are the lowest I’ve ever seen. That suggests this proportion isn’t changing even as the percentage of non-religious Americans in the general population has (mostly) increased over the past two decades. (Self-identified atheists now represent about 5 percent of the population. “Nones” are about 29 percent.) More to the point, it means the presence of atheists in U.S. federal prisons is significantly lower than what we find in the general population.”

Kudos to the governor!



FFRF Summer Intern Paul Wuller, FFRF Co-President Annie Laurie Gaylor, Wisconsin Gov. Tony Evers and FFRF Developmental Director Angela West Blank are pictured at a Planned Parenthood event in Madison celebrating Evers’ dedicated, career-long support of abortion rights.

Australian census: 39% have no religion

Australians are increasingly unlikely to worship a god, according to results from the most recent country-wide census.

For the first time, fewer than half of Australians identified as Christian, though Christianity remained the nation’s most common religion (declared by 43.9 percent of the population). Meanwhile, the number of Australians who said they had no religion rose to 38.9 percent (from 30.1 percent in 2016 and 22.2 percent in 2011).

The number of nonreligious Australians — a number that has been on the rise for decades now — may be even larger than the census results show in part because of how the question was phrased in the survey.

Woman kicked off flight for preaching to passengers

Florida evangelist Whitney Lynn was removed from a flight for safety reasons after preaching to fellow passengers during a delay.

The incident occurred before take-off on Alaska Airlines Flight 708, which was bound for San Diego from Orlando, Fla., on July 30.

“Our flight crew became increasingly concerned about a guest’s behavior on board the aircraft, which was also affecting other guests,” a spokesperson for Alaska Airlines said in a statement.

“The passenger was asked to deplane the aircraft for safety reasons,” the spokesperson continued, adding that the traveler will not be permitted to travel on Alaska Airlines flights for “the foreseeable future.”

Moms challenge Texas’ Ten Commandments law

Three Houston mothers have sued to stop displaying the Ten Commandments in Texas public school classrooms, arguing it violates the state’s religious freedom law and a voter-approved parental rights amendment.

Their lawsuit is the latest challenge to Senate Bill 10 — this time

under Texas law.

FFRF and a coalition are representing Texas plaintiffs in multiple other suits.

The mothers’ suit, filed in Harris County on July 30, demands that the displays be taken down and that the court act before mid-August, when the school year begins. The bill was signed by the governor last year.

They are also suing under the recently approved Texas Proposition 15 — also known as the Parental Rights amendment — which ensures parents have the right “to exercise care, custody, and control of the parent’s child, including the right to make decisions concerning the child’s upbringing.”

Senate Bill 10 requires all Texas classrooms to display donated posters of the King James Version of the Ten Commandments. The posters must be visible in the classroom and cannot be smaller than 16 by 20 inches.

Fla. Catholic schools may lose vouchers over vaccines

Florida Attorney General James Uthmeier told the Catholic Church that if it takes taxpayer-funded vouchers for its schools, it needs to accept vaccine rules for students, too.

In a letter sent to the Florida Conference of Catholic Bishops, Uthmeier argued that Catholic doctrine does not allow its schools to reject vaccine exemptions for religious reasons.

Many Catholic schools in Florida accept students who pay tuition with help from the state’s private school vouchers. Currently, more than 500,000 students across the state participate in the program. As of March, about a quarter of the state’s education budget goes to voucher programs, up from 12 percent in 2021.

The bishops conference issued a statement saying they are reviewing the letter and will respond to the attorney general.

Rick Garnett, a professor of law at the University of Notre Dame, said that the letter “reflects a misunderstanding of Americans’ fundamental right to religious freedom and is a glaring and dangerous government overreach.”

53% have unfavorable view of Supreme Court

Just over half of Americans (53 percent) currently have an unfavorable opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court, while a smaller share (45 percent) views the court favorably.

Opinions of the court have been relatively stable over the last few years, and favorable views remain close to a three-decade low, according to a Pew Research Center survey of U.S. adults. The survey was conducted shortly after the court’s 2025-26 term ended.

The court’s favorable rating is 20 percentage points lower today than in April 2021, when 65 percent of Americans held a positive view. Equal majorities of Democrats and Republicans (87 percent) said the justices should not bring personal politics into decisions.

Young Latinos abandoning churches to be ‘Nones’

Young Latinos are abandoning organized religion at a faster rate than any other demographic in the United States, a new Axios analysis finds.

The declining religious affiliation of Latinos ages 18 to 29 — particularly among Catholics — is challenging long-held assumptions that their explosive growth would boost traditional religious values in American culture.

The percentage of Hispanic Americans identifying as religiously unaffiliated rose steadily from 18 percent in 2013 to 23 percent in 2025, according to data from the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI).

Among Catholic Latinos, the declines were historic. The share of Latino adults identifying as Catholic plummeted from 67 percent in 2010 to 43 percent in 2022.

Kim Davis sued for avoiding to pay \$565K

In Kentucky, former Rowan County Clerk Kim Davis is facing a new lawsuit accusing her of hiding inherited assets to avoid paying the \$565,000 federal civil rights judgment against her for refusing to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples. Attorneys for the two Kentucky men whose case drew international attention after the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage in 2015 filed a lawsuit in Rowan Circuit Court in July. They want a judge to void the transfer of Davis’ half-interest in property she inherited from her mother last year and later gave to her husband, son, brother and sister-in-law.

The attorneys claim Davis lied under oath about the inheritance to defraud David Ermold and David Moore of the money a federal jury awarded them in 2023.

The lawsuit marks the latest chapter in the decade-long legal battle that began when Davis, then Rowan County clerk, refused to issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples after the landmark Obergefell v. Hodges decision. While courts ultimately found Davis personally liable for violating the couples’ constitutional rights, the new case shifts the fight from the courtroom to her finances, alleging she deliberately transferred inherited assets to family members to shield them from collection as the plaintiffs seek to enforce the six-figure judgment.

FFRF VICTORIES

By Greg Fletcher

FFRF, as a national state/church watchdog, proudly offers its members (as well as the public) the opportunity (at no cost) to report state/church violations (ffrf.org/legal/report-church-state/). If actionable, FFRF attorneys will send a legal complaint letter as resources permit. Through such actions, FFRF typically ends 200 state/church violations or more annually. Freethought Today reports representative samplings of these victories. FFRF's legal team also oversees FFRF's substantial litigation and its legislative team oversees public policy violations. Find out what your donation to FFRF's legal fund supports at: ffrf.org/misc/legal.

Alabama

FFRF worked to ensure that Mobile County Public Schools in Alabama would no longer promote Christian holidays via official social media channels.

A community member reported that on April 5, the official Alma Bryant High School Facebook account posted an image celebrating Easter. The post read "Happy Easter" with a prominent Latin cross on it.

"The high school's promotion of one religion's holy day on its official social media signals that it favors religion over nonreligion, and, in this case, Christianity over all other faiths," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

After receiving FFRF's letter, the district's legal counsel, Frank G. Taylor, confirmed that the law firm "addressed this matter with the school."

Alabama

The Prattville Parks & Recreation Department took action to ensure that coaches would no longer be forcing youth softball players in the city to recite an explicitly Christian prayer at the end of games and practices.

A concerned parent reported that the city's softball league had been requiring youth players to recite the Lord's Prayer. On or around April 11, the softball league's opening day ceremony commenced with a recitation of the Lord's Prayer led by the city council's president, and FFRF understood that all players present were expected to participate in the prayer. Additionally, the complainant stated that "most games and practices are concluded with forced prayer, requiring all players to circle and hold hands," and the prayers are "led by umpires and coaches." Reportedly, a coach told players, including youth players, that they "needed to go home and learn the Lord's Prayer because they weren't reciting it well enough."

"The fact that the city is requiring youth players to learn and recite the Lord's Prayer is particularly concerning," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote. "Youth-athletes are especially susceptible to coercion, and the relationship between youths and their coaches is inherently ripe for coercion."

After receiving the letter, Parks and Recreation Director Kellie Carter emailed FFRF to assure that the prayers would be halted. "Prattville Parks and Recreation Department does not and will not require, organize, coerce or direct the recitation of prayers by participants, coaches, officials or staff during league activities," she wrote.

Alabama

The Mt. Pleasant Senior Center in Enterprise, Ala., will not force seniors to participate in a pre-meal prayer after FFRF

Chill, bro!



Sue Schuetz of Wisconsin sent us this photo from a church marquee in Oxford, Wis. She writes: "Oh, it's free until you walk through the door and suddenly the collection plate appears."

pointed out the violation of seniors' rights.

A senior center attendee reported that during meals at the center, the manager of the center, acting in her official capacity as a senior center employee, would stand up and call on a senior to pray and bless the food before patrons eat. The prayers were routinely given in the name of Jesus Christ.

"Coercing seniors to participate in public prayer doesn't just violate federal law, it also violates our citizens' rights to be free from religious proselytizing," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

The legal representative for the center, Rod Morgan, wrote back to FFRF to confirm that the concerns had been addressed. "I further explained that any prayer must be voluntary and initiated by one of the seniors, that no county employee or volunteer could call for, prompt or initiate a prayer," Morgan wrote. "I ensured that they understood that they have the right, and indeed are welcome, to pray silently or audibly, so long as it is of their own volition."

Arizona

The Colorado City USD in Arizona changed a longstanding practice of including prayer in graduation ceremonies after FFRF stood up on behalf of students who had been ignored by the school board.

A student at El Capitan High School stated that the district and its governing board had a pattern and practice of mandating prayer at the school's graduation ceremony. The student said the invocation and benediction have been "a mandatory practice for all previous graduation years." The district planned to include prayers at the June 3 graduation, evidenced by the ceremony program that was given to participating students in advance. A copy of the program provided to FFRF showed that two students had been selected ahead of time to lead the entire audience, including fellow students, in an invocation and benediction.

The student also reported that a number of El Capitan High School's graduating students complained to the district and governing board about the mandatory prayers. Reportedly, the governing board resisted removing the prayers, and a board member stated at a meeting that "It is the school's graduation, not the students"

Due to complaints, the district and governing board altered the 2026 graduation program, with the entire audience and students being led in a school-sponsored prayer "before the ceremony started" and

that the prayer was "optional."

After receiving a letter from FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence stating this alteration was still unconstitutional, Superintendent Carol Timpson confirmed that the district had taken action. "Our board consulted with the district attorney and consequently removed prayer from the program," Timpson wrote. "They have also adopted a graduation template to be used each year going forward that begins the program with a moment of silence rather than prayer."

Florida

The Escambia County Public Schools system in Pensacola, Fla., has taken corrective action to ensure that future senior graduation breakfasts will not include a prayer before the event, after the principal "blessed" the food at a May gathering.

A local parent reported that on May 18, West Florida High School's principal led students in prayer at a school-sponsored senior grad breakfast. The parent stated that while students were congregating in the school's gym before the breakfast and ceremony rehearsal, the principal announced that "before we eat breakfast, we are going to bless our food real quick." She then allegedly asked students to "bow their heads," and then she blessed the food, blessed the students and blessed their families. The parent further explained that "many students found [the prayer] odd and misplaced. Even stranger as it was in the gym before the food was present." Finally, the students reportedly felt that participating in the prayer was mandatory.

"Even if the principal had told students that the prayer was voluntary, that would not fix the situation," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote. "Voluntariness is not a safeguard against violating students' First Amendment rights."

After receiving the letter, Superintendent Keith Leonard conducted an investigation into the situation. Leonard wrote, "I have provided direction regarding appropriate next steps. The district remains committed to safeguarding the constitutional rights of all our students." Leonard also stated that he would address the matters with all administrators during an upcoming annual pre-school administrative conference and through ongoing professional development sessions throughout the year.

Florida

FFRF helped Alachua County Public Schools put an end to a practice and pattern of starting the Citizen of the Year Award ceremony with an invocation.

FFRF received a report that the district's May 27 Citizen of the Year Award ceremony included a prayer event. Though the local Kiwanis Club assisted with the event, the district was responsible for selecting students to receive the award, and the district advertised and appeared to help organize the ceremony. Taken together, the district's actions and involvement heavily suggested that the Citizen of the Year Award ceremony was, at least in a significant part, a school-sponsored event.

Per official video of the event, the invocation occurred during the award ceremony with students, family members and district employees in attendance, and the invocation was overtly Christian. This allegedly also occurred in 2023 and 2024.

"Inserting prayer into an awards ceremony meant to honor outstanding students forces those students and their families to choose between attending or remaining at the ceremony and participating in a prayer that they do not believe in or exiting the ceremony in order to avoid violating their conscience," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

After receiving the letter, the district conducted an investigation. The district's legal representative confirmed that positive action had been taken. "The entity who delivered the prayer will not be involved in this event in the future," district representative Patrick J. Duggan wrote. "As a result, we do not expect any issues moving forward."

Florida

FFRF ensured that the Orange County Public Schools system put a stop to a religious club being led by an outside representative from the Campus Crusade for Christ (CRU).

A district member reported that the CRU Club at Timber Springs Middle School was being led, organized and run entirely by adults, not students. The complainant stated that CRU is "operating a structured religious recruitment program in our school with the involvement of multiple staff members" and an outside adult CRU representative.

CRU Club flyers were reportedly posted throughout the middle school, and the flyers directed interested students to scan a QR code, which led to a Google form. At the top of the form, the club explained, "At CRU club, everyone is welcome to gather and learn more about Jesus. Whether you consider yourself a Christian or not, you and your friends are invited to come, listen, ask questions, and eat pizza (lunch) or donuts (Friday mornings)! We hope to see you at one of our meetings."

FFRF contacted the district in hopes of putting a stop to the club.

"As the district is aware, public schools may not permit outside adults or organizations to lead, organize or regularly participate in 'student' religious clubs, including CRU Club," FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote.

The school principal confirmed that teachers were informed that this is not allowed and that CRU will have to be disbanded because of it.

Kansas

FFRF ensured that a teacher from the Leavenworth USD would no longer be allowed to abuse his position to preach his personal religion and retaliate against a student who did not align with it.

A district parent reported that a chemistry teacher at Leavenworth High School was retaliating against a student for disagreeing with his personal religious beliefs. Reportedly, on Dec. 15, 2025, the teacher lectured his sophomore chemistry class on the bible after the parent’s child made a joke about the “6/7” meme. In response to the student’s joke, the teacher allegedly told students that the “real meaning” of the meme is based on Christianity, and that “6/7 refers to how God created the world on the sixth day and rested on the seventh.”

The parent reported that several days after the incident, the teacher accused their child of cheating on a test and gave the student a “zero” as their grade. After the parent called and spoke to the school’s principal, the teacher changed the student’s grade to a “D.” Further, the teacher had previously told his class that chemistry “proves that God exists” and that he cannot understand why atheists do not believe in God. In previous years, others have reportedly complained about the teacher lecturing students about religion during class.

“Here, [the teacher] has crossed the constitutional line by sermonizing to his students during chemistry class and allegedly retaliating against [the student] for making a joke that he disagreed with on religious grounds,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

In response to the letter, the district’s attorney called FFRF directly. He confirmed that the district “thoroughly addressed” the situation and the issue should not happen again. The attorney additionally stated that he was open to any follow-up questions from either FFRF or the parent.

Minnesota

FFRF saw corrective action taken at the Hennepin County Medical Center (HCMC) in Minneapolis after a patient reported being repeatedly contacted by a religious chaplain despite declining spiritual care.

A patient reported that, in fall 2025, they received multiple visits from an HCMC chaplain, despite repeatedly informing staff that they did not want to speak to a chaplain. Specifically, the complainant stated that when they were receiving in-patient care at HCMC in October 2025, they explicitly told a nurse they did not wish to see the chaplain after the chaplain’s first attempt at a visit. FFRF was told that the chaplain again visited the complainant against their wishes. Per MyChart records provided by the patient to FFRF, the chaplain also made outpatient calls to the complainant on Nov. 4 and Dec. 9, 2025. The complainant stated that the chaplain had still been listed as one of their providers by HCMC, despite having told staff and the chaplain that they did not wish to speak to or see a chaplain.

“Allowing a chaplain to continue to attempt to speak to a patient in direct violation of the patient’s express wishes needlessly marginalized our complainant,” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the hospital.

FFRF is pleased to report that HCMC has renewed its dedication to protecting patients from religious coercion.

In an email to FFRF, HCMC Compliance Director Pameal Sandquist confirmed that the chaplain has been identified, and “the contract with this vendor has been terminated. Current employed Spiritual Care Providers have been reminded of the importance of following our processes, especially when a patient declines services.” Sandquist thanked FFRF for reporting the issue.

Legal charter



Photo by Chris Line

The FFRF legal team took its annual boat cruise aboard the Pontoon Porch on Lake Mendota in Madison, Wis., in late July as an appreciation event for FFRF’s summer interns. FFRF thanks a generous member for making this annual gift to entertain interns. For more about the interns, see page 19.

Missouri

The Alton R-IV School District in Ash Grove, Mo., took FFRF’s advice and agreed not to advertise religious graduation events via official school channels.

A district parent reported that Ash Grove High School sponsored and advertised a baccalaureate ceremony on May 13. The school advertised and promoted the ceremony alongside official school graduation events on its official Ash Grove High School Facebook page. The advertisement included a quote from the bible as well as a photograph from the church where the ceremony took place. The event was also added to the official online school calendar.

The program featured the school’s logo and trademark colors. The program’s design, along with the persistent promotion by the school, strongly suggested that the school was involved in organizing the baccalaureate ceremony and may have contributed school resources or staff time to the event.

After receiving a letter from FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence, the district reached out to legal representative Emily Omohundro. Omohundro informed FFRF that the district did not sponsor or plan the event. “The district did not intend for this advertisement to convey a favoritism toward religion over nonreligion, and Christianity above all faiths,” she wrote. “Going forward, the district agrees that it will no longer share information regarding this event or include it on the district’s school calendar so as to avoid any indication of sponsorship or involvement in this event by the district.”

New Jersey

FFRF’s work saw the Gloucester City Public Schools system remove opening invocations from future Gloucester City Middle School’s National Junior Honor Society induction ceremonies.

A district parent informed FFRF that during Gloucester City Middle School’s National Junior Honor Society induction ceremony on May 7, the school invited a pastor to perform two prayers, an invocation and a benediction. During the ceremony, the pastor repeatedly directed the audience to participate in the prayer and to say “Amen.” The parent stated that they were uncomfortable and upset when the pastor was brought in to conduct a prayer, but felt forced to stay as they did not want to miss or ruin an important milestone for their child. Parents and students were re-

portedly not informed ahead of time that the ceremony would involve prayer.

“Here, the school crossed the line by allowing [the pastor] to lead students and guests in prayer as an official part of the induction ceremony,” FFRF Staff Attorney Madeline Ziegler wrote. “The inclusion of an invocation and a benediction coerced all in attendance to observe and participate in a religious exercise.”

FFRF received an email from Superintendent Sean Gorman, confirming that corrective action had been taken. “After reviewing the matter and your concerns, we will be ceasing the tradition moving forward,” he wrote.

New Mexico

FFRF successfully advised Silver Consolidated Schools in Silver City, N.M., to put a stop to a practice of allowing the high school graduation ceremony to be opened with a student-led prayer.

A community member stated that at the May 15 Cliff High School graduation ceremony, a student led the audience in prayer at the beginning of the ceremony. This was referred to as a “blessing” by the principal. The student prayer contained overtly Christian themes and concluded “in Jesus’s name.” While the prayer did not appear in the ceremony program, the fact that the principal introduced the student and called the prayer a “blessing,” and the fact that the student was clearly reciting a scripted prayer, suggested that the prayer was planned and approved of by the school. According to official videos of the event, prayer at Cliff High School’s graduation is not a new occurrence, as a prayer was delivered by a student at the 2025 ceremony in the same fashion. Finally, the community member expressed that they were very uncomfortable hearing a prayer being delivered at a public school graduation with the support of the staff.

“The school cannot avoid a constitutional violation by assigning students to give invocations or ‘blessings,’” FFRF Staff Attorney Sammi Lawrence wrote to the district.

District Superintendent William Hawkins wrote back to FFRF to confirm that the district would adhere to the Constitution going forward. “We will communicate the applicable legal expectations regarding religious neutrality at school-sponsored events and will direct that future graduation ceremonies and other school sponsored events be planned in a manner consistent with our Cliff School’s Community and District expectations,” Hawkins wrote.

South Carolina

With the help of FFRF, the Abbeville County School District addressed multiple constitutional concerns that made the district appear to be closely intertwined with a local religious group.

A district parent reported that Westwood Elementary School had been hosting church-related events during the breakfast hour every Wednesday that were being run by a teacher at the school. Additionally, the school has held fundraisers for religious groups, including taking part in a “Unity Walk” and selling T-shirts for the event in support of the United Christian Ministries of Abbeville County.

Another school-sponsored fundraiser sold Fellowship of Christian Athletes T-shirts with “John 3:16” printed on the back. These shirts were also given out to all students seemingly by the school. Also, the official Westwood Elementary School Facebook page has promoted prayer events in connection with a “Buddy Bench” that was donated to the school, which has the bible verse “1 Thessalonians 5:11” printed on it.

“Even if [the religious group] is properly renting school space for its meetings, Westwood Elementary School cannot give the group favored treatment through preferential rental terms, or by promoting or encouraging student attendance at the church breakfasts,” FFRF Patrick O’Reiley Legal Fellow Charlotte R. Gude wrote to the district.

Superintendent Lori Brownlee-Brewton responded to FFRF, addressing the concerns on a case-by-case basis. The morning gathering group was now being conducted by an outside group before the start of the school day and outside of the district’s breakfast period. The Buddy Bench is secular in purpose and design, and is not a religious display and was not established, designated, or approved by the district for any religious purpose. The Unity Walk was organized as a secular event to promote community unity.

“We acknowledge the concerns raised regarding social media communications and the associated T-shirt fundraiser,” Brownlee-Brewton wrote. “The district is addressing these matters through increased oversight to ensure that future communications and activities clearly align with constitutional requirements and district policy.”

Tennessee

The West Carroll Special School District in Tennessee agreed to put a stop to multiple violations of students’ First Amendment right to be free from religious conduct at school, thanks to FFRF.

FFRF received a report that was confirmed by the commencement program that included staff-led prayer and student-led benediction in the 2025 graduation ceremony. The program further indicated that the audience was directed to stand during the prayer and benediction. Additionally, the official West Carroll Special School District Facebook page promoted a 2025 baccalaureate ceremony. FFRF also learned that the WCSSD Board of Education began each meeting with a prayer or invocation. Finally, the schools’ dress code included a prohibition of items that advertise satanic worship or cults.

FFRF Legal Fellow Charlotte R. Gude wrote to the district and received a response from the district’s legal representative, Christopher C. Hayden, who confirmed that the district had taken action. “The West Carroll Special School District has conducted an investigation into the allegations contained within your letter and can confirm that the concerns discussed in your correspondence no longer exist.” When asked for more detail, Hayden stated that he addressed the concerns raised by FFRF with school leadership, and they agreed to put a stop to the conduct.

Trump

Continued from page 1

I have often imagined the answer I wish one of them had given:

“What’s my favorite bible verse? If I have one, how is that remotely relevant to my ability to lead this country? I would, however, be happy to discuss my favorite constitutional amendment.”

That moment has stayed with me because it perfectly illustrates something that has troubled me for much of my life: the cynical misuse of religion as a tool for political gain. It is one thing for faith to guide a person’s private moral life. It is something entirely different when politicians invoke religion as a means of manipulating voters or proving their qualifications for public office. Those are two very different things, and we have spent far too long pretending otherwise.

The truth is, I was actually a very religious child, something that surprises people because it certainly did not come from my family. Looking back, I am still not entirely sure why I feel almost embarrassed admitting that, but I do. What offended me was never religion itself. What offended me was the version of religion practiced by certain members of my family.

My grandfather, Fred Trump, was a devoted follower of Norman Vincent Peale and his proto-prosperity gospel. “The Power of Positive Thinking” saturated my childhood. It was more than a bestselling book. It became a philosophy that justified every cruel, corrupt and selfish thing my grandfather ever did.

That is one of the great dangers of prosperity theology. If you believe you are inherently great, as my grandfather certainly did, and as somebody else we all know believes he is, then you never have to concern yourself with becoming good.

If you believe that your success proves you have been chosen, then kindness, compassion, humility and integrity become optional. If you believe that your wealth demonstrates divine favor, you stop asking whether you deserve it. You stop questioning the harm you cause other people because, by definition, your success has already become proof of your righteousness.

Putting people in positions of power who believe so completely in their own exceptionalism inevitably leads us somewhere very dark.

Oppression, whether religious or otherwise, is fundamentally incompatible with democracy.

And, yet, racism, misogyny and religious bigotry have always been woven into the fabric of this country. I would argue that religious intolerance has often served as the justification for the other two. These forces reinforce one another, creating systems that privilege a select few while diminishing everyone else.

That means we have been traveling down this road for a very long time.

Because of that history, I believe we need to become much better at explaining why allowing religion and government to become intertwined poses such an enormous threat to the American experiment itself. It undermines our freedoms while eroding the democratic principles upon which this country was founded.

People are often surprised when I tell them I was never particularly interested in politics. I always voted because voting mattered deeply to me, but politics itself was never my passion. Quite honestly, I still do not think of politics as my passion today.

Then something happened in 2016. Suddenly politics became intensely personal.

I want to return to that idea because I believe all of us need to take politics personally now, perhaps more than ever before. But first, it is important to recognize the extraor-



Photo by Chris Line

Mary L. Trump speaks to the attendees at the third annual Congressional Reason Reception in Washington, D.C., on July 21. View her speech online at YouTube.

dinary moment we are living through. I often refer to it as “the horrors,” and I understand why so many people feel exhausted, cynical, overwhelmed and tempted to disengage. Every day seems to bring another assault on reason, another attack on democratic institutions, another example of cruelty masquerading as leadership.

History reminds us, however, that humanity has often made its greatest advances during its darkest moments.

That is not because suffering is noble. It is because crisis forces us to confront truths we have ignored for far too long. Moments like these create opportunities to build something better, but only if we are willing to understand honestly how we arrived here in the first place.

This moment did not appear overnight. It has been centuries in the making.

If we want to move forward, we have to understand not only what we are fighting, but also the historical, political, cultural and religious forces that brought us to this point. Without that understanding, we will simply continue treating symptoms while ignoring the disease.

That is why I believe we should view this year and the next election cycle not simply as political contests, but as opportunities to speak to everyone and compete everywhere.

We need candidates, regardless of party, who understand what is at stake, who appreciate what public service actually means, and who are prepared to use the authority entrusted to them to make the kind of fundamental structural changes this country desperately needs.

The goal cannot simply be to win the next election.

The goal must be ensuring we never again place so many people in harm’s way because our institutions proved incapable of protecting us.

That brings me to one of my favorite films, “Spotlight,” which I have watched more times than I care to admit.

Near the end of the film, Marty Baron, the editor of The Boston Globe, speaks to the investigative team preparing to expose the Catholic Church’s decades-long cover-up of child sexual abuse. The reporters believe they have enough evidence to publish immediately. Baron insists they must do something much harder. It is not enough, he tells them, to expose individual priests. They have to expose the system.

That lesson has stayed with me because it applies just as powerfully today.

Much of what we are confronting has

become deeply embedded within our institutions. Donald Trump and today’s Republican Party have done many terrible things, but if they have unintentionally done us one favor, it is exposing just how broken so many of our systems truly are.

Of course, we must address individual acts of corruption, cruelty and abuse. But if we stop there, we will have accomplished very little. We have to go after the system itself.

Only then can we begin repairing the conditions that made this moment possible in the first place. And if we can help people understand that larger picture, they may begin to see that what we are confronting extends far beyond politics. It is ultimately about what kind of country we choose to become.

That larger picture became very real to me last November when Ronda and I traveled to Madison County, Ohio. Ronda grew up there on a farm, and Madison County is a deeply rural, overwhelmingly red district. Her sister belongs to the Madison County Democrats, which, as Ronda likes to point out, really is a thing. They asked if I would come speak, and I immediately said yes. We did not go simply to give a speech. We went to meet the people doing the difficult work every single day, the people organizing their communities, knocking on doors, having conversations, and engaging Republican voters in places where those conversations are often the hardest to have. We wanted to thank them, encourage them, and remind them that the work they were doing mattered because they are on the front lines every single day.

During the question-and-answer session, one woman stood up and asked something that has stayed with me ever since. She told me that her entire family was MAGA and asked whether she should continue having relationships with them. I could not answer that question for her because I would never presume to tell somebody else how to navigate relationships that are so deeply personal.

In my own case, that decision was remarkably easy given the family I happened to be born into, but most people are not in that position, and I would never suggest otherwise. Instead, I encouraged her to approach those relationships differently by asking questions rather than making declarations.

I think that is something all of us need to do more often. We need to ask the

“ Moments like these create opportunities to build something better, but only if we are willing to understand honestly how we arrived here in the first place.

questions that matter. Who are we now? Is this who we want to be? If it is not, then who do we want to become, and how do we get there?

From there, we can begin asking another series of questions that all start the same way. Is it OK with you? Is it OK with you that a government agency is killing American citizens in American cities? Is it OK with you that religious zealots are inserting themselves into our politics, banning books and dictating what our children are allowed to learn? Is it OK with you that people who claim to speak for God fly around in private jets, live in mansions and ignore the very teachings of the person they profess to follow?

Those are not rhetorical questions. They are invitations for people to think honestly about what they believe and whether they are comfortable with the consequences of those beliefs.

Questions matter because they give people agency. They invite reflection instead of demanding agreement, and they encourage people to examine their own beliefs rather than immediately becoming defensive. Most importantly, they make people responsible for their own answers. I think that is a far more productive way of having these conversations than simply telling people they are wrong, because when people arrive at uncomfortable conclusions themselves, those conclusions are much more likely to stay with them.

I also think it is important to remember something that can be difficult in moments like these. Many of the people we need to reach have been lied to for years. Those of us fortunate enough to value reason, evidence and perspective sometimes forget that not everybody has had access to the same information or the same opportunities to question what they have been told. Many people have spent years immersed in systems deliberately designed to manipulate them through fear, misinformation, resentment and grievance. That does not absolve them of responsibility for the choices they have made, but it should influence how we choose to engage with them.

I mean this in the most secular sense imaginable when I say that we need to extend grace. From the position we occupy, with the benefit of reason and perspective, we have an opportunity to meet people where they are rather than where we wish they already were. I genuinely believe that if we can do that, we can begin building common cause with people who, in many ways, have suffered from the consequences of their own choices just as surely as the rest of us have. It will require patience, empathy and a willingness to continue showing up for difficult conversations, but democracy has never depended upon certainty. It has always depended upon our willingness to engage one another honestly, especially when doing so is uncomfortable.

That is one of the reasons I was so deeply honored to speak before the Congressional Freethought Caucus. The very existence of a group like this gives me hope because I hope we eventually reach a point where every member of Congress, regardless of party, understands why organizations like this matter. The future of our democracy depends upon getting as many people as possible to recognize that the strongest societies are built not upon dogma or blind loyalty, but upon ethical behavior, reasoned analysis, intellectual curiosity and a willingness to change our minds when the evidence demands it. Those values are not weaknesses, and they are certainly not obstacles to democracy. They are the very qualities that allow free people to live together, disagree honestly and continue building a more just society.

Those are the values worth defending because they are the values that make the American experiment possible in the first place.

Reason Reception 2026

Photos by Chris Line



Mary L. Trump, second from left, stands with some of the organizers of the 2026 Congressional Reason Reception, from left, Scott MacConomy, Secular Coalition of America’s director of policy and government affairs; Mark Dann, FFRF’s director of governmental affairs; and Isabella Russian, American Humanist Association’s policy manager.



From left, Dan Barker and Annie Laurie Gaylor, FFRF co-presidents; Rep. Steve Cohen; Fish Stark, executive director of the American Humanist Association; Claudette St.Pierre, Secular Coalition of America president; Rep. Jamie Raskin; Mary L. Trump; and Steve Emmert, executive director of SCA, gathered for a group photo.



Rep. Sean Casten, D-Ill., and CFC member, speaks with Rachel Deitch, policy and political director for AHA.



Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, enjoys chatting with reception attendees prior to the event.



Rep. Jared Huffman, D-Calif., founder and co-chair of the Congressional Freethought Caucus, gets animated while talking with FFRF Co-President Dan Barker. Rep. Huffman will be speaking at FFRF’s convention on Oct. 15 in Milwaukee.



“All you need to do is read the Declaration of Independence to understand that our Founders did not want and did not intend for this to be a religious country,” Rep. Suzanne Bonamici, D-Ore., and CFC member, said during her remarks at the reception.



In his Capitol office, Rep. Jared Huffman held a pre-reception gathering with Mary Trump that included FFRF’s Dan Barker, Annie Laurie Gaylor and Mark Dann.



Nnenna, communications manager for SCA, and Sadie Pattinson, events and outreach manager for FFRF, worked the registration table and welcomed attendees to the reception.

Horrendous suffering effectively refutes God

By John W. Loftus

In my anthology, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” my focus as an author is on heinous, hideous, horrific levels of horrendous suffering given the belief in a theistic God who is all-powerful, all-knowing and perfectly good. Unless we focus on that kind of suffering — the kind that seems needless and absolutely inexplicable — we’ll fail to see the problem of evil for what it is. Instead of focusing on bruises, sprained ankles, slaps on the cheek, a clump of hair being pulled out, or sicknesses like colds and the flu, let’s focus instead on people who have been burned alive, boiled alive and buried alive.

God may well have good reasons to allow for a modest amount of pain since we have physical bodies and we will all die. So, we can set aside that kind of suffering as largely uninteresting. Horrendous suffering — the kind that turns our stomachs — should be our focus.

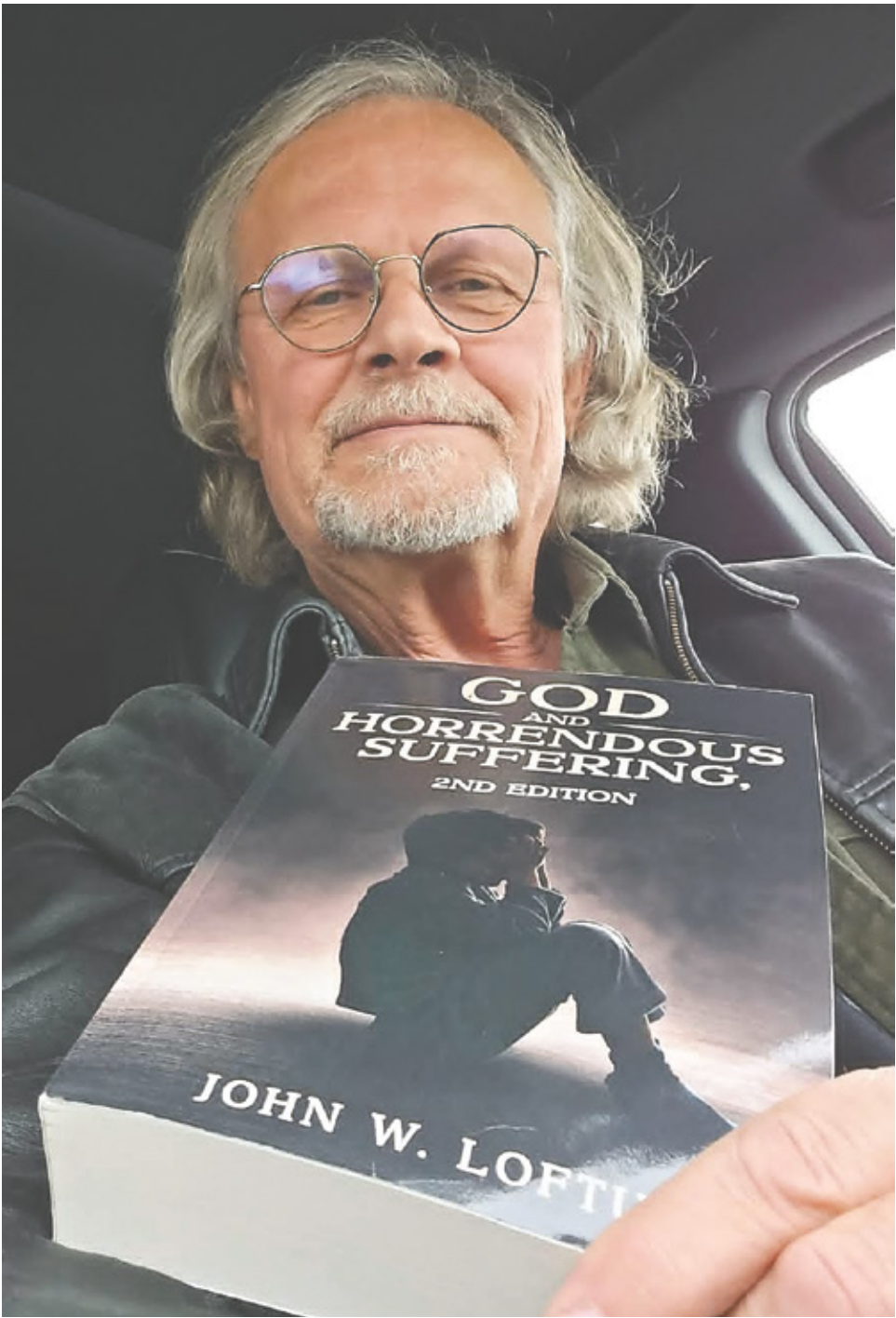
My perspective is a “minimal facts” approach to the problem of suffering. I’m arguing that a theistic God should not allow a specific kind of suffering — horrendous suffering. Failing to focus on it is a failure to honestly search for the truth. For when horrendous suffering is our focus, the standard theodicies don’t work. My contention is that the theistic God probably doesn’t exist given the existence of horrendous suffering. I have used several different arguments to get this point across.

Just ask what we would expect to find if we woke up one morning for the very first time (akin to being behind a Rawlsian veil of ignorance). Would we expect to find so much horrendous suffering on this planet given the belief in a theistic God? I submit that no one could ever guess there would be as much horrendous suffering as there is in our world. Such a God would never allow it, since he could have prevented it, should have prevented it, yet doesn’t prevent it.

Think in terms of who has the greatest moral obligation to help someone who is suffering. It’s the person who knows of the suffering, who cares the most to alleviate it, and who has the greatest ability to alleviate it. Therefore, the person who has the greatest obligation to alleviate horrendous suffering is a theistic God, if he exists. Anyone who is wholly good would be morally obligated to prevent horrendous suffering, especially if all it would take was a “snap” of the fingers to do so.

Think in terms of good parents. They would never allow their children to experience horrendous suffering for any reason. While they’re not omniscient, they couldn’t possibly conceive of any circumstances that might justify its use for a greater good. They would never allow it under any circumstances. Parents would protect their children from horrendous suffering regardless of any lessons they might learn from it. They would certainly want all predators, killers and rapists locked in prisons away from their children, because having a safe society is eminently more valuable than allowing really bad people to run amok.

Good parents raise their children to be good people, sometimes despite bad circumstances. Bad parents don’t. Why is it that a heavenly fatherly God couldn’t do that with us, especially since he allegedly had the means to do so? God failed as a parent! There are clearly better parenting influences that can improve the chances that a new baby will be a good person



John W. Loftus holds a copy of his book, “God and Horrendous Suffering,” which includes a chapter (“Supernatural Evil”) by FFRF Co-President Dan Barker.

when they grow up. Why isn’t God like a good parent? Consider D’Angelo Hill, a severely disabled 5-year-old boy who suffered “critical, life-threatening burns” in an apartment fire. If an omniscient God couldn’t have kept him away from that apartment fire, then an omnipotent God should’ve secretly extinguished it as soon as it started. Otherwise, a perfectly good God should’ve created us with a gland that injects morphine to deaden severe pain whenever needed, especially before we discovered anesthesia.

We’re told God infinitely cares for every single individual, enough to die for us all. If that’s truly the case, then it follows that the sufferings of individual people cannot be justified by hindsight lessons learned from their sufferings, like those of the Nazi Holocaust. Otherwise, we would be mere pawns used by God to teach lessons to later generations. If God were to exploit us like that, where the ends justify the means, we wouldn’t have any intrinsic value. We would only have instrumental value. But, if we lack intrinsic value, then God would never send his son Jesus to die for us.

If theists object, then at a fundamental level they don’t think much of God’s infinite love. Surely, God would place his infinite knowledge and power into the ser-

vice of his infinite love.

Given this present world, horrendous suffering exists because species evolve through an evolutionary process whereby the fittest species survive. There shouldn’t even be a debate about this. The amount and the degree of horrific suffering on Earth throughout every millennium, century, decade, year, month, week, day, hour, minute and second should prove, all on its own, that God is not perfectly good.

Concrete examples like these go on to show God doesn’t do any miracles to alleviate suffering. If God doesn’t stop the most horrific instances of suffering, there’s no reason to think he stops any lesser instances of suffering. If nothing else, the more instances of horrendous suffering, then the less likely God exists. Now do the math.

Let’s turn to seven concerns about this conclusion.

1) We don’t abuse the freedom given to us.

The giver of a gift is blameworthy if he or she knowingly gives gifts to people who will terribly abuse them. Any parent who gives a razor blade to a 2-year-old is culpable if that child hurts himself or others with it. Good parents give their children more and more freedom to do what they

want so long as they are responsible with their freedom. If children abuse their freedom, parents will discipline them by taking away their freedom to make bad choices. It’s that simple. God, like a good parent, should’ve done likewise when it came to giving us free will. He should have waited until we could use it responsibly.

God should have kept us from abusing our freedom by creating us with a stronger propensity to dislike wrongdoing, in much the same way that we have an aversion to drinking motor oil. We could still drink it if we wanted to, but it’s nauseating. Such a deity could keep a person from hurting or killing someone if, at the very thought of it, the person began to suffer severe nausea.

A theistic god has many other means at his disposal to keep us from harming others. A heart attack could have killed Hitler and prevented World War II. The Zyklon B pellets dropped down into the Auschwitz gas chambers could have simply “malfunctioned” by being miraculously neutralized.

2) The environment God placed us in will not cause us excessive suffering.

At the very minimum, God should prevent all natural disasters. If such a god exists, the 2004 Indonesian tsunami that killed approximately a quarter million people should never have taken place. If God had prevented it with a miracle, by stopping the underwater earthquake before it happened, no one would have been the wiser, precisely because it didn’t happen. By doing so, God could have remained hidden — for some hidden reason. Then, with a perpetual miracle, he could keep it from happening in the future. Such a god could stop all naturally caused horrendous suffering in this manner, and none of us would be the wiser. We would just conclude this is how the natural world works, with much less suffering in it.

A theistic god should not have created predation in the animal world, either. The amount of animal suffering is atrocious, as creatures prey on one another to feed themselves. The extent of animal suffering cries out against the existence of a good god. This horrific suffering is perhaps the most difficult problem of all. In lieu of this, God should have created all living things as herbivores, such as rabbits, deer, sheep, cows and hippos. And, in order to be sure there is enough vegetation for all of us, God could have reduced our mating cycles and/or made edible vegetation like apple trees, corn stalks, blueberry bushes, wheat, and tomato plants grow as plentiful as wild weeds do today.

An all-powerful god didn’t even have to create us such that we needed to eat anything at all. God could sustain us all with miraculously created nutrients inside our biological systems throughout our lives, and we wouldn’t know anything different. Such a deity could simply do a perpetual miracle here, as well. In fact, there is nothing prohibiting God from feeding us by the process of photosynthesis, just like plant life, thereby not requiring animals at all.

3) Our bodies provide us a reasonable measure of well-being.

A god should have created all human beings with one color of skin. There, that was easy! There has been too much institutional racism, race-based slavery and too many tribalistic wars because we don’t all have the same color of skin.

A god should have created us with much stronger immune systems so there would be no pandemics that decimate whole populations, or chronic diseases

like cancer, emphysema, leukemia, or, for that matter, babies born with deformed limbs, blindness, deafness, muteness and so on. This is horrific suffering that God should never have allowed in his creation.

Such a God could have created us with self-regenerating bodies. When we receive a cut, it heals itself over time, as does a sprained ankle or even a broken bone. But, why can't an injured spinal cord heal itself? Why can't an amputated leg grow back in a few weeks? If that's all we experienced in this world, we wouldn't know any different. Many animals can regrow parts of their bodies that have been damaged or severed. Lizards can grow new tails. Sharks can replace lost teeth. Spiders can regrow legs. An octopus can regrow their arms. Starfish can even grow an entirely new body out of a severed arm.

We find lots of examples in nature that God could have created in us but didn't. Such a god could have created us with a much higher threshold of pain. He could have given us fish-like gills to keep us from drowning. He could have given us wings on our backs so we could fly to safety if we fell off a cliff. Or, he could have made us much smaller in size so if we accidentally fell off that cliff we wouldn't get hurt, just like ants who have a very low terminal velocity.

Such a deity should also have made all creatures capable of sexually self-reproducing, like zebra sharks, Komodo dragons and others. If God had done this, it would eliminate gender discrimination and gay hate crimes, since there wouldn't be any gender or sexual differences between us.

4) Prevent a wide diversity of religions in the world.

If a good god exists, he should have made it a priority to prevent religious diversity by clearly revealing himself in this world such that only people who consciously refuse to believe would do so. There would be no such thing as reasonable nonbelief in the one true sect-specific religion, regardless of when and where we were born, or how we might be culturally indoctrinated otherwise. Such a god would have made his revelation available to every culture and buttressed it with some astounding evidence-based miracles. This deity would provide a naturalistic moral code for everyone that



excluded all religions that were misogynistic, racist, homophobic, nationalistic and otherwise barbaric. In this way, he'd prevent religiously motivated wars, crusades, inquisitions, witch burnings, suicide bombers and terrorists.

5) God just can't help us when free will is involved.

But as it stands, theists are the first ones to say unrestricted freedom is not a good thing. In the case of heinous crimes, we put criminals in prison. We do not let them roam the streets once they are discovered. They lose their freedom in the interests of having a safe society. Safety is a higher value than freedom. The theistic god has a mixed-up sense of what is more valuable, for that god thinks human freedom is more valuable than having a safe society.

To cut to the chase, all of us have a very limited range of free choices, if we have any at all. The limits of our choices are set by our genetic material and our environment. It does absolutely no good at all to have free will and not also have the ability to exercise it. Some people don't have the strength needed to stop an attacker, while others don't have the rational capacity needed to spot a con artist. I could not be a world-class athlete, even if I wanted to. Our free will to do what we want is limited by our age, race, gender, mental capacity, financial means and geographical locality. Since we already have limited choices, then God should further limit our choices

if we seek to cause horrific harm to others.

6) Suffering is a necessary byproduct of causal natural laws.

God is believed to have created the universe from nothing, along with the laws of nature. If God can do that, he can also create a different universe with different laws of nature without any horrendous suffering in it. It just doesn't make any sense that God chose to create this world with so much horrific suffering, when he could've created a better one without it.

Even if God failed to create a good universe initially, he could still do miracles in this world to correct any errors in it. An omnipotent miracle-working god can do anything in the material universe, or else he's not a miracle-working god. Christian philosopher Richard Swinburne agrees, saying in a debate with Eddie Tabash that "God is not limited by the laws of nature; he makes them and he can change or suspend them — if he chooses."

Since this world is causing so much horrific suffering, the question for the theist is why the laws of this world are fixed and necessary when God could intervene to alleviate the most horrific kinds of suffering. If changing the world requires some miraculous adjustment, what's the problem? People should matter enough for God to do that. I wonder if theists have really thought through the implications of a god who prefers this present set of natural laws with its sufferings over constant miraculous maintenance. Does their god

care? Is their god lazy?

7) We just cannot understand God's reasons for allowing horrendous suffering in this world.

I am suggesting there are several things a god could do to eliminate horrendous suffering without producing a chaotic world, or inhibiting our character development, that would help draw us to him, all of which are easy to conceive and already found in the animal kingdom. Since God, if he exists, could have done differently but did not, he is to blame for all horrific suffering in this world.

The truth is that it seems very likely we should be able to see God's reasons for allowing it, since most theists also claim God wants us to believe in him, and will condemn us in the afterlife if we don't. More importantly, this answer cuts both ways. We're told we can't understand God's purposes. We can't begin to grasp why there is so much suffering in our world if a good omnipotent god exists. But, if God is omniscient as claimed, he should know how to create a better world, especially since we do have a good idea how he could've created it.

So, which is more likely: That we cannot begin to understand God's omniscient ways, or that we can have some kind of idea about them? If we consider the idea that we're all created in God's image, the answer seems obvious. We should indeed have some kind of idea about God's omniscient ways. Since this is so, and since we have good ideas on how God might have done things differently, the most reasonable conclusion is that an all-powerful, omniscient, perfectly good God does not exist.

Only if theists expect very little from their god can they defend what their god has done. Either God is not smart enough to figure out how to create a good world, or God doesn't have the power to create it, or God just doesn't care.

Conclusion

The evidential problem of horrendous suffering is one of the most powerful refutations of the theistic god as can be found.

FFRF member and author John W. Loftus has written and edited a dozen books.

'Debating God's Existence'

New book offers a fair look at both sides

By Dan Barker

Can you imagine a book endorsed by both atheist philosopher/podcaster Alex O'Connor and Christian philosopher/theologian William Lane Craig?



Photo by Chris Line
Dan Barker

In 2022, I participated in a "Does God Exist?" debate at the FREE-FLO conference in Orlando, Fla., organized by the Florida Humanist Association and co-sponsored by the Central Florida Freethought Community (CFFC), an FFRF chapter. David Williamson of CFFC was the moderator. My opponent was Christian theologian/philosopher Adam Lloyd Johnson, founder and president of Convincing Proof.

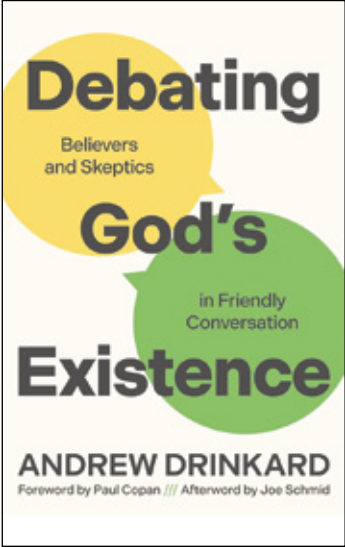
What was especially notable about this debate was its conviviality. Williamson and Orlando pastor Andy Searles,

who are good friends, set the tone with an amiable joint introduction celebrating openness and charitable listening.

The main debate topics were causation, design (fine-tuning) and morality. We also touched on immaterial minds, free will and the hiddenness of God.

In the audience was editor Andrew Drinkard, director of Inspiring Christianity ministries. After the event, he asked Adam and me if we thought our debate might make a good book. We agreed. He made a proposal to William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company (a Christian publisher), and after much deliberation, it agreed.

Andrew transcribed the debate, including audience questions. Then Ee-



"Debating God's Existence" is available at FFRF's shop: ffrf.org/shop-category/. Dan's royalties from the book purchased here go to FFRF.

rdmans enlisted five Christian philosophers and six nontheist philosophers to comment on the debate. (Two nontheists wrote a joint article, so it was five to five.) Popular theologian Paul Copan, president of the Evangelical Philosophical Society, wrote the foreword and Christian philosopher Delores Morris wrote the introduction. Adam and I each contributed a chapter commenting on our debate, plus a concluding chapter responding to the other contributors. Nontheist philosopher Joe Schmid wrote the afterword. All total, the contributors include eight theists and eight nontheists.

"Debating God's Existence: Believers and Skeptics in Friendly Conversation"

is truly a fair and balanced book. Sean McDowell, professor of Apologetics at Talbot School of Theology, says: "[This] is my new go-to book for believers and skeptics who want to understand the arguments for and against God. Both the tone and content of the dialogue are first-rate." Alex O'Connor, host of CosmicSkeptic, writes: "A great resource for both introducing and thoroughly engaging with some of the most important arguments surrounding the question of God's existence. . . the book aims to help you figure out for yourself how to think about the question." You will notice that my name is not on the cover of the book. Eerdmans considers Paul Copan to be a bigger draw to their mainly Christian buyers. That is fine with me. I want Christians as well as nonbelievers to pick up the book and read both sides. Published and endorsed by Christians, this is a book you can comfortably share with your religious friends and relatives. Dan Barker is co-president of FFRF.

First in the Family student essay winners

The Freedom From Religion Foundation is proud to announce the 12 top winners and nine honorable mentions of the 2026 David Hudak Memorial First in the Family Student Essay Competition.

FFRF has paid out a total of \$18,150 in award money for the contest this year.

Students who will be first in their family to attend either a two- or four-year college or university and who are ages 17–21 were asked to write on the topic of “Why white supremacy goes hand in hand with Christian nationalism.”

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 tie fashion.)

FIRST PLACE

Nyla Woods, 21, University of Kansas, \$3,500.

SECOND PLACE

Isaiah Lopez Ruiz, 21, Paradise Valley Community College, \$3,000.

THIRD PLACE

Anastasia Gonzalez, 19, Harvard University, \$2,500.

FOURTH PLACE

Angelle Jean-Pierre, 18, Howard University, \$2,000.



FIFTH PLACE

Antonio Drain, 18, University of Central Oklahoma, \$1,500.

SIXTH PLACE

Carina Reyes-Ortiz, 18, West Chester University, \$1,000.

SEVENTH PLACE

Cha’Miah Phoenix, 19, UCLA, \$750.

EIGHTH PLACE (tie)

Cydney Dixon, 19, Baylor University, \$500.

Yusef Houssein, 19, Saint Joseph University, \$500.

NINTH PLACE (tie)

Jayda Gaither, 18, East Carolina University, \$400.

Samani Ismail, 18, University of Berkeley, \$400.

TENTH PLACE

Laila Coutou, 20, New York University, \$300.

HONORABLE MENTION (\$200 each)

Mariana Catalan, 18, University of Houston

Christine Cowing, 18, Montana State University - Billings

Brooklyn Dosen, 21, Cochise College

Cash Guello, 18, University of North Georgia

Gabrielle Horsley, 18, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Jackson Manis, 18, University of Texas

Iman Merchant, 17, University of Texas

Kira Saintvil, 18, Rochester Institute of Technology

Kason Steward, 18, Sacramento State University

FFRF thanks Lisa Treu for managing the details of this (and FFRF’s other essay competitions).

FFRF would also like to thank our volunteer and staff readers and judges, including: Don Ardell, Dan Barker, David Chivers, Wrenna Fine, Jon Galehouse, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Ricki Grunberg, Susan Haines, Linda Josheff, Kevin Kirby, Jeffrey LaVicka, Sammi Lawrence, Robert Leonhard, Tom Ludwinski, Katya Maes, David Malcolm, Tori Mizerak, Jason Mosebach, Henry Mongrain, Chris O’Connell, Andrea Osburne, Brooks Rimes, Kathy Rogers, Rose Mary Sheldon, PJ Slinger, Michelle Smith and Matthew Woodruff.

This contest is named for the late David Hudak, an FFRF member who left a bequest to generously fund a student essay contest.

FFRF has offered essay competitions to students of color (now first in the family to attend college) since 2016. It has also offered essay contests open to all college students since 1979, high school seniors since 1994, grad students since 2010 and one for law students since 2019.

FIRST PLACE

The weaponization of the bible

FFRF awarded Nyla \$3,500.

By Nyla Woods

Christianity and Christian nationalism have been used to uphold white supremacy since the establishment of the United States.

Political leaders and theologians weaponized the bible and used distorted scriptures, divine entitlement and nationalistic narratives to justify the horrendous acts of colonization, slavery and racial segregation. By doing this, white Christian nationalists successfully sacralized white dominance and transformed systemic oppression into a perceived spiritual sanction.

An example of this would be how institutionalized prejudice was prominent (and still is) in private religious schools. While Christian private schools have been religious academic institutions since the 1600s, they massively expanded during the 1950s as a direct response to the legislative desegregation of American public schools. The expansion of these institutions was not created to educate the increasing number of Christian youth, but to create a



Nyla Woods

legal loophole to the Supreme Court’s ruling that declared racial segregation in public schools as unconstitutional. At private schools, the school board is legally allowed to deny admission to any student that they deem as “unfit” for their institution. White supremacists in these private academic advisory roles abused their autonomy to perpetuate discriminatory practices that prohibited African Americans and other

minorities from attending their schools under the guise of “academic selectivity” and “religious freedom.”

I know firsthand what it feels like to grow up in a culture that treats whiteness as the gold standard. As a young African American girl who grew up in the suburbs, I was often one of the only two Black girls in my class. Outside of school, the media rarely offered girls like me fair and accurate representation. Instead, it constantly represented Eurocentric features and European ancestry as the sole markers of beauty and worth. Like other young minority children consuming the media, I also internalized those messages so deeply that I believed I had to change myself to matter in society.

Today, Christian nationalism wants to take that same feeling of exclusion and write it into our modern democracy. Our current executive leader and his administration have been overturning previous progressive milestones and implementing new policies that make sure white Christian culture stays dominant while forcing everyone else to conform. The fusion of exclusive biblical principles and our American governance is a direct attack on our

secular democracy because it creates a system where your rights depend on your race, religion and gender.

There are many evident instances of this happening: Women having their reproductive rights stripped away, the Supreme Court allowing unfair election maps that significantly impairs the ability of Black voters to elect leaders of their choice, and the implementation of reversed protections for LGBTQ+ and transgender rights.

Therefore, it is important that we continue to educate ourselves and advocate on behalf of each other to protect our secular democracy against these dangerous beliefs and build a community where people don’t have to change themselves to matter.

Nyla, 21, is seeking a degree in visual communications from the University of Kansas.

“I am passionate about art and storytelling,” Nyla writes. “Drawing has always been a creative outlet for me since my youth. I aspire to be a comic creator, concept artist and animated feature screenwriter. I volunteer at my city’s local non-profit bookstore that gives kids and adults access to literacy and affordable books.”

SECOND PLACE

U.S. is not an ethno-theocracy

FFRF awarded Isaiah \$3,000.

By Isaiah Lopez Ruiz

White supremacy survives most effectively when it no longer presents itself openly as hatred. Instead, it infiltrates and adapts into institutions of power, traditions and moral language that are perceived as socially legitimate. Christian nationalism has too often provided exactly that shield. The religious conservative movement has longed for an ethno-nationalist society, where race and religion are the decid-

ing factors in who gets to wield power, what is idealized and what is minimized. This grotesquely threatens the rights and dignity of a pluralistic society, nullifying key parts of the U.S. Constitution, which mandates that our government remain secular. A democratic, constitutional system endeavors for “freedom without favor and equality without exception,” to quote American United. A Christian ethno-nationalist state would undoubtedly seek to disintegrate our shared liberties and principles we hold sacred as Americans. They are an existential danger that is raging against the dying of their

privilege.

Christian ethno-nationalists would eviscerate my rights recognized by the Supreme Court in Obergefell, Lawrence, and Tinker. I still cannot enjoy federal civil rights as an LGBTQ+ young adult, and this movement will target other minority demographics, including bodily autonomy, Black, Hispanic, non-Christian, women and even our democratic institutions. It is fundamentally incompatible with a secular society because Christian nationalism advocates for a system that will disproportionately oppress anyone based on race and religion, while



Isaiah Lopez Ruiz

a secular government ensures neutrality among demographics, where no one can subjugate others or be marginalized.

We are one of the few nations that guarantees religious liberty for all, but it is being distorted and eroded by religious theocrats. Secularism is the only sane, constitutional path to a developing, advanced country.

I grew up in the conservative suburbs of Arizona. There were many Mormon churches and right-wing populists who espoused the ideas of Christian ethno-nationalism. I faced mistreatment at school and work places because of my ethnicity and sexual

orientation/gender identity.

The Mormon religion had formally endorsed the concept of Black people being “cursed by God” and therefore could not ascend in the priesthood or leadership. Many religious families that I knew were very vocal in their opposition to interracial relationships. For them, religion is their cognitive shortcut to life’s complex reality. This is a disdain for humanity and our shared values in a functional society.

We must be united and organized

for the separation of church and state to preserve our U.S. Constitution and the promises of America. We can push further by repealing the Religious Restoration Act of 1996 and implementing the Do No Harm Act to recalibrate our modern system to affirm that religious liberty is meant to shield us, not to attack others. We must end Republican states’ efforts to pollute public education with religious doctrine, funnel taxpayer funds to private religious schools and force public prayers. The United

States was built as a constitutional republic, not an ethno-theocracy.

Isaiah, 21, is studying law at Paradise Valley Community College.

“I am a first-generation, Hispanic, neurodivergent, LGBTQ+, atheist student with a current 4.0 GPA and doing honors coursework,” Isaiah writes. “My goal is to get enrolled in law school and obtain a J.D. degree to practice law. I have worked on voter campaigns and have done political canvassing. I have also worked as a poll worker for U.S. elections and participated in peaceful protests.”

THIRD PLACE

Race and reproductive injustice in America

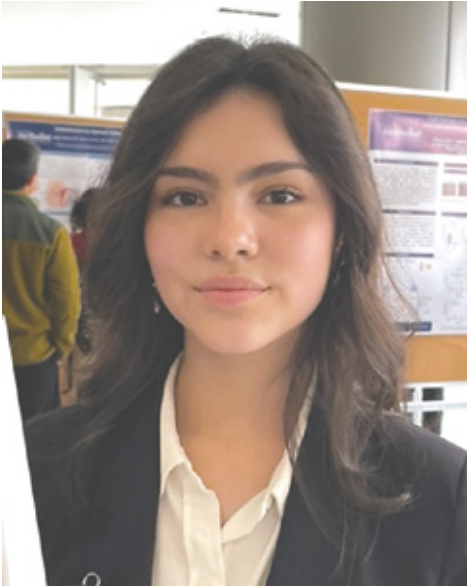
FFRF awarded Anastasia \$2,500.

By Anastasia Gonzalez

How many mathematicians, writers, doctors, scientists and activists of color have had their souls drowned by men who force them down like waves in the ocean?

Centuries of rape of women of color have been fueled by a view that our dreams are disposable — and therefore we can be used. Black and Indigenous women across North America are more vulnerable to rape because politically dominant white Christian nationalists have subjected them to poverty and abandonment by the justice system. Historically, because Indigenous women were not white or Christian, they were viewed by conquistadores as commodities for subjugation.

My family is originally Nahuatl, an Indigenous group of central Mexico. As girls surviving deeply rooted poverty in a small village, even my mother and aunts faced intimidation through sexual violence countless times. Rape was also inflicted on enslaved Black women to forcefully bear more enslaved children. Today, daughters of these Black and Indigenous women in



Anastasia Gonzalez

the United States continue to have their autonomy stolen.

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* is a manifestation of Christian nationalism and a cloaked weapon of white supremacy. Abortion bans, fueled by Christian ideas infiltrating political power, dwindle the socioeconomic advancement of and kill many Black and Hispanic women. Black and Hispanic women seek abortions at higher rates than white women. Histori-

cal discrimination by whites and Christian nationalists skewed the proportion of minorities living in poverty. This increased our vulnerability to sexual violence, while decreasing health insurance coverage of contraception and sex education.

Furthermore, immigrants are very likely to face sexual assault upon migration and/or during detention. The greatest victims of this imposition of Christian doctrine on our laws are Black and Hispanic women. As a young Mexican woman in Texas, my heart aches as I watch more and more girls like me being robbed of their autonomy by Christian nationalists. Family planning clinics are vanishing around my community. In states with total abortion bans, disproportionately high numbers of Black and Hispanic women are forced to carry children of their rapists. Raising children further traps these women in cycles of poverty by preventing our career advancement, increasing expenses and reducing our ability to pursue higher education. These burdens on socioeconomic mobility compound with the generational wealth gap white supremacists and Christian nationalists left on our families.

On top of this, Black and Hispanic women die from pregnancy complications

that could’ve been preventable with abortion at significantly higher rates in these states. Criminalizing abortion also only increases the incidence of unsafe abortions, leading to more deaths of women of color desperate for autonomy over our lives and bodies.

Once again, women of color are subjected to the choice of oppression or death. These sickening abortion laws not only control our bodies, but our socioeconomic mobility. No true American patriot would let the separation of church and state, a Bill of Rights amendment, be undermined. Yet, we watch these precedents be broken for white Christian America at our expense — again.

Anastasia, 19, attends Harvard University.

“My dream is to become a biomedical researcher,” she writes. “I have worked in research labs for three years. I am a research assistant in the Golub Lab at the Broad Institute working on Parkinson’s disease. Last summer, in collaboration with a nonprofit organization for seniors, I started a project at a local care home interviewing residents and writing their memoirs to share with their families. I have had a small art business for seven years, creating portrait commissions and painting live at weddings.”

FOURTH PLACE

The danger of white Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Angelle \$2,000.

By Angelle Jean-Pierre

Christian nationalism presents itself as a movement to “restore” America’s religious values, but historically and politically it has often been tied to white supremacy.

At its core, white Christian nationalism promotes the idea that the United States was founded by and for white Christians and that political power should remain in their hands. This ideology is dangerous because it excludes religious minorities, immigrants, Black Americans and anyone who does not fit its narrow definition of a “real American.” It also threatens the constitutional principle of separation between church and state that protects democracy and religious freedom.

The connection between white supremacy and Christian nationalism is not new. During slavery and segregation, many churches and religious

leaders defended racial hierarchy by claiming it was part of God’s plan. Even today, researchers have found strong links between Christian nationalist beliefs and anti-Black racism, anti-immigrant attitudes and hostility toward religious diversity.

According to a 2023 survey by the Public Religion Research Institute, most Christian nationalist adherents rejected the idea that white supremacy remains a major problem in the United States. The same study also found that supporters of Christian nationalism were significantly more likely to support authoritarian politics and discriminatory views toward immigrants and Muslims.

Christian nationalism is especially threatening to a secular democracy because it treats one religion as more “American” than others. The First Amendment was written to prevent exactly this kind of religious favoritism. When politicians argue that laws should be based on one specific interpretation of Christianity, they weaken



Angelle Jean-Pierre

the rights of people with different beliefs. A democracy can only function fairly when citizens are equal under the law regardless of race or religion. Christian nationalism undermines that equality by promoting the idea that white conservative Christians deserve special political and cultural power.

I find white Christian nationalism

disturbing because it disguises intolerance as patriotism and faith. As someone who values diversity and democratic freedoms, I believe religion should inspire compassion rather than division. Seeing crosses displayed beside political slogans and extremist rhetoric makes me uncomfortable because Christianity’s message of love and justice becomes distorted into a tool for exclusion and control. For racial minorities and immigrant communities, this movement can create fear and alienation, especially when political leaders use religious language to justify discrimination.

America is strongest when it protects pluralism and equal rights. White Christian nationalism threatens those ideals by combining racial resentment with religious authority. History shows that when governments elevate one race or religion above others, freedom suffers. Defending secular democracy is not hostility toward religion; it is protection for everyone’s freedom to believe — or not believe — as they choose.

Angelle, 18, attends Howard University and is pursuing a career in medicine as a doctor.

FIFTH PLACE

When faith is used to divide

FFRF awarded Antonio \$1,500.

By Antonio Drain

As an African American, I believe that white supremacy and Christian nationalism go hand in hand because both are rooted in the idea that America belongs more to some people than others.

Christian nationalism pushes the belief that the United States was founded specifically for Christians and should continue to reflect one version of Christian values and culture. The problem is that, historically, the image of the real American connected to that movement has usually been white. Black Americans have suffered because of this connection.

During the slavery era, white slave owners used Christianity to justify enslaving African people, claiming it was somehow part of God’s plan. Later, during segregation, many white churches either supported racist laws or stayed silent while Black Americans fought for equal rights. At the same time, Black churches became places of resistance, hope and community. That contrast says a lot.

However, Christianity itself was nev-



Antonio Drain

er the issue, it was the way religion was used to protect racial power and make inequality seem morally acceptable. Even today, Christian nationalism still carries some of those same ideas. The movement often promotes a version of America centered around white Christian culture while making minorities and people of other religions feel like outsiders.

When politicians or activists talk

about “taking America back,” I sometimes wonder who they believe America was taken from in the first place. For many African Americans, phrases like that can feel less patriotic and more like a desire to return to a time when minorities had less power and fewer rights.

As someone who grew up in the South, I have seen how race, politics and religion can become deeply connected. When people talk about “traditional American values,” they often ignore the fact that those traditions did not always include equality for everyone. Even when racism is not openly expressed, Christian nationalism can still create an environment where minorities feel excluded or unheard.

Fast forward to the Jan. 6, 2021, Capitol insurrection, which made this issue even more real to me. Seeing crosses, Christian flags and prayers mixed in with anger, conspiracy theories and political violence was unsettling.

Faith should be about compassion, justice and humility, not nationalism

“Faith should be about compassion, justice and humility, not nationalism or superiority.”

or superiority. When religion becomes tied to the belief that one racial or cultural group deserves more control than others, democracy becomes threatened. I truly believe that America is strongest when everyone has equal freedom and equal belonging, regardless of race or religion. I believe Christianity should inspire people to care for others, not divide them.

White supremacy and Christian nationalism both depend on exclusion, deciding who counts as a real American and who does not. That mindset is dangerous not only for minorities, but for democracy itself.

Antonio, 18, will be attending the University of Central Oklahoma.

“I was raised in the historically Black town of Tatum, Okla.,” Antonio writes. “I left my hometown in pursuit of a better education, which is how I ended up at Frederick Douglass High School, where I graduated this year at the top of my class with a 4.0 GPA. I plan to pursue a bachelor’s degree in business marketing. My career goal is to work my way up until I become a marketing director.”

SIXTH PLACE

Latina, Christian and unapologetic

FFRF awarded Carina \$1,000.

By Carina Reyes Ortiz

I grew up in a Puerto Rican household where faith meant service, love, sacrifice and community. It sounded like Spanish Christian music playing through my grandmother’s house on Saturday mornings and looked like my mother praying quietly at night after exhausting days, while still finding the strength to raise four children.

Christianity, in my life, was never about power. It was about compassion.

That is why white Christian nationalism feels so deeply offensive to me as both a Christian and a Latina. White Christian nationalism takes faith and turns it into a weapon. As the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty explains, “White Christian nationalism seeks to merge Christian and American identities, distorting both the Christian faith and America’s constitutional democracy.”

That distortion is dangerous because it pushes the idea that America belongs to one specific type of person: white, conservative, English-speaking and “Christian” in a narrow political sense. Historically, movements rooted in white Christian nationalism defended segregation and discrimination while using religion as justification.

Today, much of that same fear has simply been redirected toward immigrants and communities of color. As a young Puerto Rican woman from Philadelphia,

“Historically, movements rooted in white Christian nationalism defended segregation and discrimination while using religion as justification. Today, much of that same fear has simply been redirected toward immigrants and communities of color.”

I have seen the damage this mindset creates. I have heard immigrants described as burdens instead of human beings.

Through internships, I worked with Latino families navigating immigration concerns, housing instability and discrimination. Many of those families were deeply religious themselves, yet they were still treated as outsiders by people claiming to defend “Christian values.” That contradiction has always angered me.

There is nothing Christian about using religion to justify cruelty, racism or exclusion. There is nothing Christian about making immigrant families feel disposable while quoting scripture at the same time. White Christian nationalism distorts faith into something rooted in fear and superiority rather than humility and love. It is also a direct threat to our secular democracy.



Carina Reyes Ortiz

The United States was built on the principle that no single religion should control the government.

Once political power becomes tied to one religious identity, minority communities become vulnerable. People who do not fit that image of America begin to have their humanity questioned, their rights debated and their voices si-

lenced. I refuse to accept the idea that patriotism belongs only to certain people or that God belongs only to certain communities.

My Puerto Rican identity, my faith and my voice belong in this country, too. I plan to study political science and pursue law because I want to fight for communities that are too often ignored or stereotyped. I want immigrant families, Latino communities and young girls who look like me to know they deserve dignity, protection and representation. Faith should never be used to make people feel smaller. If anything, it should challenge us to stand up louder for those whose humanity is constantly questioned.

Carina, 18, attends West Chester University and plans to major in political science.

“I’m a proud Puerto Rican student from Philadelphia,” Carina writes. “During high school, I earned an associate’s degree through the Community College of Philadelphia, graduating cum laude before even receiving my high school diploma. Alongside balancing high school and college coursework, I also dedicated my time to volunteering in elementary schools, mentoring younger students and encouraging them to believe in their own potential.”

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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SEVENTH PLACE

‘One nation under God’

FFRF awarded Cha’Miah \$750.

By Cha’Miah Phoenix

Ah, America. Good ol’ red, white and blue. The land of the free and the home of the brave. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Over and over, the picture of an idealistic, equal-opportunity America is at the forefront of what it means to be American. From the outside looking in, America seems amazing. However, what America seems to be is not what it is.

“Love thy neighbor,” Jesus said.
“All men are created equal,” Thomas Jefferson claimed.

These two figures represent the intersection of Christianity and politics: the civil liberty of equality. Somewhere down the road, their words have been misconstrued.

“Love thy neighbor,” but not your Chinese co-worker.

“All men are created equal,” but not your Dominican electrician.

“God loves all,” but not your Black “friend.”

But, but and but.

Historically, white Christians in America often used biblical scripture to exclude, erase and harm non-white Christians.

“Love thy neighbor,” if your neighbor is white.



Cha’Miah Phoenix

“All men are created equal,” if your co-worker is white.

“God loves all,” if your friend is white.

When I moved to Centerville, Ohio, a predominantly white Christian city, at the age of 6, the culture shocked me. Growing up in a Black Christian household, I saw people as people, not their race. The version of Christianity I often encountered throughout my city felt very different from the one I was raised with.

“Your hair looks better straightened,” my white cheer teammates told me after I damaged my curls trying to fit in as the only Black girl in the program.

“You know, black women are murderers because they always get abortions,” a white woman once told me.

“I don’t think all men are created equal,” a white boy in my AP Government class announced after I gave a presentation on the Declaration of Independence.

When I asked him why, he told me: “The bible says so.”

White supremacy, the belief that white people are superior to other races and/or minorities, and Christian nationalism, the belief that American identity and government should be rooted in a conservative vision of Christianity, function jointly because they prioritize hate: Slavery, “Manifest Destiny” and the Spanish caste system are all instances when people of color were harmed in the name of the white Christians’ god.

As a Black girl, I’ve seen how these ideas continue to influence everyday interactions. My experiences have shown me how faith can be weaponized to legitimize prejudice when it becomes intertwined with white supremacy rather than compassion.

The majority in America is white

Christians, and, unfortunately, white Christian nationalism has become the dominant force of federal and state politics in America. A democracy depends on equal citizenship regardless of race or religion. White Christian nationalism contradicts that principle by demanding that some Americans belong more than others. As long as white Christian nationalism defines who belongs in America, the American dream remains inaccessible to many of the very people it promises to include.

Cha’Miah Phoenix, 19, attends UCLA and plans to become a medical malpractice attorney.

“I like to think of myself as a ‘random’ person because I have varying hobbies from sewing, singing, dancing, drawing, reading, writing and cooking,” Cha’Miah writes. “I’ve helped raise over \$131,000 with 10 other seniors in my graduating class, and we donated the funds to five local charities. I mentored over 300 students ages 4 to 14. I’ve won the Optimist International Youth Appreciation Award, AP Scholar, Delta Sigma Theta Honors. My first language was Japanese because I lived in Japan growing up, and I speak a bit of French and Korean. as well.”

“As long as white Christian nationalism defines who belongs in America, the American dream remains inaccessible to many of the very people it promises to include.”

EIGHTH PLACE (tie)

White supremacy and Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Cydney \$500.

By Cydney Dixon

White Christian nationalism is a cultural and political worldview that merges American identity with a specific version of Christianity. The two concepts go hand in hand because they reinforce each other.

White Christian nationalism is extremely detrimental to society, transforming religion from a source of faith into a manipulative tool for political, radical and racial control. Although Christianity teaches compassion and humility, white Christian nationalism has historically distorted those values to preserve white dominance in society. From slavery to segregation, religion was repeatedly used to justify oppression.

White supremacists continuously, malignantly exploit the bible to distort its words to support their contorted values. Slaveholders quoted selective scripture while ignoring scriptures imploring Christians to act with love and kindness, especially when it came to the lives of the American community. Many churches remained silent during decades of lynching, segregation and voter oppression. The legacy of that history still exists today.

What makes white Christian nationalism so dangerous is its belief that America belongs to white Christians. At the same time, minorities are seen as hoodlums, criminals and a threat to the nation’s “white” culture.

As a Black woman, being affected by political rhetoric about “taking America back” carries a heavy historical weight,



Cydney Dixon

equality and the belief that all citizens deserve protection under the law, regardless of race or religion. Because of that, I sit in pain watching Christianity be used to justify division and superiority, promoting empathy and justice. America’s strength has never come from one race or religion dominating others, but the flow of different cultures coming together as one. Creating diversity, representation and the freedom for all people to live peacefully. No one should be scared to walk down the street fearing they will be judged for personal beliefs or the color of their skin.

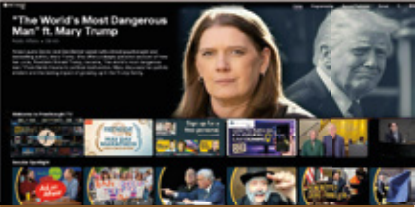
Democracy cannot survive if equality is dead. Despite white Christian nationalism, we, the new generation, will build coalitions and be the change, advocating for a better future for the American people. Enough equality, humanity and love will drown out the ugly, deceitful teachings of white supremacy cloaked in the name of Christianity.

Cydney, 18, attends Baylor University, where she is majoring in biology and minoring in ASL on the pre-med track with plans to become a dermatologist.

“I loved staying involved in my community and building meaningful connections through leadership, service, academics and sports,” Cydney writes. “They have helped me grow into a more confident and compassionate person while teaching me the importance of leadership and teamwork. Giving back to others has always been especially important to me, I have spent my time in college volunteering with organizations such as the American Red Cross, Round Rock Serving Center, Fuzzy Friends Waco, Hutto Food Pantry, and community clean-up projects through my club American Medical Women’s Association as well as Black Student Union at Baylor.”

“America’s strength has never come from one race or religion dominating others, but the flow of different cultures coming together as one.”

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EIGHTH PLACE (tie)

When religion becomes political

FFRF awarded Yusef \$500.

By Yusef Hussein

For a long time, there has been this idea that being a “real American” also means being Christian, and usually the example has been centered around white Christianity instead of the many different religions and cultures that actually exist across the country.

This is where Christian nationalism becomes dangerous, because it slowly stops being about personal faith or individual belief and instead becomes more focused on political power and deciding who belongs in America and who does not. It says that certain groups deserve a stronger voice or a more important place in society because of their race, religion or background.

Throughout American history, religion has often been used to defend racist ideas, even when people do not openly admit it. One example of this can be seen during segregation, when some churches supported racial separation and acted as if it reflected Christian values instead of prejudice. Even today, political



Yusef Hussein

movements and certain public figures often talk about “taking America back,” which sounds harmless on the surface but usually carries a message that blames immigrants, minorities or people with different beliefs for changes happening in the country.

America was founded as a secular democracy where people are supposed to have religious freedom, so

when one religion starts becoming closely tied to government and national identity, it creates division and makes many people feel excluded from their own country.

Politics and Christianity seem more connected than ever before, especially when certain presidents or political leaders speak as if Christianity should directly influence laws and government decisions instead of remaining separate from them. Religion can inspire people morally and help guide their personal choices, but there is an important difference between living by your faith and expecting an entire country to follow one religious perspective. Without a separation between church and state, people outside the majority religion can easily start feeling like they are less respected, less accepted or even less American because they do not fit a certain image.

I live in a diverse community at St. Joseph’s University and am grateful to still be able to live together and

“Throughout American history, religion has often been used to defend racist ideas, even when people do not openly admit it.”

share the same spaces peacefully. Christian nationalism threatens that idea because it creates an “us versus them” mindset that turns people against one another instead of bringing them together. I have seen this especially online, where immigrants, Muslims, Blacks and nonreligious people are sometimes blamed for ruining the country. Those opinions are hidden behind religious language.

Many Christians truly support equality and compassion, but when religion becomes mixed with nationalism, democracy becomes weaker since equality and freedom can no longer exist fairly.

Yusef, 19, attends Saint Joseph’s University.

“I enjoy spending my free time going on walks and reading books, which help me relax and continue learning new things,” Yusef writes. “I am focused on continuing to work hard in school while building a successful future for myself in a career of pharmacy.”

NINTH PLACE (tie)

The impact of white Christian nationalism

FFRF awarded Jayda \$400.

By Jayda Gaither

“Repent Now!”
“Heaven or Hell?”
“Jesus Saves!”

These phrases are permanently etched in my brain. I’ve seen these billboards a number of times as I drive down southern roads. On those same streets are Confederate flags, Trump stickers on trucks, and pro-white messages that are hard to ignore.

I begin thinking back to a time when Christianity was forced onto my ancestors, keeping them in a submissive mindset as they waited for their “savior” Jesus to free them. But whose prayers was he answering? The white slave owners who built a country off the backs of Black people while gaining generational wealth and power? The slaves who had to endure torture and pain for centuries while future generations continue to suffer at the hands of the enslavers’ descendants? Because of Christian nationalism, white people have been able to excuse the wrongdoings of their people and continue to create a corrupt country where they’re placed on a pedestal.

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution declares that there is no official religion of the United States. But that doesn’t stop politicians from using Christian morals to dictate the lives of

“Because of Christian nationalism, white people have been able to excuse the wrongdoings of their people and continue to create a corrupt country where they’re placed on a pedestal.”

its citizens. From Jim Crow laws to creating AI-generated images of the president as Jesus, the “word of God” has been used to create a reality that caters to white America, of which many Black people are oblivious.

During slavery, Black people were prohibited from learning how to read, with the exception of the bible. Other practices and religions that slaves brought with them from Africa were demonized. The bible encouraged slaves to stay in line because there was a light at the end of the tunnel — “heaven.” For generations, this mindset has been passed down, causing many Black people to not take accountability for many aspects of their lives, leaving it all up to God.

I noticed that when I question these ideologies, their entire outlook on life is disrupted, challenging the illusion. White supremacy goes hand in hand



Jayda Gaither

with Christian nationalism because the “word of God” has been warped to favor white America and keep other minorities trapped in a docile mindset. This is a threat to my community because if we can’t even acknowledge the history and root of the issues happening around us, how will we be able to stand up to the

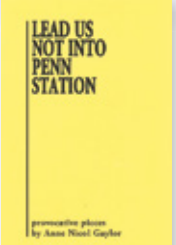
injustices that are being used to keep us held back in society?

My goal is to encourage others in the Black community to think critically about the correlations between religion and racism in our society. I want to help my generation, and the generations after, challenge these ideas and recognize the harmful effects that come from them. To combat the effects of white supremacy in America, we must first fully understand how they came to be and recognize who is truly accountable for the way minorities in America are treated.

Jayda, 18, attends East Carolina University with plans to study graphic design and marketing.

“I am a member of the Academy of Financial Technology and was the first in my class to complete the program, also earning my Excel specialist certification,” Jayda writes. “I was an active member of the Black Student Union at my school and had been the social manager for other clubs including BSU, DECA and the Dazzling Bulls Dance Team. I also run my own press-on nail business, in which I vendor at events and collect cans for my canned food drive.”

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NINTH PLACE (tie)

A mother who cares

FFRF awarded Samani \$400.

By Samani Ismail

When I hear politicians say America is a Christian nation, as a Black Muslim whose parents are refugees from Sudan, it sounds tyrannical to me.

The way the United States was built is through the hard work of many different migrants and the oppression and culture of slavery. To call it a Christian country — when the reason America is one of the best countries in the world is because of all of those people — is beyond arrogant. It would not be where it is without the hard labor of people who came from other lands, not only to seek refuge but to express their creativity and share ideas freely. You strip that away and America is only a husk of what it was and is.

It goes beyond what the Constitution is about, especially the First



Samani Ismail

Amendment, which literally guarantees freedom of religion. To call it a Christian country when Christians took it over from Indigenous people is ludicrous.

The way I see America is a country

being cradled and taken care of by a mother. What mothers do is nurse their young, watch over them and take care of them without prejudice. Mothers do not care how you look or how you talk. They only show love because that is a mother’s duty. That is what America is supposed to be. To call it a Christian nation is no better than a Third World oppressed country. We would become the same things our ancestors and the wars before us fought to stop. My parents fled Sudan because of exactly this kind of persecution — religious and ethnic. They survived refugee camps for over a decade because they believed somewhere out there was a place that would take them in without asking what they believed first. That place was supposed to be America.

When I hear politicians try to claim

this country for one religion, I think about everything my family did to get here, and I think about how easily that promise disappears when the wrong people get loud enough.

Samani, 18, attends the University of Berkeley.

“I was born in Kenya to parents from Darfur, Sudan, who fled war and spent years in refugee camps before immigrating to San Diego, where I grew up in a one-bedroom home alongside four siblings,” Samani writes. “Navigating language barriers, financial hardship and complex systems on behalf of my family taught me early that clear communication is not just a skill but a form of care. These experiences led me to volunteer as a computer science instructor in the Refugee Tutoring Program, where I taught younger refugee students digital literacy skills.”

“To call it a Christian country when Christians took it over from Indigenous people is ludicrous.”

TENTH PLACE

Racial and religious oppression

FFRF awarded Laila \$300.

By Laila Coutou

Christian nationalism is a political ideology that says there is no difference between being a Christian and being an American. It reinforces the idea that the United States of America was founded on Christian beliefs and values. Christian nationalism also has a long history of enforcing white supremacist ideals and implicitly treating white people as the “superior” citizens of America.

Throughout history, Christianity has been used to justify the genocide against the Indigenous peoples and has played a large role in the expansion of white victimhood. Christian nationalism began in this country centuries before its forma-

“From the start, Christian nationalism and white supremacy have fought the ideals of freedom that America claims to have.”

tion. Christopher Columbus, known as the person who “discovered” America, took over a land in which people were already living and created “a new kind of promised land.” This was justified by the claims that the people native to this land were “merciless savages.” This carried on with the Declaration of Independence, even using this phrase.

It is astounding how, even today, we still hear that the Native Americans were worshiping devils and fighting and killing each other before the white people came to this land. White supremacy is continuously fed by lies such as this because it ensures that white people are viewed as the perfect prototype. Maintaining this idea is a direct threat to the secular democracy because it places Christianity as the superior religion, immediately othering non-Christians.

The ideals of Christian nationalism and white supremacy also lean into a different definition of what it means to truly experience racism. Many white people not only believe that they experience racism, but also believe that they experience it more than Black people and all people of color. While



Laila Coutou

some may argue that white people can experience racism as individuals, I disagree. Racism goes beyond just comments; it is a historical system that was set up by the people who founded this country. A white person could never truly face racial discrimination because racism is systemic.

As a Black and Brown woman who grew up in Florida, I was taught at a young age that no matter who I was inside, I would never be seen as equal to my white peers in the eyes of my white Christian church leaders and teachers. It is an idea that becomes ingrained

in your nervous system that you are forced to work around throughout your entire life.

From the start, Christian nationalism and white supremacy have fought the ideals of freedom that America claims to have. From the genocide against the native people to the concept of “reverse racism,” the standards for both ideologies have been coalesced and implemented into the systems that we live under today. In my experience, I have found that it is vital to form your own ideals and standards for the “proper” way to live and exist. Though simple, it is a small personal rebellion against the biases this country was built on.

Laila, 20, attends New York University, where she is majoring in music business.

“Music has been a constant force in my life, and it’s the one field that has consistently challenged and inspired me,” Laila writes. “While I’ve explored a wide range of skills in academics and work, I’ve found my greatest focus in the music industry, a space where creativity and strategy intersect. Through my vocal studies, business coursework, songwriting, and detailed song analysis, I’ve developed both an artistic perspective and a curiosity for the work that happens behind the scenes. My ultimate goal is to open my own record label. I am a recent graduate of Valencia College, awarded with an Associate of Arts in Business Administration with a focus on music industry coursework.”

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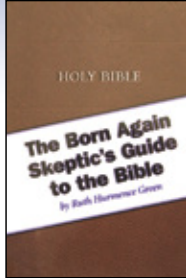
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What is the Freedom From Religion Foundation?

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

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

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



The Born Again Skeptic’s Guide to the Bible

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

By Ruth Hurmence Green

— 440 pages / PB
Published by FFRF **\$15** Item #FB12

Buy it from FFRF online
@ ffrf.org/shop

2026 ‘First in the Family’ honorable mentions

Mariana Catalan

Overall, people’s use of religion to justify white supremacy is simply an excuse. White supremacy is about control



Mariana Catalan

and the making of an enemy. And right now, “the enemy” is my own community. I come from a family of immigrants; I come from Indigenous ancestors — those who were called savages. And, now that I finally have the chance to make at least a small difference through voting, the people who have made my life a lot harder than it already was want to take away my only way of fighting back. Justification or not, it’s clear that white Christian nationalism is complicit in our backsliding democracy.

Mariana, 18, attends the University of Houston.

Christine Cowing

Growing up around people who said unkind things about my skin color, I began believing them at a young age.



Christine Cowing

The one constant among those who treated me this way? They were either explicitly Christian nationalists and white supremacists or were closely tied to those circles. As a child, I remember having a mother and father lead their child away from me and my sister simply because they didn’t want their child to play with a Black kid. The child didn’t care about my skin color, but the parents did. In doing this, they took away his choice and encouraged discriminatory behavior. Watching that kid grow older, he now displays an aversion to people of color and believes himself to be superior. This was a prime example of social learning through generations.

Christine, 18, attends Montana State University with plans to major in accounting.

Brooklyn Dosen

As an atheist Latina woman, I would be the ideal target for underlying Christian nationalist beliefs and prejudices.



Brooklyn Dosen

Going into a career in aviation, which is largely male-dominated, I believe that no matter what I do, I am destined to experience this prejudice in one form or another in my career. These beliefs seek to recreate an idealized past where white men held the majority of power over others in both a professional manner and in an informal manner, such as the conservative view of the nuclear family.

Brooklyn, 21, attends Cochise College with plans to become a pilot.

Cash Guello

While I was growing up, I was taught about many facts and ideas that imply an equality among religions and races, such as the country’s lack of an official religion and the concept of the melting pot. However, the dominant culture and faith became clear to me as I grew older. I learned about who was expected to assimilate, who is thought to be unable to assimilate, which places of worship exist on every block and which can only be found in isolated homes. These details create a familiarity bias among the dominant culture, and those with political power know how to appeal to it and twist it further to their advantage.

Cash, 18, attends the University of North Georgia with plans to major in psychology.

Gabrielle Horsley

As someone who grew up in a heavenly Christian African American family, I have seen firsthand how Christianity clouds the judgment of my older family members. I often have conversations with my grandma about current events, and we had a talk about high divorce rates. She told me that the reason why the



Gabrielle Horsley

divorce rates were so high were because women did not know how to submit and shut up and stay in their place. I rebutted that by telling her that women are learning how to know when not to submit and when it’s time to leave. She dismissed me and told me that it was the devil speaking in me.

Gabrielle, 18, attends North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University with plans to major in nursing.

Jackson Manis

Letting the idea of the superiority of a certain religion into our government ruins one of the core tenets of our secular democracy: the separation of church and state. Without this ideal, the original purpose of America as a melting pot of people and cultures from all over the world is tarnished. Millions who have lived their entire lives in America will find themselves uprooted. In fact, we can see this already happening with the violent and illegal ICE raids removing undocumented immigrants that never committed a crime, and even documented U.S. citizens just based on their perceived identity.

Jackson, 18, attends the University of Texas, with plans to get a degree in data science.

Iman Merchant

The United States is built upon a few sacred values that ensure that we strive toward a fair and balanced democracy.



Iman Merchant

These values, such as freedom of religion, the right to vote and freedom of speech, are directly threatened by white supremacy and Christian nationalism. These issues are of great importance to me as a nonwhite, non-Christian American. I have faced discrimination and racism for the color of my skin and the nature of my beliefs, from being called a terrorist to racial slurs being hurled at me. These issues aren’t uncommon in Texas, where there has been a sharp rise in anti-Muslim sen-

timent and policies among both lawmakers and the average Texan. My greatest worry is that if the people who espouse these ideas are able to turn them into laws, the treatment I face will worsen, and I will lose the protections that my parents came here to seek.

Iman, 18, is attending the University of Texas with plans to major in architecture.

Kira Saintvil

Through Christian nationalist narratives about preserving a “Christian nation,” racial inequalities and pressures to assimilate are enforced. The intertwining of white supremacy and Christian nationalism creates a self-validating cycle of exclusion and discrimination. While Christian doctrine can be utilized to validate the ideology of white supremacy, white supremacy in turn validates Christian doctrine by placing Christianity as the religion of the white race.

Kira, 18, attends Rochester Institute of Technology.

Kason Steward

White Christian nationalism has made a targeted effort to strip people who look like me of rights, of a level playing field and of basic considerations. While racism has always existed, Trump’s America and white Christian nationalism have made it OK to be openly racist. As an 18-year-old male, I have been told by my parents exactly what to do if I am ever pulled over by the police. That’s not a conversation white Christian nationalists have with their kids. They don’t have to. Until America is honest about the foundation on which it has been built, acknowledges and takes equitable actions toward repentance and repair, a society of “white power” will remain at the forefront, deepening the hole and covering it up in the name of God.

Kason, 18, attends Sacramento State University with plans to major in nursing and a career goal of becoming a nurse practitioner.



Kason Steward

CRANKMAIL

Here is this month’s Crankmail, where we publish some of the comments, letters and correspondence we receive from those who don’t quite align with FFRF’s mission. Printed as received.

Hell: Anyone who says he’s not afraid to burn in hell forever is a liar.

Prayer works: God always answers prayer. He just doesn’t always say yes. The only God that is disproven by him saying no to you, is a God that you think should worship you.

Stay out of schools: I am sure you have been getting a lot of emails regarding the foolishness you are atheist trying to put your beliefs on school systems it is sad to see how yall can push that bull shit on someone else but someone can pray in schools I will continue to pray in school. Stop your foolishness you just mad no

one wants to fallow your bs God not dead he is alive .

Freedom OF religion: Stop your misuse of the constitution. It’s freedom of religion. The freedom to actually worship GOD. This group attacked a prison where the inmates were actually benefitting from the scriptures and you seek to take that from them through your lies. Your one of the reasons the USA sucks now

Prayer: prayer should be in schools
Bibles in schools: How do you people feel now that there’s going to be a Bible in every classroom and it’s going to be taught out of. So much for your so called “freedom from religion”. It’s not about religion anyways it’s about a relationship with Jesus Christ!!! Nothing you can do about the 10 commandments in schools either! Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess Jesus Christ is Lord!!!!!! I truly

hope you repent because hell is no place to be.

You are dense: Can anyone really be this dense. You do know that America was founded by Protestants who are fleeing the Catholic Church so that they could Worship in the manner they choose Which was having a direct relationship with Jesus Christ. They were also fleeing the Tierney of the king. What I find so amusing is that without God being the fundamental concept within the constitution, you have no in alienable rights because those are “God-given” rights. You want to throw God out of America and say goodbye to your freedom. Do you people ever think past your emotions because it’s obvious to me you don’t.

Burning in hell: You lost me at “not afraid to burn in hell” Also, Dan Barker says in other videos that he’s not afraid

to go suffer in hell for eternity. And so as he says in his Oxford union debate performance, “judge a tree by its fruit.” Lets.

Satanic channel: They really think christians don’t know the church of Satan is not funding them or something. Hypocrites freedom from religion, but they shove their religion down everybody throat!

USA: The United States of America is one nation under God. But beyond that (the national government) this is the Divided States of America.

Demon hunter: Describe of law satanic , paganism are not a witch. stop hunting us down or we hunting you down like we are demon hunter, make sence? Your under paganism law of order . Watch your words and your mouth .Your star doesn’t look like a paganism star like a star of Bethlehem !

Meet FFRF’s 2026 student summer interns

Each summer, FFRF hires graduate and undergraduate students to work throughout the summer as interns. This year, FFRF hired five students to work in the legal department. Here’s a look at this year’s team of interns.

Tira Alvarez

Hometown: Basking Ridge, N.J.
Undergrad school: University of Wisconsin-Madison.
Grad school: University of Wisconsin Law School.

Why did you want to intern at FFRF?: I wanted to work at FFRF this summer because I wanted to get experience doing First Amendment impact litigation. I came to law school to work on constitutional issues, and FFRF has such an important purpose in that space. The staff’s excitement about their work gave me even more of a reason to want to spend my summer here.

What’s your favorite part about working here?: It’s the incredible culture at our office. It has made the work so engaging and exciting. Everyone is collectively working together on various church/state issues and, at the end of each day, I feel confident that our work is paving the way for change.

Career goals: I’d like to work on issues related to election and voting policy. This has been my area of interest since starting undergrad at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. I would like to end up in a position where I can work on issues related to civil rights and liberties so that I can continue to try to make a difference in our community.

Something interesting about you: I have a sourdough starter that I began right before coming to law school. Since then, I have shared my starter with multiple law students and co-workers. During the rest of law school, I hope to share my starter with even more students and friends so that everyone can experience the joy of making sourdough bread.

Ellen Gaul

Hometown: Pittsburgh, Pa.
Undergrad school: Cornell.



Photo by Chris Line

FFRF’s student summer interns are, from left, Paul Wuller, Tira Alvarez, Ellen Gaul, Trinity MacArthur and Emma Hanson.

Grad school: University of Wisconsin Law School

Why did you want to intern at FFRF?: Growing up, the idea that state and church were meant to be separate was never something that I questioned — it made (and continues to make) complete sense. As I have gotten older, I have realized that this was not what everyone was taught and that this separation is something that needs to be actively protected.

What’s your favorite part about working here?: Everyone who works here is really nice and really passionate about the work they are doing.

Career goals: I want to work in civil rights law or in government.

Something interesting about you: In high school, I was part of a steel drum band!

Emma Hanson

Hometown: Sturgeon Bay, Wis.
Undergrad school: St. Norbert College.
Grad school: University of Wisconsin Law School.

Why did you want to intern at FFRF?: Growing up nonreligious, I didn’t think much about religion until I attended St. Norbert College, a Catholic college, where I was required to take multiple theology courses. I was shocked by how

much I enjoyed exploring theological concepts from an academic perspective and was fortunate enough to take both Black Theology and Queer Theology courses. However, these courses were enjoyable because they were purely academic, largely encouraging students to understand why religious individuals believe what they do, rather than pushing students to believe a specific religious ideology. During law school, my legal interests in the First Amendment meshed with my strong belief that genuine religious (or nonreligious) beliefs cannot be developed when specific ideas are pushed on a person, leading me to develop a strong interest in the separation of church and state. Interning at FFRF has allowed me to combine my personal and legal interests and support important Establishment Clause work.

What’s your favorite part about working here?: The work environment is incredibly collaborative, and I feel comfortable asking any of the attorneys for help or advice.

Career goals: I would like to work at either a nonprofit organization involved in constitutional litigation or for a plaintiff-side litigation firm.

Something interesting about you: I do a lot of creative writing and am currently writing my first book.

Trinity MacArthur

Hometown: Bailey, Colo.
Undergrad school: University of Colorado Boulder.
Grad school: Penn State Dickinson Law.

Why did you want to intern at FFRF?: I love working with the standards for religious liberty and wanted to have the opportunity to have an impact in the area.

What’s your favorite part about working here?: Getting to see all the unique ways the attorneys here work with the First Amendment.

Career goals: I’d like to work in civil rights and civil liberties for an organization such as the ACLU.

Something interesting about you: I can do a split.

Paul Wuller

Hometown: Dallas.
Undergrad school: Southern Methodist University.

Why did you want to intern at FFRF?: Ever since I left Christianity in high school, I realized the impact that indoctrination and social pressure had on me and my life. As a Texan, I see the Christian nationalist agenda being pushed daily in our government and schools. I want to fight to make sure our government stays neutral and no one, regardless of their religious beliefs, is coerced, targeted or neglected by the government. As the premier state/church group, FFRF felt like a perfect fit for me to help combat the false narrative being promoted in many states such as my own.

What’s your favorite part about working here?: The people here are amazing and all care deeply about state/church separation. I enjoy working on a cause that I am passionate about with like-minded freethinkers.

Career goals: I plan to attend law school and then continue working in the secular movement.

Something interesting about you: I can solve a Rubik’s Cube in under 16 seconds.

Why yes, I do have a questionsion



Daniel Crandall of Idaho snapped this photo in June in Pendleton, Ore. “I find it delightfully ambiguous,” Daniel wrote.

OVERHEARD

I would rather vote for somebody who has made a stand for women and children above religion.

Buster Johnson, a longtime Republican supervisor in Mojave County, Ariz., saying he wouldn’t vote for U.S. Rep. Andy Biggs, who is running for governor of Arizona. In 2013, when Biggs was the state Senate’s president, he was behind stopping the passage of a bill designed to strip authority from the Colorado City, Ariz., marshal’s office, which at the time was abetting a polygamist religious group accused of sexually abusing girls in rural Arizona.
Washington Post, 7-20-26

A young person believing that religion is important is one thing, but sitting in a pew on a Sunday morning is something else entirely. It’s feigning fealty without any real devotion.

Ryan Burge, a professor at Washington University and author of “The Vanishing Church,” in his column, “American is undergoing a vibes revival.”
Washington Post, 7-31-26

But there’s a big chunk of the MAGA-verse for whom the pantomime of religion permits as many of the seven deadly sins as they wish to rack up. . . Mouth enough dogma, sprinkle your conversation with enough references to Christ, maybe drape a cross around your neck and all manner of cruelty and corruption is forgiven. Seems to be [Pete] Hegseth’s calculation.

Frank Bruni, in his “Conversation” column with Bret Stephens.
New York Times, 7-23-26

The danger is clear. Liberal democracy rests on the premise that citizens of every faith — and the approximately 28 percent of American adults who describe themselves as atheists, agnostics or “nothing in particular” — stand as equals before the law. When government defines national identity in explicitly Christian terms, it marginalizes religious minorities, weakens constitutional protections for dissent, and transforms political disagreement into heresy.

David Wippman and Glenn C. Altschuler in their op-ed, “Inside Christian nationalists’ war on religious freedom.”
The Hill, 8-2-26

IN MEMORIAM

Gary Giordano was longtime engineer

HE DEAD.

This simple phrase is what Gary wanted his obituary to say, but there is so much more to his story.

Gary Anthony Giordano, 69, died March 25. After a wonderful and habitually productive day with his wife Susan, his heart tragically stopped.

He was born in New Orleans, La., on Dec. 13, 1956, to a proud Sicilian Orleanian family.

Dedicated to family, Gary adored living life with Susan; taught his daughters to be independent, strong, and ambitious women; was the goofiest Poppa G his grandchildren could have asked for; regularly visited and cared for his parents; and served as a dependable resource for his nieces and nephews.

Gary built deep, lifelong friendships filled with strong bonds, laughter and adventure. He loved gathering with those closest to him to share good



Gary Giordano

jokes, music, food, drinks, vacations and (cheating at) card games.

Throughout his 40-plus years as an engineer for Texaco and Chevron, Gary beamed with excitement over his individual accomplishments along with his mentorship of and advocacy for his associates.

Gary and his boisterous voice and vivacious laugh will be missed by all who knew and loved him.

Paula Romeo was animal rights activist

Paula Romeo, 75, died June 15 from lung cancer.

She was born on Oct. 2, 1950, two minutes after her twin brother Pete in Red Bank, N.J., to parents Joseph and Susan Romeo.

Paula grew up in Middletown Township, graduating from MTHS in 1969. She worked as a fingerprint technician at the Federal Bureau of Investigation in Washington, D.C., as fingerprint technician at the Wisconsin Department of Justice, Crime Information Bureau, and administrative professional in various departments at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Paula met Victor Emanuel in 1986 and they would live together from 1987 on. She married Victor on Jan. 6, 2009, at Smather’s Beach in Key West, Fla. (so Victor would not get “cold feet”). Their wedding bands were then designed by Victor.

She graduated from Madison Area Technical College in 2013 with an administrative professional two-year degree. She was proud to have been a member of Phi Theta Kappa honor society. She also was an American Red Cross blood donor from 1972 to 2025, making 255 donations, one pint short of the Thirty-Two Gallon Club.

Paula became vegetarian in 1985 and vegan in 2011, supporting animal



Paula Romeo

rights organizations. She then proudly joined the Freedom From Religion Foundation as a supporter of separation of church and government.

Along with Victor, she bicycled week-long rides in Wisconsin and cycled across Iowa three times with Powered by Plants Vegan Bicycling Team. Her first tattoo was “Powered by Plants” and her second was a heart with a green stem symbolizing veganism.

She volunteered at WHA-TV, public television in the Madison area, Gilda’s Club Wisconsin, various community events.

Paula’s final quote, at the end of every email, and now the end of her obituary is this:

“If you can’t fly, then run; if you can’t run, then walk; if you can’t walk, then crawl; but whatever you do, you have to keep moving forward.” — Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lanny Peissig enjoyed woodworking, fishing

Lifetime member Lanny Robert Peissig, 83, of Medford, died June 30 at his home while under the care of Hope Hospice.

Lanny was born Sept. 21, 1942, in Baraboo, Wis., to Alfred and Ruth (Holiday) Peissig. When Lanny was young, his family moved to Rib Lake, where he attended Rib Lake schools.

On June 20, 1964, Lanny married Sharon Kautzer at Trinity Lutheran Church in Whittlesey. They lived in Milwaukee for a short time, where Lanny worked at Briggs & Stratton before returning to the Medford area. He worked at Weather Shield for some years and then worked at Tombstone for 30 years, retiring in 2003.



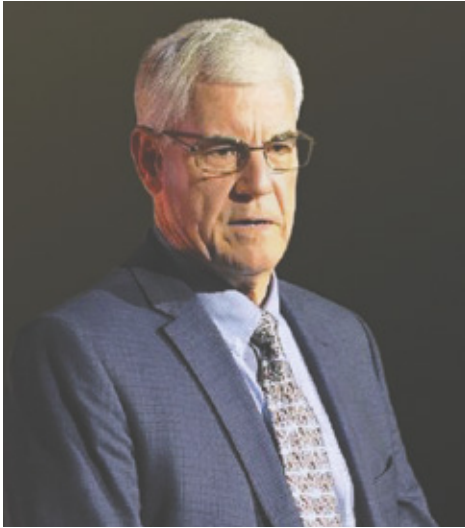
Lanny Peissig

Lanny enjoyed woodworking, especially building furniture and other treasured pieces for friends and family. He looked forward to his annual fishing trips to Canada with his friends and cherished the many road trips he and Sharon took together exploring different states.

His son, Todd, is an FFRF Board member.

Barry Mano founded referee group, magazine

FFRF Member Barry Mano, who founded Referee magazine and the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO), died after a brief battle with a rare autoimmune disease. He was 82.



Barry Mano

A Racine, Wis., native who lived in Union Grove, Wis., Mano created the world’s only monthly magazine devoted to sports officials when he launched Referee in January 1976. Guided by the principle of being “by officials, for officials,” he spent half a century building it into the premier voice for the sports officiating industry.

In 1980, Mano founded NASO to provide protection, benefits, advocacy and professional development to officials at all sports and all levels. The association grew to more than 32,000 members and became the leading ad-

vocacy organization for sports officials in the country. Mano served as NASO president for more than four decades before stepping down in 2023.

He remained publisher of Referee and chief strategy officer of Referee Enterprises, Inc. (REI) until his death.

A basketball referee for 23 years who worked at the NCAA D-I level, Mano was inspired to create Referee after witnessing the media’s unfair treatment of his brother, Mark, an NBA official who was excoriated in the Chicago press after correctly waving off a basket during a 1972 Bulls-Lakers game. Despite being vindicated by the league, Mark had no way to defend himself — and no organization existed to speak on his behalf.

“I just felt there was a need to have a publication to address who we are,” Mano once said. “Because we were getting beaten up by the newspapers and nobody was speaking out on our behalf.”

Happy Heathen Mug

Imprint of the Tree of Life on teal green with a glossy finish. American-made handcrafted mugs. 100% lead-free, dishwasher, microwave & oven safe. 12 fl. oz. Height 3 7/8"

\$35 each
\$60 for two

Item #MU06

Buy it from FFRF online
ffrf.org/shop

Tamara Sloan dies

Lifetime Member and veterinarian Dr. Tamara Sloan died Dec. 26, 2025, in Farmington Hills, Mich.

She was diagnosed in mid-December 2025 with an aggressive brain tumor and died two weeks later. She is survived by her husband Pat Price.

Tamara served as chief of staff at Cat Care of Rochester Hills.

Cryptogram answer

I don’t believe in heaven and hell. I don’t know if I believe in God. All I know is that as an individual, I won’t allow this life — the only thing I know to exist — to be wasted.

— George Clooney

What Is a Freethinker?

freethinker *n.*

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

FFRF convention, Oct. 15–18

Come see what’s brewing!

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

General schedule

Thursday, Oct. 15
FFRF will be offering early-bird workshops on Thursday afternoon in the Baird Center from 1-4 p.m. Please indicate on your convention registration form if you are interested in attending these workshops.

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

Thursday night, Oct. 15 — Saturday, Oct. 17

The formal convention programming begins in the Baird Center Ballroom on Thursday evening with Rep. Jared Huffman’s speech and continues through Saturday evening.

Registration will reopen on Friday at 8 a.m. in the Baird Center Ballroom foyer and registration will continue throughout the conference.

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

To see the list of 2026 national convention speakers, turn to Page 3 or visit the convention speakers page at: ffrf.us/con-26speakers. View the detailed schedule at ffrf.us/con26schedule.

Registration

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

T-shirt

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

Optional group meals

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

Friday Dinner

Chicken: Citrus & herb-marinated airline chicken with oven-roasted tomato and onion jam, roasted garlic confit, fingerling potatoes and seasonal roasted veg-



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

etables with rosemary jus (GF). \$65
Pork: Roasted garlic-crusted pork tenderloin with Door County cherry glaze, brown sugar-whipped sweet potatoes and charred asparagus (GF). \$65
Vegan/Veggie: Roasted eggplant & squash ratatouille with tomato and saffron purée, toasted pine nuts and aged balsamic (GF, V, VEG). \$65

Saturday Non-Prayer Breakfast
Regular: Fluffy scrambled egg bake with bacon, spinach and wild mushrooms; served with crispy fingerling potato hash and thick cut Applewood smoked bacon (GF). \$40
Veggie: Egg white frittata. Feta cheese, spinach and oven-dried tomatoes; served with a side of sweet potato hash \$40 (GF, V).
Vegan: Chickpea tostada. Blackened chickpea and tofu tinga tostada with re-fried beans, avocado, pico de gallo and micro cilantro; served with toasted breakfast potatoes (GF, V, VEG). \$40

Saturday Dinner
Chicken: Dijon roasted airline chicken breast with pretzel crust, whole grain mustard cream sauce, pickled mustard seed, garlic whipped Yukon potatoes and haricot vert tossed in a lemon vinaigrette (GF). \$65
Fish: Miso & honey-glazed salmon, with lemon grass-scented basmati and forbidden rice, tamari-glazed bok choy and stir fry vegetables (GF). \$65
Vegan/Veggie: Pan-seared roasted cauliflower steak with pecan and caper salsa over housemade lemon herb roasted garlic hummus and single estate olive oil (GF, V, VEG). \$65

Hotel booking

FFRF’s discounted hotel room block will be at the Hilton Milwaukee, 509 W. Wisconsin Ave., which is connected to the Baird Center via ADA-accessible skywalk.
We encourage you to book your room soon. Reservations must be made on or before Tuesday, Sept. 22 (unless the block sells out before then), to receive FFRF’s discounted rate of \$229 plus taxes per night.
If you need an ADA-accessible room, please indicate your needs when making your reservation. Check-in time is 4 p.m., and check-out time is 11 a.m.
Book your room online or by phone:
Online: ffrf.us/con26reserve
Phone: 800-774-1500. **State that you are with the Freedom From Religion Foundation** and provide our group code “90N” when booking.
Cancellation policy: One night’s room rate plus tax will be charged for all no-shows and for reservations canceled within 48 hours of arrival.
Find out more at ffrf.us/con26

FFRF

National Convention

MILWAUKEE

OCTOBER 15–18, 2026

CONVENTION REGISTRATION FORM

Or register online: ffrf.us/con26

REGISTRATION FEES	Number Registering	Cost
Member	_____	\$100 \$_____
Spouse or Companion (Non-member accompanying member)	_____	\$105 \$_____
Youth (ages 17 & under; must be accompanied by a paid adult)	_____	Free \$_____
College Student with ID	_____	\$25 \$_____
Non-member	_____	\$160 \$_____
☐ Or, I will join FFRF for \$40 (and save \$20)	_____	\$140 \$_____

OPTIONAL MEALS / EVENTS

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

Thursday, October 15th

Thursday Afternoon Workshops [must indicate to attend] _____ Free

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Evening Welcome Reception [must indicate to attend] _____ Free

Check box if attending ☐ Registrant 1 ☐ Registrant 2

Friday, October 16th

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

Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Pork ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Pork ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

Saturday, October 17th

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

Registrant 1 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Regular ☐ Vegetarian ☐ Vegan

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

Registrant 1 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

Registrant 2 ☐ Chicken ☐ Fish ☐ Vegetarian/Vegan

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

Quantity

Cost

Optional Commemorative 2026 Convention Logo T-shirt (Cream)

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

Size(s)_____ ▶ Total \$_____

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

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

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

Name of Registrant 1

Pronouns (optional)

Name of Registrant 2

Pronouns (optional)

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

Address

City

State / ZIP

Phone*

Email*

Credit Card Number

Expiration Date / Security Code

Billing Name / Signature

*Contact information for in-house use only

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