The Freethought Society News
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The Freethought Society News is published by The Freethought Society (FS) for the nontheist community.

Free subscriptions are available for supporters, donors and like-minded individuals upon request.

Contact FS at: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Articles on topics of interest to freethinkers are welcomed and will be considered for publication.

Submit articles (5,000 word max) for review by the FS editorial board.

Please submit articles with a bio and photo, a suggested title, and relevant photos/clip art to:

Ezine@FtSociety.org

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Articles herein do not necessarily represent official positions of the Freethought Society.

The 2025 FFRF Conference Report

The Freedom From Religion Foundation's (FFRF) 48th Annual Convention was held in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina in October 2025. The weekend activities were attended by more than 500 people from 43 states (plus Washington, D.C.). Below is a recap of some of the awardees, followed by two pages of convention photos. The following link will take you to the FFRF YouTube channel where you will find videos of the all presenters and special events:

https://www.youtube.com/@FFRForg

The first award of the conference honored the Center for Reproductive Rights, with **Nancy Northup**, president and CEO accepting the $50,000 **Henry Zumach** Freedom From Fundamentalist Religion Award on behalf of the center. In her "Defending Today, Building for Tomorrow" acceptance speech, Northup highlighted the rollbacks of reproductive freedoms since *Dobbs v. Jackson.*

Author and investigative journalist **Katherine Stewart** spoke about her insightful new exposé, *Money, Lies and God.* She skillfully connected dark money, religious lobbying, and authoritarian politics. Stewart cautioned the audience that "The concrete is being poured — but it hasn't hardened yet," urging the building of coalitions to defend democracy at every level.

Several members of FFRF's legal team reported major legal advocacies, including the 10 lawsuits the organization has filed in the past year to protect the separation of religion and government. The panel included Legal Director **Patrick Elliott**, Deputy Legal Director **Liz Cavell**, Senior Counsel **Sam Grover,** and Staff Attorney **Sammi Lawrence.** Following the panel, State Policy Manager **Ryan Dudley** and Governmental Affairs Director **Mark Dann** summarized FFRF's important and growing legislative advocacy.

Oklahoma Representative **Mickey Dollens** introduced his practical guide to citizen-driven political change, emphasizing: Facts, Opportunity, Rights, Workforce Development, Accountability, Respect, and Democracy. He calls this framework "F.O.R.W.A.R.D."

FFRF honored Dr. **Maggie Carpenter**, who is under extradition by the State of Louisiana for prescribing mail-ordered abortion medication to a patient living in that state. Carpenter was given FFRF's Forward Award for her courage and achievements, including becoming the first United States doctor criminally charged for providing abortion pills across state lines.

Eli Frost, an 18-year-old college student and winner of the $5,000 **Beverly & Richard Hermsen** Award, shared how he persuaded his Minnesota school district to move graduation out of a megachurch. Three more teen students were honored for their scholarship essays. They were **Jaianah Hightower**, **Gabrielle Williams** and **Mekah'E LeClair.**

The **Avijit Roy** Courage Award, was given virtually to **Mubarak Bala**, president of the Humanists of Nigeria. He endured five years of imprisonment for "blasphemy."

Chrissy Stroop received FFRF's 2025 Freethought Heroine award. Her acceptance speech was about being transgender in a world of misunderstanding.

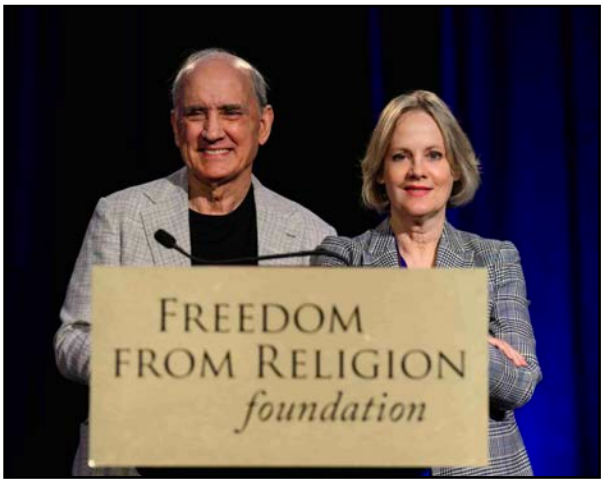
Harvard political scientist **Steven Levitsky**, co-author of *How Democracies Die*, delivered an inspirational yet sober talk warning that the United States is not immune to authoritarianism. He praised civic organizations like FFRF as essential guardrails. "Democracy survives," he said, "when citizens organize to defend it."

More speakers are highlighted in the following two pages of photos, and viewing the speeches online is easy using the link that appears above.

Mark your calendar for the 2026 conference which will take place October 16-18, 2026 (Friday-Sunday) at The Baird Center, 400 West Wisconsin Avenue, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. ◻

Photos from the Freedom From Religion Foundation's 2025 South Carolina Conference

(Most of the photos on these pages were taken by Freedom From Religion Foundation photographer **Chris Line**.)



Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) co-presidents **Dan Barker** and **Annie Laurie Gaylor** are pictured above.

Barker opened the formal program with a sing-along of the 19th century freethought anthem "Die Gedanken Sind Frei."

Gaylor and Barker then presented their annual "Highlights of the Year," which celebrated major legal victories, FFRF's significant scholarship program, and an overview of the many outreach efforts they have led. FFRF membership is now over 42,000.

Mary L. Trump received FFRF's Emperor Has No Clothes Award for her work in "speaking vital truth to power" as well as her commentary on the dangers of autocracy and the misuse of religion. In her acceptance speech she examined the psychology of authoritarianism and the emotional manipulation fueling Christian nationalism. She is pictured below.

Trump is a clinical psychologist, bestselling author, and niece of United States President **Donald Trump**.

Mary gained prominence with her bestselling book, *Too Much and Never Enough: How My Family Created the World's Most Dangerous Man*, and recently released *Who Could Ever Love You: A Family Memoir*, which offers a personal look at family and trauma behind the headlines. Mary graciously signed her books after delivering her acceptance speech. See her speech at the below link:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sj6NPOLMQfg

Pictured above is musical satirist **Roy Zimmerman.** The crowd thoroughly enjoyed the music and the many laughs he generated with his clever lyrics. Find more Zimmerman music at:

https://www.royzimmerman.com/

Pictured left are **Jamelle Bouie** (right) and **Zenos Frudakis** (left). Bouie is a *New York Times* columnist. He is shown receiving the **Clarence Darrow** Award for his clear-eyed writings on the importance of secular governance and democracy.

The bronze award is a miniature of the statue FFRF erected in front of the courthouse in which the 1925 Scopes Trial took place. The award was handed to Bouie by Frudakis, who sculpted the Darrow statue.

The FFRF conference was planned several years in advance. Consequently, it conflicted with the October 18, 2025 No Kings Day. Attendees recognized the importance of the day by posing in front of the No Kings Day announcement and listening to many informative speakers about ways in which attendees could help save the United States from becoming an autocracy.

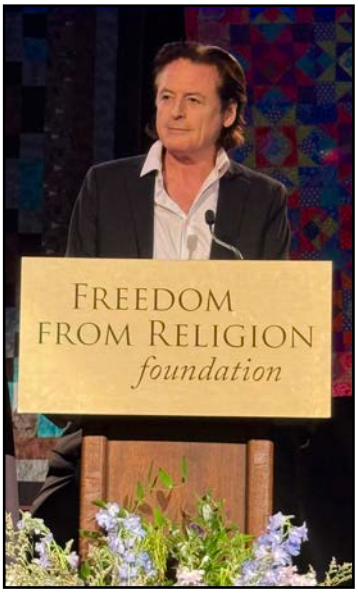
Awardees on Saturday included 19-year-old college student **Bailey Harris**, who received the $5,000 **Diane & Stephen Uhl** Memorial Out of God's Closet Award in recognition of her fun and educational children's science books.

Comedian, actor and SiriusXM host **John Fugelsang** closed the convention with his trademark fusion of humor, history and social commentary. Quoting from his new bestseller book *Separate Church and Hate*, Fugelsang took aim at hypocrisy within Christian nationalism.

His presentation was very funny, yet thought-provoking. Fuglesang encouraged alliances between progressive believers and atheists.

The audience gave Fugelsang a well-deserved standing ovation. See his presentation at the following link:

https://youtu.be/vYsfxZvpXmI?si=qLO1ufj6YxH2JR4y

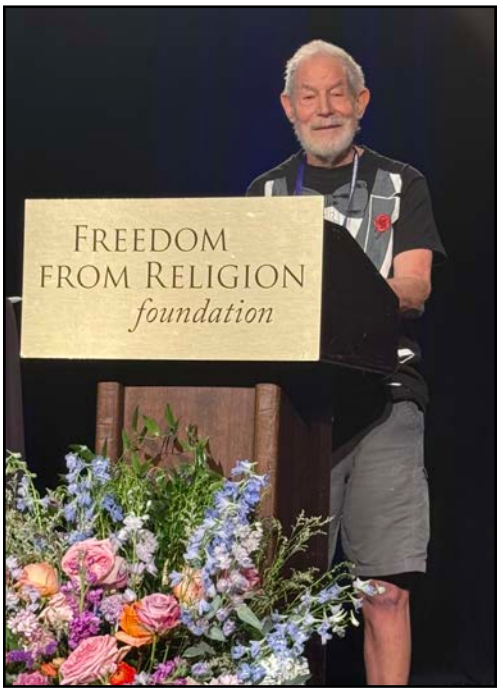


Pictured right are The Godless Gospel Singers. The group performed gospel-style secular songs to open the conference and also at the Saturday morning breakfast.

Left to right are **Cynthia McDonald**, **Candace Gorham**, and **Mandisa Thomas**.

Welcome to South Carolina, fellow freethinkers!

*A speech delivered by **Herb Silverman** at the 47th annual conference of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He was also the recipient of the 2025 "Freethinker of the Year" Award.*



Good morning, and welcome to South Carolina. Seeing this large bunch of atheists and humanists meeting in South Carolina would have been quite a scandal back in 1976, when I moved here from Philadelphia to teach mathematics at the College of Charleston. It was my first trip below the Mason Dixon line, a bit of a culture shock for me and, I think, for South Carolina as well.

After teaching at the College of Charleston for 14 years, I underwent a major life change in 1990 when a colleague pointed out that our South Carolina Constitution prohibits atheists from becoming Governor. I knew the United States Constitution barred religious tests for public office, so I visited a local ACLU office. A lawyer there told me an atheist would have to mount a legal challenge by running for governor. He said that the very best candidate would be me. Well, I looked around and I didn't see any other volunteers, so I agreed to become the "Candidate Without a Prayer."

I learned that "atheist" is a very provocative word, and not just in South Carolina. The national Associated Press picked up the story and the following day I got a call from a very distressed woman in Philadelphia — my mother.

I had to admit that the *Philadelphia Inquirer* was not the best way for my mother to find out that her only child was a candidate for governor, and an atheist. She didn't so much mind my being an atheist. The problem for her was going public about it. She always wanted me to appear "respectable," but that never quite happened.

During my campaign, I heard stereotypical comments that atheists are "mean" and "angry protestors" who do nothing but ridicule religion. I wanted to show that we do have a sense of humor. So here are some questions I was asked during my campaign and my answers.

1. What would be the first thing you would do if you were elected Governor?

Demand a recount.

2. What do you think are your chances of winning the election?

Look, I'm an atheist. I'm not a fool.

3. What would make you believe in God?

Perhaps if I won the election. It would take that kind of a miracle.

4. What do you think will happen to you when you die?

I'm going to medical school, just like my Jewish mother always wanted me to do. I expect to use my body parts to their fullest while I'm alive, but I hope others can make good use of them when I'm dead.

Meanwhile, during my campaign, Republican South Carolina Governor **Carroll Campbell** said our South Carolina Constitution was fine because the United States of America was founded on "godly principles."

I was soon invited onto a number of radio talk shows. Some callers would say things like: "As an atheist, I suppose you feel free to go out and rape and murder and do whatever you think you can get away with." My response to such callers would be: With an attitude like that, I hope you continue to believe in a god.

I realized I didn't just want to change the South Carolina State Constitution; I also wanted to change the hearts and minds of some of my fellow South Carolinians.

Governor Campbell knew he would have an easy re-election victory, and he refused to debate the other candidates. I, however, participated in a number of three-way debates with candidates from the Democratic Party and the American Party (that's the old **George Wallace** racist party). This included a debate on South Carolina public television. My friends thought I had won that debate, while friends of the other candidates probably thought they had won. A year later, however, there was an objective way to determine the winner. Of the three participants in that debate, I was the only one who was not in jail! The American Party candidate was in jail for driving without a license and refusing to get one because it's none of the "gov-man's" business. The Democratic Party candidate was in jail for more traditional reasons — tax evasion.

Regarding the legal challenge about running for office without a belief in God, I did have my day in court. The judge decided he would only rule on the merits of my case if I won the election. Well, to the surprise of no one, I lost. But I'm an optimistic kind of guy, and I always look for positives in a situation. The best for me, personally, was that I met **Sharon Fratepietro**, and we've been together ever since. We met in church! It was the Unitarian Church, the only church that invited me to speak during my campaign.

After living in sin for ten years, Sharon and I got married in our home on January 1, 2000 at 12:01 AM. Sharon wanted me to get dressed up for the wedding, so she got me this Tuxedo T-shirt which I'm wearing now. When I lost the election I blamed Sharon because she had become my campaign manager. Sounds like something **Donald Trump** would say, except he'd expect people to believe him.

While campaigning, I heard from a lot of people who thought they were the only atheist in South Carolina. I took names, and in 1984 I helped form the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, a vibrant community with about 150 members. Many of them are here, attending this conference.

After losing the gubernatorial race, and with politics now in my blood, what to do next? I decided to fulfill my lifelong dream of becoming a Notary Public (someone who stamps documents). Actually, I learned in 1991 that the South Carolina Constitution prohibits atheists from serving in any public office, and Notary Public would be the easiest one to challenge. When Governor Campbell rejected my application, I asked why and he said: "It's too burdensome to respond to all Notary Public rejections." In a deposition three years later, we learned there were over 33,000 notary acceptances in that time period, and that mine was the only one rejected. As far as I know I'm the only one in the history of South Carolina to be rejected as a Notary Public.

I won my case in several lower courts, but the state kept appealing it up to the South Carolina Supreme Court. On May 27, 1997 the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled unanimously in my favor, nullifying the anti-atheist clause in the South Carolina Constitution.

Finally I was granted a Notary commission! I went to the county clerk's office with Sharon to pick up my notary certificate. We were both really excited. Sharon took pictures of the clerk handing me my notary license, and of me holding it above my head in triumph. Now I don't know what your definition of a loser is, but people in the county clerk's office, who knew nothing of my case, had quite a chuckle thinking that the high point of this guy's life was becoming a Notary Public. Incidentally, if you get a copy of one of my books on sale at this conference, I'll not only sign it, I'll also be glad to notarize it for you!

During my campaign I learned about several national atheist and humanist organizations, and I joined them all because they were involved with issues I supported. But each was doing its own thing and ignoring likeminded organizations. I wanted to show our strength in numbers and cooperate on issues that affect all secular Americans.

In 2002, I helped form the Secular Coalition for America (SCA). Its mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for secular viewpoints. SCA's mission is to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government. SCA formed as a political advocacy group to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans. We now have 22 national member organizations covering the full spectrum of our movement — including, of course, FFRF. Please check the SCA website for more information:

https://secular.org/

We should always look for common ground with religious people, where we can work together on selected projects. Sometimes that's very difficult, as in the following case. Now what could I possibly have in common with **Jerry Falwell**? Well, Falwell once said that God does not hear the prayers of a Jew. I agree with Falwell, but for very different reasons.

So that's my story, and I look forward to meeting many of you and hearing your stories. Thanks for coming, and thanks again to FFRF for meeting here in South Carolina.

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's (FS) quarterly publication *The Freethought Society News*.

His past submissions can be found at the following FS website page:

https://www.ftsociety.org/herb-silverman-articles/

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available online and at your local bookstores.

Silverman welcomes hearing from readers. He is also available for local, national, and international speaking engagements. Contact him at the following email address:

silvermanh@cofc.edu

Thomas Paine Memorial Association Literature Offer

The Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA) thanks the Freedom From Religion Foundation for providing **Margaret Downey** (pictured left) an opportunity to address attendees of the 2025 conference held in South Carolina. She is the president of TPMA, and her short presentation provided an update on the project.

TPMA has created an informative trifold that includes details about how anyone can participate in helping to place a memorial to Thomas Paine in the Washington, D.C. area. Trifolds can be supplied to organizations that are passionate about the project and have opportunities to display and/or distribute them. Trifolds can also be made available to individuals who want to assist in circulating information about the efforts of TPMA. Send a literature request, with your contact information to:

margaret@ThomasPaineMemorial.org

The 2025 International Secular Day of the Dead Online Event

The Secular Day of the Dead is a nontheist version of Día de los Muertos. Traditions associated with Día de los Muertos remain the same but without religious overtones. The idea is to offer a way to remember loved ones and celebrate their legacies outside of a religious framing. The celebration of life brings together individuals and organizations aligned with secularism. The 2025 event offered a community ritual filled with tributes and sharing. As a virtual Zoom event, people from all over the world could participate.

Co-hosts included **David Tamayo**, **Margaret Downey**, and **Memo Benumea**. A wonderful welcome address was provided by actor, producer, and director **Jon Huertas**.

The formal program started with a video of Tamayo's farewell visit with Dr. **Hector Avalos**, who was a beloved professor of Religious Studies, an atheist, and a secular humanist ethicist.

During this section of the program, actor, author, and monologist **Julia Sweeney** provided an appreciation for singer, playwright, and social activist **Jill Sobule**. Podcaster and author **Seth Andrews** shared sentiments about author and scientist **Abby Hafer**. **Dan Barker** (co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation) honored the life and work of political cartoonist **Steve Benson**. The formal program ended with **Annie Laurie Gaylor** (co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation) honoring activist and Life Member **Dick Hewetson**.

Audience members were invited to speak about their deceased loved ones, and many participated in this call for interaction. **James Sobule** spoke about his sister and expressed appreciation of how the event paid tribute to her.

In recognition of participation that included decorations, face painting, hair adornment, and best honoring table, prizes were awarded prior to the cosponsor messages. Cosponsors of this event were the Freethought Society, Hispanic American Freethinkers, American Humanist Association, Center for Inquiry, Black Nonbelievers, Secular Coalition for America, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

The recorded program can be seen at the link below:

https://youtu.be/O0ue93lXb_c?si=6sSVGKyM4JXWRZ4j

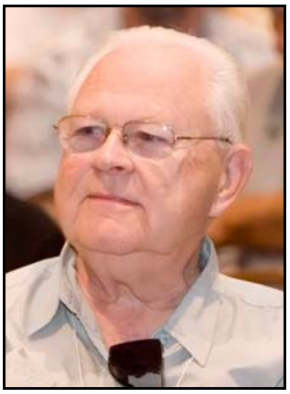
The Freethought Society Diversity Outreach Committee thanks all the cosponsors and the following people who helped make the 2025 International Online Secular Day of the Dead possible:

Hyder Shah: Pre-event video rendering, live streaming, and post-event editing duties.

David Condo: Online Connection Coordinator.

Esau Benumea: Live Zoom, Spotlight Manager, and Chat Monitor.

Pictured above left to right are cohosts **David Tamayo**, **Margaret Downey**, and **Memo Benumea**.
The team has been together since 2013, presenting both online and in-person Secular Day of the Dead events.



Pictured above are some of people who were honored during the 2025 International Secular Day of the Dead Online Event.
Left to right are **Hector Avalos**, **Jill Sobule**, **Steven Benson**, **Abby Hafer**, and **Dick Hewetson**.

Happy New Year!
What are your 2026 resolutions — if any?

by Margaret Downey

As the calendar turns and the world pauses briefly to mark a new year, many people reflect on where they've been and where they want to go. For some, this ritual is tied to faith-based traditions such as renewal, forgiveness, or divine guidance. But for those of us who are nonreligious, New Year's resolutions can hold deep personal meaning that's entirely secular, grounded in reason, reflection, and self-determination.

At its core, a New Year's resolution is a reformative act of self-empowerment. It acknowledges that we, as human beings, have the ability to shape our own futures. For nonreligious people this concept of human agency is especially significant. Setting goals becomes an affirmation that we are capable of growth, that our choices matter, and that we can make the world around us a little better through our own actions.

While some religious traditions mark renewal through prayer or ritual, the secular version of renewal can be just as profound. Reflection, evaluation, and self-improvement are deeply rational processes. Examining past habits, recognizing what worked and what didn't, and establishing achievable goals, nonreligious individuals engage in a kind of evidence-based personal evolution. It's not about redemption — it's about progress.

Meaning doesn't require mysticism. The start of a new year offers an opportunity to construct meaning from one's own values, whether that means committing to kindness, learning a new skill, volunteering, or caring for the planet. For humanists and freethinkers, resolutions can reflect ethical priorities rather than divine commandments. Secular priorities are naturally rooted in empathy, reason, and the shared human experience.

The New Year is also one of the few cultural moments that unites nearly everyone, regardless of belief. Many resolutions can resonate with everyone such as losing weight, eating healthier, working out more, and avoidance of drugs and alcohol. These are cross-cultural resolutions and are meaningful to almost all humans.

In the United States, however, it's very likely that 2026 will continue to frustrate and divide many citizens and residents. The current administration has adopted national authoritarian-type policies, unconstitutional executive orders, and dictator-style legislation. Perhaps a good 2026 resolution, for those who are concerned about our dwindling democracy, would be to increase volunteer levels, donate more, and engage more frequently in educational activities as well as protest efforts.

The Freethought Society (FS) stands ready to provide information for such goals, but FS also encourages supporters to look into what other secular groups have to offer in pushing back against the takeover of the United States by a fascist regime.

Information about large and small secular groups can be found at the website of the Secular Coalition for America (SCA). These groups represent a unified community that shares valuable resources and coordinates activist efforts. During a pre-arranged monthly SCA Zoom meeting, affiliate groups meet to communicate with each other about many pressing issues. Leaders and/or representatives from affiliate groups brainstorm, help each other as much as possible, and offer encouragement. Supporting SCA is really about supporting the entire secular community. Please visit the SCA website at the following link: www.secular.org

SCA's Lobby Day is taking place on Tuesday, March 10, 2026. The most important issue at that time will be determined, and training for lobbying sessions will take place accordingly. Lobby Day provides an opportunity for people to visit Washington, D.C. and talk to their representatives. No experience is necessary, so please mark your calendar to participate in this meaningful exercise.

There is more hopeful news to share as we celebrate our existence in a new calendar year. For instance, the Congressional Freethought Caucus (CFC) has grown! As of the printing of this newsletter, CFC has 31 members.

CFC was unveiled by Congressman **Jared Huffman** (D-CA District 2) during SCA's annual awards dinner in Washington, D.C. in 2018. CFC founders are **Jared Huffman**, Congressman **Jamie Raskin** (D-MD District 8), and Congressman **Jerry McNerney** (D-CA District 9).

As stated in an SCA press release, "The formation of a Congressional Freethought Caucus is a milestone moment for nonreligious Americans in our continued struggle for inclusion in the political process and recognition as a constituency."

FS is committed to continuing its mission of cooperation rather than competition, and many 2026 events will involve cosponsorships on a national and local level. This type of cooperation enables groups to share in expenses such as speaker honorariums and onsite rentals. A cosponsored Zoom event bonus is that rather than traveling to various locations a presenter will be able to reach an audience in many locations at one sitting. Also, announcements made through cosponsors will significantly increase audience sizes.

The future looks bright for many reasons, so don't lose hope reading the terrible news of how our democracy is being stripped away from those who want to claim the United States as a Christian Nation. It is not now and has never been a Christian Nation!

The following article link discloses that an "Evangelical/MAGA Quiet Quit" is taking place all across the nation:

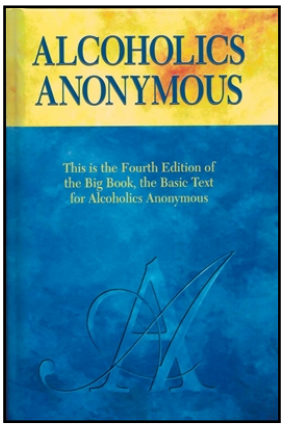
https://www.axios.com/2025/10/29/evangelicals-quietly-quitting-trump-maga?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=newsletter_axiosam&stream=top

The November 2025 election results gave many citizens hope that an authoritarian, anti-democracy, racist, and lawless administration will soon come to an end. We must, however, continue to show up at rallies, communicate with government representatives, and support separation of religion and government. FS will do its part in educating the public, representing the nontheist community, and uniting secular groups as a way to stand strong, proud, and loud. Resolve with FS to overcome obstacles and unpleasant news. United we stand!

Happy New Year to all the newsletter/ezine readers, secular leaders, supporters, colleagues, and friends of FS. ◻

Learning More About AA's The Big Book

by Ross Blocher



The Big Book distributed by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is something more than a book, given its importance to those who have found a way out of alcoholism with its help. Two years ago I read **William H. Schaberg**'s *Writing The Big Book: The Creation of A.A.*, which was ironically bigger than *The Big Book* itself. From that, I felt I had a pretty good understanding of the original work's contents and composition, but it was an interesting exercise to read through the personal recovery stories. I knew just how much work had gone into developing the original AA program, refining its talking points and 12 steps, and getting it to publication in 1939. I read the fourth and current edition, released in 2001, with multiple forewords and updated narratives.

The Big Book is mostly structured around personal stories, starting with that of co-founder **Bill W (Wilson)**, as he no longer requires anonymity. Most stories take the form of the anonymous author sharing his or her upbringing, their first time encountering alcohol, and the horrible effects of their dependence: blackouts, social withdrawal, lost jobs, damaged relationships, physical abuse, car accidents, jail time, hospital stays, loss of home, and more. The story then shifts to the first time that person heard about AA, the person who encouraged them to attend, how their various resistances were overcome, how long they've maintained sobriety, relapses if they have had them, and how life has measurably improved.

The original stories are mostly about White men, with a nod to women facing the same struggles. In the newer editions the diversity is rounded out with many more women's stories (I didn't count, but I wouldn't be surprised if it was 50/50), as well as the accounts of Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, gay, and lesbian alcoholics. Some are stories of lives almost completely destroyed, and others represent those who "stopped in time." Some were high-powered executives, others were construction workers or store clerks. There's a little something for everyone, the hope being that a new or prospective member will find just the right anecdote or drop of wisdom to strike deep and resonate.

There are many themes that emerge. It's important that you be the one who realizes you're an alcoholic; nobody else can assign that label for you. In the earlier literature alcoholism is described as an "allergy" to alcohol that only affects the unlucky alcoholics. Allergy strikes me as completely the wrong term, but is apparently helpful framing for some. The intervention of a non-alcoholic won't mean anything; it's only someone who understands what you've gone through who can speak to your plight. You need to admit that you are powerless on your own (this is the first of the famed 12 steps).

Alcoholism never goes away; one drink, even years later, can nullify all the progress you've made. You need to keep meeting with AA members as often as you would normally drink. Many stories mentioned attending meetings daily (or more). You need to keep referring to yourself as an alcoholic, even after decades of sobriety.

I remember finding it astounding that one of my dearly departed friends, Jerry (who led a local, secular AA chapter), called himself an alcoholic. He had not had a drink since before 1982, the year I was born.

Part of your path to sobriety is bringing other alcoholics into the fold and looking out for them. Another famous step of the 12-step process (#9) is to make amends to people you've harmed in the past.

This next theme deserves its own paragraph. You must believe in a higher power, specifically "God as we understood Him." Much ink is devoted to this central point, as the emphasis is that this must be a spiritual path. The phrasing is clever, as it gives leeway to redefine "God" to be whatever that term means to you — compatible with all religions as well as no religion — as long as that God is not you.

One early chapter, "We Agnostics," must be the most absurd section of the book, with the flimsiest of arguments in favor of belief. In a passage aptly annotated with a "WTF?" by the friend who lent me his copy, it states:

> *"Everybody nowadays, believes in scores of assumptions for which there is good evidence, but no perfect visual proof. And does not science demonstrate that visual proof is the weakest proof? It is being constantly revealed, as mankind studies the material world, that outward appearances are not inward reality at all."*

WTF, indeed!

In the chapter "Doctor Bob's Nightmare," one of the other founders states:

> *"If you think you are an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptic, or have any other form of intellectual pride which keeps you from accepting what is in this book, I feel sorry for you. If you still think you are strong enough to beat the game alone, that is your affair."*

Only occasionally is there acknowledgment of related theological problems, such as why a God who cares enough to get you out of alcoholism would have created you as an alcoholic, and why he would allow all the pain and suffering to get you to this point. And yet, I can understand how the reliance on something greater can short-circuit a lot of excuses and rationalizations, and I won't deny it may be essential to the process for many — whether there is a god or not.

I've seen various secular organizations, such as Self-Management And Recovery Training (SMART) and Secular Organizations for Sobriety, aka Save Our Selves, aka SOS. I knew the founder of that organization, **Jim Christopher**, as his office was located at the Center for Inquiry in Los Angeles, California where I am involved in multiple programs. He was quiet and kind, but when I saw Christopher he usually had his head down, focused on the task at hand.

He was clearly dedicated to his mission to bring people out of addiction. I applaud the secular organizations' work to provide a path out of alcoholism without the "God" language, but there are secular AA groups as well.

My takeaway is that I can see why this program has been as successful as it has, even though I know its success rates are not perfect (and are the topic of much speculation). I don't think an expectation of "perfection" in this difficult pursuit is a reasonable standard.

In this 2001 edition, AA boasts 19.55 million copies of the previous editions circulated, and 100,800 active groups meeting in about 150 countries. There's a lot of good wisdom here, and life advice in general. I've always admired the simplicity of the "Serenity Prayer" by Lutheran theologian **Reinhold Niebuhr** (which is now associated with AA, though not emphasized in the book to the extent I thought it would be): "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Individual contributors also drop insights that have resonated with them, such as "AA does not teach us how to handle our drinking. It teaches us how to handle sobriety."

Elsewhere, **Herbert Spencer**'s observation (which has broader applicability) is shared:

> *"There is a principle which is a bar against all information, which is proof against all arguments, and which cannot fail to keep a man in everlasting ignorance — that principle is contempt prior to investigation."*

About the author: **Ross Blocher** was co-host of the hit podcast "Oh No, Ross and Carrie!" Currently, he is co-host of the show "I'm Sure It's All True." Blocher is an investigator of all things fringe science, alternative medicine, paranormal, and spiritual. He is a member of the Center for Inquiry Investigations Group (CFIIG), which offers a $500,000 prize for proof of paranormal abilities.

Blocher was raised in evangelical Christianity and spent a lot of time in churches of various denominations. His religious journey included memorizing scripture, wearing robes, and singing in choirs. At the same time, he voraciously read books about ghosts, vampires, aliens and chupacabras. While his beliefs changed, his fascination did not, and Blocher continues to study paranormal experiences and varieties of belief.

Recognizing the Signs of Alcoholism

A public service announcement brought to you by your Freethought Society family and friends.

Alcoholism is a chronic condition characterized by an inability to control drinking despite negative consequences. It develops gradually, often beginning with social or casual drinking that escalates into dependency. Recognizing the early signs is essential for getting help and preventing long-term health and social problems.

Below are signs of alcoholism. Should you recognize yourself, **Ross Blocher**'s article entitled *Learning More About AA's The Big Book,* and the following **David Weidman** article, *An Atheist Finds a SMART Way to Recover,* offers suggestions for nontheists who are personally facing alcoholism or who are dealing with an alcoholic loved one.

Increased Tolerance:

One of the first signs of alcoholism is the need to drink more to achieve the same effect. Over time the body adapts to regular alcohol use, requiring higher amounts to feel relaxed or intoxicated.

Loss of Control:

People struggling with alcoholism often find it difficult to stop drinking once they start. They may promise themselves or others that they'll have "just one drink," but end up consuming much more.

Neglecting Responsibilities:

Alcohol use can begin to interfere with daily life — work, school, or family duties may be neglected. Absences, missed deadlines, and relationship conflicts are common consequences.

Withdrawal Symptoms:

When not drinking, individuals may experience physical or emotional withdrawal symptoms such as shaking, sweating, anxiety, nausea, or irritability. These signs indicate physical dependence.

Drinking Despite Negative Consequences:

Continuing to drink even after experiencing health problems, accidents, or strained relationships is a strong indicator of alcoholism. The person may also rationalize or hide their drinking.

Isolation and Secretive Behavior:

Many people with alcoholism begin drinking alone or in secret. They may hide bottles, lie about how much they've had, or withdraw from social activities that don't involve alcohol.

Using Alcohol to Cope:

Relying on alcohol to manage stress, sadness, or anxiety is another warning sign. Emotional dependence can quickly lead to physical addiction. ◻

An Atheist Finds a SMART Way to Recover

by David Weidman

My relationship with Self Management and Recovery Training (SMART) began in 2010, after I spent many years over-using opioids. During the first few months of my recovery, I attended many 12-step meetings including Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and sought advice from counselors and psychiatrists. They all advised me that that the only way out of an addiction is to surrender to a "higher power."

As a natural-born skeptic and evidence-informed person, this made zero sense to me. I was being informed, by professionals no less, that the only way to master an OxyContin habit would be through a spiritual awakening! I attempted to pocket my agnostic/atheist non-religious views and give it a try.

The fit was terrible! Within a few months I stopped going to 12-step meetings. The education I received, however, was invaluable and it would inform my recovery in many ways after I discovered SMART. I learned that I could help a lot of people through facilitating SMART meetings and showing that recovery without spirituality is just as possible as with spirituality.

I remember how excited I felt when, on one of my first days in treatment, I discovered that the AA guidebook entitled *The Big Book* has a chapter directed to an agnostic. Sadly, my bubble burst very quickly when I read the chapter. It stated that the poor agnostic must simply keep coming to meetings and follow the 12 steps to achieve sobriety — which includes "surrendering to a higher power." Eventually the atheist and agnostic must accept "the way," or fail.

I found a SMART pamphlet in the lobby of the outpatient facility I visited. The pamphlet stated that the fourth point of their 4-point program was to live a balanced life. That could be achieved, not with a lifetime commitment to endless social support and twelve-step meetings, but by attending 12-18 months of SMART Recovery group meetings.

SMART was described as a non-faith-based alternative to the faith-based 12 step groups. Also noted in the pamphlet was that their meetings welcomed all — basically anyone attempting to change a maladaptive habit. SMART was not broken down by any particular substance habit, such as alcohol versus drugs. The premise is that habits can be changed, but it takes hard work to change them.

That was almost 16 years ago. Through my association with SMART as a participant, I discovered there are many ways to recover from a maladaptive habit — as many paths to recovery as there are people trying to recover! In due time I became a facilitator and later named as a regional coordinator.

While the SMART Recovery program never rejects religion, especially in regard to recovery, we understand that there is a myriad of places to acquire spirituality in our society. Therefore, our program focuses on real-world tools and solutions to change. Our tools are based on longstanding scientific methods of Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT). The SMART handbook carefully walks one through it all.

Despite the apparent benefits of our evidence-informed and science-based tools program, a number of studies suggest that all mutual social support groups aid those who attend, whether it be SMART Recovery or a religious-based 12-step group. What I have learned from facilitating is that people are greatly helped by social support. Humans are social beings and maladaptive habits oftentimes occur in secret, hiding them from the people we love the most. Bringing those secrets to light, and exposing what the fear is behind the secret, often helps people change.

Understanding stigma, shame, and guilt can free people from the bondage of using their habits against themselves. This is the reason I often describe our SMART meetings as a group based on the philosophy of addiction. Often we can find answers when we explore the things that cause additive habits. It's hardly ever the substance itself, but rather the emotional upset from relationships that can be salved with drugs and/or alcohol habits.

We often speak in our groups about doing what is difficult and confronting our comfort zones. Since we allow cross talk/open communication in our groups we can delve into the emotional upsets that our loved ones or others may cause rather than simply focusing on substances as the source.

The SMART Cost-Benefit Analysis tool enables our members to assess the risks of using and the benefits of avoiding, as well as analyzing why we pick up/use in the first place. This allows us to make an action plan, then follow the plan. It's often hard, but this tool provides clarity to the fact that instant gratification almost always interferes with long-term goals.

Less well known, but growing at a rapid rate is SMART's Family & Friends program. It is an alternative to the faith-based AA Al-Anon 12-step groups. The SMART Family & Friends program is also coordinated by a trained facilitator, and the meetings can be incredibly instructive to families coping with a loved one struggling to recover.

It is worth pointing out that the SMART Family & Friends handbook is almost twice the size of our SMART handbook. This is related to the fact that loved ones have a lot more to learn. They often are resistant to training, since it isn't "their" problem. SMART Recovery attempts to look at all causes of addiction such as psychological, social, and societal, to examine the panoply of a substance use disorder and maladaptive habits.

The science of addiction, and its progression, allows SMART to teach facilitators that abstinence is not the only way to recovery — it's just one of many ways. The SMART nonjudgmental approach allows facilitators to meet participants where they are, and sometimes suggest small changes rather than a "cold-turkey" approach, for example, by promoting a new healthy lifestyle by means that employs self-empowerment for the participant. Some will find that they are helped by what are called "medication assisted treatments" in the addiction field. Medicines such as Suboxone, Methadone, GLP-1's, and Naltrexone are sometimes used for urges early on in one's recovery. Other people in recovery will utilize less life-threatening drugs to help get off a life-threatening addiction.

I often hear from SMART meeting attendees that AA and NA meeting participants reject any medications as a breach of abstinence, sometimes even including psychiatric medicines. To reject these life-saving medications is dangerous.

Lastly, it is worth noting that SMART Recovery is an almost entirely volunteer nonprofit organization, with only a few paid employees doing office work and training future facilitators through online programs. Personally, I have donated well over 10,000 hours of my time bringing these amazing groups to Southern California.

I'm excited that we have begun hosting SMART Recovery and SMART Family & Friends meetings with United States veterans who reside at a live-in facility located in West Los Angeles, California. In addition to SMART Recovery USA, we have also grown greatly in Australia and England. The SMART handbook is available in over 18 languages, and most recently in Swahili. Listed below is more information about connecting to SMART Recovery programs, resources/literature, meetings, and more:

SMART Recovery website:
https://smartrecovery.org/

SMART Recovery handbooks:
https://shop.smartrecovery.org/?_gl=1*134pnfz*_ga*Mjc5OTI0NjEuMTc1OTAxOTg0Nw..*_ga_09VGRPNWSG*czE3NjAxMDQ3NDckbzIkZzEkdDE3NjAxMDUyMTUkajIyJGwwJGgxOTAxMTgwMTgx

Find a SMART Recovery meeting:
https://meetings.smartrecovery.org/meetings/

SMART Recovery Family & Friends:
https://smartrecovery.org/family

About the author: **David Weidman** is a professional recovery coach in Los Angeles, and is SMART Recovery's Regional Coordinator for Greater Los Angeles, California where he has lived since 1985.

Besides his work with SMART Recovery, Weidman owns and runs Djembe Los Angeles, where he teaches and practices drum meditation for non-drummers, utilizing large mahogany djembes in a quiet outdoor setting.

Weidman has written professionally about motivational interviewing, maladaptive habit recovery and psilocybin therapy. His hobbies range from cat-wrangling to astrophysics.

Reach Weidman at: david@davidweidman.com

Living Fully: Celebrating Our One and Only Life

by Margaret Downey

For those who don't believe in an afterlife, the idea that this is our one and only life can be both humbling and exhilarating. Without promises of eternity, we are destined to create meaning in the here and now — through love, learning, beauty, and kindness. To an atheist or secular humanist, this single life isn't a prelude to something greater; it is the great thing.

Without appealing to the supernatural, we can find awe in what is. The vastness of the cosmos, the intricacy of evolution, the quiet beauty of a sunrise — these are everyday natural wonders. When we pause to appreciate them, we celebrate existence itself.

When we accept that our time is limited our relationships become even more precious. Every shared laugh, act of compassion, and moment of forgiveness shapes how we will be remembered. Immortality will not come through heaven — it lives on in the hearts of those we touch, through our legacy and worthwhile endeavors.

Curiosity, reason, and creativity are uniquely human gifts. Exploring new ideas, making art, and learning for the sake of understanding as much as possible gives life richness and purpose. Meaning isn't waiting to be found — it's built by the choices we make and the life stories we create.

If life is finite, what we leave behind truly matters. Working for justice, caring for our planet, and helping others are ways to make our short time count. Our impact endures in the world we improve and the lives we lift up.

To live without belief in an afterlife is to see how incredible it is to be alive at all — to think, to love, to feel. Gratitude doesn't require a deity; it grows from awareness. Each day becomes an unrepeatable gift worthy of attention and awe.

Accepting death as natural brings clarity and peace. It reminds us to live intentionally, to speak truth, show love, and spend our time wisely. In embracing our mortality we learn what it means to truly live. To celebrate our one and only life is to live fully, think freely, love deeply, and leave kindness behind. The universe may not offer eternity but it has given us this moment, and that is more than enough.

In the words of **Robert Green Ingersoll** (aka "The Great Agnostic" pictured left), "The time to be happy is now. The place to be happy is here." ◻

The Winning 2025 $1,000 FS Student Scholarship Essay

Each year the Freethought Society donates $1,000 to the Secular Student Alliance in order to participate in its annual scholarship program. We are pleased to present the winning essay submitted by **Saoirse** (last name withheld for privacy concerns). Saoirse is a student at **Julia R. Masterman** High School located in Pennsylvania and will be graduating in May 2026. She plans to study political science in college and later pursue law school, with a focus on civic literacy and public service.

Goals have always been the center of how I live my life. Moving from one goal to the next, achieving all that I can, to not just benefit myself but the community around me, is what I want for my life. Throughout high school, my focus has not just been my grades but what I can do with the knowledge I gather from my education.

My junior year of high school was when I truly began to live this lifestyle. I branched out more than I ever had, joining clubs and applying to programs that align with my interests and although I dipped my feet into a variety of different things, I narrowed it down to one of my main passions — civic literacy.

At 16, too young to vote, but not too young to act, I began to volunteer for the **Kamala Harris** campaign. I engaged in phone banking after school on the weekdays, and canvassing in different neighborhoods throughout my city on Saturdays.

I made my way to neighborhoods struck with poverty and to neighborhoods where wealth was apparent. I spoke with people in public housing and gated communities, in neighborhoods recovering from violence and areas steeped in generational wealth. My goal was simple: help people access their voice. I encouraged them to vote, not just for a candidate but for their own futures.

My next step on this journey was making a change inside my smaller school community. I joined the Get Out to Vote club at my school. In this club, along with other students, I went to senior classrooms and spoke to seniors about registering to vote, which led to our school having the highest voter turnout in the Philadelphia, Pennsylvania school district.

Presently, I am an intern at VoteThatJawn, which is a Philadelphia not-for-profit agency focused on working with youth to encourage other young people to vote and be active in their community. I applied without knowing too much about the program, but now I am creating content for others to see about what voting truly means to me, and what it can mean to them.

I want to use the knowledge I have to make the world better. We can't make the changes we need if the people who need the help aren't in the room to see it happen. That is why the largest goal I have for my future is to pursue political science in college and use that degree to enter law school, but throughout school and far after, focus on civil literacy of those who don't get the privilege and opportunity to learn what I have.

I believe in justice, equity, empathy, and doing good, not because a religion commands it but because those values are deeply human and should be pursued regardless of belief in a higher power. My secular identity stems from what I see going on around me. Most have learned in their United States history classes that we are a secular nation, yet it is so apparent to me that this supposed fact isn't always true.

I live in a diverse city, and surround myself with friends from all religions, yet I only see one truly represented in our government. I grew up questioning my religious identity. My parents, Irish immigrants, were enrolled in strict Catholic schools all throughout their education. We discussed this in our household and I was brought up with organized religion. I also saw this connection between education and religion deeply affecting my mom's own religious identity.

Bringing religion into all aspects of life has proven to do more harm than good, whether that be in schooling or in an entire government system. As I got more involved in conversations about racial justice, gender equality, immigration rights, and economic inequality, I started to notice that religious values were sometimes used to justify oppression and exclusion. I do not want my moral compass to be tied to any system that could be weaponized to silence or erase people. So my secularism became a way to ground my values in real-world empathy and accountability. To me, secularism is owning your choices and responsibilities, not for God's sake, or because a divine power instructed you to do so, but because of one's own moral compass and thoughts that guide them through life.

Secularism never appeared to me as a lack of religion because it is an understanding that you can hold religious beliefs that compel you, but I know that I must also lead a life guided by myself and not a power above, and that is how I believe our government systems should operate. I have come to be an atheist. Many believe this to be because of a lack of religious influence, but I reject that because I have explored religion. As in everything in my life, I won't believe something to be true without proof, and the same goes for religion.

Being a first-generation American, especially one with Irish parents like mine, means that secularism has always been a quiet but significant part of my identity. Ireland, a country historically steeped in Catholic traditions, still wrestles with its Catholic roots. While it has made many strides in becoming more accepting of divorce and also being the first country to vote for gay marriage, Catholicism is still deeply embedded in its constitutional, educational and cultural traditions. This religious legacy has not only shaped Ireland as a nation but my parents' journey with their own religion and secularism as well.

My mother is now an atheist, and her rejection of religion is deeply influenced by the rigidity of the Catholic education she endured, where prayer and doctrine were an expectation rather than a personal choice. My father, on the other hand, still maintains a quiet connection to God. Unlike many of my friends' parents, though, he never forced religion onto us.

He never pressured us into attending church or believing in what he believes in. I have thought about this reality a lot,

whether his restraint comes from a conscious desire to let us find our own paths, or rather from his own experience with a heavy religious hand.

From observing these two religious journeys, one of rejection and one of retention, I have come to value that secularism does not mean the opposite of religion but rather the freedom to explore your beliefs on your own terms. I believe the best way to raise a child, and possibly a nation, is to permit the expression of beliefs and allow people to ask questions and explore differing perspectives.

On campus, I have made myself involved in voter activism with my school. A club I am a part of was the reason our school reached the highest voter turnout in our school district. However, what is important about our activism is that we never preached any side or perspective, just the desire for people to use their voice to vote. Outside of school, I canvassed and phone banked for the Harris campaign, a candidate who preached secularism throughout her race for presidency. When speaking to different people, whether it be on a call or in person, I only gave them the facts about what she wanted for the country; I never brought in my own beliefs, whether that be religious or political, as they were not relevant to the mission at hand.

This past summer I was an intern at a civic literacy advocacy group for eligible youth voters. We were taught as interns to create content that doesn't take a religious or political standpoint but preaches the importance of topics that youth voters are serious about. Through this internship I learned the importance of remaining separated from my religious beliefs when speaking about the political state of our country, that is, until I need to combat the lack of secularism.

One huge part of my political and secular identity is exploring the beliefs of other countries. Last fall, I applied to, got accepted, and attended a University of Pennsylvania program called the Organization of American States (OAS). This program was attended by high school and college students, and we learned about a variety of South American countries and how they govern. We were educated on issues ranging from secularism to crime rates, in countries that are leading powers and also smaller nations. With this knowledge, we participated in a model simulation of an OAS general assembly in Washington, D.C. We met students from all over the world, and through this exposure I learned not just about my own participant country, Mexico's secularism, but the other countries in which I interacted. Even from just speaking to students from different Latin American countries, I could grasp an understanding of their cultural identity and how that played into their countries' governance.

There have also been various school activities that relate to my secular identity. Being interested in politics and law, I am also interested in the history of our country's government and lawyers. Because of this I joined an academic team under the National History Day program, where students create projects with the question "What was a turning point in history?" I made a documentary about the history of the death penalty and the landmark case *Furman v. Georgia*. I was proud to have placed 4th in the state in my section and continued to mentor in the program in the 2024-25 school year. Law may not seem directly correlated to secularism, but it is crucial. Law and order is why secularism exists, and it's how the separation of church and state is enforced. Just think about cases like *Carson v. Makin*, where the Supreme Court ruled that states must fund religious schools, or *McCreary County v. ACLU*, where the court ruled against showing the Ten Commandments in a Kentucky courtroom.

The IRS and religious organizations are challenging the Johnson Amendment of 1954. This amendment prohibits the involvement of tax-free organizations, like churches, from engaging in political campaigning. All of this makes me intensely aware of what is going on in our courtrooms and how it can deeply impact not only now how we run our country but also operate day to day.

For this academic year, I plan to take on a more active leadership role in civic and political engagement through several avenues. One of my primary goals is to lead and expand the Get Out to Vote club at my school. As a senior, I'm especially aware that many of my classmates are now eligible to vote for the first time. However, because I won't be 18 during the next few elections in my city, as I am only turning 17 soon, I feel an even greater responsibility to support my peers in registering and showing up to the polls. I want to use my voice and position to help normalize civic engagement among teenagers and show that you don't need to be of voting age to play a meaningful role in democracy.

One concrete step I plan to take is to organize voter registration drives at school and coordinate informational sessions on local candidates and ballot measures. I also plan to create accessible resources, such as posters, infographics, and classroom announcements, to make sure students understand the importance of local elections, not just the presidential ones.

Since I can't vote yet, I plan to volunteer as a student poll worker in my city on election days through the Student Worker Program. I know how vital poll workers are to ensure fair and smooth elections, and I want to do my part to support the democratic process from the ground up. This is also an opportunity to learn firsthand about election logistics and voter turnout, especially in underrepresented communities.

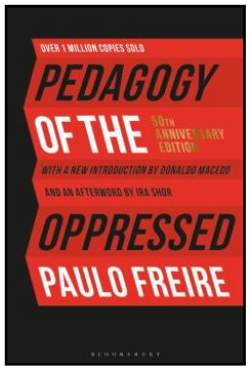
In addition to my work in voting advocacy, I also plan to mentor younger students through the National History Day club at my school. I've noticed that many younger high school students aren't introduced to politics, the legal system, or issues like secularism in a way that feels engaging or relevant.

I want to encourage students to take on projects that explore court cases, political activism, and the role of religion in public life, because understanding these topics at a young age can empower them to think more critically about the systems in which they live. As a mentor, I will help them refine their research, guide them toward strong sources, and challenge them to make connections between history and contemporary civic issues. Through these combined efforts I hope to make activism more accessible and relevant to young people who may not feel like they have a place in the political world yet. I want to help show them that activism isn't just for adults, and that change begins with education, outreach, and showing up in whatever ways we can.

SSA's work is important to me because it is centered around the values of scientific rationality, secularism, and religious freedom, ideas that have both shaped my identity and my understanding of civic responsibility.

(continued on next page)

In my OAS program, our first home-work assignment was to read chapter one of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* by **Paulo Freire**, then write down a quote that stuck out. Mine was, "Freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly." This quote stuck out to me, and although now instead of aspiring to live by it, I actually live it.



As a first-generation American with Irish roots, I have seen how religious institutions can inform national identity and limit progression in a nation. SSA's mission to empower young people to think critically and ethically outside of religious frameworks offers a vision of a future where people are guided not by doctrine but by empathy, evidence, and human dignity.

My goal this year is to bring this vision into tangible action in my school and city. As someone who isn't yet old enough to vote, I'm planning to volunteer as a poll worker to contribute to the smooth and fair functioning of democratic elections.

Within my school, I plan to lead efforts through our Get Out to Vote club, where I'll help students register, understand their rights, and recognize the power of their voice, regardless of religion or political affiliation.

Additionally, as a mentor in our National History Day club, I want to encourage younger students to explore political and legal history through a secular lens, especially focusing on landmark court cases related to freedom of religion, the separation of church and state, and the evolution of civil rights. Too often young people don't get the chance to reflect on how secular values are embedded in the legal system, or how important those protections are for religious and nonreligious people alike.

Finally I want to attend more city council meetings, to understand how they progress and how I can use my voice to influence my district council members. When I am 18 I hope to become a documenter of public meetings and publish those results through the Documenters.org program.

SSA's vision is not about promoting atheism; it's about building inclusive, ethical communities where belief isn't a prerequisite for respect. Through education, civic engagement, and youth empowerment, I hope to carry that mission forward both in my school and beyond.

Throughout my years of school, the most challenging moment I had was having to miss a total of one year of school due to medical issues. I was not able to finish my eighth grade year nor start my high school experience like most of my peers. Even when facing non-school-related challenges, my first priority throughout it all was completing middle school and starting high school strong, despite not being there in person.

Coming back to school in January of my ninth grade year, I was unsure of what to expect of this new school. For most, and even for me now, missing a few days or a week of school due to sickness can feel like the end of the world. I faced many challenges. Having to make up large quantities of classwork, homework, and testing is hugely stressful. I had to learn multiple units of geometry, on my own, re-learn the end of algebra one, take summer courses to make up missed credits, and the list goes on.

That year was challenging, but I think what ultimately got me through it was my constant drive to do better. I knew I could not give up, or else I would be repeating my first year of high school. This was not a matter of overcoming this challenge but something I needed to do. I felt as though, and I know this not to be true now, that my purpose was school, succeeding in that walk of life.

In summary, although I overcame this obstacle to my schooling that is not what I am most proud of. Looking back I am proud of how I grew from it, how I see school as a passion that leaves space for other things. This scholarship will help me achieve my goals and also assist my family in paying for college. My illness was not only an emotional burden but also a financial one and scholarships like this one would make college increasingly affordable for me.

My passion for this field stems from the era in which I grew up, one marked by justice movements like Black Lives Matter and Me Too. Throughout my childhood and formative years, I witnessed my brother and my mom actively participating in Black Lives Matter and Pride marches. From an early age it was instilled in me that all people, regardless of race, gender, socioeconomic status, or background, should have the fundamental right to fully exercise their freedoms. This has profoundly shaped my desire to play a role in social justice.

Almost every day I wake up to horrific news, such as wars that seem endless in countries that seem far away, fear-provoking executive orders, and stories of communities being torn apart by injustice. These issues are not distant — they are personal. I see them affect my friends, who come from diverse backgrounds. I see them impact my brother, a gay man, who must navigate a world where his rights are constantly under scrutiny. While my dad immigrated to this country with documentation, my mother did not. I feel deeply for those who didn't succeed in getting documentation and now live in fear of deportation and separation from their families.

Growing up in Philadelphia, a diverse city filled with culture and resilience, I have witnessed the harsh realities of systemic injustice firsthand. I hear about ICE raids happening in public spaces, tearing families apart. I see communities targeted by discriminatory policies that strip people of their basic rights. It saddens me, it angers me, that there is often so little I can do.

The work I put into canvassing, phone banking, and advocating for another administration did not yield the results I had hoped for. Despite the setbacks I refuse to be disheartened. Instead, they reinforce my belief that studying civil liberties, engaging in social justice movements, and advocating for fundamental rights is not just an interest of mine, it is a necessity. I also know that even if I had grown up in a world without these injustices, if I had never witnessed oppression or systemic inequality, I would still feel this same urgency. There is no world in which I could stand by and believe that there isn't more to be done, more rights to be granted, more injustices to combat. Fighting for civil liberties isn't just about reacting to the wrongs I've seen; it's about ensuring that future generations inherit a world that is fair and more inclusive. ◻

Freethought Society Calendar Page

To receive notices about Zoom events, become a member of The Freethought Society Meetup group. Join at: **https://www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/**. Each listing will have a unique Zoom link listed in the description of the event. FS meetings have security features and will be recorded for replay on social media. Those who join the meeting consent to be recorded and agree to abide by the FS Anti-Harassment and Code of Conduct Policy found at the FS webpage: **https://www.ftsociety.org/freethought-society-code-of-conduct/**

January 29

Please plan to join us for the yearly celebration of the official birthdate of one of the most important Founders of the United States of America, **Thomas Paine**. The online event, entitled "The Times That Tried Men's Souls: Thomas Paine's Service During The Revolutionary War," will take place on **Thursday**, **January 29**, **2026** at **4:00 PM PST/7:00 PM EST**. Pre-registration is required at the below link:

https://us02web.zoom.us/meeting/register/ga-dvEPuR0iLzT5LA45BOw

A memorial to Paine is pictured below. The memorial depicts Paine writing *The American Crisis* papers during the Revolutionary War. It was sculpted by **Georg Lober**. The memorial was dedicated on July 4, 1950 in Morristown, New Jersey.

The January 2026 event is sponsored by the Thomas Paine Memorial Association (TPMA), Black Nonbelievers, Thomas Paine Historical Association, Freethought Society, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Thomas Paine Society, Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, American Atheists, Secular Coalition for America, American Humanist Association, and Center for Inquiry/Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason.

TPMA president **Margaret Downey** and TPMA board member **Christopher Cameron** will host the live online event.

Congressman **Jamie Raskin** and Congresswoman **Victoria Spartz** will deliver opening words. Little known facts about Paine's military service will be disclosed and **Jack Kelly**, author of *Tom Paine's War,* will be the keynote speaker.

Actor **Ian Ruskin** will read excerpts from Paine's *The American Crisis* papers, which were often written in battleground locations.

Gene Jones from Florida Veterans for Common Sense will talk about Paine's heroism and how the government repaid his service.

A video created by caretakers of the Thomas Paine Cottage, **Suzanne Tanswell** and **Gary Bush**, will be shown. The cottage is located in New Rochelle, New York.

The Question-and-Answer segment will feature Paine expert **Gary Berton** along with TPMA Board Members Downey, **Frances Chiu** and **Joy Masoff**, as well as all the presenters. The event will end with a casual social hour and toasts to Paine's legacy are welcomed. The first toast will come from sculptor **Zenos Frudakis** as he shows us the progress he has made creating a statue of Paine.

February 15

On **Sunday**, **February 15**, **2026,** at **3:00 PM PST/6:00 PM EST**, the Freethought Society (FS) and the Humanists Society of Santa Barbara are pleased to cosponsor presenter **Thomas Dixon**.

His speech is entitled "How Valentine's Day Became Secular." Dixon will talk about how holidays are far from static, in that we can expect change in them over time. Most likely those celebrating the holiday of Valentine's Day as it began would not recognize the holiday that it has over time become. Valentine's Day is currently not a religious holiday, yet its origins were religious. Dixon will cover how it started, the path the holiday took, and what our celebrations of love on Valentine's Day look like now. The Zoom link for this event is: **https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833**

Dixon is an accomplished writer and the author of a memoir on how he nearly died, then switched to a life with digital memory strategies titled *I'm Sorry... That's Awesome!: Inventing a Solution for Memory Loss.* He is also the inventor of ME.mory (a digital memory mobile application/service).

March 10

The Secular Coalition for America's Lobby Day is taking place on **Tuesday**, **March 10**, **2026**, in Washington, D.C. The most important political issue at that time will be determined, and lobby training will take place accordingly. Lobby Day provides an opportunity for people to visit Washington, D.C. and talk to their representatives. No experience is necessary. Register at: **https://lobbyday.us/**

Plan your trip to include attending the **Monday**, **March 9th** reception taking place at the **Rayburn House Office Building** (**45 Independence Ave. SW, Washington, DC 20515**) at **5:30 PM**. While the event agenda is not set and special guest speakers are still being selected, all members of the Congressional Freethought Caucus have been invited to the reception.

The special rates for accommodations of $269 per night is available at the **Phoenix Park Hotel**, March 6-11 (use code "SCFA664"). Use the below hotel phone number or website to make your reservation:

(202) 638-6900 or **https://phoenixparkhotel.ihotelier.com/home/book/dates-of-stay?groupID=4796928**

The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates for separation of religion and government. We assist nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas.

FS publishes *The Freethought Society News* every other month. The publication link is sent in an email notification and is complimentary to supporters, donors, and those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in locations across the United States via Zoom or in-person when possible. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from supporters. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (**www.FtSociety.org/donate/**). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Donations can be earmarked for use in a committee (see list below), project, and/or an event. Donations not earmarked will be applied to a general fund which finances office-related expenses. Please donate generously.

Yes! I would like to:

( ) become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to The Freethought Society):
$35 Individual Supporter $45 Family Supporter $25 Student $1,000 Supporter for a Lifetime

( ) become a "Freethought Star" by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from my bank or through:
PayPal in the amount of (circle one): $5 $10 $15 $20 $25 $30 $35 $40 $45 $50 $55 $_____other (per month)

( ) earmark a donation to (insert project, event or committee name): _____

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone: _____Cell: _____

( ) Check here if you prefer your sponsorship to remain anonymous.

FS will send a complimentary ezine to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS publication. FS will never share or sell a subscriber's contact information.

Name: _____Email: _____

Mail this form to: Freethought Society, 19744 Beach Blvd. #140, Huntington Beach, CA 92648 or scan and email this form to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through The Freethought Society

Supporters of FS often want to do more than just make a financial contribution. Listed below are committees designed to fulfill the mission, goals, and vision of FS. Volunteers are needed in all committees listed. Please contact FS to volunteer at:

volunteers@FtSociety.org

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee
(nontheism explained in classroom settings)

Community Outreach
(locate tabling opportunities)

Diversity Outreach Committee
(developing programs to appeal to underrepresented groups)

Free Speech Zone Committee
(research and implement displays in public venues)

Freethinkers Supporting Safe Streets
(fosters communication with law enforcement)

Helping Hands
(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)

Jump Into the Jean Pool
(collection of jeans for donations)

Literature Placement for the Incarcerated
(provides freethought literature to prison libraries)

Meetup Committee
(planning events)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators
(schedule, manage speakers, and venues)

Secular Celebrations
(develop new nontheist celebrations)

Sole Searching
(collection of athletic shoes for donations)

Southern California Secular Coalition
(connect, share, and grow together)

Speakers Bureau
(provide FS a resume, photo, and speech subjects/titles)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee
(work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee
(promote and support the concept nationwide)