While the gay community is rejoicing and celebrating a change in the membership policies of the Boy Scouts of America (BSA), I remain unimpressed and dissatisfied. Yes, the BSA's national office, as of July 27, 2015, allows troops to accept gays to join, participate and be hired, but their position forbidding the inclusion of nontheists has not changed. The exact wording released by BSA is:

*Duty to God and duty to country, as expressed in the Scout Oath and the Scout Law, are the fundamental tenets of Scouting and always have been. It remains the position of the BSA that these ideals and principles are central to teaching young people to make better choices over their lifetimes.*

BSA's national executive board includes 71 civic, corporate and church leaders. The more lenient membership rules that will allow participation of the gay community were adopted by almost 80 percent of BSA board members who participated in a conference call to vote. Not surprisingly, the Mormon Church was quick to denounce the decision. The following statement was circulated by the Mormon Church just minutes after the BSA change was announced:

*"The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is deeply troubled by today's vote by the Boy Scouts of America National Executive Board."*

In an effort to avoid a mass exodus of fundamental Christians and other conservative religious groups, BSA will allow church-based local units (approximately 70 percent of BSA troops) to exclude gay adults from voluntary leadership roles such as Scoutmasters, and Cub Scout den/pack leaders. The Mormon Church, however, remains “troubled.” They are upset that gay people will be allowed to participate at all.

Throughout my 25-year battle to end all BSA discriminatory membership rules, BSA has made very slow progress. I applaud the overall acceptance of the gay community, but denounce the ongoing ban against openly nontheist Scouts. Nontheists cannot join BSA as Scouts, leaders, volunteers, or employees. We are not permitted to participate in BSA at any level. If BSA officials discover a nontheist amongst its ranks, immediate expulsion is sure to follow. Nontheists remain at the bottom of the socially-accepted totem pole. We are so far below the radar that discrimination against us is rarely mentioned in media coverage.

The Freethought Society (FS) has reported many incidents of this type of bigotry in the pages of this newsletter over the years. The stories we have covered are heartbreaking and exemplify the damage being done to both the victims of discrimination and those who observe the injustice. Too often, the media ignores discrimination against nontheists and praises BSA for having done away with their prejudices. It is our job to remind everyone that nontheists remain victims of unfair negative stereotyping and bigotry.

When BSA declared itself a private organization in 2000, they did so in order to be able to set their own membership criteria. That reclassification, from a “public” to a “private” organization should have come with penalties and recruitment changes, and BSA should have lost their Congressional Charter as a civic group. It is up to the nontheist community to prevent BSA from recruiting at public schools. If BSA only wants religious members, let them recruit only in private religious schools! Civil entities such as schools, national parks,
etc. should not provide assistance, support or endorsement for a group that discriminates in any way — against any citizen!

FS, along with many other national nontheist groups, will continue to protest against BSA, even though they have traveled halfway down the road of tolerance. There are miles to go, however, until they reach the campground of Diversity and Acceptance. I hope to see a time when nontheists are judged by our abilities — not our philosophical worldviews.

I am calling for an increase in efforts to educate the media, public school officials, and community members that BSA is still discriminating against a minority. We all must step up, speak out and not be complacent about being deemed unworthy to participate in the world’s largest youth group. BSA’s acceptance of the gay community happened because of many pressures that were placed on their national board and executives. We must apply the same strategies in order to eliminate discrimination against nontheists.

There are several efforts that must be made. To begin with, all nontheists should be informing their local public schools that BSA is not “out of the woods” in regard to being nondiscriminatory. BSA still adheres to exclusionary practices and many families will be affected.

We must keep pressuring BSA to eliminate their biases against the nontheist community. Their discriminatory membership policy must be pointed out to the public, media, public school system and businesses.

Find out if your public school system is allowing BSA on the grounds during school hours to recruit. They only want religious members, so they should recruit only in religious schools. FS can help and guide you in this important effort. We are available to attend school board meetings and can assist you with calls, email and letters.

If you see endorsement, support and entanglement between public school officials and BSA, take photos and be sure to keep evidence such as flyers and recruitment materials. Document dates, names and important information to help gather information to file a complete complaint.

FS joins the effort of the Openly Secular campaign to contact businesses that can help keep the pressure on BSA to drop their anti-nontheist membership policy. Below is a list of 23 companies that formerly revoked their funding from BSA due to the ban on gay leaders. Letters, emails and phone calls to them must be made. Please request that they continue withholding funds from BSA until the ban against open and proud nontheists is lifted.

Some points to make are that BSA explicitly excludes atheists from their membership, and their bylaws and policies state that a belief in God is foundational to becoming “the best kind of citizen.” This statement suggests that secular boys and leaders are deficient in some way, even though 23 percent of Americans say they have no religious affiliation.

The companies who are reconsidering their support of BSA have nonreligious customers and employees. These companies have already proven a commitment to equality and this request simply asks them to show the same concern for boys from nontheist families.

Please take a moment to send a message that discrimination against a nontheist is wrong. Please add your voice to ours and contact the following companies to stress that BSA is still a bigoted and discriminatory organization when they are unaccepting of the nontheist community.

Please send a copy of the letter/email you send to FS:

Levi Strauss & Company
Attention: Charles V. Bergh
1155 Battery St.
San Francisco, CA 94111
(415) 501-7777
newsmediarequests@levi.com

J.P. Morgan
Attention: James Dimon
800 Connecticut Ave. NW
Washington, DC 20006
(212) 270-6000

American Airlines
Attention: Doug Parker
P. O. Box 619616
MD 5675 DFW Airport, TX 75261
(817) 967-1577
mediarelations@aa.com

Medtronic, Inc.
Attention: Omar Ishrak
c/o Cindy Resman
Communications Director
710 Medtronic Parkway
Minneapolis, MN 55432
(763) 505-0291
cindy.resman@medtronic.com

Wells Fargo
Attention: John G. Stumpf
c/o Oscar Suris
Director of Corporate Communications
420 Montgomery St.
San Francisco, CA 94104
(415) 396-3300
oscar.suris@wellsfargo.com

Portland General Gas and Electric
Attention: Jim Piro
P. O. Box 4404
Portland, OR 97208
(503) 464-8444

Hewlett Packard
Attention: Meg Whitman
c/o Sarah Pompei
Director of Global Media Relations
300 Hanover St.
Palo Alto, CA 94304
(650) 236-0954
sarah.pompei@hp.com

Caterpillar
Attention: Douglas R. Oberhelman
c/o Rachel Potts
U.S. & Corporate Media Relations Manager
501 Southwest Jefferson Ave.
Pekia, IL 61630
potts_rachel_a@cat.com
Nontheists are not allowed in this tent or any other BSA activities.

Gays are allowed in this tent and can participate in all BSA activities.
It’s a truly bizarre experience watching those I once admired and esteemed as inherently good people turn into some of the most vile creatures around. This happened with people that I’ve been the closest to, that I have laughed with, cried with, and with whom I’ve spent years of my life. Such was the case last summer in a Facebook conversation that began, “It (the movie God Is Not Dead) just goes to show that if you don’t stand for God, than what DO you stand for?!” and ended with, “Well I’ll just be offensive to those who oppose JESUS!”

I have to remind myself that people like this will tenaciously hold on to their negative stereotypes of what non-Christians are like rather than listening to the actual real-life atheist they’ve known most of their lives. I hit the handy little “block” button of Facebook, and moved on.

Unfortunately, that block button doesn’t function so well in real life, creating rather awkward social encounters, such as the time I attended my first Open House at China Elementary School. There I was ushered in by a “friend” and his like-minded brother-in-law, who were both dressed in full Boy Scouts of America (BSA) troop leader uniforms. Their cute little Cub Scout minions marched in single file to lead the Open House program.

I avoided all interaction with the BSA recruitment table that evening, hoping that the children of my friend and his brother-in-law were enrolled at the school.

I was wrong. When I picked my first grader up from school that week he was excited beyond words. “Guess what, Mom,” he exclaimed as he handed me some flyers. I couldn’t help but notice that his arm was covered in BSA promotional rubber wristbands as he jumped up and down excitedly proclaiming, “I’m in the Cub Scouts!!!”

During the inevitable conversation my son assured me (no less than five times) that “any boy can join.” He knew this to be true because the “people in the outfits,” visited his classroom and told him so.

I had heard that last year the locals were in an uproar over the BSA policy change to allow gay youth, but I hadn’t paid much attention until this point. According to the Beaumont Enterprise newspaper, by “losing its moral compass” the Scouts lost “about two churches in each of the four (local) districts.” It seems both Christians and secularists alike find their current policies problematic.

I was a little confused by what happened. Surely there are school policies on club recruitment and distribution of non-curricular materials that exclude class time. I didn’t care that the club had a recruitment table at the open house/parent meeting, but I DID have a problem with my child being told he was already a member in a club that maintains discriminatory practices. I wondered how BSA was given free reign to classrooms in a public school that has a clear anti-discrimination policy. How do you explain these things to a six-year-old who has just had his hopes up in being accepted as a member?

Such was my introduction to the inappropriate recruitment techniques used by BSA within the public school system. I went to the school’s website. There I saw a Cub Scout group photo on the home page. Then I saw statements about BSA receiving several hundred dollars in PTO funds along with school sponsorship.

I discovered another nonreligious family in the community who was put in the same situation the previous year. They let their son join because they didn’t want to tell him no, but eventually pulled him from both the Cub Scouts and from China Elementary school. They said they did so because he just wasn’t “a good fit.”

The damage was done, but I didn’t want this kind of thing to be a continuous problem so I sent the vice principal an email explaining the ethics of partnering with an openly discriminatory private organization. I also requested to be notified in advance of future guest speakers at the school. Below is what I sent to the China Elementary Assistant Principal via email:

Dear Dianne Timberlake,

Good Morning! I wanted to address something that I was bothered by on Tuesday of this week. My son came home extremely excited about the Boy Scouts and was thoroughly convinced he was already a part of this club. I am highly disturbed to find out Boy Scouts of America (BSA) leaders are in classrooms, in uniform, recruiting children and getting young kids all pumped up about a club they may be excluded from joining on the basis of their families’ religion, sexual orientation, or sex. You may not be aware that the United States Supreme Court ruled on June 28, 2000 that the Boy Scouts are a private group with the right to exclusionary practices.

(continued)
In February 6, 2002, the National Executive Board of the BSA passed a formal resolution that expressly excluded atheists, agnostics, and homosexuals from membership. Furthermore, the Board resolved that all censuals and sponsoring organizations must sign a statement to the effect that they will enforce all policies of BSA including the exclusion of homosexuals, agnostics, and atheists as members.

In 2014, BSA changed its policy to allow homosexual youth to join, but retained its position forbidding homosexual parents/adults to volunteer. As government agencies, public schools are bound by the First Amendment not to provide fiscal support (in this case class time) to religious organizations. Allowing any group that openly discriminates against students based on their religious beliefs or sexual orientation of themselves and/or their families to recruit students during school hours is a violation of both state and federal laws as well as our school’s own policies regarding discrimination of protected classes and distribution of outside materials.

Current demographics on minority groups in America show that 16.1% of Americans say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith today. People who identify as atheist are at a grossly high risk for becoming the target of harassment, bullying, threats of violence, ostracizing by peers, and actual violence. An estimated 5 to 9% of American youth identify as LGBT or are unsure of their sexual orientation.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the LGBT population are members of every community, come from all walks of life, and include people of all races and ethnicities, all ages, all socioeconomic statuses, and from all parts of this country. As many as 93% of American youth regularly hear derogatory words about sexual orientation in their schools, 78% of perceived LGBT youth are bullied by their schools and community, and a national survey of nearly 3,500 youth states one-third reported that students in their school are frequently harassed because of their perceived or actual sexual orientation. LGBT youth are at a much greater risk of physical assault than other children, are four times more likely to be threatened with or injured by a weapon, are three times more likely to drop out of school, are less likely to get the support they need due to adult intolerance, one-third report the school made no effort to respond to LGBT bullying, LGBT youth are at a higher risk for engaging in self-harming behaviors, and are two to three times more likely to commit suicide. Suicide and attempted suicide rates are significantly higher in areas where homosexuality is not accepted.

Two of the China Cub Scout troop leaders in particular have both personally verbally attacked me in the past by publicly making accusations and insults against myself including my children, specifically regarding our difference in Biblical interpretation and family values. One of them proudly and vehemently condemns those who do not subscribe to his particular interpretation of Christianity stating that he “will just be offensive to those who oppose JESUS!” in a conversation about treating religious minorities equally. I was excited about the “Meet the Teacher” night, but felt immediately uncomfortable and unwelcome when I saw those men in a position of leadership during the meeting. I would never leave my children alone with either of those two men and am disturbed to find they are given free rein to promote their hate-based agenda on campus and in the classrooms.

Southeast Texas is notorious for its discrimination and bigotry, that cannot be avoided. However the school should be a safe place for children of all religious backgrounds and sexes.

I make it a high priority to teach my children compassion for others and tolerance for diversity in a culture where that is not the popular thing to do. My son will not be a part of the Cub Scouts until he is old enough to understand their homophobic and discriminatory policies. I finally had to tell my son last night after his endless questions that they only let certain boys join and left it at that.

He actually replied that he didn’t think that was very nice and said he did not want to join anymore. He said groups “should let any boy join no matter what.”

Children are not born prejudiced, they are made that way by their environment. I have been thoroughly impressed with China Elementary thus far. My children both love it and the atmosphere is tops which is why I am so disappointed that valuable learning time was spent promoting a prejudiced homophobic hate group.

On October 23, 1993, the Girl Scouts of America (GSA) changed its policies to accommodate non-religious members. GSA President B. LaRae Orullian stated that it was “a very strong statement that Girl Scouts continue to be on the cutting edge, and this is a continuing effort to show that we have strength in diversity and that we are an inclusive organization.”

Until the Boy Scouts does the same, partnering with them is in my opinion, morally wrong and is an inevitable invitation for discrimination within the schools. I am also concerned about other discriminatory groups seeking equal access to the student body. Any group that issues invitations to students in federally funded schools needs to abide by the admissions standards of said schools and stop discriminating on the basis of religious belief or sexual orientation.

Until the Boy Scouts, an otherwise excellent organization, dismisses their anti-gay and religiously-exclusive policies and makes amends for all the children they have hurt, I cannot tolerate my child being exposed to their proselytizing. I would appreciate confirmation that this will not happen again in the future and from now on, I expect to be notified of all future speakers in my children’s school and the topic of discussion.

Thank you so much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you soon!

Sincerely,
Amber Barnhill

A few days later, I received the following email response from Timberlake:

Ms. Barnhill,
Thank you for sharing your concern. At China Elementary School we will work to ensure that all groups who come into our school join us in our effort to build students up and support their education.
I immediately wrote back to Timberlake saying:

Ms. Timberlake,

Thank you for your prompt reply! I'm not quite sure I understand how that addresses my concerns though.

Could you please give clarification for sake of future violations and a detailed response to my complaint? I still have concerns about groups that only have an interest in “building up” SOME students, rather than all, and those who might potentially have an interest in interfering with parental rights. My main concern in this matter is mainly with regard to inappropriate use of class time. What the school allows while my child is not present, even if it violates policies does not personally affect me. However, what happens during instructional hours is of my concern.

I’m quite certain HJISD Local policies address distribution of materials in classrooms and hallways during the school day. You may want to refer my inquiry to the district’s legal counsel to avoid confusion. Thank you so much for your time!

I think Timberlake became concerned and troubled because I soon received an email message from her saying that she was referring my email correspondence to the principal of the school, Mrs. Sherman.

After attempting to communicate via email with the assistant principal, then the principal, and eventually the school superintendent over the course of the year, with no written answer to my questions, I finally arranged to meet with the superintendent in person.

The superintendent surprised me with his openness to hear my concerns and assured me that BSA recruitment during class time was indeed inappropriate.

The bigger picture here is a culture of school-sponsored intolerance and discrimination towards non-adherents. The most common response from this community is a loud resounding, “if you don't like it, leave!”

The students at China Elementary School are literally being taught by educational leaders that atheists “hate” them, are “attacking” them, and told repeatedly that we “intend to harm” them! The discriminatory policies maintained by BSA are not merely insignificant fine print, they are part of a culture that systematically builds walls between children and teaches them either to hate themselves, or to hate others not like them.

The proof of these things can be found on blogs and Facebook pages. I have collected a folder full of screen shots documenting the hateful language and efforts made to promote intolerances. Many religious people in the community made all kinds of threats against me and my family.

Hawks for Christ meets on school grounds. It is predominantly comprised of adults who are teachers and principals of schools from around the Southeast Texas area. Interestingly, there are very few actual students involved in this group. When Hawks for Christ learned about my efforts, they made lanyards for students, teachers and others to wear promoting a Bible verse Philippians 4:13, which states, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

A T-shirt is also being sold. The statement on one side of the shirt is, “Put on the whole armor of God take a stand” and on the other side, it states, “Put on all God’s armor so that you will be able to stand firm against all strategies of the devil.” These items were created specifically as a response to what Hawks for Christ called “attacks on the school.”

The BSA issue is only one of many separation of religion and government infractions. There are many violations at my children’s public school. I am hoping my efforts to address such a contentious issue will be a step toward a more tolerant future for this small Texas bible belt town.

The below photo of a Hawks for Christ group was taken in the school gymnasium just prior to a school activity. The parents of the children in the photo have encouraged the children to stand up for their religious beliefs and to be fearful of those who are not followers.
Mourning the Death of a Freethought Society Supporter
by Margaret Downey

Linda L. Mahan, age 72, died Tuesday, August 4, 2015, only five weeks after learning she had pancreatic cancer. She was a long-time supporter of the Freethought Society (FS) and the wife of another supporter, Alan B. Palmer.

Linda was born and raised in West Chester, Pennsylvania. She was a student at Henderson High School and a Drexel University graduate.

Linda retired from DuPont Merck Pharmaceutical Company as a benefits specialist in Human Resources. Outside of work, Linda had many interests. She enjoyed working in her yard and had lovely gardens around her home. Her flowers attracted birds and butterflies and she became an avid bird watcher. She loved photographing them any chance she had.

Linda also loved to travel and once boasted about being on a Concorde flight! I was envious of her travel experiences. Each year Linda and Al would enjoy a trip to Hilton Head, South Carolina. It became a tradition for them both.

I recall how excited she was after I delivered a speech about the upstate New York area known as “The Freethought Trail.” She and Al immediately booked hotels along the route that I had highlighted in my presentation. They had a marvelous time learning more about the history and brave freethinkers who lived there. When she recounted the adventure, her eyes were shining and she glowed with excitement. I will cherish that memory of her.

Al told me later that during the trip along the Freethought Trail, Linda acquired a new heroine as she became familiar with the life and work of Matilda Joselyn Gage. It was upsetting for Linda to realize that Gage was one of the least known suffragettes even though she was the one who had written most of the Suffrage movement literature.

For many years, Linda collected antique dolls and lovely miniatures. She enjoyed working with the tiny replicas and her miniature displays were of museum quality. I had the pleasure of seeing these items when I visited Linda and Al at their home. I was fascinated by the detail and elegance of her collection.

Linda and I often talked about FS’s efforts to maintain separation of religion and government. However, Linda was so well-versed in the world of miniatures, that our conversations were diverse and interesting. I enjoyed the escape those little houses, furniture and scenes in her collection provided.

Linda was a life member of Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF). She was also a member of the American Humanist Association (AHA) and its Delaware chapter, The Delaware Association for Humanism. She considered herself a “freethinking humanist.”

Her passions were exemplified by her volunteer work. She devoted time to the West Chester branch of Planned Parenthood. Once a week she would escort clients past angry and insensitive protesters who yelled vile rhetoric and held disgusting signs. This is where she met FS board member Sally Flynn. Sally recalls:

Linda and I first met at the Planned Parenthood Clinic in West Chester. We were escort volunteers and also counter protesters to the “loonies” who showed up every Tuesday to harass the entering clients.

As we stood across the street from the clinic holding our “I AM PRO CHOICE” signs, we discovered we both loved animals, especially dogs, as well as flowers, strawberries, and freethinking.

It is so difficult to lose such a good friend. I will miss her.

When Sally and I filed the Federal lawsuit to remove the Ten Commandments plaque from the facade of the Chester County Courthouse, Linda attended every hearing of the trial. She was elated when Judge Stewart Dalzell ruled against the placement of the plaque, but the joy was short lived. Linda was astounded when a three-panel Appeals Court overturned the decision allowing the plaque to remain as “a historical item and not a religious one.”

Linda’s husband, Al, said he was so proud of the way she would sympathize with the plight of others. He recalls:

Linda once led a picketing effort at the Chester County Book Company. She did this because the books that were always piled in the aisles precluded wheel chair accessibility inside the store. After complaints were ignored Linda decided to get their attention with picket signs and in-person protests. Linda’s brother suffered from a medical condition that confined him in a wheelchair so the issue was meaningful to her. The book store reviewed their stacking policy and to this day keeps the aisles wide and uncluttered.

Linda’s greatest passion was for animals, however. She often volunteered for animal welfare organizations and once she sponsored a scholarship for a veterinary student. Throughout her life she adopted several rescue dogs. She was a dedicated supporter of FS, FFRF, and AHA. She also loved taking care of animals in need.

Pictured below is a photo of Linda as we like to remember her — smiling and happy.
Representative Ralph Abraham  
417 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515-1805  

Dear Representative Abraham,  

The undersigned secularist, humanist, nontheist, atheist, and religious freedom advocacy organizations write in support of H. Resolution 290, a bi-partisan international religious freedom resolution recently introduced by Representatives Joseph Pitts (R-PA) and Sheila Jackson Lee (D-TX).  

This resolution calls upon the President and the U.S. State Department to make the repeal of blasphemy laws a priority in their relationships with countries that have such laws. In addition, this resolution encourages the President and the State Department to oppose any efforts at the United Nations or other international forums to create an international anti-blasphemy norm, or attempts to expand the international norm on incitement to include blasphemy or defamation of religions.  

Blasphemy laws are the most explicit laws banning the expression of doubts or criticism regarding religion, and various countries employ them to ban criticism of religious beliefs, symbols, and figures. In several countries, the penalty for violating these laws is as severe as death. These laws harm not just the non-religious, but dissidents in all religious sects.  

Alexander Aan, a former Indonesian civil servant who in January 2012 posted messages to Facebook expressing his lack of belief in a god, was attacked at his workplace by an angry mob. When police arrived, they arrested Aan and charged him with blasphemy, promoting atheism, and disseminating information aimed at inciting religious hatred or hostility. On June 15, 2012, a district court found Aan guilty of the charges and sentenced him to 30 months in prison, and fined him an amount equivalent to $10,600.  

Raif Badawi, an advocate for freedom of religion, belief, and expression, was arrested and charged on June 17, 2012 with insulting Islam and blasphemy. On July 29, 2013, a criminal court sentenced Badawi to seven years in jail and 600 lashes. On May 7, 2014, a Saudi court issued a new sentence for Raif: 10 years in prison, 1,000 lashes, and a fine equivalent to $267,000. On January 9, 2015, Saudi authorities gave Badawi the first 50 of his 1,000 lashes, and in June 2015 Saudi Arabia's Supreme Court upheld the sentence of 1,000 lashes and ten years in prison.  

These are just some of the many cases of individuals who have been affected by blasphemy laws. Thankfully, Congress has the unique ability to promote international religious freedom on the global stage and to encourage governments of countries where religious and non-religious rights are not respected to remedy the situation. As such, the undersigned groups urge you to co-sponsor this important resolution, and support its passage should it come to the House floor or a committee on which you serve.  

Sincerely,  

FS Signs Anti-Blasphemy Law Coalition Letter  
Pictured above are attendees to the American Atheist 2015 conference as they hold up photos of activists who have been killed or imprisoned because of blasphemy laws in foreign countries.  

On July 3, 2015, Iceland’s minority Pirate Party won its first major legislative victory — the repeal of a 75-year-old blasphemy law that made it a crime to “ridicule or insult” the teachings of a legally-recognized religious community. The repeal, passed in Iceland’s parliament, said it is “essential in a free society that the public express themselves without fear of punishment.” Prior to the repeal, anyone found violating the blasphemy law was subject to a fine and three months in prison.  

Not surprisingly, the Catholic Church of Iceland, the Pentecostal Church and the Church of Iceland’s eastern province all opposed repealing the blasphemy law.
Dear Prime Minister Hasina and Ambassador Ziauddin:

We at the Secular Policy Institute, together with the below signed member organizations, are deeply saddened by the recent wave of violence in your country toward those who have written blogs critical of religion. The world has taken notice of these murders and as a leading voice in the global secular community, we would like to arrange a meeting with Ambassador Ziauddin to establish a constructive dialogue regarding the pursuit of fair prosecution for those involved in the attacks against people placed on the kill list of terrorist Ansarullah Bangla.

As an advocacy organization in support of a more rational world, we find Sheikh Mujibur’s implementation of a secular Bangladesh, its 2010 reestablishment by the High Court, and further development by the Awami League as led by the Honorable Sheikh Hasina, to be beacons of light for those in the process of secularization. Despite these advances, however, new challenges encumber these pursuits. Democracy requires the protection of political speech and discussion. This includes the right to question the role of religion in public policy and decision-making. The Honorable Prime Minister has carried her father’s torch in advancing secularism and human rights. Both Bangladesh’s bold “Vision 2021” and “Digital Bangladesh” represent progressive steps in this direction. But the realization of these visions will require ongoing efforts to promote a more reason-minded society.

In support of this goal, we seek justice for those non-violent writers who were murdered for expressing their beliefs, and to assist in addressing those policies and processes that constrain Bangladesh in its efforts to become a flourishing secular democracy by its Golden Jubilee Deadline.

Sincerely,

Edwina Rogers
CEO, Secular Policy Institute

Supporting Organizations:

- Apathetic Agnostic - USA
- Atheist Advocates of San Francisco - San Francisco, CA, USA
- Atheist Alliance International - Washington, DC, USA
- Atheist Community of Rochester - Rochester, NY, USA
- Central Colorado Humanists - Colorado, USA
- Council of Ex-Muslims of Britain - UK
- East Bay Atheists - East San Francisco Bay Area, CA, USA
- Freethought Society Pocopson, PA - USA
- Humanist Association of American University - Washington, DC, USA
- Humanist Community of Rochester - USA
- Humanist India - India
- Humanists of North Central Florida - FL, USA
- LaCrosse Area Freethought Society - WI, USA
- National Secular Society - London, UK
- Northern Ohio Freethought Society - Cleveland, OH, USA
- Omaha Metro Area Humanist Association - Omaha, NE, USA
- One Law for All - UK
- Pink Triangle Trust - UK
- Secular Events - Chicago, IL, USA
- United Church of Bacon - NV, USA
- United Coalition for Reason - Washington, DC, USA
- Watford Area Humanists - UK

The Freethought Society sadly reports that on August 7, 2015, Niloy Chakrabati Neel (pictured left), a Bangladeshi blogger, was hacked to death by a machete-wielding gang. The thugs broke into his fifth story apartment to commit the murder. Neel, who criticized Muslim extremism, is the fourth such social media activist to be killed in the South Asian country so far this year.

Just hours after the assault an email claiming responsibility was received from Ansar-al-Islam, an Islamic terrorist organization and according to intelligence officials, is believed to be affiliated with al-Qaeda on the Indian sub-continent.

Ansar-al-Islam identifies the blogger as “an enemy of Allah.” Neel was an advocate of women’s rights and for the oppressed. He regularly denounced extremism. The name “Niloy Chakrabati Neel” had been on a hit list and was targeted on social media by Islamist fundamentalists. The three other bloggers slain this year were similarly targeted and were killed in the same way. All were on a list of 84 “atheist bloggers” drawn up and widely circulated by Islamic groups in 2013.

In the months before Neel’s death, his pleas for police protection went unheeded. Coincidentally, extremist Muslim ideologies have gained strength in Bangladesh in recent years even though, officially, Bangladesh is secular. Ninety percent of the population identifies as Muslim.
September 24

The Freethought Society (FS) is pleased to co-host a presentation by Annie Laurie Gaylor with the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia (EHSP).

Gaylor is the co-founder and co-president of The Freedom From Religion Foundation which is a 501(c)3 educational, legal and activist organization headquartered in Madison, Wisconsin.

Gaylor’s speech “Why Women Need Freedom From Religion” is based on Gaylor’s books Woe to Women: The Bible Tells Me So and Women Without Superstition: No Gods, No Masters. This event will take place on Thursday, September 24, 2015 at 7:00 PM. Please join us in the spacious and beautiful auditorium of the EHSP building located at 1906 South Rittenhouse Square, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103.

Please note that this presentation takes place one day before the arrival of Pope Francis to the City of Philadelphia. Traffic will be heavy and public transportation will be crowded. Make sure to allow extra time for that evening’s inevitable transportation difficulties. Security and transportation restriction start at midnight.

October 24

FS is happy to host the president of American Atheists, David Silverman, on Saturday, October 24, 2015 at 2:00 PM.

The presentation will take place at the Free Library of Philadelphia (meet in the Montgomery Auditorium). The library is located at 1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

Silverman will speak about his book, Fighting God, in which he asserts that “firebrand/in-your-face atheism is not only more effective at making change and leading progress, but is also more humanistic than the so-called ‘nice guy’ approach.

“Religion is a poisonous lie, and needs to be dealt with as such,” Silverman says.

Silverman’s presentation will include a PowerPoint slide show and is sure to be informative and provocative.

America Atheists is a nonprofit organization dedicated to defending the civil liberties of atheists, and advocates for complete separation of religion and government.

November 10

In celebration of Veterans Day 2015, FS is excited to host two excellent speakers on Tuesday, November 10, 2015. The subject of atheists in foxholes will be covered at 7:00 PM in the Skyline Room (4th floor) of the Free Library of Philadelphia, located at 1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

This important topic will be addressed by Jason Torpy (pictured above), President of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF) and Jason Heap (pictured below), the Executive Director of United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR). Heap is also a Humanist Chaplain and is currently involved in a lawsuit against the United States Navy and Armed Forces Chaplains Board. The case is Heap et al v. Hagel et al, No. 1:2014cv01490 - Document 79 (E.D. Va. 2015). Heap will talk about his advocacy, goals and much more.

Torpy will discuss the vision, mission and purpose of MAAF and how citizens can be of assistance within and outside the military.

Please note that this November 10 event is a prelude to the Wednesday, November 11, 2015 Veterans Day public celebration highlighted on the second page of this FS Activities Calendar.
November 11

Jason Torpy and Jason Heap will conduct the first ever public “Yes, there are atheists in foxholes” Veterans Day event, proudly hosted by the Freethought Society (FS).

Please join us on Wednesday, November 11, 2015, for an open-air rally at the Chester County Historical Courthouse located at 2 North High Street (between Market and Gay Streets), West Chester, Pennsylvania.

The festivities start at 11:00 AM. FS representatives will be at the rally site until 2:00 PM. There will be an “Ask an Atheist” table, open microphone, speeches, an awards ceremony, free snacks and much more. Scheduled presenters are:

Margaret Downey
Founder and President of the Freethought Society

Jason Heap
Executive Director of United Coalition of Reason

Jason Torpy
President of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers

Pictured above are Heap (left) and Torpy (right). Heap is the Executive Director of United Coalition of Reason (UnitedCoR). Heap is also a Humanist Chaplain and is currently involved in a lawsuit against the United States Navy and Armed Forces Chaplains Board. The case is Heap et al v. Hagel et al, No. 1:2014cv01490-Document 79 (E.D. Va. 2015). Heap will talk about his advocacy, goals and much more.

Torpy is the President of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAAF). Torpy will discuss the vision, mission and purpose of MAAF and how citizens can be of assistance within and outside the military.

While this event takes place on a weekday, we hope to attract media and the participation of passersby, business people in the area and anyone who can come to the venue.

December 6

The Freethought Society (FS) is pleased to be co-sponsoring a very special event with Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia (EHSP) and the Delaware Valley Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State to mark the 10th anniversary of the “Intelligent Design” court case of Tammy Kitzmiller, et al. v. Dover Area School District, et al. (400 F. Supp. 2d 707, Docket No. 4cv2688).

The Sunday, December 6, 2015 event starts with a free and open-to-the-public 11:00 AM, EHSP morning platform featuring Hugh Taft-Morales (EHSP Leader).

This event will take place at the EHSP building located at 1906 South Rittenhouse Square Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103.

The 2015 EHSP/FS Tree of Knowledge will be decorated after the platform speech and everyone is invited to participate. There will be music, singing, and books to purchase from authors. Please see the article “The Tree of Knowledge Ornament Scan Project” in this issue of the FS newsletter to learn how your books can be made into ornaments.

The official 10th Anniversary program starts with a luncheon service at 1:00 PM. The $30 program fee includes lunch, afternoon speakers, a cash bar ($5 wine and champagne) and Happy Hour Closing Ceremony (includes finger foods, music, a celebration cake and photo opportunities).

For only $15, you can enjoy afternoon speakers and the happy hour. That portion of the event starts at 2:30 PM. The program includes:

2:30-3:00 PM
Welcome and Opening Words by Event Hosts: Hugh Taft-Morales, Margaret Downey and Janice Rael

3:00-3:30 PM
Steve Harvey, attorney and owner of Steve Harvey Law

3:30-4:00 PM
Eric Rothchild, partner at Pepper Hamilton LLP

4:00-4:30 PM
Lori Lebo, journalist who covered the trial in Dover, PA

4:30-5:00 PM
Hedya Aryani, associate at Pepper Hamilton LLP

5:00-5:30 PM
Question and Answer Panel with Plaintiffs and Speakers

Reservations are required. Please make your reservations as soon as possible as seats are limited. RSVP at: http://bit.ly/1Md20hU

Join us for the morning platform, tree decorating party, luncheon, presentations, and happy hour. For more information, contact Margaret Downey at (610) 357-9432 or Janice Rael at (856) 881-1816.
When the Freethought Society (FS) began the *Tree of Knowledge* winter holiday display project in 2007, volunteers made ornaments using color copies of book covers. We received copies of books from authors, publishers, nontheist organizations and individual collectors. Within that first year, *Tree of Knowledge* volunteers had created hundreds of ornaments.

Now that the *Tree of Knowledge* concept has drawn interest from locations all around the world, FS would like to start providing ornaments upon request. The only feasible way to create needed ornaments is to build a database of scanned book covers.

FS needs your help with this important project. We ask that participants submit a high-resolution scan of the front cover of books you want to see used on the branches of *The Tree of Knowledge*. It’s fine if you send a scan of a book cover that we already have—we would like as many scans as possible for our collection.

There are several ways that scans can be delivered for use. One way is to send a scan as an email attachment to: Margaret@FtSociety.org.

Another way is to place your scans on a flash drive and bring it to the next FS gathering. The file will be immediately downloaded to the FS laptop during the event.

Please name your scan the same name as the title of the book so that FS will be able to fulfill ornament requests quickly and easily.

For those who want to purchase ornaments, below is the cost per ornament (postage billed separately):

- **$1 Extra-small** (Recommended for top tier of a tree.)
- **$2 Small** (Recommended for top tiers of a tree.)
- **$3 Medium** (Recommended for use on the upper middle area of a tree.)
- **$4 Large** (Recommended for use on the lower middle area of a tree.)
- **$5 Extra-Large** (Recommended for use on the bottom area of a tree.)

Do you want a *Tree of Knowledge* ornament kit for your home or organization? Here is an approximate number of ornaments you might need:

- **10-12’ Tall Tree**
  - 100-120 ornaments
- **6-8’ Tall Tree**
  - 50-80 Ornaments
- **4-5’ Tall Tree**
  - 40-50 Ornaments

Pictured above is the 2015 *Tree of Knowledge* that was installed at the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia. This 12-foot-high tree has approximately 120 ornaments. Since the ornaments are laminated, this tree could be used as an outdoor display. If you place a *Tree of Knowledge* in your home, please send us a photo. The Freethought Society is keeping a database of trees in use in an effort to prove that it is an accepted and cherished winter holiday symbol for the nontheist community.
Presents:

‘The Freethought Renaissance’

October 2 - 4, 2015

Holiday Inn Downtown

601 Main St, Lynchburg, VA

Featuring: John Davidson, Margaret Downey, Tom Flynn, Ron Lindsay, Jason Heap, Andy Thomson, Linda LaScola, Austin Cooper, Justus Cade, Julien Musolino

Friday Evening: 5:00 PM - 9:00 PM
Registration, Reception, Opening, Speakers and Social

Saturday Conference: 8:00 AM - 5:00 PM
VIP Breakfast, Speaker Sessions and Lunch

Saturday Evening: 5:30 PM - 10:00 PM
Reception, WASH Annual Banquet, Entertainment
Presenting “An Evening with John Davidson”

Conference Registration and Details at

www.wash.org/washcon15

Hotel Daily Rates: $95 Plus Tax With Promotional Code WSH
For Hotel Reservations Call 434-528-2500
SEPTEMBER 11-13, 2015
HARRISBURG, PA
BEST WESTERN PREMIER
THE CENTRAL HOTEL

SPEAKERS & ENTERTAINMENT
MC: Mark Nebo, Adriana Heguy, Amanda K. Metskas, Aron Ra, Ben Blanchard, Beth Presswood, Chris Johnson, David Fitzgerald, George Hrab, Kevin Davis, Lee Moore, Mandisa Thomas, Matt Dillahunty, Muhammad Syed, Richard Carrier, Sarah Morehead, Seth Andrews, and Teresa MacBain

Featuring performances by Victor Harris, Shelley Segal, Maribeth Mooney and a special viewing of A Better Life with filmmaker Chris Johnson, based on his book. Also, live onstage podcasts from the Barroom Atheists and the Ra-Men.

HELP SUPPORT
ATHEISTS FIGHT HUNGER
AT PASTAHcon
gofundme.com/atheistsfighthunger

TICKETS & INFORMATION
www.atheistpa.org
Facebook: atheistpa
Twitter: pastahcon
SECULAR DAY OF THE DEAD

Bring the family!
Sunday Nov 1, 2015
2 - 5 PM
Location: See Scan
3855 Ruffin Road, San Diego, CA

Bring a picture for the Honoring Table

Face painting, coloring masks, food, games, piñatas, raffle, and more!
$5 adults/$3 kids

#SecularDayOfTheDead
http://goo.gl/6XXgMl
The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. FS publishes The Freethought Society News every other month. The newsletter is delivered as an ezine via email and is complimentary to supporters, donors, like-minded individuals and those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in many locations across the United States, with emphasis in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. FS activities and services depend on the financial contributions of supporters. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (www.FtSociety.org/donate/). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Please donate generously.

Yes! I want to:

( ) become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):

$30 Individual Supporter  $35 Family Supporter  $20 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  $____ (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 email a complimentary newsletter to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS newsletter.

Name: _______________________________________________________________________________________

Email: _______________________________________________________________________________________