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What I Learned from Fighting Back Against Public School Bible Distributions May 5, 2015 Hemant Mehta



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What I Learned from Fighting Back Against Public School Bible Distributions

By [Hemant Mehta](#)

May 5, 2015

This is a guest post written by **Andrew Seidel**. He is a staff attorney at the Freedom From Religion Foundation.



...

When bibles were distributed in Orange County Public Schools in January of 2013, I [wrote a letter](#) to the school district on behalf of FFRF asking them to “halt all distributions” (See Exhibit D). Earlier this year the district [finally banned all such distributions](#), but only after we sued.

Yesterday, the Eleventh Circuit Court of Appeals [handed down the final word](#) on the case, which has essentially been over since the school board voted in February to give FFRF what it asked for 28 months ago. Basically, the court said the case was moot because the school district changed its mind.

Endings are a time for reflection and I learned several lessons litigating this case. But to understand the lessons, you need to understand exactly what happened. FFRF tries to resolve state/church complaints through education. We only resort to lawsuits when the government ignores us or defends their First Amendment violations as legitimate. Hence, our January 2013 [educational letter](#) to the district asking them to halt all bible distributions.

The district refused. It claimed that it had an “open forum” where any outside group, including FFRF, could distribute any literature, including bibles, on school property. FFRF’s position has always been that these forums should be closed. It’s a [debate I’ve been having](#) with Oklahoma’s **Attorney General Scott Pruitt** for a few weeks now. (The following shows why Pruitt is wrong.) But if bibles are going to be distributed, FFRF thinks students should also get literature that criticizes the bible.

With the help of our local chapter, the Central Florida Freethought Community and its founder **David Williamson**, FFRF asked to distribute our own lit. Orange County Public Schools insisted on vetting the literature and censored much of it. For instance, the district prohibited one book because its message that Jesus was not crucified or resurrected “is age inappropriate for the maturity levels of many of the students in high school,” even though the district-approved bible claims that Jesus was crucified and resurrected. So, FFRF sued.

Only after we filed the federal lawsuit did the school district agree that our material should be permitted in public schools. The following school year, on January 3, 2014, the school district told FFRF its literature could be distributed and that the deadline for submitting new material to the school district for vetting was December 31, 2013. Yes, you read that correctly, they told us three days *after* the deadline. Had we wanted to distribute new literature — and we did — it would have been impossible given this timing. Moreover, the district kept the same broken vetting process in place — the same person, same procedures, and the same unbridled authority to prohibit literature with a message the district disliked — and that vetting was only applied to us. (The district actually admitted it did not vet the bible.)

Even though we were not given any time to actually participate in the 2014 distribution, the court declared the case moot.

But more importantly, the distribution forum was still open. Sure, we could finally distribute our message, but that was not our primary goal. From the first letter we sent in January 2013, we made it clear we were trying to “halt all distributions” from the bible to atheist literature. So we wanted a way to test the forum, to ensure that it truly was a fair forum, open to all.

That’s why I called my friend **Lucien Greaves** at The Satanic Temple in July 2014. Lucien agreed that, if the bible is being distributed in the public schools, kids should hear about the messages of other religions as well, including The Satanic Temple. Like FFRF, TST thinks that schools should stick to educating students and not open forums for adults to prey on other people’s children — but like us, TST is unwilling to allow bible-thumpers to monopolize those forums.

When TST [requested to distribute](#) its [wonderful coloring books](#) in public schools, the backlash was harsh and immediate. It was also predictable. In fact, it’s so predictable that David Williamson, who is not only the founder of CFFC but also a plaintiff in the case, coined a new phrase: “Lucien’s Law.”

Lucien’s Law states that governments will either (1) close open forums when The Satanic Temple asks to speak, or (2) censor The Satanic Temple, thereby opening itself to legal liability. It is, [as Hemant has noted](#), “like the nuclear option of church/state separation cases.” By November 2014, it became clear that the school board was going to choose option #1 and close the forum, which [they eventually did](#) in February 2015.

So what have we learned?

Lesson #1: Despite the court opinions declaring the case moot, it was an unqualified success for FFRF and our chapter, CFFC. We sought to close this bible distribution forum, and it is closed. We accomplished our objectives, even if the court battle was technically a loss.

Lesson #2: Apparently, The Satanic Temple’s coloring book is scarier than atheist literature. Perhaps we atheists are not the most hated group in America. Or, perhaps we’re the most hated, but less feared. After all, Satan does run hell.

Lesson #3: This strategy is portable. Other school districts around the country allow bible distributions. Just this year, two districts in Oklahoma — Okemah and Checotah — told us bible distributions occurred as part of open forums. I informed them that, in that case, FFRF would like to use the forum and that [we’d be telling some friends](#). They had closed their distributions forums within a month.

Lesson #4: Groups trying to distribute bibles in public schools are not thinking. (Shocking, I know.) Bibles are the most widely available book in this country, if not the world. It is incredibly easy for students to get a bible, but it’s much harder for students to get literature critical of the bible. When these groups infiltrate schools, the schools are forced to declare an open forum, which brings in the atheists. Which message will have a bigger impact on students, the one they hear for the hundredth time or the one they hear for the first time?

If bibles or other religious literature is being distributed in your schools, report the violation to FFRF [here](#). Think handling 3,500 state/church complaints every year is impressive? [Join FFRF](#).

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nameless • 5 years ago
I think the takeaway here is that we should get the satanic temple more involved in politics across the board.

40 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Annerdr → nameless • 5 years ago
I have to say, they are becoming one of my favorite options.

18 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›

Dan Beck → nameless • 5 years ago
Ummm....



11 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Tobias 27772 → nameless · 5 years ago

Actually, it seems to me that Andrew's last point indicates that atheists should compile convincing atheist literature and plenty of copies to take advantage of these open forums. We have much more to gain by competing with these religious messages. Plus our rational approach should be the very stuff that IS promoted in schools.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



nameless → Tobias 27772 · 5 years ago · edited

I don't think anyone should be distributing materials in school as it is inappropriate to the venue. I'll agree that rationalism should be advanced in school but only because critical thinking is a subject that schools are supposed to be teaching.

The last thing we want to do is give christian teachers and administrators an excuse to share their views and explain why they are "correct."

EDIT: Or put students in awkward positions with their peers. Religious bullying happens enough without throwing gas on the fire.

4 ^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›



Tobias 27772 → nameless · 5 years ago · edited

If you could promise me that all Christians would stop pushing their agendas in schools, I might agree. However, if there is to be a competition between varying viewpoints, then let's make sure that the best one wins.

I will be happy to concede to your position a bit and agree to push empirical evidence and rational thinking instead of atheism.

If you think that Christian teachers and administrators need an excuse to push their religion on kids, you don't know what you are talking about. Finally, if you want to keep rational students from being bullied, you don't encourage them to shrink from discussing issues. You strengthen their reasons and rationales. You support their desire to stand up and face the world on real terms.

I am not embarrassed to think for myself and I want to encourage young people to feel free to do the same.

I am a high school teacher in South Carolina and for two years I sponsored a Free-thinking club at my school. The response was overwhelming. Dozens of fine young thinkers so happy to be in a room where they could comfortably question and discuss their ideas without the religious condemnation that was so prevalent in the community.

I wish I could start one of these clubs in every high school in the country.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Julee Gordon → Tobias 27772 · 4 years ago

I have never pushed my religion on anyone and I am Catholic, I also studied 5 different religions in college. I have no problem in people believing different things, I do have a problem with people telling me what I believe is wrong. I am an American born white heterosexual catholic and that makes me a target. Believe what you want, love who you want, you are not bothering me so don't bother me if I say I am heading to a Catholic mass.

^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›



Tobias 27772 → Julee Gordon · 4 years ago



1. WOW, this is a blast from the past.

2. I don't think that I have said here that what you believe is wrong. I certainly cannot say that of all the christians or all the catholics that I have encountered.

3. Finally, I would say that what you believe is without substantial empirical evidence or any rational basis. You certainly have the right to believe what you will, but the intensity of your belief has not one iota of impact on its veracity.

1 ^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›



Julee Gordon → Tobias 27772 · 4 years ago

Can you show me facts on what you believe????? There is historical proof that the person I believe to be Jesus existed and was persecuted. I never bible read is based entirely facts, and that was also taught to me by nuns and priests. and correct me if I am wrong, you state in #2 above that you never said what I believe is wrong, but in #3 you come short of saying I am an idiot for believing a fairy tale lastly the fact that I have to give you an email so you can bully those against your agenda is ridiculous.

^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›



Tobias 27772 → Julee Gordon · 4 years ago

Julee,

I am having a little trouble deciphering your post so let me try to further our conversation by laying out my position more clearly.

Please allow me to begin by saying that I do not wish to reproach you personally for your beliefs. I do not know much about you so any type of judgement of you on my part would be foolish in the extreme.

That being said, I have to point out that even by your own admission, you seem to have accepted what was taught to you as a child - before you had developed the capacity to reason and to question. If I am reading your post correctly, you seem to suggest that you have not fully examined that childhood indoctrination as an adult.

For instance, can you show me any real evidence that this Jesus lived. I know that plenty of christian clergy claim these as facts but I think that if you will examine the so-called evidence without bias, you will find it shaky and over-extended. I am not even examining any claims about being the son of god. i am merely expressing my skepticism that he really existed at all.

Finally, you ask me for facts on what I believe. Actually, my status as an atheist is defined by what I do not believe. I do not believe in a god or his son for which there is no empirical evidence nor rational thinking. For me to believe that there is some invisible man in the sky who is watching over would take far more evidence than I have seen so far - and I have been looking for a long time. All of the evidence that I see seems to far more suggest that there are no supernatural entities in this universe.

I don't want to attack you personally. You may be a perfectly fine human being, but you don't need invisible supernatural beings to be a fine human being. You just need to trust your rational mind and your compassionate heart.

PS: I really don't know what you mean by your last sentence. Could you explain ??

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Julee Gordon → Tobias 27772 · 4 years ago · edited

Not sure where to start. I first have to say wow, it is obvious that your in the legal field, no one can twist words better. I would also love to point out that none of the people cheering on satan are told they are in a fantasy land and brainwashed as a child to believe something they never looked into as an adult.

Let me explain my beliefs. Yes I was born to Catholic parents who baptized me into the faith and raised me in the faith. With that said I was never forced to believe a thing. Yes I went to church weekly and attended Catholic school for 12 years. Not once in all of those years at church or attending school was I told that this is what I must believe. I was fortunate to have wonderful and fairly free thinking priests leading my chosen church and even more free thinking nun when I was in high school. I was never taught that the bible is an accurate version of what my faith is based on, in fact I often had teachers and leaders of the church challenge it, not that Jesus is a fairy tale, but that the bible is not a factual historical document. So yes I have explored my religious beliefs and have also studied other religions as an adult as well.

Now lets go into your comment about how Christians push their beliefs on others and have never had Jesus pushed on me. Believe it or not, there are non Christians that attend Catholic schools for the sake of a better education. I attended school side by side with them, never were they forced to read that bible, to attend mass, receive the sacraments so your comment about how Christians push their agenda on school children offends me. I have never asked a non-Catholic to attend church so they can be saved. I have often been told I should go to other churches and had religious fanatics show up at my door trying to force their religion on me, not Christianity. I have also had people who bash the church use bible versus when it suits their agenda. Amazing how those who say we believe in fairy tales can quote scripture. Lets talk about Jesus the person existing. I have heard from many about many shows on reputable networks having real life historians, NOT CATHOLICS, talking about artifacts pointing to Jesus the man existing.

1 ^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›



Julee Gordon → Tobias 27772 · 4 years ago · edited

This is a continuation of the post below.

Now, I know a person who was raised in a different faith, I never asked this person to go to church with me and he never did. Even though I believe I fairy tales they fell in love with me and wanted to marry me. I never asked to be married in my church and we were not. Somehow this person decided as an adult, married, and later with children that he wanted to become Catholic. This was never forced on him as a child, in church, in school or at home. Can you show me proof that your beloved Satan that all of your friends believe me exists???? How about Buddha, David, any religious icon??? They all must be crazy as well right.

That also brings me to my last point. You clearly stated that I don't need to believe in fictional people to be a good person, never said that is why I believe. See I believe people are good or bad on how they treat others. I do not put people down or tell them what they believe in is wrong, they must believe what I do. I believe that we all have free will, are allowed to have opinions and even faith. Because in the end that is what it is, Faith. You may call it make believe, I feel that without faith life is not worth living. Not because I have to be right and my God or my belief is the only way, I will admit that I may be wrong and others may be right, but I have faith, not just in God but in the human race as a whole. That allows me to love everyone, not just those that agree with me. I was put here for a purpose and my purpose is not to put down those that have different beliefs, that seems to be your niche. It is fitting that your friends believe in Satan because if this is a fair world, when you leave the body you exist in now, you can go hang out with your buddy and apparent idol, Satan himself.

^ | v 1 · Reply · Share ›




Keyser Swayze → Julee Gordon · 2 years ago


The Satanic Temple is a non-theistic religion. We don't believe in a literal Satan.


^ | v · Reply · Share ›



The_Wretched → nameless · 5 years ago

 If xtians didn't make it a point to target schools for getting their sectarian religious message out, atheists wouldn't be making noise. Asking the atheists to sit down and shut up is right out.
3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


 **nameless** → The_Wretched · 5 years ago
100% agree.
1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›


 **DannyJane** → nameless · 5 years ago
Right there with ya, Scooter.
^ | v · Reply · Share ›


 **Psycho Gecko** · 5 years ago



32 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Whitney Currie** → Psycho Gecko · 5 years ago · edited
It does occur to me that in some ways, that whole "Garden of Eden" thing does little more than prove that God's a lousy parent.
8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **skeptical_inquirer** → Whitney Currie · 5 years ago
Also a crappy gardener considering he has a giant pest on his favorite tree.
9 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Sophia Sadek** → Psycho Gecko · 5 years ago
Whatta snake!
3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **adhoc** · 5 years ago
"...close this bible distribution forum, and it is closed."

Good ideas will stand up to scrutiny. Good ideas don't run when light is shone upon them. Good ideas don't want to silence other opinions, good ideas *need* those other opinions to show why they are the better choice. When someone's "good idea" can't stand up to the scrutiny/competition of the Satanic Temple, that "good idea" is probably not that good.

This is why we need freedom of speech. This is why we let asshat groups march and protest. Everyone is an example, some good, some bad.

I think its interesting that not too long ago, the Catholic Church was killing folks who made the Bible available to the masses in the native language.

14 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

 **Lexical Cannibal** → adhoc · 5 years ago
Most importantly, those who put forth good ideas should have the metacognition to see the

flaws in their otherwise good ideas and step aside when *better* ideas come up. That's the linchpin of intellectual evolution. Otherwise, we just get more dogma.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Mademoiselle · 5 years ago

"Okemah and Checotah — told us bible distributions occurred as part of open forums. I informed them that, in that case, FFRF would like to use the forum and that we'd be telling some friends. They had closed their distributions forums within a month."

So WWJD? Take his ball and go home, apparently. What a sore loser he is!

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



UWIR → Mademoiselle · 5 years ago

No, take his ball and go to another court. When the atheists finally figure out where he's taken the ball, claim that they had been welcome to play if they had just asked, but he's decided to stop playing there from now. Rinse, repeat.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



my2cents → Mademoiselle · 5 years ago

WAH!

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Dan McLeod · 5 years ago

Satanic Temple.

That'll learn these bible thumpers.

8 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



EmmaDarlan · 5 years ago

"Think handling 3,500 state/church complaints every year is impressive? Join FFRF."

Glad I did. They do wonderful work.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



DannyJane · 5 years ago

A fundamentalist co-worker once asked me if I was afraid of going to hell after I die. I told her I wasn't because the devil had a restraining order out on me. She didn't find it amusing.

4 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Asherah Sarasvati Athena Siri · 5 years ago

Mr. Seidel you have a very nice smile. It makes me smile. I like those kinds of smiles. Thank you for the work you do.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



XaurreauX · 5 years ago

Secularism is for grownups.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Chuck Farley · 5 years ago

The FFRF is an excellent organization and I urge everyone who can to join. They are doing great work keeping church and state separate. As their numbers rise so does their influence and that is a good thing. I'm also considering joining the TST, just so they have some funds to print coloring books and make statues.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Ann Kah · 5 years ago

Oh-oh, Steele-the-troll has just arrived. Let's not let him dominate the thread again.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



DeathWarmedOver · 5 years ago



Well at least it isn't Sharia law.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sophia Sadek · 5 years ago

Deep down, Christians probably realize that Satan created their deity in the first place.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Chucktech → Sophia Sadek · 5 years ago

Deep down, christians know their deity is a big, giant hoax

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Sophia Sadek → Chucktech · 5 years ago

"Hot damn! I aint nevah gonna git outta hell cuz i'z barn o' th' deceptive spurritt!"

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



hawks · 5 years ago

The Satanic Temple has become favorite "religious" organization. I use the term "religious" very loosely because, at it's core, TST is an Atheistic organization.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Keyser Swayze → hawks · 2 years ago

Doesn't mean we're not a religion.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



The_Wretched · 5 years ago

I'm bothered by the courts punching the "moot" button. Mootness doesn't apply when a harm is likely and capable of being repeated. It's trivial for the school systems to flip on a dime or re-allow bible distribution (without notice) at any time. TLDR - christian privilege rearing it's ugly head in another way just for SOCAS issues.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



LinCA → The_Wretched · 5 years ago

Unfortunately (in this case) that's how the system works. When there is no longer a conflict between the parties, the courts typically no longer have a say in the matter. They have no choice but to punch the "moot" button.

It is in this case the school district that you should be upset with. They employed a pretty common tactic to delay (what they undoubtedly recognized as inevitable) for as long as possible only to stop the offending practice just in time for the court case to become moot. They ensure that no ruling is issued that could be used in other cases. It allows for the practice to continue because it never reaches a court that can strike it down. It forces the plaintiffs to go after every single offender.

I am for this reason very glad that a few states decided to take their same sex marriage ruling all the way to the Supreme Court. Now there is a pretty decent chance that by this summer same sex marriage will be legal in all 50 states. Without the occasional ideologue, such issues linger far longer than they should.

1 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



TimfromMaine · 5 years ago · edited

One reason bible thumping school boards lose so many court cases is they can't keep their mouths shut. They'll have a perfectly good narrative going - it's all about tradition,culture, history - anything but religion. Then one of them talks to his congregation or his Facebook page and proudly proclaims that it's all about getting Jesus back in schools. They're fucked.

I think Andrew Seidel is making the same mistake. Useful it may be, but FFRF would be wise not to crow about their relationship with the SatanicTemple.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



nameless → TimfromMaine · 5 years ago

Why? FFRF isn't a satanist organization and if people expect the satanists to show up any

time they try to promote religion most of them will stop trying.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Ann Kah · 5 years ago

I'm uncomfortable with "Satanic temple" sponsorship, the confusing replacement of one mythology by another, although I recognize its shock value (for adults) and attractive nature (for kids). Ideally I'd want something more on the line of a book that addresses kids' questions (the kind I've seen addressed in an "ask god" format) with honest and reasoned answers. Maybe it could feature two characters, one religious and one non-religious, and a juxtaposition of their answers for comparison. Any designers want to take this on?

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Lark62 → Ann Kah · 5 years ago

It is possible that the Satanic Temple are atheists with a sense of humor and good branding. Their coloring book is excellent with a strong anti bullying message.

The FFRF passes out good material, but has nothing of the impact of the mere mention of the Satanic Temple.

14 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



EmmaDarian → Lark62 · 5 years ago

Plus they are a religion, so if you have to be religion to get access, they have it.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



shy guy → Lark62 · 5 years ago

Looking at their web site I would mostly agree with you. Its odd in that there is no apparent reference to spirituality nor do they flat out state they are an atheist



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