

Red River Rationalist

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OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

The susceptibility of Christian Fundamentalists to hypocritical leaders and to outbreaks of bizarre protest, such as the one giving rise to my favorite bumper sticker ("The hell with the Baptists! I'm going to Disneyland!"), suggest there is something wrong with it. I think there are objective answers for what is wrong about it, by which I mean answers based on grounds that Fundamentalists themselves would acknowledge as fair, whether or not they would accept them as valid, and I think that looking for them is a way of trying to communicate with Fundamentalists.

Incidentally, I say "Fundamentalists" rather than "Fundamentalism" to deliberately focus on the people rather than the belief system. I regard the belief system as seriously flawed. But I also claim Fundamentalist culture, the interaction of people and belief, is seriously flawed, and we can examine the expression of the culture through the acts of its members. Of course, they have their up side: Fundamentalists are sexually chaste, generally civil, don't use coarse language, care for their families, and, well, are sexually chaste. But they have a down side, and I say that one thing wrong with Fundamentalists is that they set a bad example for students.

A cascade of Letters to the Editor of the Fargo Forum over the past month provides a sample to illustrate my point. I can only provide a brief look here. The letters started on 3 January with a "Media are biased against Christians" letter. It expresses views that are common in Fundamentalist circles:

- (1) "the anti-Christian bias, which emanates from mass media and public education, is really outrageous";
- (2) the "morally restrained and just government" of the "Christian West" as well as "honest scientific enquiry, stems from faith in a rational and benevolent Creator";
- (3) "Personal liberty, private property and equality are Christian principles"; and
- (4) "The Bill of Rights is rooted in Christian ideology."

An extensive response by Tristan Larson appeared 13 January. For example, with respect to (4), Larson points out that the Bill of Rights begins with the First Amendment, separating church and state. This is a statement of tolerance for diversity, not of Christian ideology. As for (1), anti-Christian bias is claimed but not supported by examples. The "bias" may be the media "simply exercising its right to freedom of speech, while the public schools are merely following the guidelines laid out by our founding fathers in the Constitution".

In my response here, I will show how the 3 January writer is setting a bad example for students. I would be very interested in any Fundamentalist response, especially as to whether I have been fair.

(1) The critical analysis of ideas, of concepts, of views is an essential component of education. This is the component that prepares citizens for participation in a democracy, to form opinions for themselves rather than have their opinions handed to them on a plate. Fundamentalists seem to think of education as a passive amassing of "facts" rather than an active process of testing and understanding and the recognition of multiple views. Their claim of "bias" seems to be a misunderstanding of what critical examination involves. They set a bad example for students by missing the very meaning of education.

(2) It is true that the Scientific Revolution of the 1600s was carried out by theists, not atheists. But the claim that this advance in knowledge was the result of their theism, their belief in a "rational and benevolent Creator" leaves open the possibility that still greater progress might have been made by

atheists. We can't examine this possibility, however, for a simple and brutal reason: in Europe at that time, atheism, even heresy (nonorthodox Christianity), was punishable by death. The Scientific Revolution was accomplished by "believers" for the simple reason that there were no "nonbelievers". The failure to provide context for the claim is an example of poor critical analysis and a bad example for students. (The question should be, given the extraordinary and explosive advance of knowledge under the pagan Greeks, why did the society of medieval Europe with its belief in a "rational and benevolent Creator" take so long to make the advances we now praise?)

(3) The Bible records that the Christian community started by holding property in common, the absolute opposite of private property, and Acts 5 records the unfortunate consequences of withholding. The practice is still followed by monastic communities and by groups such as the Hutterites. This Fundamentalist claim clearly differs from Scriptural practice and needs justification. I have no doubt that Fundamentalists will have some sort of justification for it, but surely it is obvious, given the opposite practice stated in the Bible, that justification is needed. This is a failure of coherence and sets a bad example for students.

(4) I can scarcely put it better than Larson. See above.

Pledge of Allegiance

(1924 - 1954)

*I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,
and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation,
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all*

WHY ARE WE AT WAR?

This is the title of a little book by Norman Mailer (Random House. 2003. trade paperback original). It was written before we "liberated" Iraq and Mailer, like most everyone else, could see that George W.

Bush was determined to have his war.

The first section of the 111-page book is an eye- witness account of the morning and afternoon of 9/11 by Dotson Rader (a friend of Mailer's).

The next section, which makes up most of the book is Mailer's take on the run-up and of the war.

The author describes how, after the attack on the twin towers, the U.S. was anxious to punish whoever was responsible. The usual suspect in this kind of plot was Osama bin Laden but, since we failed to find him in Afghanistan, Bush and company were determined to link bin Laden and Saddam Hussein.

In reality, Saddam and Osama were not allies, but enemies. Then Osama leaked the hint that he and Saddam might strike a deal if the U.S. went to war in Iraq. Osama, of course, would be delighted if the Great Satan became embroiled in an invasion and occupation of Iraq.

Other nations around the world reacted with horror at George W. Bush's obvious agenda to go to war. The European Edition of *Time* magazine polled its readers on "Which country poses the greatest threat to world peace?" With 318,000 votes cast the results were: North Korea 7%, Iraq 8%, U.S.A. 84%.

John le Carre, in *The Times* of London said: "America has entered one of its periods of historic madness, but this is the worst I can remember." Harold Pinter said "...The American Administration is now a bloodthirsty wild animal."

Mailer next describes the problems of the Bush administration before 9/11. The President was regarded by many as having stolen the election. We were faced with scandals in the FBI, the Catholic Church, political and corporate greed, and criminal activities within these entities. Without 9/11, Mailer says, "the presidency was mired in malaise."

Bush and his ilk are described as "Flag Conservatives" -- in order to avoid narrowing their political base, pay lip service to some conservative values, but at bottom they don't give a damn. They tend to classify everything as either good or evil. They feel the U.S. must strive for world empire. War is the best possible solution. Iraq is seen as a huge military preserve in the Middle East and a stepping stone to World Domination.

The Bush philosophy, says Mailer, goes "9/11 was evil -- Saddam Hussein is evil -- all evil is connected -- ergo Iraq!" The unstated motive is of course Oil. George W. Bush's underlying dream is Empire.

Even if the war results in more acts of terrorism, the flag conservatives are not daunted. The administration will tell us that "more Americans died today -- the victims of evil.-- but since we are one with God we will prevail." Given such language, every loss is a win.

Discussing George W. Bush's self-stated close relationship with God and his reliance on prayer, Mailer says, "If I were George W. Bush's karmic defense attorney, I would argue that his best chance to avoid conviction as purveyor of false morality would be to pray for a hung jury in the afterworld."

Mailer makes several interesting observations in the final section of the book (the appendix):

"We violate Christianity with every breath we take. Equally do the Muslims violate Islam. We are speaking of a war between two essentially unbalanced and inauthentic theologies. It may yet prove to be an immense war. A vast conflict of powers is at the core, and the motives of both sides do not bear close examination. At bottom the potential for ill is so great that we can wonder if we will get through this century. We could come apart -- piece by piece, disaster after disaster, small and large, long before a final conflagration."

The author ruminates on how Bush can tell what his experts are talking about and assumes he makes his decisions in opposite fashion to his predecessor. Bill Clinton. "... Clinton made a point of surrounding himself with people who might be 90 percent as intelligent as himself but never his equal, never more intelligent. Clinton, therefore, was always the brightest guy in his circle. Whereas Bush is smart enough to know that he couldn't possibly do the same or the country would be run by morons."

Another observation: "... our nation has become a democracy that is bereft of a few of the essential elements. Nobody ever said, so far as I know, should be a place where the richest people in the country earn a thousand times more than the poorest. ...The people who feel this lack of balance ... can't do a damn thing about it. We don't control our country. Corporate power is running this country now."

Fargo/Moorhead Communiversity: Winter 2007.

Call 218-299-3438 for information.

Mark Gealy. *Examining "Intelligent Design" Models of Origins.* Sundays, Feb. 4, 11, 18, and 25. 1:30-3:30 pm.

In the last decade, a model of origins called Intelligent Design Theory (IDT) has arisen in response to the longstanding public controversy between the scientific theory of evolution and literal interpretations of Biblical creation narratives. While proponents of IDT generally accept evidence pointing to a vastly ancient earth and cosmos, as well as the evolutionary notion of natural selection, they maintain that living systems are too complex to have evolved in a piecemeal Darwinian fashion. We will begin with a discussion of the nature of scientific inquiry, giving attention to its characteristic strengths and limitations. Major tenets of IDT will be considered along with responses from experts in Darwinian evolution. Finally, we will consider whether or not IDT qualifies as a scientific theory meriting discussion in public school curricula.

John Helgeland. Issues in *Contemporary Religion.*

Sundays, Feb. 4, 11, 18, and 25. 4-6 pm

In these sessions we will explore a number of issues involving the religious community today: physical science, evolution, psychology, political thought, history, biblical studies, fundamentalism, and comparative religion. Addressing these issues are thinkers such as David Hume, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Reinold Neibuhr, Charles Darwin, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Rudolf Bultmann, Teilhard de Chardin, and Peter Berger. Both critics of religion and defenders present us with models for new ways to think about our faith today.

Arland Jacobson. *The "Real" Jesus and the Other Gospels.*

Sundays, Feb. 4, 11, 18, and 25. 4-6 pm

According to Dan Brown's Da Vinci Code, there were "more than eighty gospels," some were suppressed, and these contain the "real" Jesus. In fact, there were many gospels--at least 40 of them--and some were suppressed, but do they tell us about the "real" Jesus? Was he married? What is in those gospels? Why aren't they in the New Testament? Explore the "other gospels" and decide for yourself.

David Myers. *Accounting for Religious Diversity.*

Sundays, Feb. 4, 11, 18, and 25. 1:30-3:30 pm.

Is the best explanation for religious diversity the fact that people have radically different spiritual orientations? What implications does this have for evangelism, world peace, religious dialogue, and individual fulfillment? This course will survey a variety of religious worldviews discovering the diverse range of answers to questions concerning salvation, life after death, and the nature of ultimate reality. Perhaps by exploring our own varying religious (or even anti-religious) orientations, we can arrive at a better understanding of religious diversity.

Matt Stith. *Digging Up the Biblical Past: Archaeology and the Bible.*

Sundays, Feb. 4, 11, 18, and 25. 1:30-3:30 pm.

Some of us learned everything we know about archaeology from Indiana Jones. In real life, archaeology is a very important tool for understanding the biblical world and the Bible itself. This course will introduce the basics of "biblical archaeology," and explore how the work of digging up material remains of the ancient world can help us to read and interpret the Bible today.

Letter to the Editor

Dear Editor:

I find Dr. Cope's account of his talk (SRLS) about the inerrancy of the Bible, and his examples of contradictions, to be fascinating. However, I continue to have "trouble" with, what I have always considered, the pages and pages and gallons of ink devoted to recognizing any religion and its fictional literature as worthy of some kind of serious "respect."

Why don't more Secularists, Agnostics, Freethinkers, Atheists and all subscribers to non-belief, simply declare Christianity for what it is: purely and simply-- Fiction. Plus the Bible's content is sexist, violent, arrogant and immensely divisive among all peoples. Richard Dawkins, challenges, early in *The God Delusion*, the "respect" that so many give to belief systems. He states that he does not accept that Christianity, especially, deserves respect of any kind; and thereby he received the wrath of many who disagree---many of whom are non-believers, yet. All of my own positions on Christianity have agreed with Dawkins' stance, from the moment that I knew "in my heart" and especially in my Reason that it was all Hooooey!. My view is that Religion is all one long belly laugh; it is comedy.

That Is, until it begins to encroach and insidiously invade the U.S. Constitution. When Religion can

be shown to have begun throttling our Rights; then, it must be roundly, rudely, "give no quarter" nor respect, Attacked. No velvet gloves; instead, brass knuckles. But, until then, Religion is for laughs.

We Freethinkers and Atheists richly deserve respect and, yes, I dare say "reverence" for not murdering, wracking, burning, countering natural progress in civilizations, warring and for not corrupting millions of minds.

"Kill the evil thing," as Voltaire said.

"And that's all I have to say about that," as Forrest Gump said.

Passionately yours,
TOAOTH

America is Not a Christian Nation

America is not a Christian nation in more ways than one. Numerically? Of course, in terms of numbers America is about 85% Christian. There are smaller numbers of Jews and growing numbers of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and Sikhs. Some of our Native peoples describe themselves as Christian, but others speak of a multitude of lifeways.

And don't forget the many people who describe themselves as secular.

Our "we" in the U.S. may be that of a Christian majority, but "we" are increasingly a multi-religious nation. Constitutionally? Definitely not. Our constitution is not about numbers and percentages. It is about principles, one of which is the non-establishment of religion – any religion. Our "we" in the US is governed by a Constitution that promises no state-sponsored religion and the free exercise of religion –a prescription for religious tolerance and a recipe for religious diversity. Not only is religious freedom protected, so is the freedom not to be religious. When it comes to religion, our "we" is not to be subject to majority rule. No indeed. Freedom of conscience is sacred –especially for those who are not majorities and do not win elections.

As for Christmas, are the lights and trees, the holly and mistletoe "Christian?" I far prefer to think of them as the season's substructure of ancient paganism that we share widely and happily with people of many faiths and none.

University

By Diane L. Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion, Harvard

[*Washington Post*]

- submitted by **John**

Sherman

Or, Is It?

The right wing in America likes to think that the United States government was, at its inception, highly religious, specifically highly Christian, and even more specifically highly biblical. That was not true of that government or any later government -- until 2000, when the fiction of the past became the reality of the present.

Bush promised his evangelical followers faith-based social services, which he called "compassionate conservatism." He went beyond that to give them a faith-based war, faith-based law enforcement,

faith-based education, faith-based medicine, and faith-based science. He could deliver on all his promises because he stocked the agencies handling all these problems, in large degree, with born-again Christians of his own variety.

Gary Wills in *A Country Ruled By Faith*

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Red River Freethinkers Board Members

Interim President

701-232-7868

Jon Lindgren

jon.lindgren@ndsu.edu

Treasurer

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Carol Sawicki

csawicki@corpcomm.net

Secretary

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Davis Cope

davis_cope@msn.com

General Contacts

Interim Program Coordinator

701-232-5528

Bill Treumann

btreumann@yahoo.com

Web Master
605-280-8930

Neils Christoffersen
webmaster@redriverfreethinkers.org

Interim Publicity Director
701-293-7188

Mary Cochran
olliesmaga@msn.com

Newsletter
320-763-5666

Chuck Crane
cranes@rea-alp.com

Items for newsletter may be sent to P.O. Box 995, Alexandria, MN 56308

Red River Freethinkers Calendar

Regularly scheduled meetings are held at 2:30 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month at the Fargo Unitarian Universalist Church at 121 9th Street South in Fargo.

Our next meeting will be the usual time and place on February 18, 2007. The program is entitled "Richard Dawkins in Jerry Falwell's Hometown", and is a taped presentation of a Dawkins' lecture in Lynchburg, Virginia. Includes a question-and-answer session.

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