

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

[As reported in past newsletters, RRF has offered the City of Fargo a "sister monument" for the city's Ten Commandments monument. The RRF monument is in honor of the new library and contains the Treaty of Tripoli quote, "The government of the United States of America is not founded in any sense on the Christian religion". *The Fargo Forum* ran a 14 June editorial against our offer and a rather savage attack on RRF as well. On 18 June, the City Commission voted 5-0 to reject our monument. However, as explained below, there are potential legal complications about having one monument while refusing others. After rejecting our monument, the Commission immediately voted 3-2 to move the Ten Commandments monument. This caused an immediate local explosion, both in the press and on local talk shows, and the letter to the editor below (sent 22 June) is a commentary on the situation. A petition is also in progress for a city law that a marker or monument on city property for 40 or more years can't be removed. As of 27 June, it is estimated to have over 2000 signatures (needing 2850 to gain the status of an initiated ordinance). The curious point about this hysterical reaction is that, if it succeeds, it should actually strengthen RRF's case for a monument because it absolutely insures that the City has monuments expressing the views of private groups on public property. It will probably introduce novel complications into city renovations as well.]

Much of the current fuss about the vote to move the Ten Commandments monument seems based on a misunderstanding. Red River Freethinkers offered a second monument to honor the new Library (we support libraries). We did not request the removal of the present one. The City Commission unanimously refused our monument. That decision was unfair, but it would become fair if it were part of a uniform "no monuments" policy (which would mean removing the present one). The Commission apparently made a well-meaning attempt to address the fairness issue, but the motion it passed took a "move the Ten Commandments" form that immediately triggered Fargo's zealots and those using religion for political purposes.

RRF is associated with the Ten Commandments monument due to our requests to move it and a federal lawsuit filed in 2002. We believe public property should be neutral with respect to religious statements and that the monument should be moved to private property. Our position is a simple, straightforward, and fair interpretation of separation of church and state, and it was entirely in line with legal precedent when we went to court in 2002. When our case was finally decided in 2005, new precedents were in place, and we lost. The court ruled that a six foot tall monument with its top five-sixths labeled "The Ten Commandments" in large letters followed by all ten written out has, as its primary message, the inscription at the bottom referring to the 1958 urban renewal project. The court recognized that a reasonable observer, although distracted by urban renewal, might still notice religious content. It suggested that such content was protected by freedom of speech for those donating the monument. Our right to stand on public property and make speeches, wave signs, hand out pamphlets, and then pick up our trash and go home, applies equally, the court implied, to carving views in granite and permanently planting them in concrete on public property. The precedents enabling this decision were set at the higher levels of Circuit and Supreme Court decisions. Appeal was essentially pointless. This interpretation of church-state separation is not simple and it is not straightforward, but it is the law. Doubt not its wisdom, for it was praised in a 2005 Forum editorial.

With respect to the editorial (June 14) criticizing RRF for offering a second monument: The Forum says our monument should be refused because accepting it would "open the floodgates to any

individual or group claiming to be followers of any religion, sect or cult, no matter how marginal". At the same time, says the Forum, the Ten Commandments monument does not open those floodgates because the court ruled "the monument was as much cultural icon as religious expression". The Forum has this scrambled. The court said nothing about cultural icons and did not distinguish a special status for Fargo's monument. Its presence already sets a precedent for the placement of monuments donated by private groups. The court did address church-state separation issues raised by the monument and concluded no violation of that principle occurs. Its conclusion applies equally well to similar monuments with religious content. It applies all the more to our quotation of a U.S. treaty. The precedent has already been set, the restrictions are already off, and the floodgates are already open. Please note that we are first in line.

We make no apologies for asking the City Commission, and this community, hard questions. In fact, we encourage other groups to raise hard questions. Ours are First Amendment issues, and if the discussion has reached that level, the easy questions have been answered. The Forum is quick to wave the Constitution when freedom of the press is an issue, but the First Amendment is not just for newspapers.

With respect to writers ranting about "freethinkers" and "atheists", I feel no animosity. The writers are often misinformed or working from stereotypes. Perhaps this is because they do not read the Forum. Or perhaps it is because they do. In any case, more information and more discussion would help. RRF sponsors a Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar that has been meeting regularly on local campuses since 2000 and vigorously discusses scientific and religious controversies from all points of view. I help in running it and actively encourage the participation of conservative Christians specifically to insure different views.

Finally, with respect to the term "freethinker": It means an advocate of the use of reason, as opposed to revelation or authority, in forming religious beliefs (we also support the use of dictionaries). Remarkably, it has retained essentially the same meaning since it arose in the late 1600s. It does not refer to particular religious conclusions, but to the approach used in reaching them.

Secretary

Davis Cope,

Freethinkers

Red River

Editor's Note: The above commentary appeared in the Fargo Forum on Sunday, July 1. Several editorials and letters in that issue seemed pretty evenly divided between pro and con. The Sister Monument issue has certainly stirred a lot of interest in the topic. CC

"I will try my best to reconcile my own sense of humanity to my sense of citizenship, regardless of the number of stars or stripes on our flag."

Pledge of Allegiance

as proposed by

Mikko Cowdery

Freethought Warrior

I wonder how many RRR readers are aware of the contribution to freethought literature of E. Haldeman-Julius? He was the publisher of the Little Blue Books -- small paperbacks, approximately 3 x 5 inches and usually 50 to 60 pages. These were published during the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s and, as far as I know, were the forerunners of the modern paperback. In my "library", I recently unearthed a

copy of "The Militant Agnostic: E. Haldeman-Julius" (Prometheus Books, 1995) and will include here the introductory bio and a couple of short samples of Haldeman-Julius's writings:

"Emanuel Haldeman-Julius was born Emanuel Julius in Philadelphia on July 20, 1889. After dropping out of school in the seventh grade, young Julius worked at a series of low-paying jobs: he embarked on an ambitious program of self-education, however, reading books on philosophy, skepticism, and Marxian economic theory.

"While still in his teens, Julius was drawn to Philadelphia's socialist party. Estranged from his family for his socialist leanings, he left Philadelphia in 1906 to pursue a career in journalism, first in Tarrytown, NY (where he interviewed Mark Twain), and later in New York City for the socialist paper the *New York Evening Call* (1911). Meanwhile, Julius's stories and sketches began appearing in the radical magazine *Coming Nation*.

"Following brief stints at the *Milwaukee Leader* and the short-lived socialist daily, the *Chicago Evening World*, Julius moved to California to become editor and then owner of his first magazine, the *Western Comrade* (1913 - 1914). In 1915 he returned to New York to resume work on the *Evening Call*. There he met his wife-to-be, actress and heiress Anna Marcet Haldeman. Marcet Haldeman returned to her hometown of Girard, Kansas, following the death of her mother in 1915, and Julius soon joined her (they were married in 1916: Julius appended his wife's surname to his own).

In 1919, with his wife's financial backing, Haldeman-Julius began the People's Pocket series (later renamed the Little Blue Books), inexpensive paperback editions (some for as little as five cents) of literary classics as well as works on atheism and freethought. These Little Blue Books, and the longer and thicker Big Blue Books, were conceived as part of Haldeman-Julius's dream to bring education to the masses. Over the next thirty years the Blue Books sold in the millions, making Haldeman-Julius a wealthy man in his own right.

"In addition to the Blue Books, Haldeman-Julius published a succession of monthly and quarterly magazines and a weekly newspaper, all featuring his by-now familiar brand of radicalism and skepticism. In the 1940s Haldeman-Julius infuriated the the Catholic Church by publishing a series of articles linking the Vatican with the Axis powers during World War II. An expose' of the FBI roused the ire of J. Edgar Hoover and led to an IRS investigation. While awaiting an appeal on a charge of federal tax evasion, Haldeman-Julius drowned in the swimming pool of his Girard estate on July 31, 1951."

A sample of Haldeman-Julius's prose follows:

(The Tie That Binds): "We have it drummed into our ears that religion is the tie that binds man to man. It is represented as being a cementing force, a power for solidifying man, making him more gregarious, bringing him more homogeneity. It sounds nice, but, as Bernard Shaw pointed out so well, it simply isn't true. Instead of binding man, it divides man, sets him into warring factions. It organizes sects that engender hatred, suspicion, espionage, malice and envy. It blesses fighting armies. It whoops it up for war, frequently even provoking wars. It is a constant source of friction and bickering. Religion is not the friend of man; it is his very worst enemy. Shaw, himself a friend of clear thinking, showed how musical geniuses have helped bring men together in peace and sympathy and understanding. Art and culture enlighten man, while religion, instead of binding man, blinds him. Men like Shakespeare, Goethe, Wagner, Beethoven, Emerson, Mark Twain, Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci bring sympathy and understanding. They are creators of beauty, apostles of culture; they are the real cementers. Even business, with all its failings, is superior to religion as a consolidating force. When we hear some loud-mouthed, platitudinous Doctor of Divinity wail about religion bringing men closer together, let us recall to him the dark and bloody history of Christianity, its record of murder and slaughter, its opposition to all cultural and scientific progress that does not directly serve the purposes of the theocrats, its creation of masked hordes to spy and threaten one another, so that the name of

religion has come to mean terror and destruction."

(Lack of Belief): "The value of a religion, from an artistic point of view, depends on lack of belief in it. For example, men no longer believe in Greek mythology; those old myths are regarded quite frankly as myths; and so, while realizing the superstition out of which they grew, we can enjoy them in the spirit of poetry. They are colorful; they are entertaining; we can indulge our imagination with them and not corrupt our common sense and reason. On the other hand, the Christian religion (i.e., mythology) is still a serious belief of men; and it is by that the less interesting and, worse, is actually harmful. This religion confuses the thoughts of men; it produces strife among men; it arouses the contempt of intelligent observers. The Greek mythology is safely a matter of history; we view it as a spectacle of men creating poetry out of their wonder at a strange universe. If a serious, widespread belief in the Greek myths were to be revived, those myths would at once lose their charm and, surrendering the claim of art, be left with no other claim that would recommend itself to our intelligence. We can be rationalists, and yet not demand the abolition of fairy tales; but we know, too, that the charm of fairy tales is simply that no one believes them. A belief, a theory, a religion that will not admit its true character of mythology, is a challenge to reason and alienates men of self-respecting minds; and it cannot defend itself with a plea of symbolic beauty; it can save itself only by abandoning its false pretense and submitting to be regarded as an interesting tale, a figure of speech, a fancy that may divert us but does not demand our solemn credence. God is a joke when he is taken seriously; We can enjoy the whims of falsehood only when we acknowledge the truth."

Haldemnn-Julius does remind me of Robert Ingersoll in his writing style. The Little Blue Book titles ran into the hundreds, on about every topic you can imagine. They can still be found, from time to time. If you get a chance to acquire any of the ones on freethought topics, they are quite interesting. Incidentally, the Little Blue Books are not always blue; I have some that are yellow, orange, or gray. I believe Prometheus has published half a dozen or so of Haldeman-Julius's collections. If any one is interested, I can probably find a Prometheus catalog.

- **Chuck Crane**

Letter From Lew

Hi everyone.

Glad to be back to Fargo after a fantastic trip to China with my youngest son, Jack. It was my second trip and I learned a great deal.

It is a country of 1.3 billion, just a billion more than the US population. One of every five people on earth is Chinese. Shanghai has 30 million people. Kinda blows the mind, but traffic moves along, there is water and the society seems quite peaceful and orderly. People were very friendly. In addition to being tourists, we had meetings with trade unions, government officials and members of the Communist Party.

It is a country with Buddhists, Confucianists, and the other religions, but the vast, overwhelming population is atheist.

It is a country at peace, trying to build its economy. I think I saw one policeman and a few soldiers in my travels to Shanghai, Beijing, Lijiang, Guilin and Shangri-la.

Looking forward to the next Freethinkers meeting.

Zeno Wicks died in Louisville, KY.

I'm very excited by the vote of the City Commission to remove the Ten Commandments monument from public ground to a private location. But the fanatics, zealots, those who don't want freedom FROM religion, but want to stick our noses into it are BUSY. I wonder how this will play out.

- Lew lubka

How Many Non-Believers?

(Based on "The New Atheists" by Ronald Aronson in *The Nation* June 25, 2007)

How many of us in the United States are non-believers? A recent Newsweek poll claimed that 91% of the public "believes in God". There are many reasons to believe this number is not correct.

There is a problem in polling people about their religious faith. It is called "the social desirability effect". We all know what this means -- we don't want to answer a poll in a way that makes us feel different and uncomfortable.

A recent Financial Times/Harris poll tried to allow for this by giving people more choices about their non-belief. In addition, it allowed people to select the response, "Would prefer not to say". Six percent of respondents selected this. Nonbeliever and "prefer not to say" came to 25%. The potential that one in four people are non-believers is quite different than the Newsweek claim of one in ten. Polls consistently show that non-believers are much higher among people who hold post graduate degrees.

- Jon Lindgren

Recent Best Sellers

The *Wall Street Journal* of June 22, 2007, featured an article about the extraordinary success of books critical of religion.

"...the biggest surprise is a blazing attack on God and religion that is flying off bookshelves, even in the Bible Belt."

The article goes on to tell about the book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by Christopher Hitchens. It wasn't expected to be a blockbuster and only 40,000 copies were printed. After just seven weeks nearly 300,000 copies were in print. Bookstores were waiting for copies. The numbers for naysayers looks like this (hardcover copies):

The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins (500,000)

God is Not Great by Christopher Hitchens (296,000)

Letter to a Christian Nation by Sam Harris (185,000)

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon by Daniel C. Dennett (64,100)

God: The Failed Hypothesis by Victor J. Stenger (60,000)

- Jon Lindgren

Editor's Note: I don't have the print numbers for Sam Harris's earlier Book *The End of Faith* but did read that, when it came out in paperback, it hit the Best Seller list the same month and stayed on the list for 33 weeks. Harris then wrote *Letter to a Christian Nation* in response to the outpouring of vicious and abusive mail he received, nearly all from "devout" Christians. CC

The Red River Freethinkers is organized by freethinkers to be a nonprofit educational organization. We are a group of nonreligious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate Intellectual Freedom and the use of Reason. Articles and letters in this newsletter present ideas and opinions of individual writers and do not necessarily reflect those of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

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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.

For 15 July 2007, we will meet at the usual time and place. This month we will welcome Martin Wishnatsky , well-known Fargo religious activist, who will present "Is God Real?" followed by discussion. Rigid decorum will be observed.

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