

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

A Perfect Freethinker

Red River Freethinkers formed in July 1997 with the usual start-up problems of new groups, such as naming itself. Minnesota Atheists said we should use "atheist" in the name, because any group making an issue of religion would be called "atheist" anyway. But some members weren't atheists. We finally settled on "freethinkers" because the term was inclusive, expressed our general attitude, and had retained its original meaning over several centuries: advocates of forming beliefs, especially religious beliefs, on the basis of reason instead of authority or revelation. Of course, it has retained the original meaning only for those who use dictionaries. To the general public, it means "atheist".

I've met a lot of people with a lot of views on religion over these ten years, and many of them are certainly freethinkers. But there is one person that I think of as the "perfect freethinker", so I will now tell you about him. See what you think.

His name was Bill, he attended a couple of RRF meetings but never really joined, and I heard of his death when his newsletter subscription was canceled. Somewhere along the way, we met for coffee because he wanted to learn more about freethinkers. We met and I told him the first paragraph above, and that we aren't trying to convert people because we haven't anything to convert them to. We just wanted people to think critically and rationally about religious belief. This seemed to reassure him, and he felt comfortable enough to tell me about himself.

Bill had already been retired for several years. I don't know what he worked at, but it must have been hard work because he looked pretty rugged. He was hesitant about expressing himself but was obviously glad to have a chance to talk.

He said he and his wife had attended a local church for many years, where the congregation would stand and recite the Apostles' Creed as a regular part of the service.

(For those of you who may not have attended church lately, here is the Creed with genuine liturgical punctuation and capitalization:

'I believe in God the Father Almighty,

Maker of heaven and earth:

And in Jesus Christ his only Son our Lord:

Who was conceived by the Holy Ghost,

Born of the Virgin Mary:

Suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried:

He descended into hell;

The third day he rose again from the dead:

He ascended into heaven,

And sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty:

From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Ghost:

The holy Catholic Church;

The Communion of Saints:

The Forgiveness of Sins:

The Resurrection of the body:
And the Life everlasting. Amen.)

One Sunday, it occurred to Bill that he didn't believe what he was reciting. So he stopped. He would stand with the rest of the congregation but wouldn't say anything. After a few Sundays, his wife started poking him in the ribs. But, he told me, he still wouldn't say anything! He would not say he believed something, when he didn't.

Bill's wife told him to talk with the pastor. So he made an appointment and they talked for a couple of hours. This did not help. They ended up arguing about the existence of God. The pastor seems to have tried one of the standard existence arguments, along the lines of the Universe being so big and vast that it could not have just happened, so there must be Something Bigger and Vaster that caused it (hence God exists). I was fascinated. How would Bill deal with that? The standard God proofs and the standard refutations are part of introductory philosophy courses, but Bill didn't strike me as the kind of guy to have one of those in his resume. Bill replied: "OK, preacher, just tell me one thing: Who made God?" Wow! The standard refutation, and old Bill came up with it all on his own! "What did the preacher say?" I asked. "He just laughed and said, 'Well, Bill, you're quite a guy!'"

That was the only time I talked with him at length, and the sheer simple integrity of the whole affair left a lasting memory. He thought about what he said, and when he stopped believing something, he stopped saying he did. Who can do better? Who can do as well?

"The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction. A petty, unjust, unforgiving control freak. A vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser. A misogynistic, homophobic, racist, malevolent bully."

Richard Dawkins

Whats in a Poll?

Interpreting the nature and prevalence of religious opinions is tricky, particularly if you depend on polls. Respondents can be lacking in seriousness, unsure what they believe, and evasive. Spiritual values and practices are what pollsters call "motherhood" issues: everybody knows that he is supposed to be in favor of them.

Thus sociologists estimate that maybe only half of the Americans who say that they regularly attend church actually do so. The World Values Survey Association, an international network of social scientists, conducts research in eighty countries, and not long ago asked a large sample of the earth's population to say which of four alternatives came closest to their own beliefs: a personal God (forty-two percent chose this), a spirit or life force (thirty-four percent), neither of these (ten percent), don't know (fourteen percent). Depending on what the respondents understood by "spirit or life force," belief in God may be far less widespread than simple yes/no polls suggest.

In some religious research, it is not necessarily the respondents who are credulous. [Atheist writer Sam] Harris has made much of a survey that suggests that forty-four percent of Americans believe Jesus will return to judge mankind within the next fifty years. But, in 1998, a fifth of non-Christians told a poll for *Newsweek* that they, too, expected Jesus to return. What does Harris make of that? Any excuse for a party, perhaps....

The Bible is a motherhood issue, too. Harris takes at face value a Gallup poll suggesting that eighty-three percent of Americans regard it as the Word of God, and he ... uses up plenty of ink

establishing the wickedness of many tales in the Old Testament. Critics of the Bible should find consolation in the fact that many people do not have a clue what is in it. Surveys by the Barna Research Group, a Christian organization, have found that most Christians don't know who preached the Sermon on the Mount. (Anthony Gottlieb, writing in *The New Yorker*, May 21).

-submitted by **John**

Sherman

Letter to the Editor

Dear Rationalist,

This is a letter to protest your continued use of the "Pledge of Allegiance" as a centerpiece on the front page of the Red River Rationalist.

I understand that many of the freethinkers resent the inclusion of "god" in the current version. But I would think freethinkers would resent loyalty oaths in general, whether or not god was a party to them.

In the first place, if we support a loyalty oath, why not write it in terms that ordinary people use and understand. What would be wrong with holding your hand over your heart and saying, "I promise to be loyal to the United States." Period.

But there are a whole bunch of freethinker issues in the verbose version. Promising loyalty to a flag rather than a country means that over time, as the context changes as to what the flag might represent, people who were loyal to its original ideas may still feel obliged to be loyal to its changed meaning. For example, most of us could conceivably promise loyalty to a flag bearing a swastika, if it were represented to have its original Sanskrit meaning of "well being". But if over time the swastika took on a meaning of Hitler's Nazi concept, we might not want to maintain our loyalty promise to that symbol. It's a simple problem of symbolic logic where the symbol takes on a different meaning.

In addition, the flag of any nation almost invariably is usurped as the "logo" or "trademark" for the current administration, and I don't know any freethinkers who would promise their loyalty unquestioningly to any administration -- even to one they may generally support.

The other thing that troubles me about the verbose version is the phrase which claims the country represented by the flag has liberty and justice for all. Who thinks that the rich and poor get the same sort of liberty and justice? Who believes that reservation Indians and corporate executives get the same liberty and justice? Who believes that black crack users and white cocaine snuffers get the same liberty and justice? To insert a phrase so demonstrably untrue into a loyalty oath could only be intended as the most blatant and idiotic attempt at brainwashing through repetition.

So it is a crappy oath, I think, and deserves to be scrapped entirely, in favor of something more honest and straightforward. Here's my recommended version: "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."

- **Mikko Cowdery**, Osakis, MN

Response: Mikko, I happen to agree with you. I have arbitrarily replaced the pledge in this issue with a quote from Richard Dawkins. However, not to be dictatorial, I will comply with the wishes of the majority of our members on this. - Chuck Crane, Editor

Bible Classes in School Protested

In a lawsuit filed on Wednesday in the Western District of Texas, eight parents are contesting that the Bible course offered in their local high schools violates their religious liberty by promoting particular religious beliefs to children in their community.

In December 2005, the Ector County School Board voted to adopt a Bible course created by a private organization called the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools (NCBCPS). The elective course, called *The Bible in History and Literature*, is now taught in two high schools in Odessa, Texas -- Permian High School and Odessa High School. Rather than teaching about the Bible objectively, the course promotes religion generally as well as a particular religious viewpoint that is not shared by Jews, Catholics, Orthodox Christians, and many Protestants.

The NCBCPS course has been deeply criticized by Bible scholars for its lack of accuracy, ignorance of scholarly research, and biased promotion of a particular religious interpretation of the Bible. Although the NCBCPS defends its curriculum as being constitutional, its own website reveals a different agenda, urging people to contact NCBCPS as a "first step to get God back in your public school."

Doug Hildebrand, one of the parents bringing the lawsuit and an ordained elder and deacon at a local Presbyterian Church, said, "Religion is very important in my family and we are very involved in our religious community. But the public schools are no place for religious indoctrination that promotes certain beliefs that not all the kids in the school share. It seems like a church has invaded our school system -- *and it's not my church!*" (emphasis added).

"This class is not about educating students. It is about proselytizing one set of religious beliefs to the exclusion of others," said Daniel Mach, Director of Litigation for the ACLU's Program on Freedom of Religion and Belief. The Bible course uses the King James Version as its main textbook, which is not the Bible of choice for a wide range of Christian denominations, nor for members of the Jewish faith. It requires students to give "true" or "false" answers to questions that are a matter of religious faith, uses the Bible to instill religious life lessons, and presents an unbalanced viewpoint of American history that promotes specific religious beliefs that are in conflict with objective scholarly standards.

The lawsuit asks that the Ector County School Board be ordered to refrain from teaching the Bible course or any course like it that would unconstitutionally promote religion generally and particular religious beliefs specifically.

(e-mail bulletin, ACLU)

Ode to Jerry

While it is not right to 'glory' in the death of another, still, when a genuinely evil man dies, the world may be minimally a better place.

On the death of a namesake
I hear that Jerry Falwell
has died,
I say, 'Oh well.'
With hatred's creed,
and bigot's screed,

he's still living, now in hell.
With askance
and perchance
a plea to those on high,
his plight is such a grievous one,
for a man to die.
So he ascends to heaven,
the choir does upswell
We shake our heads in wonderment,
Bent pearly gates, a sad lament,
hosts scattered through the firmament,
At 6 feet deep, does Jerry dwell,
Returned to earth when heaven fell.

- Jerry Fauske

A Courageous Politician!

Re "Secular groups laud Rep. Stark / He's first in Congress to say he doesn't believe in God," March 13: In a nation where a recent survey showed atheists to be the least trusted minority -- below Muslims, recent immigrants and homosexuals -- it takes courage and integrity to stand up and starkly claim a non-theistic world view. That courage and integrity is a refreshing contrast to the presidential hopefuls wearing their questionable religious credentials on their sleeves, lapels and anywhere else they might influence the religious majority.

It is refreshing in the literal sense -- it is fresh again. Once upon a time, our founding fathers wrote a Constitution that forbids government from involving itself in religion and vice-versa. They saw the strife caused when the two mixed. Today, we still see this strife around the globe. Protestants and Catholics, Sunnis and Shiites fight for control of government. By standing up as a non-theist, Rep. Pete Stark is saying his lack of religious views should not and have not made him less able to represent his constituents, regardless of their personal beliefs or his.

- Brian Jones, Gold River

- submitted by **Ron**

Frederickson

“Whose name does an atheist mention when having sex?”

- The confused philosopher, CBC

Self-serving Message

The Unitarian-Universalist Church in Underwood, MN has invited me to be the program speaker on Sunday, June 24. The services start at 10:30 a.m.

As I understand it, they wish to more closely examine someone with an atheistic world-view. They would like me to relate how I came to be an unbeliever and how I manage to conduct my life without an invisible imaginary friend.

I'm hoping that some fellow infidels will attend to lend moral support (and perhaps help me escape

from town, should the natives become restive).

- **Chuck Crane**

"Faith is the irrational belief in something that is logically impossible."

- "Bones" on the TV show of that name

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.

June 17 will be our Summer Solstice potluck, to be held at the home of Gerre and Chuck Crane at 502 Willow Drive in Alexandria and starting at 1:30 pm. You need not be a member of the Red River Freethinkers to attend -- guests are welcome. All our subscribers in the Alexandria area are especially invited to come. Directions are in the column at the right. Indoors or outdoors or both, depending on

the weather. Y'all come!

Summer Solstice Potluck

Directions: Coming east on I-94 to Alex, take the second exit (Hiway 29) and turn left toward town. You will be on Broadway, which is the "main street." Stay on Broadway until you come to 5th Avenue (there's a stoplight there). Turn left and stay on 5th until you pass the baseball field and are between two small lakes. Take the first left after passing the lakes and you will be on Willow Drive. 502 is the tenth house on the right (the lake is at your left). The number is on the mailbox. Lost? Call (320) 763-5666

Anyone needing a ride may contact Davis Cope or Mary Cochran at (701) 293-7188.

BECOME A MEMBER!

Membership includes a subscription to this newsletter. Send dues, name, address, phone number and e-mail address to Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405.

Family membership	\$45/year
Individual membership	\$30/year
Student membership	\$15/year
Newsletter only	\$10/year

NOTE: If you received a complimentary copy of The Red River Rationalist and would like to be removed from our mailing list, please contact any of the officers.