

Red River Rationalist

No. 97 - March, 2007

redriverfreethinkers.org

OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

Why Fundamentalists are Bad Examples for Students.

Letters to the Editor in the *Fargo Forum* had a frisky creation vs. evolution back-and-forth during January. The business started with a letter from a minister who happened to mention 6000 years as the age of the Earth and, of course, of the human race, which began with Adam and Eve. One of the responses asked sarcastically how we could have 4 blood types if the human race started with exactly two people. I groaned when I read it and, sure enough, several triumphant replies explained about O, A, B, AB, dominant and recessive genes, so that all the blood types could have been present in two initial people. (Notice this ignores the Biblical account that Eve was created from Adam's rib, which would seem to imply she had the same blood type as Adam. But, of course, God changed Adam's XY chromosomes to Eve's XX chromosomes, so He obviously felt like tinkering with genes that day.)

I groaned because most people don't realize that Fundamentalists have an extensively developed culture complete with books, writings, websites, traveling "experts", and so on, that contribute to the isolation and separation of the Fundamentalist community from the modern world. Common objections to Fundamentalism have been noted, and prepared answers are available for the diligent Fundamentalist to provide in defense of his faith. Fundamentalist websites stockpile these canned

answers, waiting to be turned up by a bit of websearch. For example, one of the Forum respondents explained his answer came from the Answers in Genesis website, a particularly active creationist ministry that churns out such material.

Here's an example. According to Genesis, Adam and Eve had male children, Cain the firstborn, Abel, Seth, and possibly more unnamed. We read that Cain married. Who could he marry, since his parents were the first humans? His sister, necessarily. But this is incest. Isn't this forbidden (by the Bible)? Ken Ham, the founder of AiG, has answered this question, indeed, has a tract "Where did Cain get his wife?" Mr. Ham says:

"Many people immediately reject the conclusion that Adam and Eve's sons and daughters married each other by appealing to the law against brother-sister intermarriage. Some say that you can't marry your relation. Actually, if you don't marry your relation, you don't marry a human! A wife is related to her husband before they are married because ALL people are descendants of Adam and Eve -- all are of one blood. This law forbidding close relatives marrying was not given until the time of Moses (Leviticus 18-20). Provided marriage was one man for one woman for life (based on Genesis 1&2), there was no disobedience to God's law originally (before the time of Moses) when close relatives (even brothers and sisters) married each other."

So there you are! Brother-sister marriage was OK from the beginning (4004 BC) until God forbade it in Lev. 18-20 (dated at 1490 BC by the Scofield Bible, a Fundamentalist classic).

In other words, according to Fundamentalists, human history (all 6000 years of it) is divided into two periods, the first 2500 years when incest was OK, at which point God forbade it, thus making it wrong over the ensuing 3500 years. God informed the Jews of His decision, and we today know of it thanks to their record of the communication. We are not told how other peoples of the Earth were informed that incest was wrong. Presumably they were left to work it out for themselves by trial and error.

Items such as these, the letters to the editor, the tracts, illustrate why Fundamentalists are bad examples for students.

Education involves teaching skills, such as reading, writing, and arithmetic, and it involves practice in using those skills for critical thinking and critical analysis. One must be able to analyze an issue into various positions, draw implications, look for evidence both "for" and "against", look for tests, be able

to reconsider and reevaluate and restate, and so on. When applied to the natural world, this process is called "science".

The Fundamentalist approach, on the other hand, is the following, and I encourage testing of my description.

First, if the issue touches on the Bible, then the conclusion MUST agree with the "Bible position". That is, the conclusion is already set. It is not to be determined by investigation. (This view, expressed in such terms as "The Bible is the basis for our thinking in every area", is a commonplace on Fundamentalist websites. The fact that different Fundamentalist groups interpret the Bible in different ways is easily handled: the other groups are wrong.)

Since the true position is already known, critical analysis of an issue is irrelevant. However, other positions get stated due to the errors of non-Fundamentalists and, sadly, some claiming to be Fundamentalists. Since these positions are not the true position, they are wrong. Since they are wrong to begin with, it is sufficient to merely emphasize that fact in some way or another. (The practical result of this attitude is an inability to state other positions correctly and, thus, to critique them in a relevant way. It requires substantial intellectual effort and intellectual honesty to state positions accurately, especially if one disagrees with them. That is why critical analysis must be taught and practiced. If you can't address the issue, you are reduced to such devices as attacking your opponent's motives, and there is much food for thought in the amount of time Fundamentalists spend doing exactly that.)

When Fundamentalists are in the position of actually defending the true position instead of attacking others, their rejection of critical analysis reduces them to the feeble line of citing evidence for their position. This is feeble, because there is some "evidence for" virtually every position, including the existence of fairies and the Loch Ness monster. "Evidence for" is simply the initial stake that any position must bring to the intellectual table, where it should then face critical analysis. But Fundamentalists stop at the "evidence for" stage.

You can see these points at work in the letters to the editor. With respect to blood types, "evidence for" is presented by observing that the four types could be present in two people. For critical analysis, this would be a starting point. What about Rh factors? Is the claim still consistent with their presence? And Ken Ham describes the Biblical picture as saying that all people are of "one blood". If so, doesn't that mean that blood transfusion will work equally well between any two people? But it doesn't, because there are four blood types.

Fundamentalists, in possession of "truth", should be able to set a wonderful example for students by subjecting their claims to straightforward critical analysis of the sort that students do in writing reports for English class. Instead, they avoid critical analysis of their ideas and thus set a bad example for students.

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*

How to tell you're a fundamentalist Christian

10. You vigorously deny the existence of thousands of gods claimed by other religions, but feel outraged when someone denies the existence of yours.
9. You feel insulted and "dehumanized" when scientists say that people evolved from other life forms, but you have no problem with the Biblical claim that we were created from dirt.

8. You laugh at polytheists, but you have no problem believing in a Triune God.
7. Your face turns purple when you hear of the "atrocities" attributed to Allah, but you don't even flinch when hearing about how God/Jehovah slaughtered all the babies of Egypt in "Exodus" and ordered the elimination of entire ethnic groups in "Joshua" including women, children, and trees!
6. You laugh at Hindu beliefs that deify humans, and Greek claims about gods sleeping with women, but you have no problem believing that the Holy Spirit impregnated Mary, who then gave birth to a man-god who got killed, came back to life and then ascended into the sky.
5. You are willing to spend your life looking for little loopholes in the scientifically established age of Earth (few billion years), but you find nothing wrong with believing dates recorded by Bronze Age tribesmen sitting in their tents and guessing that Earth is a few generations old.
4. You believe that the entire population of this planet with the exception of those who share your beliefs -- though excluding those in all rival sects - will spend Eternity in an infinite Hell of Suffering. And yet consider your religion the most "tolerant" and "loving."
3. While modern science, history, geology, biology, and physics have failed to convince you otherwise, some idiot rolling around on the floor speaking in "tongues" may be all the evidence you need to "prove" Christianity.
2. You define 0.01% as a "high success rate" when it comes to answered prayers. You consider that to be evidence that prayer works. And you think that the remaining 99.99% FAILURE was simply the will of God.
1. You actually know a lot less than many atheists and agnostics do about the Bible, Christianity, and church history - but still call yourself a Christian.

Anonymous (Internet)

Submitted by **Mikko**

Cowdery

Letter to a Christian Nation (Review)

Chuck Crane

Sam Harris. Alfred A. Knopf. 2006

This is a follow-up to Harris's previous best seller, *The End of Faith* (see Review by Tom Ebacher in the January 2007 *Rationalist*). I liked that book a lot, with one exception: in the introductory chapter, Harris serves notice that his final chapter espouses "mystical" or "spiritual" experiences and he refers to "the body of data attesting to the reality of psychic phenomena." Then, in that final chapter, states that "mysticism is a rational enterprise."

However, in his latest book, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (also a best seller), Harris makes a much more succinct case for non-belief. He begins by citing the thousands who wrote to him, following his first book, to tell him he was wrong not to believe in God. He says that "many who claim to have been transformed by Christ's love are deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism." He goes on to mention that it's clear such hatred draws support from the Bible, as the most disturbed "always cite chapter and verse."

The primary purpose of the book "is to arm secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy, against their opponents on the Christian Right." Harris stays right on target, citing the supernatural beliefs common to all committed Christians and taking note of the

extraordinary influence in our courts, schools, and every branch of government.

One of the more important points made, I think, is that the Christian Right needs to be shown that the respect they demand for their own religious beliefs gives shelter to extremists of all faiths.

Referring to polls that show Americans choose religious beliefs over accepted science by a margin of nearly three to one, Harris points out that we stand alone among all developed nations in these convictions. Our country "now appears, as at no other time in her history, like a lumbering, bellicose, dim-witted giant the combination of great power and great stupidity is simply terrifying...."

The above is a synopsis of Harris's prefatory *Note to the Reader*. The "Letter" that makes up the rest of the book is, I think, the most lucid and convincing argument for non-belief that I have encountered.

Harris addresses the reader, whom he assumes to be a true Christian. We can agree (he writes) that if one of us is right, the other is wrong. The Bible is either the word of God, or it isn't. Jesus either offers humanity the one true path to salvation, or he doesn't. To be a true Christian is to believe that all other faiths are mistaken. If I persist in my unbelief, I will suffer the torments of hell (as will any others I have persuaded to reject the idea of God).

Topics covered include The Wisdom of the Bible ("The idea that the Bible is a perfect guide to morality is simply absurd."); Real Morality ("One of the most pernicious effects of religion is that it tends to divorce morality ... from reality ..."); Doing Good for God ("Missionaries ... waste a lot of time and money proselytizing to the needy ..."); Who Put the Good in the Good Book? ("We decide what is good in the Good Book."); The Goodness of God ("Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs."); The Power of Prophecy ("The Bible contains nothing ... that could not have been written by a man or woman living in the First Century."); The Clash of Science and Religion ("... one is either engaged in an honest appraisal of the evidence and logical arguments, or one isn't."); The Fact of Life ("All complex life on earth has developed from simpler life-forms over billions of years. This is a fact that no longer admits of intelligent dispute."); Religion, Violence, and the Fate of Civilization ("Religion raises the stakes of human conflict ..."); Conclusion ("Clearly, it is time we learned to meet our emotional needs without embracing the preposterous.").

I urge you to get a copy of this book and read it!

To quote Forrest Gump: "And that's all I have to say about that."

"Then there's Bush's slightly alarming claim to the Amish on July 9 (2004) that God speaks through him. That's what he said, God speaks through him. This raises some troubling prospects. First of all, I think God has a better grasp of subject-verb agreement than George W. Bush do. Also, when Bush changes his mind, as he frequently does, do we conclude that God had to rethink things after the polls came out?"

- Molly Ivins

Letter to the Editor

Just a note to take small issue with Prof. Diane Eck's comments, submitted by John Sherman, posted in the February *Rationalist*.

Prof. Eck states that "...in terms of numbers America is about 85% Christian."

I would suggest that any discourse, particularly from a professor of comparative religions, avoid those mushy, ambiguous terms such as Christianity, which like the words Democracy, Freedom, Liberty, etc., are often used because they conjure up a different concept in the mind of every reader or listener.

I guess my question to Prof. Eck and Mr. Sherman would be "What kind of Christians are those that comprise 85% of our population?"

Would those be ghost-believing Christians who actually mean what they are saying when they recite the apostle's creed? Would those be modern day communists who actually believe what Jesus said about wealth, greed, and the worship of Mammon? Would those be racially bigoted fundamentalists who actually believe that the Jews are God's chosen people?

I think each of us knows a few Christian True Believers who are certain that their take on Christianity is the right one – and the only right one. And since these Christian True Beliefs are often at odds with each other, and mostly at odds with the Jesus they claim to worship, if one were to come up with any clear and concise definition of Christianity, that specific definition would probably not apply to more than a scant few percent of our overall American population.

Most of my friends are what I would call secular Christians. They have a church affiliation, and they think of themselves generally as Christians, but they don't make a "religion" out of it. Christianity is, to most of them, a loosely social and ideological organization which is vaguely connected with prayer and birth and marriage and death. It's sort of like an insurance policy which is in place in case one comes to need it – but for the most part we Americans do not let the religious aspects of it get in the way of our making and spending money, indulging ourselves in luxurious hedonism, and sucking the blood out of our planet.

If it is that sort of Christian to which Prof. Eck refers, I think it's possible that a scientific survey might show half of Americans to be "Christians" but probably nothing near the 85% Prof. Eck suggests.

- **Mikko Cowdery**, Osakis,

MN

Monument Update

At recent RRTF meetings, we have discussed a project related to the Ten Commandments monument located on Fargo's City Hall Mall. You may recall that six of us took the City to court in an unsuccessful effort to have the Monument moved. Our current project is for Fargo to consider an alternative, or competing monument -- one that will cite a 1700's document challenging the commonly held view that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation. We are currently discussing this with City Commissioners. Members may call me for details.

- **Jon Lindgren**, Interim

President

The problem with writing about religion is that you run the risk

of offending sincerely religious people, and then they come after you with machetes. So I am going to be very sensitive here, which is not easy, because the thing about religion is that everybody else's appears stupid." (Dave Barry)

- Thanks to **Trana Rogne**

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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.

This month we will meet at the home of Davis Cope and Mary Cochran, 2935 Edgemont St., Fargo, for our Spring Equinox Party! It's potluck, but the essential item is an appetite!

DIRECTIONS: Edgemont St. is one block long, so directions are a little more relevant than usual. From downtown Fargo, take Broadway north to 29th Ave., turn right, then take the first left on Edgemont. 2935 is on the east side, a barn-red house with double garage. The Broadway & 29th intersection has a traffic light and the easily identifiable "witch's hat church", a notable example of Lutheran architecture.

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