

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

Form for Fundamentalists

Having to read books you disagree with is the curse of liberalism. For example, I read books on Fundamentalism and about Fundamentalism and by Fundamentalists, and there is no end to it, and I have The-Truth-of-the-Bible books offered me by well-meaning Fundamentalists. I'm perfectly willing, indeed interested, to read them, but I simply don't have time for all of them, so I thought I would try to control things a bit by asking that the offer be accompanied by a form. Here's my initial attempt with explanations:

(1) Does the author claim that God directly inspired the writers of the books of the Bible? (YES) (NO)
(If YES, give supporting page.)

(2) Does the author claim the Bible is inerrant with respect to description of events as well as teaching? (YES) (NO) (If YES, give supporting page.)

Unfortunately, claims that the Bible is inerrant have an odd way of drifting off that original point, so I have come to insist on that point being clearly stated and agreed on at the start.

(3) Does the author examine instances where the Bible gives two or more nontrivially discrepant accounts of the same event? (YES) (NO)

(If YES, give a sample list of at least two instances with Biblical references.)

There several reasons for this question. First, some truth-of-the-Bible books cite long lists of Bible verses that supposedly agree with bits of history or science; websites abound as well. For example, it is claimed that the Bible says the Earth is round, that ocean currents exist, that the Old Testament story of the walls of Jericho falling down agrees with archaeology, and so on. The argument that the occurrence of facts now known but not known at the time of writing is evidence of divine inspiration is potentially valid, but all the examples that I have seen distort the verses and, in some instances, get the history or science wrong. The approach is worthless as an argument for Biblical inerrancy because it ignores instances where the Bible does not agree with history and science. Books using this approach should produce a NO answer to (3). I'm still willing to talk with people about such arguments, but I find it embarrassing to have to explain elementary fallacies to a grown-up. Second, some truth-of-the-Bible books take a slightly higher approach acknowledging differences between the Bible and, say, science, but triumphantly claim that is because atheistic scientists attempt to discredit the Bible while True Science, done by creation scientists, supports Scripture. This argument occurs throughout creationist literature, and a book with this approach should produce a NO answer. Again, I'm willing to talk with people about such arguments, but I know that, by giving credence to such claims, they have no concept of the nature of scientific knowledge, no notion of it as tested knowledge, and so the discussion must include some explanation of what science is. Finally, there is one way of discussing inerrancy that is equally open to everyone, an equal playing field for atheist and evangelical alike, and that is the comparison of the Bible with itself. That is the discussion I wish to hold, so I look for a YES answer to (3).

A further reason for (3) is to insure that serious discrepancies are being discussed. Differences such as one verse saying 4,000 were killed while another says 40,000 are trivialities and reasonably explained as a transcription error; other difficulties might be due to something taken out of context, to ambiguities of translation or interpretation, etc. I'm not interested in trivialities, and the sample list is to convince me that the book's advocate understands the difference between trivial and nontrivial cases. It is also partial

protection against this: X and I disagree about some Biblical issue, he says it's true and I say it's false, and we go back-and-forth, back-and-forth for an hour or more, and X finally says something like, "Well, I can understand your point but, you know, this isn't really relevant to the basic Christian message." So it wise to establish at the beginning that we are discussing something nontrivial and relevant. (And I suggest "OK, give me a one paragraph written summary of the basic Christian message, and we'll talk about that." And don't accept a tract -- they deserve to have to write a paragraph.)

Incidentally, examples of nontrivial discrepancies would be the two different genealogies of Jesus in Matthew and Luke, various discrepancies in the Crucifixion and Resurrection accounts (such as two different days for the Crucifixion), and two different deaths for Judas in Matthew and Acts.

(4) Has the author simply presented "explanations" or is there some attempt at analysis? (YES) (NO) (In either case, briefly summarize the author's explanation for the two instances given in (3) and state what either the author or you consider its weakest point.) Nonfundamentalists seldom have any idea of how totally enclosing Fundamentalist culture is. The culture has its own schools and colleges, its own websites, its own radio and TV shows and magazines, and it churns out books. With respect to the Biblical difficulties, Fundamentalist "scholars" have an explanation for EVERYTHING. The issue is NOT whether they have an explanation. They will not only have one, they will have several (possibly contradictory). The real issue is whether the explanations make sense. The purpose of (4) is to get some idea of whether the book's advocate understands this point. Examples of such explanations are:

Standard Fundamentalist Explanation 0. The discrepant accounts are the result of mistranslation or misinterpretation.

Critique of 0. OK, find a Bible that translates it correctly, and we'll discuss it then.

Standard Fundamentalist Explanation 1. The discrepant accounts are all partial versions of a single underlying account.

Critique of 1. This claim can be easily tested. Combine the partial accounts into a single unified account, completely consistent with each of the partial ones, and examine the result. Has the author done this? (This is rarely done. When it is done, check whether the discrepant parts of the accounts have been omitted instead of included.)

Standard Fundamentalist Explanation 2. The discrepant accounts are a natural effect of human testimony. No two observers describe things in exactly the same way. The discrepancies are actually evidence of underlying truth.

Critique of 2. OK, the author advocates the principle that discrepant accounts are evidence of truth. Give one other example of human activity (outside Fundamentalist culture) where this principle can be applied (in law courts? in laboratories? in classrooms?).

(5) Does the author discuss the implications of his explanations with respect to point of this whole discussion, identified in questions (1) and (2)? (YES) (NO) (If YES, give at least one page number.)

For example, if the author uses Standard Fundamentalist Explanation 1, why is it that God, directly inspiring the writing, inspires the writer to leave out part of the description?

(6) Are my questions fair? Are my questions reasonable? If they are both fair and reasonable, why haven't you asked them for yourself?

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*

Debating Creationists

The above is the title of an article by Charles L. Rulon in the May/June issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*. Rulon, a professor emeritus of Long Beach City College, taught life sciences there for 34 years. He was asked to debate a scientist from the Discovery Institute regarding intelligent design. The article is the text of his opening remarks.

Prof. Rulon first expresses his mixed feelings about engaging in such a debate -- to debate "someone who still rejects the established fact of our biological evolution." Evolution, he goes on to say, "is a scientifically settled fact, as much so as the fact that our sun gives off heat. Thus, there's something surreal about this debate."

Rulon then notes the futility of trying to reason with creationists, saying that the only way they have so far been prevented from introducing their anti-evolution beliefs into public school science teaching has been "in court cases where their phony science has been exposed."

Rulon states that the only reason he takes part in this debate is his belief that science educators have a duty to "defend the scientific method from irrational attacks." He also feels a moral obligation toward those who are still undecided -- "whose minds haven't already been snapped shut by anti-evolution religious dogma."

Prof. Rulon then lists some reasons for science educators *not* to engage in such debates. First, he says, scientific fact is not derived through skilled oratory, but by application of the scientific method. He also points out that there is no such thing as bad publicity for creationists. If a scientist will debate them, it "proves" there is a scientific controversy; if he won't debate, it "proves" that he is running scared. A third reason not to debate is that creationists are able to churn out an endless amount of scientific misinformation, knowing that the student audience lacks the background and knowledge to refute it. A fourth reason is that a debate format allows each side equal time, thus perpetrating the idea that there is an actual scientific controversy. Also, these debates are publicity stunts to increase membership in Christian clubs on campuses.

Rulon says he is only present because of the large numbers of scientifically ignorant, politically active Christians who want to force their views on others "through our elected officials, our courts, and our schools."

Remember, he says, intelligent design was fabricated by a few Christian apologists to "discredit evolution and bring conservative Christian values into the classroom."

- Chuck Crane

Sister Monument Report

Your Executive Committee has been busy working to place the Freethinker's Sister Monument on Fargo's Municipal Mall, next to the Ten Commandments.

The Sister Monument will read in part, "THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES IS NOT IN ANY SENSE FOUNDED ON THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION."

Earlier this Spring, we appeared at a City Commission meeting to request an agreement in which the City would accept our Monument and display for its lifetime. The City Commission referred the matter to their City Attorney to meet with us. We have since met with him. Nothing changed as a result of the meeting. We anticipate approaching the City Commission in late May to again request an agreement. Thanks to all of you for your support on this project.

- Jon Lindgren

Speaking of the Ten Commandments

Mikko Cowdery, who provided us with such wonderful entertainment at the April meeting, has suggested that ten commandments are not enough. His own recommendations follow:

Thou shalt not rape.

Thou shalt not beat up on thy neighbor.

Thou shalt not hold humans in slavery.

Thou shalt not lie.

Thou shalt not poison thy neighbor's water, nor shalt thou pollute his air nor his food nor any part of thy neighbor's environment.

Thou shalt not infect thy neighbor with disease.

Thou shalt not impregnate thy neighbor without taking responsibility for thine act.

Thou shalt not waste thy life watching television.

Thou shalt not indulge thyself in luxury while others suffer in want.

Thou shalt not spoil thy children, for a spoiled child is an abomination.

Thou shalt not be cruel.

Thou shalt not be silent in the face of injustice.

The article in the *Fargo Forum* (April 16) on our meeting quoted some of Mikko's remarks on the commandments. This drew forth a letter to the Forum (April 22, I believe), chastising him for his lack of knowledge of graven images and of the Ten Commandments. Mikko has since sent a response to that letter.

All of us who attended the April meeting offer sincere thanks to Mikko Cowdery for some very enjoyable entertainment. I had several requests to print some of his lyrics in the newsletter and, with Mikko's permission, I am doing so in this issue.

- Chuck

Crane, Editor

Bombin' Nation

(This ditty is given freely into the public domain by its author, Mikko Cowdery)

Can you feel the deep frustration of the leaders of our nation
When they've been denied the vengeance that they crave?
You know they had to drop a bomb upon the palace of Saddam
Because they could not find Osama in his cave.

Bombin' Nation -- Bombin' Nation
What's the bombinest nation of 'em all?
The world's gonna have to trust us
Droppin' bombs for peace and justice
God help 'em when the bombs begin to fall.

We have got our flag unfurled and we're out to save the world
Gotta see the evil axis blown away
For this world requires protection from the tools of mass destruction
Unless, of course, they're made in the USA.

If Iran* is not preempted by our bombs they might be tempted
To build some weapons like the ones we use
So we'll have to drop a bomb upon the children of Islam
It's the decent, democratic thing to do.

Two hundred billion dollars would support a lot of scholars
It would buy a lot of health care for the poor
Or finance a revolution to eliminate pollution
If we hadn't gone and spent it on the war.

* Korea, Syria, Canada -- insert country of your choice.

Prayer

Harold R Rafton, Harvard 1911, was a chemist, an atheist, and a director of the American Humanist Association. I was surprised in 1958 when two of his letters on religion were published in "*Chemical and Engineering News*," *the news magazine of the American Chemical Society*.

On googling "Harvard Rafton" I found an interesting and sympathetic 1962 article from The Crimson on his talk to the Harvard Humanists. This prayer was quoted:

Holy Mother, I do believe
That without sin thou didst conceive;
And now, I pray, in thee believing,
That I may sin without conceiving.

- sent by

Bill Treumann

Whadda you suppose would Jesus do?

Listen Christian brother, if only we knew
Whadda you suppose would Jesus do?
Woody bee impressed by your treasures on earth?
Woody have a better way to calculate your worth?
Woody torment the poorest nations every day
While he prayed God blessing onna USA?
Didja hear the part in the sermon on the mount
Where he said you oughta have you a brokerage account
An' a mansion wiffa pool anna monster tee vee?
Brother tell yerself the truth an' it'll set you free
Aw, listen Christian brother, if only we knew
Whadda **you** suppose would Jesus do?

Between playin' and prayin' we raise a lotta fuss
But whadda ya s'pose would Jesus make of us?
Woody be impressed by the land of the free
With our booze and our drugs and pornography
With our drunken drivers and murder rate
Television Christians over-brimmin' with hate?
Would the Prince of Peace march us off to war
To meddle in the world or to settle a score?
Would a shepherd kill the sheep just to steal their fleece?
Woody bomb the little flockers in the name of peace?
Aw, listen Christian sister, if only we knew
Whadda **you** suppose would Jesus do?

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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.

This month's meeting will be on May 20 at the usual time and place. Our speaker will be Mark Chekola, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy, Minnesota State University, Moorhead. The Title of his presentation is "What is Happiness?: Some Answers from Philosophy and the Social Sciences."

A short summary of our speaker's background is provided in the column at the right.

Dr. Mark Chekola

Mark Chekola taught philosophy for 36 years at MSUM. His Ph.D dissertation, finished in 1974, was "The Concept of Happiness." It had some influence, without him knowing it, on some people in the social sciences who started focusing on happiness in the early 1980's. He returned to work on happiness about four years ago, and has participated in two international conferences, "The Paradoxes of Happiness in Economics" in 2003, and "Capabilities and Happiness" in 2005, both at the University of Milan in Italy.

Since 2003 he has been spending a month each year at Erasmus University in Rotterdam, the Netherlands, where there is a center devoted to happiness studies. The World Database of Happiness is housed there and he has been working on adding resources from philosophy to their bibliography.

Summer Solstice Party

Our annual summer potluck will be held at the home of Gerre and Chuck Crane at 502 Willow Drive in Alexandria on June 17 starting at 1:30 pm.

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.

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