

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

The *Fargo Forum* published a Thanksgiving Day column by Kathleen Parker under the title "Americans might want to say thanks to Christian evangelicals". My response is below. I like Ms. Parker because, although I seldom agree with her, she strikes me as honestly stating her own views (such as they are), no small achievement for anyone. Unfortunately, the Thanksgiving column seems to have been written under the emotional impact of the screening of a soon-to-be-released movie on slavery, which seems to have given Ms. Parker some incorrect historical information. If she had reflected a bit more, she might well have asked why she found herself going back 200 years to find a reason to be grateful to "Christian evangelicals".

Letter to the Editor (Fargo Forum):

Kathleen Parker (23 Nov.) says we should be grateful to Christian evangelicals because "It was, in fact, an evangelical Christian who led the movement to end slavery in the civilized world. His name was William Wilberforce, a British statesman who got himself elected to Parliament in 1780 at age 21, and soon began his crusade." Her information comes from a new movie "timed to coincide with the 200th anniversary of Britain's abolition of slavery."

Slavery had already been abolished in England in 1772. Ms. Parker confuses the "abolition of slavery" with the 1807 abolition of the slave trade in British colonies. Slavery in British colonies was not abolished until 1834.

We can be, and should be, grateful to all the individuals who worked for the abolition of slavery. The Quakers, who seem to have had a clear and united anti-slavery stand throughout their existence, deserve praise as a group. But "Christian evangelicals" do not deserve credit for the abolition of slavery because they, indeed, Christians of all kinds, were on both sides of the slavery issue. The Bible was used to argue FOR slavery as well as AGAINST slavery. In the United States, the issue split the Methodists into Northern and Southern groups in 1844 and split the Baptists in 1845, forming the Southern Baptist Convention.

The entire civilized world now regards slavery as wrong. The Bible does not. That is why it could be cited to support slavery. In Exodus, God sees the suffering of the Jews as Egyptian slaves and leads them to freedom in the Promised Land. Along the way, God provides His Own slavery laws, such as Ex.21:20-21: "When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment, for the slave is the owner's property." The New Testament takes slavery for granted. Slave and free are "one in Christ" but not in legal status. To use the Bible against slavery requires "interpretation".

The lesson of history for any group blessed with Absolute Scriptural Truth is that they may be too

inept and cantankerous to make sense of it. The Southern Baptist Convention apologized for its position on slavery. But the apology was in 1995, 150 years late. Its current practice indicates further apologies will appear around 2150.

“... Do Solemnly Swear

Keith Ellison, the Minnesota Democrat who is the first Muslim to be elected to Congress, didn't take long to become embroiled in a controversy. When he announced his intention to take his ceremonial oath of office with a Qur'an next month, the protectors of the American Theocracy swung into action.

Conservative talk-show host Dennis Prager led the charge, claiming the act “undermines American civilization.” Prager goes on to say that “insofar as a member of Congress taking an oath to serve America and uphold its values is concerned, American is interested in only one book, the Bible. If you are incapable of taking an oath on that book, don't serve in Congress.”

Prager, warming up to his subject, asked “Would they allow him to choose Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, the Nazi's bible for his oath?” and adding, “It is hard to imagine a scientologist being allowed to take his oath of office on a copy of *Dianetics* by L. Ron Hubbard.”

I found this uproar especially amusing in that, at our last Freethinker's meeting, someone brought up the question of whether Ellison would choose the Bible or the Qur'an for his swearing in. After some good-natured discussion, we concluded that it really didn't make much difference which he used.

It was mentioned that the U.S. Constitution requires no swearing on any text whatsoever, thus protecting atheists and agnostics. In fact the Constitution specifically states “The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the members of the several state legislatures, and all executive and judicial officers, both of the United States and of the several states, shall be bound by oath or affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

Prager reads a much more sinister intent, however, saying “Ellison's taking the oath on the Qur'an will embolden Islamic extremists and make new ones, as Islamists, rightly or wrongly, see the first sign of the realization of their greatest goal -- **the Islamicization of America.**”

Prager's rants are just the tip of the iceberg. One could spend many hours on the internet ferreting out similar ridiculous comments.

- **Chuck Crane**

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*

Open Letter to a Christian Liberal

I recently received an e-mail from my old friend., Lee Paulson. Some of Lee's comments are in this newsletter from time to time. Lee is pretty much a liberal in most things; he admits that most of the Old Testament doesn't make much sense, but he loves the Jesus. He claims that many of his friend are atheists and agnostics, but occasionally he will viciously turn upon us. Witness his e-mail:

Chuck, I double dare you to print my response to one of your articles in the next issue of THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST, where dissent or deviation from Fundamentalist Atheism is not to be tolerated in any pages I have ever read to this date!!!!

He continues with a diatribe about Communish in Russia, China, etc. implying, as usual, that all would have been wonderful with these regimes had they not espoused atheism. Now, Lee concludes:

I do believe that under the leadership offered by atheistic leaders to date one might come to the conclusion that atheism as well as religion is the opiate of the people!!!

Then a rather puzzling statement:

I believe as well that an absolute belief in the reliability of human reason began to lose its authority with the close of the Age of Enlightenment and such a high regard is no longer attributed to reason by modern science as it once was during the period of history that you most admire. That too is of a former age and in the distant past, my friend.

And, winding up:

I would expect a free thinking publication to live up to its name and present both sides to an argument, not just one as lopsided as I discover in each issue . . . Now if these comments find their way into your publication, I will cheerfully renew my subscription!!!

Lee Paulson

Defender of the Faith

My response:

Lee, First let me say that I have never been bullied into printing anything in the newsletter -- nor have I been "double-dared" since elementary school. I am baffled by your claim that "never have you read any dissent or deviation from Fundamentalist Atheism." (I'm sure you were excited about this, 'cause you used a whole lot of exclamation points!!!!

Since you do receive every issue, that last claim makes me wonder if you ever read them. Or, are you like some Christians who claim to believe in the Bible but have obviously never read it. In looking over my files, I find numerous book reviews -- some dealing with books on religion, but others on such books as *Huck Finn and the Virginian*; there was recently a serialized treatment of an original screenplay that dealt with racism; there have been articles on women's issues, social issues, political commentary, current events, poetry, quips and quotes from many sources, and letters from those with differing views.

Most interesting, in light of your comments, is that I have printed at least five (5) articles by one Lee Paulson (!) So I fail to see how you can make your statement about "no dissent or deviation."

Now, I double-dog dare *you*, Lee, to deny that you have seriously misstated the facts in you opening sentence.

If you have read our credo, printed on the final page of every issue, it states that “We are a group of non-religious people skeptical of religious dogma. We advocate intellectual freedom and the use of Reason.” Why, then, would you *not* expect a certain amount our content to be skeptical of religion? As stated by Bill Treumann in his commentary “Who’s One-Sided?” (Red River Rationalist, November, 2006), “I don’t see space devoted to the freethinker position in any Christian publications and I fail to see why they should provide any.”

Your appellation of “Fundamental Atheism” intrigues me. Since an atheist is, by definition, one who denies the existence of a god or gods. what would your definition of a “non-fundamentalist atheist” be? I have this image of a scientist with an elaborate experiment -- except for one step that can’t be proven. Aha! (he says). Here’s where a miracle occurs!

I do have an offer for you, Lee. I have written a poem outlining my view of the historical development of religion, which I am e-mailing you. If you will get it published in a Christian publication, I will gladly publish your letter in full.

- **Chuck Crane, editor**

What is the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar?

It is commonly assumed in the United States that the motivation for any group advocating public discussion is necessarily propaganda, proselytizing, and advancing a private agenda.

SRLS is an informal discussion group for controversial topics in science, religion, pseudoscience, and pseudoreligion. It has met regularly since Spring 2000, and the public is welcome. The creation-evolution controversy is a central, but by no means the only, topic. The Management actively seeks the presentation and discussion of a wide variety of views as well as involvement by the community. Speakers may be scientists, ministers, students, faculty, theists, atheists, creationists, evolutionists, etc. Discussion is valued. To encourage it, speakers have a standard limit of 40 minutes to allow time for questions and comments.

The motivation for SRLS is that public discussion of controversial subjects is most valuable when opposing ideas meet. Consequently, whatever your point of view, if you have not been irritated by SRLS, you have not attended enough meetings.

The Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar is sponsored by the NDSU College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences, by the NDSU Society of Physics Students, and by Red River Freethinkers. Claims made and views expressed are not necessarily those of the sponsors and are not the responsibility of the sponsors.

Specific Announcements:

*14 December 2006. 7:00 PM. Plains Art Museum. Philosophy for All Fargo/Moorhead.

Andrew Chen presents "We are Blog: Implications of Viewing the Blogosphere as a System."

Consider what happens when the network of blogs (blogosphere) is viewed as a system. Does this make bloggers merely "cogs in the machine"? Or does it somehow mean that the system will come to reflect human nature, for better or for worse? In this guided discussion, in addition to allowing the audience to discuss these questions, the presenter will humbly try to suggest that it is neither of these extremes, but instead, a little bit of both.

*30 January 2007. Noon. Family Life Center 320. Gerald Fauske. (First SRLS talk for the Spring semester. Title to be announced)

*Spring Semester. John Helgeland (History and Religious Studies, NDSU) will give an evening course on the New Testament, meeting 5:00 - 7:30 pm Thursdays.

*February 2007 (approx.). Mark Gealy (Physics Department, Concordia College) will be giving a Communi-versity Course discussing Intelligent Design Creationism. Further information will be provided as available. (Mark will review Colin Patterson's book.)

The Road Less Traveled

There are two ways: The narrow way along which the selfish go in single file, not wide enough for husband and wife to walk side by side while children clasp their hands. The narrow road over the desert of superstition "with here and there a traveler." The narrow grass-grown path, filled with flints and broken glass, bordered by thistles and thorns, where the twice-born limping walk with bleeding feet. If by this path you see a flower, do not pick it. It is a temptation. Beneath its leaves a serpent lies. Keep your eyes on the new Jerusalem. Do not look back for wife or child or friend. Think only of saving your own soul. You will be just as happy in heaven with all you love in hell. Believe, have faith, and you will be rewarded for the goodness of another. Look neither to your right or left. Keep on, straight on, and you will save your worthless, withered, selfish soul.

This is the narrow road that leads from earth to the Christian's heartless heaven.

There is another way -- the broad road. Give me the wide and ample way, the way broad enough for us all to go together. The broad way where the birds sing, where the sun shines and the streams murmur. The broad way, through the fields where the flowers grow, over the daisied slopes where sunlight, lingering, seems to sleep and dream.

Let us go the broad way with the great world, with science and art, with music and the drama, with all that thrills, thrills, refines and calms.

Let us go the wide road with husband and wife, with children and friends and with all there is of joy and love between the dawn and dusk of life's strange day.

- **Robert Ingersoll** (1833 - 1899)

Sent by **Roger Campbell**, Fargo

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“I support separation of church and state, not because I dislike religion, but because I treasure it. My faith is important to me, and I’m happy to share it with others when asked. I can’t imagine anything worse than the government deciding to ‘help’ me spread my faith. In fact, the government trying to promote faith even in seemingly benign ways -- by stamping ‘In God We Trust’ on our money or slipping ‘Under God’ into the Pledge of Allegiance, for example -- only trivializes faith.

“I want a Religious Right Christian to answer these questions: When, in the history of the world, has the union of church and state ever been a good thing? Will you please name even one instance where such a combination improved the lot of the church and led to a real flowering of religious liberty for all? I’m not holding my breath for an answer.”

(From an interview with **The Reverend Barry Lynn** in Free Inquiry, Dec. 2006/Jan. 2007)

Memberships Due for 2007

If you haven't recently renewed your membership or n/l subscription please check below.

Your contributions are the only source of income for this organization. Without your continued support, we will no longer be able to continue producing and distributing this newsletter.

Individual Membership \$30/year

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Newsletter only \$10/year

Send dues, along with name, address, phone number, and e-mail address

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_____Your membership for 2007 has been paid.

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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.

For 17 December 2006, we will have our traditional potluck party celebrating the Winter Solstice as a purely astronomical event! No yodeling this year, please. The public is welcome. Please join us for interesting discussion, information sharing, gossip, and food!

* * * * *

*Faith is an irrational belief
in something
that is logically impossible*

From the TV series *Bones*, which features a forensic anthropologist.

Collateral Damage

“In announcing his veto of the bill allowing stem cell research, [President George W.] Bush characteristically chose to make it a nauseating photo opportunity. He surrounded himself with ‘snowflake’ children, even taking one in his arms for the big climax in the photo op. Let us hope the resulting heartwarming photograph will comfort and console the bereaved in Iraq and Lebanon. Never mind that you have lost your wives and your children: at least the world is in the hands of a man who is pro-life.”

- Richard Dawkins

Free inquiry (Dec. 2006/Jan. 2007)

“If one thought rationally about mortality, one would realize that there was nothing but oblivion after death, and that what is not trouble when it arrives is an idle worry in anticipation. It is senseless to alarm oneself about a state which one could never experience.

- **Epicurus** (341 - 270 B.C.)

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