

Red River Rationalist

No. 84 - February, 2006

redriverfreethinkers.org

MUST DECLINE PRAIRIE ROSES

Davis Cope

[The following letter to the editor was sent to the *Fargo Forum* January 25, 2006 in response to an editorial that awarded the plaintiffs in the Ten Commandments case "Prairie Roses" for being sensible enough not to appeal the decision against us, which allowed Fargo's monument to remain in place. It was printed in the January 29 issue]

The Fargo Forum recently awarded "Prairie Roses" to the plaintiffs in Fargo's Ten Commandments case for deciding not to appeal the judgment to leave the monument in place. I was one of the plaintiffs and must decline the Prairie Roses.

Fargo has a Ten Commandments monument on its Civic Center Mall. Separation of church and state implies that this public space should be neutral towards religion. The presence of such monuments on public property has been found unconstitutional in the past. When such a decision was in the news in 2001, Fargo's mayor was asked whether the monument would be moved. He replied that no one had requested it. So we did. Between August 2001 and October 2002, Red River Freethinkers made three requests to the City Commission to move the monument from public to private property.

When the City Commission refused our second request in the summer of 2002, the Forum wrote that, if RRF didn't like it, we should take it to court. We did. A religious monument on public property is a First Amendment issue. It is a Bill of Rights issue, a civil rights issue. It is, literally, a federal case. We took the issue to the Clinical Education Program of the UND Law School, and our case was accepted under their Civil Rights Project. From the fall of 2002 to the fall of 2005, our case was handled as a project by successive teams of law students. They worked on a constitutional issue, they practiced in federal court, and they provided superbly professional and competent counsel.

The issue is easily distorted. Some judge it trivial because the cost of moving the monument is trivial. But the issue is interpretation of the First Amendment: where is the church-state boundary to be drawn? The trivial cost is exactly what made this an ideal test case. It is a question of principle unclouded by side issues. The Forum claims the issue is a matter of tolerance and attacks us as whiny atheists complaining about religious displays. But there was no complaint about temporary use of religious property and no complaint about religious displays on private property. Of course, the Forum may regard City Hall as the Forum's private property and may view our request as criticism of its private lawn ornament, in which case the Forum's indignation is understandable. But the actual issue is the interpretation of the First Amendment concerning a permanent religious statement embedded in concrete on public property.

Our request caused much controversy and "static". That reaction is a reminder that our society is dysfunctional with respect to religion. The "static" is the problem. Our request is not.

The case was filed in Federal District Court in November 2002, heard after numerous stays in March 2005, and decided against us in September.

An appeal cannot be based merely on disagreement with the District Court's decision. It must raise valid points about the Court's reasoning: choice of precedents, interpretation, etc. But the September decision is based on an August decision by the Circuit Court allowing a monument to remain on public property in Nebraska. We would therefore have to appeal in the face of a new precedent just set in this Circuit and applied to our case. We might appeal nonetheless, lose, and then appeal to the Supreme Court. But the August decision is based in turn on the Supreme Court's June decision allowing a monument to remain on public property in Texas. We would be appealing in the face of new precedents set over the past few months from the Supreme Court down. Those precedents specifically reject the 1971 Supreme Court decision that had been a standard test in such First Amendment cases. The new precedents replace it with ad hoc criteria designed to let "passive monuments" remain on public property. The decision not to appeal is simply our recognition that it is pointless to proceed in the face of this sudden shift in the First Amendment's interpretation. It is our decision, not our choice.

My position is that public space should be neutral towards religion. That position is clear, simple, fair. That was my position at the beginning of this case, that is my position now. I and my fellow plaintiffs maintained that position in federal court for three years, and it took a 5-4 Supreme Court decision to crack the First Amendment enough to make us lose. When we lost, every citizen depending on the Bill of Rights lost with us. The law has changed its position. I have not changed mine, and I reject the Forum's Prairie Roses and any other implication that my position has changed.

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*

It Takes Courage

Are you a freethinker? An unambiguous definition of a freethinker is "a person who forms opinions about religion on the basis of reason, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief."

According to most polls, which report that 10 - 15% of the population do not believe in a god or gods*, there must be well over 10,000 non-believers in the Fargo-Moorhead area and approximately that many potential members for Red River Freethinkers. Why, then, do we have only a fraction of one percent of this number as members?

I believe that most freethinkers hesitate to "come out of the closet" because they're reluctant to face the disapproval of friends and relatives - the majority of whom profess to be religious. This reluctance is very understandable, especially in today's climate of an emboldened and militant religious right, led by a fundamentalist chief executive. It takes a lot of courage to openly state that you are non-religious to those whose knee-jerk reaction is to equate religion with goodness and morality (and, conversely, non-religion with evil and immorality).

If the truth be known, most of your friends and neighbors acquired their religion, without any

conscious thought, from their parents - who acquired theirs the same way. The dogma, rituals, stories, myths, and songs were assimilated as part of growing up. Their acquaintance with the "good book" was mainly what was spoon-fed to them by their pastor or priest - a very few of them have ever actually read the Bible (though all claim to know what it says). Having accepted as gospel (pun intended) many rather fantastic ideas, these people become defensive and feel threatened by anyone who dares question their beliefs.

If all these good folks are content and happy in their beliefs, is there any reason we should challenge them? Yes! There are several. Consider that, while most churchgoers are happy to make use of the latest technological and scientific advances, many are woefully ignorant about science. They are thus all too likely to go along when fundamentalist groups try to insert religion into school science studies, hamper medical and scientific research, set back women's reproductive rights, or legislate discrimination against certain citizens (just to name a few). Historically, religion has been the enemy of science and it is vital that we keep the two separate.

So we, the non-religious, need to have the courage of our convictions. It will not always be easy. There may be some personal cost, especially if you own a business or have political aspirations. If you become too outspoken, you will be vilified by some and (all too commonly) invited to leave the U.S. and move to some "Satanist" country. But, the alternative is to allow our country to continue to slide toward becoming a theocracy and be dictated to by whichever sect is in power.

So, if you are one of the 10,000, take the step to attend a meeting of some group like the Red River Freethinkers. Check the website for links to like-minded groups and publications. Contact us for more information. You don't have to become an activist, but you'll find it inspiring to be in contact with others who share your views.

- Chuck Crane, editor

* The 10 - 15% reported by polls represents those who answer "No" when asked "Do you believe in God?" However, when the question is phrased "Do you believe in a personal God who intercedes in human affairs and is responsive to prayers?" the "No" responses approach 30%.

[Postscript: Whenever I presume to write an "editorial," I'm reminded of the following quote by John Kenneth Galbraith: "I'm deeply accustomed to giving advice that is not heard. That shouldn't keep anybody from doing it, because even unwelcome advice can cause a certain amount of public annoyance. Even if you don't succeed in reform, you succeed in making enough people angry to make it worthwhile. Even if I don't expect that identifying something wrong, something insane, is a solution, I'm prepared to irritate for its own sake." CC]

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Coming Attraction

Wednesday, 19 April, at the Fargo Theatre: **DAVID SEDARIS**, the national best selling author and NPR regular. "One of America's most prickly, and most delicious, young comic talents." *The Washington Post*. Tickets available at all TICKETMASTER outlets 701-235-7171. Tickets also available at the Fargo Theatre Box Office during regular business hours.

Memberships Due for 2006

For most of you, your memberships to Red River Freethinkers for 2006 are due this month.

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
Family Membership \$45/year
Student Membership \$15/year
Newsletter only \$10/year

Send dues, along with name, address, phone number, and e-mail address to: Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405

_____ Your membership for 2006 has been paid.
_____ You are not yet a member for 2006

THE ORIGINAL SWINGING SOCIETY

Apes have a very low crime rate.
They pay no taxes,
never go to war, never go into debt.
They have no population explosion
nor any threatened food shortage.
No one has to spend big ad dollars to tell them,
"Never put bananas in the refrigerator."
They don't need a beautification program
because they don't spoil their surroundings.
They don't pollute their air; don't waste their water.

Their government is a model of efficiency and simplicity.
True, they don't have Scotch whiskey, cellophane,
jet planes, ice cubes or pro football, but
they have established a balanced equilibrium
with their natural environment.

A million years ago, an ape-like creature
came swinging out of the trees and said,
"I'm going to stand on two feet,
call myself Man,
and build a better world."
Isn't it time we got started?

- Author unknown, sent by Lee

Paulson

An Atheist's Perspective on Salvation

[Quotes from an address given at the World Religions Conference (Oct. 1, 2005) by Dan Barker, co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.]

"Atheism is a philosophical position, a world view that disbelieves or denies the existence of god(s). Atheism has no creeds, rituals, holy book, moral code, origin, myth, sacred spaces or shrines, It has no sin, divine judgement, forbidden words, prayer, worship, prophecy, group privileges, or anointed "holy" leaders. Atheists don't believe in a transcendent world or supernatural afterlife.

"Most important, there is no orthodoxy in atheism. We atheists do not expect conformity of thought or action. To freethinkers, allowing for differences of opinion is a sign of health....

"Atheists are simply people without theism....

"... We champion reason as the only tool of verifiable knowledge. For morality, most atheists follow humanism, a set of natural principles (not rules) that help us think about how to live...

"We atheists possess 'salvation' not because we are released from a sentence, but because we don't deserve the punishment in the first place. We have committed no 'sin.'...

"... Only those who consider themselves 'sinners' need this kind of 'salvation.' It's a religious solution to a religious problem."

- from *Freethought*

Today January/February 2006

Bible Verse

Another in our series of limericks to help make Bible study more fun:

*Lot would not let the Sodomites in,
'Cause for men to rape men was a sin.
"Please now, don't be such rotters -
"Take my two virgin daughters,"
Offered Lot - with a wink and a grin.*

(Genesis 19:5-8)

For readers who don't have their Bible handy, the appropriate Bible passages are herewith appended:

19:5 And they called unto Lot, and said unto him, where are the men

which came in to thee this night? bring them out unto us, that we may know them.

19:6 And Lot went out at the door unto them, and shut the door after him,

19:7 And said, I pray to you, brethren, do not so wickedly.

19:8 Behold now, I have two daughters which have not known man; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes; only unto these men do nothing; for therefore came they under the shadow of my roof.

Readers of RRR are encouraged to submit their own favorite passages from the Bible (preferably KJV) in the form of a limerick.

Ingersoll was an Optimist

Some quotes from Robert Ingersoll:

“Christianity has declined. The flames of faith are flickering, zeal is cooling and even bigotry is beginning to see the other side. ...The dogma of eternal pain is no longer believed by the reasonably intelligent. People who have a sense of justice know that eternal revenge cannot be enjoyed by infinite goodness. They know that hell would make heaven impossible. ...Men and women who know something of the history of man, of the horrors of plague, famine and flood, of earthquake, volcano and cyclone, of religious persecution and slavery, have but little confidence in special providence. They do not believe that a prayer was ever answered...

"Christianity does not satisfy the brain and heart. It contains too many absurdities. It is unphilosophic, unnatural, impossible. Not to resist evil is moral suicide. To love your enemies is impossible. To desert wife and children for the sake of heaven is cowardly and selfish. To threaten torture for honest unbelief is infamous. Christianity is declining because men and women are growing better."

[Note that the above was written before 1930. I fear that the "Great Agnostic" would not rest easy could he see today's blustering by the militant, fundamentalist, evangelistic, poselytizing, bigoted, religious right neo-cons. 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.

Next meeting is **Sunday, February 19 at 2:30 - 4:30 p.m.** at the Unitarian Universalist Church and we will discuss the possibility of constructing our meetings as a "Critical Discussion Group," a format popular with many humanist and atheist groups.

Bumper Sticker

Can't We Impeach Cheney First??

SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND LUNCH SEMINAR

Spring Semester 2006

North Dakota State University

Updated 02/27/2006.

Meadow Lark Room = Memorial Union 342/343.

University Chamber = Memorial Union 349.

Plains Room = Memorial Union 350.

[A campus map can be found in the local telephone directory.]

24 Jan. Meadow Lark. John Pexton: Review of "The Non-Existence of God" by Nicholas Everitt._
31 Jan. University Chamber. Davis Cope: Creationism as a Bad Example for Students - Fallacies of Argument and Analysis._
7 Feb. Meadow Lark. Paul Froeschle: How Heresy Becomes Gospel._
14 Feb. University Chamber. Creation Instruction Association (video): Scientific Evidences of a Young Earth.
21 Feb. University Chamber. Martin Wishnatsky: What Darwin Thought About God: The Influence of Theology upon Science.
28 Feb. Meadow Lark. Davis Cope: Creationism as a Bad Example for Students - Case Study: The Age of the Earth. Part I.
7 Mar. Meadow Lark. Davis Cope: Creationism as a Bad Example for Students - Case Study: The Age of the Earth. Part II.
21 Mar. Meadow Lark. John Helgeland: De-mythologizing Scripture.
28 Mar. University Chamber. Dennis Cooley: Does Liberalism Lead to Relativism in Science and Religion?
4 Apr. Meadow Lark. [Presentation on Islam.]
11 Apr. University Chamber. Gerald Fauske: Review of "The Evolution of a Creationist" by Jobe Martin.
18 Apr. Meadow Lark. Kris Groberg: [On the Russian Orthodox Church.]

The Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar has been sponsored by Red River Freethinkers since spring 2000.

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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

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