

# Red River Rationalist

No. 83 - January, 2006  
redriverfreethinkers.org

## OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

Bertrand Russell. "What is an Agnostic?" in Leo G. Rosten (ed.), *Religions of America: Ferment and Faith in an Age of Crisis* (1975).

Leo G. Rosten, author of such treasures as *The Joys of Yiddish* and *The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N*, published *A Guide to the Religions of America* in 1955 and continued with expanded and updated versions. He asked Catholics and Jews, Methodists and Mormons, etc. to define their religion, providing a list of basic questions to allow common areas for comparison. I was reminded of Rosten recently by an appendix to *The New Quotable Einstein*, which includes a newly discovered journal by Johanna Fantova, a young woman who was a friend of Einstein's and kept a record of phone conversations with him over the last couple of years of his life. Here's a sample from the end of 1953:

December 20. Went to a wedding in New York, which he found too extravagant and lavish. The best thing about it was that the rabbi gave a very short but good speech. December 21. Says he had a good day today because he did not have to attend a wedding. Asked about [Fantova's] Christmas plans. December 22. Read Bertrand Russell's article, "What Is an Agnostic?" [reprinted in Leo Rosten's *Religions in America*]. Expressed admiration for Russell. December 27. As always on Sundays, listened to Howard K. Smith on the radio; found his commentary outstanding, as usual. December 31. Has a bad cold, but still received some company for New Year's Eve. Read Bertrand Russell's article on religion to his visitors; considers Russell the best of the living writers.

But back to Russell. The rest of this article will be quotes from "What is an Agnostic?" except for a couple of bracketed comments by me.

### ARE AGNOSTICS ATHEISTS?

No. An atheist, like a Christian, holds that we can know whether or not there is a God. The Christian holds that we can know there is a God; the atheist, that we can know there is not. The agnostic suspends judgment, saying that there are not sufficient grounds either for affirmation or for denial.

At the same time, an agnostic may hold that the existence of God, though not impossible, is very improbable, he may even hold it so improbable that it is not worth considering in practice. ...

[There's a bit of a terminology issue here: Russell says Christians hold the existence of God is a matter of knowledge, not belief or faith, while I suppose liberal Christians would say it is a matter of belief. I regard my atheism as a matter of belief, not knowledge, so I guess that makes me a liberal atheist. DC]

### DOES AN AGNOSTIC BELIEVE IN A HEREAFTER, IN HEAVEN OR HELL?

The question whether people survive death is one as to which evidence is possible. Psychical research and spiritualism are thought by many to supply such evidence.

An agnostic, as such, does not take a view about survival unless he thinks that there is evidence one way or the other.

For my part, I do not think there is any good reason to believe that we survive death, but I am open to conviction if adequate evidence should appear.

Heaven and hell are a different matter. Belief in hell is bound up with the belief that the vindictive punishment of sin is a good thing, quite independently of any reformatory or deterrent effect that it may have. Hardly any agnostic believes this. ...

[Note the emphasis on evidence. Thomas Henry Huxley, who coined the word, somewhere defines agnosticism as the position that it is immoral to make objective claims of truth without objective evidence in support. He apparently cited the Resurrection as an example of an objective claim without objective evidence, causing quite an uproar. DC]

#### HOW DO AGNOSTICS EXPLAIN THE BEAUTY AND HARMONY OF NATURE?

I do not understand where this "beauty" and "harmony" are supposed to be found. Throughout the animal kingdom, animals ruthlessly prey upon each other. Most of them are either cruelly killed by other animals or slowly die of hunger. For my part, I am unable to see any very great beauty or harmony in the tapeworm. Let it not be said that this creature is sent as a punishment for our sins, for it is more prevalent among animals than among humans. ...

#### ARE YOU NEVER AFRAID OF GOD'S JUDGMENT IN DENYING HIM?

Most certainly not. I also deny Zeus and Jupiter and Odin and Brahma, but this causes me no qualms. ...

#### WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE TO THE AGNOSTIC?

I feel inclined to answer by another question: What is the meaning of "the meaning of life"? I suppose what is intended is some general purpose.

I do not think that life in general has any purpose. It just happened. But individual human beings have purposes, and there is nothing in agnosticism to cause them to abandon these purposes. They cannot, of course, be certain of achieving the results at which they aim; but you would think ill of a soldier who refused to fight unless victory was certain.

The person who needs religion to bolster up his own purposes is a timorous person, and I cannot think as well of him as of the man who takes his chances while admitting that defeat is not impossible.

#### DO AGNOSTICS THINK THAT SCIENCE AND RELIGION ARE IMPOSSIBLE TO RECONCILE?

The answer turns upon what is meant by "religion." If it means merely a system of ethics, it can be

reconciled with science. If it means a system of dogma, regarded as unquestionably true, it is incompatible with the scientific spirit, which refuses to accept matters of fact without evidence and also holds that complete certainty is hardly ever attainable.

***"It is for the good of the state that man should be deluded by religion."***

MARCUS TERENTIUS VARRO  
(116 - 27 B.C.)

## **Heart of the Beholder**

(A review of the movie of that title shown at the November meeting by Tom Ebacher)

When I was in my late teenage years one of the truths I stumbled on was that beauty was in the eye of the beholder. I had learned that the only way I can judge beauty is by what I value. When I first heard of this movie, because of the similarity in the name with the common truth, I was intrigued. A group trying to produce a movie approached me asking for money. It seemed a sincere effort and although I did contribute, my contribution was returned due to difficulties with the religious right and legal issues foiling their efforts. In spite of the difficulties, they persisted and have finally produced a movie.

*The Heart of the Beholder* was produced by Darlene Lieblich. It is a true story of Ken and Carol Tipton who were starting a video rental business in the 1970's. Christian right groups who were locally active in the St. Louis area asked them to remove several videos from their stores. When Ken and Carol refused, their stores were picketed, their child threatened and they were repeatedly harassed in a variety of ways.

Eventually their business was ruined. After struggling with the issues, Ken sought out the cause of his troubles and found that the Christian right group was not only being used by the developer who eventually bought his video stores but the group leader was involved in the fire bombings of the local women's health clinic. He also found out that the district attorney was pressured into pressing charges against them because of his misappropriation of funds and involvement with the local hookers. Ken found a way to get even.

The Heart of the beholder is a compelling story and well worth the time to watch it. It has now taken "Best Film" in 5 film festivals. Darlene Lieblich continues to enter the film in other film festivals in the hopes of building enough of an audience to be accepted in the local theater circuits. It can be purchased now by visiting their website <http://www.beholder.com> for about \$20. Get your copy today!

**- Tom Ebacher**

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"War ... creates, insidiously, a common morality for all sides. It poisons everyone who is engaged in it, however different they are in many ways, turns them into killers and torturers, as we are seeing now. It pretends to be concerned with toppling tyrants, and may in fact do so, but the people it kills are the victims of the tyrants. It appears to cleanse the world of evil, but that does not last, because its very nature spawns more evil. Wars, like violence in general ... is a drug. It gives a quick high, the thrill of victory, but that wears off and then comes despair."

(Howard Zinn. *After the War*, an article in *The Progressive*, January, 2006).

## Is Life Really Improbable?

Hi, Michael\* - so you think life is too complex to be the result of "mere chance." Well, many people believe that about two millennia ago a young man died to atone for the sins you had not yet committed. He lived about 80 or 90 generations ago. In his day, what was the probability that you would ever be born? Looking back just ten generations, you had about 1000 ancestors with about 500 yet to be born. Some may have to be counted twice; Edward VII had only six great-grandparents. Going back 20 generations you had about a million living ancestors, but there may be quite a bit of duplication. There certainly is if we go back 30 generations because your calculated billion ancestors is more than the total population of the world during the crusades.

A bus company reported that it served a million passengers during the previous year, regarding a person who rode a hundred times as 100 passengers. Adopting the same approach, 40 generations back would correspond to a trillion ancestors, 50 generations to a quadrillion; 60: a quintillion, i.e., 10 raised to the 18th power,  $10^{18}$ , 1 followed by 18 zeros. This is fantastic enough; let's not bother to go way back to the 90th.

We can be precise about one aspect of your human ancestors: half were male; half female. Starting with the birth of your younger parent, what was the probability of their getting together? If they lived in a tiny villiage, perhaps one in ten; if active travelers, maybe one in ten million. To be conservative, let's choose 1/10 and multiply it by two tiny fractions. At birth, your mother had about two million oocytes, only one of which could have lead to you. But your father would produce perhaps a trillion spermatozoa before joining his ancestors. So at your mother's birth the a priori odds against YOU were more than 20 quintillion to one. As we go further back we should reduce new odds because of shorter male lives and the overlapping of remote ancestors. The former is not serious and the latter is of little importance until we get back more than, say, ten generations. But let's be generous and cut the odds in half, to  $10^{19}$  to one.

Now what about your parents' chances? The starting odds against each of them may also be taken as  $10^{19}$ . To be less tedious, I'm going to omit "to one against" and "one out of." Cubing that for you gives us  $10^{57}$ . You were inconceivable in more ways than one - but we're just getting started. Using  $10^{19}$  for each of your four grandparents gives us  $10^{76} \times 10^{57}$  or  $10^{133}$ , vastly more than a googol!\*\* Let's not bother going back any further; it's obvious that preposterously improbable events do occur -

and at every moment!

You say that life could not have been an accident. It's true that there is only a tiny chance that life began on some specific planet (or even a large moon) circling one of the innumerable stars in one of the vast number of galaxies in one of perhaps many universes. Only one universe, did you object? But if our own universe started with a big bang was that a unique event? Might there be a vast number of other universes too remote from each other for mutual awareness to be possible? Did you ask how in all probability we could be in the right spot to observe the outcome? But where else would we be?

But back to "mere chance." As a first approximation, consider a random planet orbiting a random star in a random galaxy in a random universe. The probability that life has never existed there is very slightly less than unity. But to consider the big question we must raise that fraction to the power equal to the fantastically large number of all planets. Is the resulting probability of no-life small? Is the possibility of life having occurred by "mere chance," perhaps more than once, actually probable?

**- Bill Treumann**

[Notes: \* - Michael may refer to Michael Behe, a biochemist who wrote a book saying that the complexity of some living things proves that they did not arise by "mere chance." \*\* - Googol is the name for the number one followed by one hundred zeroes.]

## **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**

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**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**

## Concern Over Trifles?

Concern over the posting of the Ten Commandments in public places, the use of Christmas in the public sphere, the mention of God in the pledge of allegiance, and so on, is understandable and worthy of due diligence is its monitoring. However, these things fit into the category of trifles.

Human affairs are hardly fully rational in the wide breadth of their expression and the following of any and all lines of thought to their logical conclusions will bring us to absurdities and unintended consequences. We could utterly ban the presence of religious sentiments in the public arena in an effort to keep the government out of danger of establishing religion and end up with such foolishness as banning religious programming on radio and television because they are public air waves.

Human beings are cracked pots, faulty switches, and broken pipes. We are all capable of the most egregious errors and abuse of our fellows and so it behooves us to exercise grace and good will in the allowance of each other's freedoms. If they want to hang the Koran or the Gitas in the Courthouse it is of little moment. Forcing my kids to go to Mosque, synagogue, or church would be another matter. Vastly more substance comes to bear here. Requiring me by law to pay the support of the local preacher bites harder. Enforcing a religious loyalty oath to hold public office twists my arm. But passive public expressions that no one is required to venerate can only qualify as trifles.

- Mark Weise

[Editors note: Mark Weise is a friend and a recent subscriber to the Red River Rationalist. He is also lay pastor of a small Baptist Church. I appreciate his input and can understand the point he makes in his letter, but would disagree with some particulars. I'm sure other readers may have some views on this.]

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"Unlike scientists, the general public does not understand that belief takes no part in scientific thinking. ... Unfortunately, most Americans have little or no idea of the mass of evidence that substantiates evolution. Thus, when an eloquent proponent of creationism who possesses apparently scientific credentials tells them that evolution is false, or inadequate, or blindly accepted dogma, they do not recognize him as a crank or a pseudoscientist or a religious polemicist. ... Not knowing that a creationist has contributed nothing to the science he claims to represent, they can give his statements equal weight with those of working scientists who actually contribute to the progress of the life sciences."

(Lawrence S. Lerner. *Skeptical*

*Inquirer*, Nov,Dec, 2005)

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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.

Next meeting is **Sunday, January 15 at 2:30 p.m.** at the Unitarian Universalist Church. We will watch and discuss a video on the Creation Museum at Paluxy River, Texas, where the proprietor claims fossil remnants of intermixed human and dinosaur tracks.

\* \* \* \* \*

"... evolution is much more than just a topic in biology, it is the foundation of the entire discipline. Biology without evolution is like physics without gravity. ... All general survey courses and texts must have evolution as their central unifying theme."

- Sean B. Carroll

## Bible Verse

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

**To Mary, "BEHOLD -**

*We bring you tidings of great joy,  
You will give birth to a Holy boy.  
And it is the Almighty  
Who will lift your nightie.  
We'll not put the blame on some goy...."*

**(Matthew 1: 18 et al)**

- Thanks to **Marc Stratton**

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

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18. Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise; When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost.

*Readers of RRR are encouraged to submit their own version of favorite Bible passages in the form of a limerick.*

\* \* \* \* \*

**At this Season of the Winter Solstice May Reason Prevail: There are no Gods, No Devils, No Angels, No Heaven or Hell. There is only our Natural World. Religion is but Myth and Superstition that Hardens Hearts and Enslaves Minds.**

The above is the heading of an ad for the Freedom From Religion Foundation. They offer a complimentary issue of their publication *Freethought Today* at [www.ffrf.org/sampleissue.php](http://www.ffrf.org/sampleissue.php)

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