

Red River Rationalist

No. 107 - January, 2008

redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.

[Sherri Richards, the *Fargo Forum's* Religion Reporter, wrote an article "Understanding Doubt" that appeared in the 22 December issue. Doubt was represented by David Johnson, who became an atheist as a Marine medic in Vietnam and has been a longtime enthusiastic supporter of Red River Freethinkers. David will also be the speaker for our January meeting. It was an interesting idea for an article, and I hope we might follow up the topic a bit further here in the newsletter. In any event, I sent in the following Letter to the Editor.]

Dear Editor:

In "Understanding Doubt" [Dec. 22], Sherri Richards did a fine job of presenting views on the complicated subject of doubt and faith. I would like to toss in a few remarks myself.

One meaning of faith is that it is our interpretation of our experience. Experience provides the dots, we draw the lines between them, and how we draw the lines sums up our faith. We may need guidance to draw the lines at first. Some keep drawing the lines the way they were first told. Some start filling in lines for themselves. In either case, faith, in this sense, is personal and quiet, and it is easy to respect the faiths of others. You can talk with others, learn how they connected their dots, describe your connections. Communication is possible. Dialogue can occur.

Fundamentalists and many other Christians use "Faith" and "Truth" to mean the same thing. Of course, if they have the "Truth", then everyone who differs from them has the "False". This would seem to give Fundamentalists an advantage. Dialogue would lead to Truth becoming evident by comparison. But they use one-way proclamation instead of seeking two-way communication, a continual proclaiming of "Truth" in sermons, Bible studies, Bible camps, prayer meetings, and the ever necessary revivals.

I doubt that those who confuse "Faith" and "Truth" achieve either. Truth could stand up to genuine critical examination and feedback. Fundamentalist practice does not allow such a possibility.

Those interested in seeing wide-open discussion in practice will find it at the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar, an informal local seminar meeting weekly during the school year I would be happy to provide information.

- **Davis Cope**

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***"Proverbs save us the
trouble of thinking. What
we call folk wisdom
is often no more than a***

*kind of expedient
stupidity."*

Edward Abbey

A Free Press

The Fargo Forum wanted to understand doubt so our David L. Johnson was interviewed. David asks why there was only one of him versus several pious Christians, but of course he knows the answer. To operate at a profit a newspaper must not alienate any sizable number of its advertisers, preferably not any. Subscribers are important mainly as potential customers for the advertisers.

In 1947 the editor and owner of the *Valley City Times Record* editorialized that the US ought to try to get along with the Soviet Union. This mild and common-sense position so infuriated a large number of his advertisers that they withheld their ads and demanded that the editor sell the paper to them for peanuts or they would start a rival paper.

Many people around North Dakota and Minnesota were sufficiently aroused to place their own display ads in the *Times-Record* expressing their support for a free press - but of course this could not be sustained.

Before long the editor yielded to the inevitable, sold the paper to his oppressors and got a job with another small newspaper, no doubt having learned an important lesson.

- Bill Treumann

Defining "Doubt"

Kudos to David Johnson for presenting his views on "Faith and Doubt" for the *Fargo Forum* reporter. David offers a very poignant account of his loss of faith.

Davis Cope, in his article in the adjacent column, adds some remarks on the meanings of "Truth" and "Faith."

I tend to look at the other side of the issue. To me, the people expressing "Doubt" are those who "Believe" in mysticism and mythology and "Doubt" the findings of centuries of scientific study and the "Facts" proven by observation and experiment, using the scientific method. A good example is the ongoing effort to invalidate evolution (considered by most reputable scientists to be the bedrock foundation of the biological sciences) as "only a theory."

I respect anyone's religious beliefs, until they intrude on areas where they do actual harm, e.g. the push for creationism in school science texts.

- Chuck Crane

Letter

[This letter appeared in the Sept. 17 issue of *Common Dreams* in response to an interview of James Carroll by Tomdispatch. It was reprinted in the Nov./Dec. issue of *The American Rationalist*. The letter is not signed with a real name]

My experience with fundamentalism is deep. My mother's parents were founders of the Church of God. My mother is a fundamentalist Christian. My sister and brother are also. I was a Christian for 25+ years, until I was involved in a bible-based cult that, after a year, showed me that trying to take the bible literally and do everything the leaders demanded was equivalent to slavery and mind control. I began to doubt at that point, and that led me to study REAL history and ancient religions to the point in which I was convinced that the story of Jesus (and almost all other stories in the bible) are mythological and based on astrotheology.

As long as people believe in sky-gods, we will never have peace on this planet. It is impossible, in the truest sense of the word. The reason is [that] ... there is no empirical evidence to back up what GOD is, or that he/she/it really exists. So, to make up for lack of evidence, people will always eventually resort to violence to prove their interpretation of GOD is the right one. Religion will always end up being spread by the tip of a sword or the barrel of a gun. Always. Always. It is the scourge on the face of this earth. It is sickening, disgusting, and vile when stripped of its pretty buildings, hypnotizing music and children singing "Jesus loves me." It has no place in our modern world.

People cling to religion because they can read any bias, bigotry, or selfish desire into their religion and make it acceptable. How can war be justified? It's okay, God did it all the time. How can slavery be justified? It's in the bible. How can rulers command the masses? The bible tells people to.

I'm so sick of pussy-footing around this religious crap anymore. It is so sickening to watch our leaders use it as a tool to control minds.

If you want me to "believe," you'd better show me that "god" is somehow more real than a group of zealot fundies, or more real than the IRS. It still amazes me that people are willing to believe that 9/11 could have been allowed to happen, yet they believe that god somehow intervenes in our daily lives and gives a shit who wins the Friday night high school football game (while over a million people are dead because of a war justified in the name of "god").

The ignorant flock to religion, and the manipulators are more than happy to lead them right down that path. I wish I believed in hell, because most certainly all of them would end up there.

- billyv September

17th, 2007 (Common Dreams)

Separation of Church and State

The following letter was sent to the *Fargo Forum* and was printed in the Dec. 16 issue. Mandy Jensen, a senior in Pharmacy, organized the Atheists, Agnostics, and Secular Humanists student group at NDSU.]

I'm writing in response to "Liberal looneyism wins another debate" (letter, Dec. 10).

One could argue one way or another that political correctness is starting to go overboard, but I'm

really getting tired of people treating atheism like it is a bad word.

I am an atheist and I don't care if people put up Christmas decorations. In fact I like the way the colored lights twinkle off of the snow. I think it is important to teach children about religion in school, as it seems to be a pervasive topic in all areas of our existence.

The thing I do care about is the government using my money to put up symbols of a religion. Even if our Founding Fathers were Christian (and some were not, most notable Jefferson), it is a red herring argument because the Constitution requires a separation between church and state.

Why don't we start blaming our problems on real culprits, such as our love of money?

- Mandy Jensen

Letter From Lew

Re the Winter Solstice party at the Rogne farm: Of course, Katherine and Leslie and Trana and Gail Rogne were there. After all, it's their home we enjoyed.

Jon Lindgren and Elaine, Davis Cope and Mary Cochran, Jason and Lilie Schoenack, John Ohnstad, Carol and Chas. Sawicki, and yours truly with Supatra and her sister Pia (Thai ladies) and Pia's hubby, Dave Scheer. I may have overlooked somebody, but my memory ain't what it used to be.

We had a discussion of where the monument thing is at the moment. Thanks to Jon and Carol for doing the legwork. The Fargo City Commission is playing games with us. At the moment they say NO sister monument. So they have the 10C monstrosity on the City Hall lawn and will permit no other monuments. We have an offer of legal assistance from a great attorney who ran for Atty General of ND on the Democratic ticket in the last election - lost. He wanted to represent us pro bono but his law firm said we had to pay \$15 Gs. Jon says we can cover that and mentioned my name as one of the donors. Ha Ha. Right now Jon is negotiating with the law firm.

Jon said that where the city government has been challenged legally in cases like ours, the 10Cs monument disappeared. Happy Holidays and let's hope for PEACE in 2008.

- Lew Lubka

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Weigh in on the Dawkins Scale

Richard Dawkins is a celebrated British evolutionary biologist and an outspoken antireligionist, atheist, secular humanist, and skeptic. He is also "professor of the public understanding of science" at Oxford University.

In his recent, best-selling book *The God Delusion* (2006), Dawkins introduces a sort of "belief scale" for rating the position and strength of one's own theistic or nontheistic beliefs. On the Internet, this scale is commonly known as "the Dawkins Scale". The scale looks something like this:

1. Strong Theist - I am 100% convinced that God exists.
2. De facto Theist - Not 100% but very close.
3. Weak Theist - Not sure, but still a believer.
4. Pure Agnostic - 50/50 chance that God exists.
5. Weak Atheist - Not sure, but leaning toward non-belief.
6. De facto Atheist - Not 100%, but very close.
7. Strong Atheist - I am 100% convinced that no God exists.

Where would you rate yourself on this scale? If we polled the citizens of the Red River Valley on this scale, what do you suppose the results would be? How about the United States, or the world?

As of November 2007, the English version of *The God Delusion* had sold over 1.5 million copies.

On Tuesday January 29th, Red River Freethinkers Secretary Lillie Schoenack will be giving a book review on *The God Delusion* at the NDSU Science Religion and Lunch Seminar at 12:00PM.

- Jason Schoenack

Top 10 Reasons Why Beer Is Better Than Jesus

10. No one will kill you for not drinking Beer.
9. Beer doesn't tell you how to have sex.
8. Beer has never caused a major war.
7. They don't force Beer on minors who can't think for themselves.
6. When you have Beer, you don't knock on people's doors trying to make them drink it.
5. Nobody's ever been burned at the stake, hanged, or tortured over their brand of Beer.
4. You don't have to wait more than 2,000 years for a second Beer.
3. There are laws saying that Beer labels can't lie to you.
2. If you've devoted your life to Beer, there are groups to help you stop.
1. You can prove you have a Beer.

American Atheists 101

I recently became very interested in the organization known as American Atheists. Not knowing anything (non-obvious) about American Atheists, I went to the Internet and to the American Atheists' website for more information.

"American Atheists is an organization in the United States dedicated to defending the civil liberties of atheists and advocating for the complete separation of church and state."

American Atheists was founded in 1963 by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, amid her battles against mandatory prayer in public schools.

In 1995, Ellen Johnson, a second-generation atheist, became president of the American Atheists. In November 2002, at the Godless Americans March on Washington, Johnson led hundreds of atheists

who marched to demand a voice in American politics.

Over the years American Atheists has filed numerous lawsuits against public institutions it considers to have breached the wall of separation between church and state.

From their website, American Atheists has three primary goals:

1. TO SECURE OUR FREEDOM FROM RELIGION.
2. TO LABOR FOR, IN ALL LAWFUL WAYS, THE COMPLETE AND ABSOLUTE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE.
3. TO DEFEND THE CIVIL RIGHTS OF ATHEISTS.

This year, the 34th Annual conference of America Atheists is going to be March 21-23, 2008 in Minneapolis, MN.

Since learning more about American Atheists and the organization's goals and ideals, my wife and I have become members and made reservations in Minneapolis to attend their (our) 34th annual conference.

- Jason Schoenack

A Couple of Quotes

" ... Politicians of both parties have been bought and paid for by corporations. Our so-called representatives of the people of the people tend to look out for the interests of the wealthy at the expense of the proletariat who are used as cannon fodder to die in unjustified wars."

[*James Stempel in a Letter to the Editor, The Progressive, Jan. 2008*]

"It depends on who does it."

[*Rudy Giuliani, at a stump-speech in Iowa, responding to a question from the audience as to the legality of waterboarding.*]

Memberships Due for 2008

For most of you, your memberships to Red River Freethinkers for 2008 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 2008 has been paid.**

_____ **You are not yet a member for 2008**

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.

Red River Freethinkers Board Members

President	701-232-7868	Jon Lindgren jon.lindgren@ndsu.edu
Treasurer	701-232-5676	Carol Sawicki csawicki@corpcomm.net
Secretary	701-306-0630	Lilie Schoenack lilieann@msn.com

General Contacts

Interim Program Coordinator	701-232-2164	Lew Lubka lubka@fargocity.com
Web Masters	605-306-0815	Eric Ashton & Jason Schoenack webmaster@redriverfreethinkers.org
Interim Publicity Director	701-293-7188	Mary Cochran olliesmaga@msn.com
Newsletter	320-763-5666	Chuck Crane cranes@rea-alp.com

Items for newsletter may be sent to P.O. Box 995, Alexandria, MN 56308

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 our January 20 meeting, a conference room at the new branch library in Fargo has been reserved. This is a new meeting place for us, and we'd like to try it out and see if the group likes it. The official address is: Fargo Public Library, Carlson Branch, 2801 32nd Ave S, Fargo. It is across the street from Innovis Hospital. The library phone is 476-5980.

January Program

The Jan. speaker is David Johnson who will review for us his book which is almost ready for the printer. I'll be in Brazil and Paraguay, but maybe one of these days I'll get to buy a copy and read the book. From the snippets of it that I've seen, it seems to be a very interesting take on that thing called "ligon" down South where I spent many interesting years.

Haven't yet finalized the Feb. speaker, but I'm hoping to find some knowledgeable Buddhists who can clearly and simply tell us about Buddhism. The lecture on Hinduism was way over my head. With

that kind of ligo in my background, I'd almost want to be an untouchable.

- Lew Lubka

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