

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.

William Peter Blatty: The Exorcist. 1971.

In the early 70s, I shared an office with two other graduate students. One Monday morning, I mentioned reading *The Exorcist* over the weekend. "Wow!" I said. "That's one book they'll never make a movie out of!"

"Guess what, Davis!" said Marvin. "They're already making it into a movie."

So I sadly struck "prophet" off my list of possible occupations (also "movie critic"). Rereading the book recently, I found it as absorbing as I remembered, which brings us to the topic of demonic possession.

Christianity claims not only the existence of a supernatural world but a structure for that world, including entities such as God, Satan, angels, demons, etc. We know demons exist because Christ identified them as the source of many ills and cured the ills by casting out the demons. Notice treatment consists of removing demons, not destroying or exterminating them. If the treatment strikes you as odd, your worldview may be tainted by modern ideas, such as effective insecticides, antibiotics, and the germ theory of disease. Demons, demonic possessions, and "casting out" are part of the reality of many churches less tainted.

A few years ago, *The Fargo Forum* interviewed local churches about demons. I learned Fargo's Catholic Diocese has an official Exorcist (his identity is confidential), and my Catholic friends tell me this is standard practice. Every diocese has its official exorcist. One Protestant church agreed that demonic possession occurs. I responded as any atheist would. I called both groups and tried to arrange speakers on demonic possession for our Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar. No success.

This morning's *Forum* has a pertinent article ["Texas rules exorcism protected", 29 June]. An Assembly of God church in Texas performed an exorcism on a 17-year-old girl in 1996. She sued in 2002. A jury found the church "liable for abusing and falsely imprisoning the girl" and awarded her \$300,000. A state court of appeals reduced the verdict to \$188,000. The Texas Supreme Court has now overturned the verdict altogether due to "religious aspects" not considered in the original trial. The church is not liable, said the Court, because to hold it so "would have an unconstitutional 'chilling effect' by compelling the church to abandon core principles of its religious beliefs". In other words, when the church pinned the 17-year-old to the floor for hours against her will and cut and bruised her in an Assembly-of-God-style exorcism, the key point is neither the occurrence of the physical abuse nor its ensuing psychological effect. Instead, holding the church responsible for such acts would entangle the state in cooling their religious fervor, an involvement forbidden by the First Amendment. An interesting stretch. It will apply equally well when the church burns a witch.

But back to the novel. Chris MacNeil is an actress temporarily living near Georgetown University while working on site in a movie. Her 12-year-old daughter Regan, a loving and charming girl, has been spending time in the basement with a ouija board. She rapidly develops deeply disturbing behavior -- frenzied energy, spasms and seizures, bizarre talk and conduct -- the details are best skipped. Soon she has to be kept strapped to a rubber mattress, where her violent convulsions and cries

can be heard throughout the house. Chris frantically consults doctors. Physically, Regan's tests are normal. Chris turns to psychiatrists. They are baffled and tentatively suggest a "split personality" with an odd religious component. Then Burke Dennings, Chris's director in the movie and a personal friend, is found dead outside her house. Due to a coincidental absence of all attendants, the last anybody knows of him is that he and Regan were alone in the house for a short time in the evening. His body is found the next morning beneath Regan's second story bedroom window. Chris is worried Regan committed murder and, atheist though she might have been, she's thinking demons as well.

Chris meets Father Damien Karras, a Jesuit priest and psychiatrist at Georgetown University. She trusts him, has him see Regan, asks about exorcisms. Karras has been having personal problems -- increasing uncertainty about his vocation, about his religion. He hesitates about an exorcism because he wants definite evidence of possession. After all, it could be just a 12-year-old female murderer with convulsions and a split personality. Here's one of his tests. Demons have a mastery of languages. He tries German on Regan. She answers in German, then switches to Latin. They converse in Latin. Karras has the proof! Then Regan says "... of course it will occur to you, I suppose, that while you were asking your questions in Latin, you were mentally formulating answers in Latin. All unconscious, of course. Yes, whatever would we do without unconsciousness? Do you see what I'm driving at, Karras? I cannot speak Latin at all. I read your mind. I merely plucked the responses from your head!" Darn, Karras hadn't thought of that! It's not demon possession at all -- it's just a 12-year-old interspersing periods of hysterical convulsion with periods of coherence produced by telepathically combing the mind of her interrogator.

But it's a good read, and I won't give away the ending or how Karras is finally convinced that Regan is actually possessed. Instead, let's talk about demons: What are they and do they exist? In fairness, a point needs to be made. Blatty set his novel in a Catholic context and drew heavily on Catholic views about demons. In his Acknowledgments, he thanks a Jesuit priest "for suggesting the subject matter of this book", and he thanks "Dr. Bernard M. Wagner of Georgetown University, for teaching me to write, and the Jesuits, for teaching me to think." Nonetheless, this is a novel. It is a made-up story. It should not be taken as some sort of authoritative view, Catholic or otherwise, about the nature of demons.

That said, the following seems a reasonably conservative summary of what demons are: Demons are supernatural beings who can observe and interact with the natural world to some extent (at least enough to set "snares" via ouija boards). They cannot simply "take over" a human being, otherwise we would all be possessed. But, in some way, an initial contact can be expanded to full possession. This apparently requires permission on the part of the human, which can be obtained by demonic deception and mastery of languages. The demon has full control of the body under possession, including speech and movement. The demon retains its supernatural powers during possession, such as the capability for supernatural observation, but the body provides a greatly amplified means of interacting with the natural world. The demon's existence is independent of the body, so it need not be concerned with the body's death, and it can move from one human to another if the necessary permission is obtained. A demon can only possess one body at a time. The motive for possession is to work evil in the natural world.

Do demons exist? Of course not. Suppose you have a being, in every physical way human (because possessed bodies are human) and completely compatible with the surrounding culture, but with no linguistic barriers, with the intelligence accompanying multiple language mastery, with a supernatural ability to observe its surroundings (even limited to a few dozen feet), and with a feeble psychokinetic ability (sufficient to affect the motion of a planchette or the typing of a computer key). Then these "feeble powers" directed by such intelligence would take such a being to the heights of power in short order. I once read that any mediocre chess player could be world champion if, just once in any game, he or she could make two moves in a row. That's a good analogy for leveraging small, but extraordinary,

advantages to unlimited results. If demons existed, then once the inevitable possession of one body occurred, the strategy would be the immediate insurance of a source of further bodies (Ouija Board Tournaments), then building of personal power for the possessed, then the achievement of evil. Now I ask you, look at our leaders today, how could anyone think for a moment Wait a minute,

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The "Invisible" Atheists

Let's not concern ourselves with the meanings of critical, rejectionist, and *de facto* atheism, or the distinctions between agnosticism and atheism, implicit and explicit atheism, negative and positive, or weak and strong atheism. Rather, let us consider why most atheists are invisible, even to the pollsters.

Alice, a kindergarten teacher, is usually an atheist. The rest of the time she's an agnostic. She keeps her opinions to herself.

Billy is an 11-year old atheist. His mother, who died a year ago, extracted his promise that he would read his bible every day. He had hardly finished Exodus before he decided that god does not exist but he hasn't told even his best friend. Of course his logic leaves something to be desired. He might have kept his faith had he read Tom Paine's assertion in "Age of Reason" that the bible is a libel against the god he worshiped.

Carol is an atheist, an attorney, and a feminist. She appends "Esq." to her professional name. She is a member of a large Presbyterian church; to her close friends she confides that one can't have too many influential contacts.

Davis, an outspoken atheist, is a professor at a state university. He may have been less open before he attained tenure.

Ellen is an agnostic and a linguist. She does not believe in god but rejects the label "atheist," saying it is pejorative in common usage. She points out that "cretin" comes from a Swiss-dialect word for "Christian" and that now few understand "ecology" to be synonymous with "bionomics." She contends that it is futile to insist that words mean what they "ought" to mean.

Francois describes himself as a Catholic atheist. He rejects the existence of gods and he does not participate in confession but he says he loves the Catholic rituals, the stained glass windows, and the beauty of the cathedrals. He also points out the long history of Catholicism in his family. How a pollster would classify him would depend on how he phrased his questions.

Gloria is an atheist and a self-employed consultant. She was open in an on-line chat group that expected members to use their own names. She wrote that the children of atheists often are discriminated against in school. To protect herself against being googled she alternated spaces with the letters in her unusual surname but a religious participant removed the spaces and even added the name of her home town. Now she is worried about her livelihood.

Harris, an atheist, is in prison for embezzling half a million. He regards his 18-month sentence as not too hard to take because restitution was not required. But he can find none but believers among his fellow convicts, including the short-termers who have little reason to be deceptive.

Irene has recently retired as an accountant. She no longer needs to conceal her views so she joined a freethinker group. She was not surprised to note the prevalence of gray hair.

John is an atheist and a socialist, trained in philosophy. He is not outspoken but is not secretive about his views so it is surprising that he became the popular president of a state college. After a very successful decade he moved on to another presidency.

Kathy is a US Senator. Although an atheist she often attends church and speaks eloquently about her faith.

Larry is an atheist who owns a Ben Franklin store in a city of 60,000. He was having trouble enough before a WalMart store opened nearby. He is glad that he had exposed his views only to his immediate family so few eyebrows were raised when he joined a large local church.

Margo is an atheist member of a Unitarian Universalist church. She says that many there share her views so she regards it as a good place to socialize and to provide protective coloration for her kids, who are often asked about their church affiliation. She says she was not a member when she lived in Connecticut because there they were too theistic.

Narottam says he is one if a hundred million Taravadas. It's hard for an outsider to fathom this religion. It seems to have no gods so he must be some sort of an atheist.

Olise is a farmer's wife. She lives in the midst of a religious community but people accept her. Without pretense she frequently participates in bake sales and other secular church events. When someone asked her to teach Sunday school she replied that she couldn't do that because she's not a believer. She was astonished by the reply "Oh, we never ask people what they believe."

I don't recall her name but a successful British politician describes herself as a Buddhist atheist. I doubt that an American counterpart could ever be elected to public office. However, Pete Stark, a long-time US Representative, has recently revealed his atheism. Perhaps he plans to retire.

Lori Lipman Brown, Esq. (Yes, she uses that designation) was a state senator in Nevada. She was defeated in her bid for re-election by an opponent who exploited her lack of religion.

Several known atheists have been elected to the House of Commons in Britain. The first, late in the nineteenth century, was Charles Bradlaugh. He was not allowed to take his seat because he refused to take an oath of some sort but he was accepted when he was re-elected. The most recent was probably Nick Clegg. Several known atheists have been elected to public office on the continent. Europe seems to have outgrown its bloody religious past. It must regard the US as rather adolescent.

- Bill Treumann

Updates From Jon

I had a couple of things to pass along. Our court case against the City of Fargo to place our own monument next to the Ten Commandment, as well as to remove the Ten Commandments because of the religious intentions stated for the recent ordinance requiring it remain in its present location, is sort of at "rest". The City, at the time I write this, has not responded to our Complaint.

Recently, I was able to purchase a relic of the early days of what we might call today the "Fight Communism with Ten Commandments Project". This is an 8" X 11" cardboard or heavy paper poster without a date but seems early 1950's. On the front is a version of the Ten Commandments with very stylized print with only a few of the bizarre symbols that appeared later on the stone versions. The poster was distributed by the "Youth Guidance Commission" of the national Order of Eagles. On the back is some information and several testimonials. Over 7000 copies of this poster were distributed. The purpose of the poster was to put young people face to face with the 10 Commandments in order that "it may inspire in all who see it with renewed respect for the Law of God."

The posters were to be distributed, not to be displayed on public property, but to members of the Eagles to be posted in their homes. One finds on the back several statements of endorsement which seem plausible for something to be displayed in homes, but a bit curious had the stated purpose been to display on public property. A Rabbi from Minneapolis makes a comment about how youth should learn about the 10 Commandments. A sitting Federal Judge wrote that the poster illustrates, "...our belief that our lives should be guided by Divine Law."

The Secretary of the St. Cloud, MN., Ministerial Association wrote that this poster illustrated the

Eagles was an organization who believed "this republic was founded on religious faith and the Law of God". In our previous 10 Commandments case, the City and Judge agreed the Eagles are a "Civic", not a religious, organization.Hmm.

- **Jon Lindgren**

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"Religion. . . [is] one of the worst things that ever happened to the human heart and the human mind. . . To surrender all the reason and potential of the human mind to a man in the sky who exists just to punish you seems very primitive to me."

- The late **George Carlin**

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Bushspeak

The following is from a dialogue between reporter Robert Sherman and George W. Bush in 1987.

Sherman: What will you do to win the votes of the Americans who are atheists?

Bush: I guess I'm pretty weak in the atheist community. Faith in God is important to me.

Sherman: Surely you recognize the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are atheists?

Bush: No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.

Sherman: Do you support as a sound constitutional principle the separation of church and state?

Bush: Yes, I support the separation of church and state. I'm just not very high on atheism.

This doesn't alarm you? Just listen to "liberal" candidates as they jump in bed with the "religious right."

Red River Freethinkers are 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 us 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 1:00 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month. The location for each meeting will be posted in this space in an upcoming newsletter.

This month's meeting will be held in the Atomic Coffee shop on 222 N Broadway in Fargo from 1-4 p.m on Sunday, July 20th. Our guest speaker this month will Patricia McLaughlin. A brief description of her topic is below.

July Speaker

Patricia (Paddy) McLaughlin will be speaking at our gathering on July 20, 2008. Paddy is a peace activist recently returned from a pilgrimage to Crete where she explored the ancient matrifocal civilization of Minoan, Crete, the last known culture to know no war. Gathering with women from around the globe, the experience was one of ancient ritual, women's issues, spirituality and life affirming practices. In her talk with the Free Thinkers she will share the experiences, knowledge and insights she gained from her adventure into the past to look to the future.

- Lew Lubka

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