

Red River Rationalist

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OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

The New York Review of Books for June 8, 2006.

The NYRB is a wonderful magazine published 20 times per year. Virtually every issue fascinates me. The books range across history, politics, science (with evolution versus creation popping up two or three times per year), religion, etcetera, etcetera, and the reviews are written by experts not above sticking a pin in a peer. Here's a bit of one review in the latest issue, and you can weigh the danger of addiction for yourself.

The Gospel of Judas from Codex Tchacos. Edited by R. Kasser, M. Meyer, and G. Wurst. Reviewed by P. Townsend, E. Iricinski, and L. Jenott. "... [T]he recently uncovered Gospel of Judas survives in a third- or fourth-century papyrus codex and is written in Coptic, the ancient language of Egyptian Christianity (though scholars believe the original was in Greek). It was first discovered in the 1970s by some Egyptian peasants in a burial cave ... The gospel was badly damaged in its long journey from the darkness of that burial cave to its recent publication." The manuscript, crumbling and deteriorating at every step of the way, finally reached "the renowned Swiss papyrologist Rudolphe Kasser" in 2001. He and Florence Darbre "... undertook the painstaking task of putting the codex back together. Each of the fragments had to be fitted together like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. Not only the shapes of the fragments but also the individual fibers had to be matched. Darbre used a powerful microscope to view fibers so fine they were invisible to the naked eye. Only then could Kasser proceed with the transcription and translation of the Coptic script. Fiber by fiber, then letter by letter, a story unread for over 1,500 years began to unfold"

This is the amazing rediscovery of a gospel previously only known through early Christian writings, where it is briefly mentioned in order to attack it. The first mention of the *Gospel of Judas*, for example, is by Irenaeus in his *Refutation of All Heresies*, written about 180 CE. The Gospel's description of the betrayal of Jesus is quite different from the canonical gospels. Instead of Judas acting from malice or from Satanic possession, he is acting on orders from Jesus. The reviewers go on to describe a split within early Christianity between the "bishops" and the Gnostics. The bishops eventually won and became the source of the modern Church(es) (Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, etc.), while the writings of the Gnostics were declared heretical and banned. They were certainly different. The Gnostics viewed the cosmos as created by "God" but, as our earthly experience teaches us, it is a "cesspool of pain, misery, and suffering", from which we conclude that it is the "evil creation of an inferior and malevolent lower being", who happens to be the "God" of the Old Testament.

Here "Jesus is primarily a teacher and revealer of wisdom and knowledge, not a savior who dies for the sins of the world." The reviewers go on to discuss issues scholars face in trying to understand Gnosticism (not much is left to understand it with!) and what the writer of the *Gospel of Judas* might have been trying to achieve. They note the second century (when the Gospel must have existed since it was being attacked in 180 CE) was a time of persecution for early Christians. They note that, in spite of the common picture of early Christians joyfully accepting the consequences of persecution, "...

martyrdom was in fact a controversial issue at the time. Some Christians objected to what they saw as a pointless waste of life, and they believed that public confessions of faith were unimportant." They propose that the author of the *Gospel of Judas* is actually presenting an anti-martyrdom view, but here things start to get mighty interpretive and scholarly, and beyond my summarizing capabilities.

The review, naturally enough, quotes the Gospel several times, and a footnote provides insight into the quality of the reviewers for NYRB: "All translations of the *Gospel of Judas* are by the authors [i.e. the reviewers] and in some cases differ from the recently published translation." Indeed, one such instance of different translations is part of the evidence for the anti-martyrdom theory and an example of the parry-and-thrust of scholarship: "The author of the *Gospel of Judas* apparently views martyrdom as a vain sacrifice, and blames the church leaders for leading their sheep-like congregations to the slaughter. The editors miss this aspect of the *Gospel of Judas*, translating the text as saying: 'This is the crowd whom you are leading astray before that altar.' However, the Coptic literally says 'upon.'" A comment that leaves me with a sudden, but mercifully brief, desire to study Coptic.

The issue also includes the following fascinations (and more):

American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century. By K. Phillips. Reviewed by J. Madrick. *Shooting Star: The Brief Arc of Joe McCarthy.* By Tom Wicker. Reviewed by Anthony Lewis. *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation.* By Jon Meachum. *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers.* By D. L. Holmes. Reviewed by G. S. Wood.

- **Davis Cope**

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*

Some of My Best Friends ...

Some of my best friends are xians. Walt is fairly representative. He is what might be called a genetic xian because his parents were xians who weren't very specific about what tenets were important. Because so many people around him are xians he has never felt any need to examine why he believes as he does. Because his religious thoughts are non-denominational he might also be called a generic xian.

He tells me that he is confident that Jesus was the son of God but he's not sure exactly what that means.

He believes in heaven and expects to get there but is not so sure about hell. He believes that Jesus advised his followers to be decent to others but he regards as unrealistic the idea of loving one's enemies.

He thinks that what other people do is their own business unless it impinges on him; then he expects to defend himself.

He's never read more than a few scraps of the bible; says they're too boring. He never goes to church; he's not interested in what the pope or any preachers have to say. He sees no point in listening to sermons on the electronic media. In Walt's opinion, whatever he thinks proper behavior is what Jesus would have recommended.

He agrees that if he had been raised in, say, Iran he would likely be a Muslim without really questioning why.

He's neither a racist nor a sexist. He's against capital punishment; he does not oppose abortion. He thinks drug addicts should be treated rather than imprisoned.

He supports gay rights, freedom of thought and of expression. When it comes to what to do in specific situations, he and I are usually in close accord. He's my kind of xian. His logic may not be sound but I think the world would be a much better place if the xians (and the Muslims, Hindus, Shintoists, etc.) were more like him.

Onward, Xian Soldiers -- like Walt.

- Bill Treumann

There is no God.
But it does not matter.
Man is enough.

- Edna St. Vincent Millay
Social Security

Perhaps we are asking the wrong questions during election years.

Our Senators and Congresspersons do not pay into Social Security and, of course, they do not collect from it. You see, Social Security benefits were not suitable for persons of their rare elevation in society. They felt they should have a special plan for themselves! So, many years ago they voted in their own benefit plan.

In more recent years, no congressperson has felt the need to change it. After all, it is a great plan. For all practical purposes their plan works like this: When they retire, they continue to draw the same pay until they die. Except it may increase from time to time for cost of living adjustments.

For example, Senator Byrd and Congressman White and their wives may expect to draw \$7,800,000.00 (that's Seven Million, Eight-Hundred Thousand Dollars), with their wives drawing \$275,000.00 during the last years of their lives. This is calculated on an average life span for each of those two Dignitaries. Younger Dignitaries who retire at an early age, will receive much more during the rest of their lives.

Their cost for this excellent plan is \$0.00.... NADA....ZILCH!

This little perk they voted for themselves is free to them.

You and I pick up the tab for this plan. The funds for this fine retirement plan come directly from the General Fund.

"OUR TAX DOLLARS AT WORK"!

From our own Social Security Plan, which you and I pay (or have paid) into -- every payday until we retire (which amount is matched by our employer) -- we can expect to get an average of \$1,000 per month after retirement.

Or, in other words, we would have to collect our average of \$1,000 monthly benefits for 68 years and one (1) month to equal Senator! Bill Bradley's benefits!

Social Security could be very good if only one small change were made. That change would be to jerk the Golden Parachute Retirement Plan from under the Senators and Congressmen; put them into the Social Security plan with the rest of us -- then sit back and see how fast they would fix it.

If enough people receive this, maybe a seed of awareness will be planted and maybe good changes will evolve.

[Editor's Note: This is one of those things I receive in my e-mail, urging me to send it a copy to everyone I know. Most of these I discard with barely a glance. This one, I happen to agree with. Broaden it to bring postal workers and other government employees into the social security system AND remove the earnings cap (so Bill Gates, the Walton heirs, etc., pay on ALL their earnings and I believe the social security "crisis" is solved for the foreseeable future. CC]

The End of Faith

Some comments about, and excerpts from, the book of the same title by **Sam Harris**, subtitled *Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. Published by W.W.Norton, 2004, 2005.

Early in his thought-provoking book, Harris discusses "the myth of 'moderation' in religion":

"The idea that any one of our religions represents the infallible word of the One True God requires an encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art even to be entertained -- as the beliefs, rituals, and iconography of each of our religions attest to centuries of cross-pollination among them. Whatever their imagined source, the doctrines of modern religions are no more tenable than those which, for lack of adherents, were cast upon the scrap heap of mythology millennia ago; for there is no

more evidence to justify a belief in the literal existence of Yahweh and Satan than there was to keep Zeus perched upon his mountain throne or Poseidon churning the seas.

"According to Gallup, 35 percent of Americans believe that the Bible is the literal and inerrant word of the Creator of the universe. Another 48 percent believe that it is the 'inspired' word of the same -- still inerrant, though certain of its passages must be interpreted symbolically before their truth can be brought to light. Only 17 percent of us remain to doubt that a personal God, in his infinite wisdom, is likely to have authored the text -- or for that matter, to have created the earth with its 250,000 species of beetles. Some 46 percent of Americans take a literalist view of creation (40 percent believe that God has guided creation over the course of millions of years). This means that 120 million of us place the big bang 2,500 years after the Babylonians and Sumerians learned to brew beer. If our polls are to be trusted, nearly 230 million Americans believe that a book showing neither unity of style nor internal consistency was authored by an omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent deity. A survey of Hindus, Muslims, and Jews around the world would surely yield similar results, revealing that we, as a species, have grown almost perfectly intoxicated by our myths. How is it that, in this one area of our lives, we have convinced ourselves that our beliefs about the world can float entirely free of reason and evidence?"

Harris goes on to point out that, in the twenty-first century, to be a religious "moderate" adherents of every faith would have to loosely interpret or ignore much of what they profess to "believe" and that, in America, religious moderation is further enforced by the fact that "most Christians and Jews do not read the Bible in its entirety and consequently have no idea just how vigorously the God of Abraham wants heresy expunged." The author mentions that, while certain passages in Deuteronomy specifically call for stoning to death any of your children or other relatives who are guilty of heresy, the practice has "gone out of fashion." Harris continues "... it is only by ignoring such barbarisms that the Good Book can be reconciled with life in the modern world."

Harris argues that "the only way anyone is 'moderate' in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought the doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the inside. The moderation we see among nonfundamentalists is not some sign that faith itself has evolved; it is rather, the product of the many hammer blows of modernity that have exposed certain tenets of faith to doubt."

As the author sees it "The problem that religious moderation poses for all of us is that it does not permit anything very critical to be said about religious literalism. We cannot say that fundamentalists are crazy, because they are merely practicing their freedom of belief; we cannot even say they are mistaken in religious terms, because their knowledge of scripture is generally unrivaled. ... The benignity of most religious moderates does not suggest that religious faith is anything more sublime than a desperate marriage of hope and ignorance."

Harris concludes this section with the argument that religion is the one area of discourse that "does not admit of progress. ... If religion addresses a genuine sphere of understanding and human necessity, then it should be susceptible to progress; its doctrines should become more useful, rather than less."

Harris feels that we cannot afford the political correctness of failing to speak the truth about the state of our world, such as that "the Bible and the Koran both contain mountains of life-destroying gibberish."

These excerpts just give a quick glance at the first of seven chapters. There are also extensive Notes

and Bibliography sections. I highly recommend this very timely book. It is available in both hard cover and paperback..

- **Chuck Crane**

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(Ad)Verse

On the Birth of My Son

*Most fathers, when they have a son,
hope the boy will prove intelligent.
But I, through misapplied intelligence,
have wrecked my whole life,
and therefore hope my son
will grow up ignorant,
stupid and dull.
That way he'll lead a tranquil life
as a public administrator,
college president,
or United States Senator.*

- **Edward Abbey**

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.

The **SUMMER SOLSTICE PARTY** for Red River Freethinkers will be held at the **Rogne Farm** thanks to the generous hospitality of Katherine and Leslie Rogne, Gail and Trana Rogne.

It will be a potluck on **Sunday, 18 June, 1:00-4:00 pm**. Directions: On I-29, take Exit 48W onto Hwy 46. (Exit 48 is roughly 15 miles south of Fargo.) On Hwy 46, go about 2.5 miles west to Richland County Road 1, turn south. On Richland County Road 1, go about 1/2 mile south to the first farm to the blue house on west side of road.

"Reason is the greatest enemy that faith has; it never comes to the aid of spiritual things, but -- more frequently than not -- struggles against the divine Word, treating with contempt all that emanates from God."

- Martin Luther

BECOME A MEMBER!

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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removed from our mailing list, please contact any of the officers.