

Red River Rationalist

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Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.

When Oxymorons Come Home to Roost: Legislated Respect.

"Respect" has been a hot topic in Fargo lately, the latest issue being three students at a nearby Minnesota junior high school who did not stand for the Pledge of Allegiance. The school principal was observing the class at the time, and she promptly sent the three to the office, where they were punished with a day's detention. The incident made the front page of the *Fargo Forum*. It mixes patriotism, the Pledge, free speech, school discipline, "respect", etc., and there have been follow-up articles and heated letters-to-the-editor.

One of the high points for me was a ringing endorsement of freedom of speech in a letter-to-the-editor by Bryan Kautzman (*Fargo Forum*, 15 May), who wrote "... the rallying cry seems to have been, 'Whatever happened to respect?' I can only answer ... 'Whatever happened to the Constitution?' " and "I shall pledge my allegiance toward the Constitution of the United States, but I will never pledge my allegiance to the flag that so often misinterprets the Constitution." Good for you, Mr. Kautzman! Priorities we should all think about!

At the same time, as best I can tell from the reports, free speech was not an issue in the original incident. The three students did not remain seated to express an opinion. One student claimed, according to her father, that she had not heard the announcement for the pledge (and apparently failed to notice the class standing and reciting it as well). Another student, according to a letter-to-the-editor from his mother in today's *Forum* (25 May 2008), had not stood for the pledge all year (reason not given). But, she writes, they had a good talk about the meaning of respect, and he stood for the pledge the next day. Consequently, sitting out the Pledge was not an act of symbolic speech articulating a position on civil rights or U.S. foreign policy. If nothing is said, symbolically or otherwise, there is nothing for the First Amendment to protect.

However, a fourth student did see the original incident as involving freedom of speech, was concerned about the punishment, and remained sitting during the Pledge the next day in deliberate protest (and was given a detention for it). That student had principles. And guts. So the fallout of the original incident does involve the First Amendment.

Why were the students punished? It turns out that the school's policy does not require reciting the Pledge but does require standing for it. It is interesting to compare this with Minnesota Statutes 2006, kindly obtained for me by MC, where 121A.11 states:

--"All public and charter school students shall recite the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag of the United States of America one or more times each week."

--"Any student or teacher may decline to participate in recitation of the pledge."

--Student handbooks and policy guides "must include a statement that anyone who does not wish to participate in reciting the Pledge of Allegiance for any personal reasons may elect not to do so and that students must respect another person's right to make that choice."

In other words, your right to not participate in reciting the Pledge must be respected, but--in this particular school--you have to stand while it is recited. Tricky. But standing is what the policy requires and that has now been emphasized by punishing students for not standing.

This tricky situation immediately became more confused because both the principal and the teacher involved claimed that standing was a matter of "respect". Respect for what? Respect for our soldiers in Iraq, of course.

And "respect" has been the theme of letter after letter to the *Fargo Forum*, criticizing the students for not showing "respect", their parents for not inculcating "respect", even the school (!) for not teaching "respect" for our American war dead who, we are reminded, died defending those rights now being so outrageously exercised!

The whole situation is a reminder of how public debate, the very means of resolving issues that free speech is intended to protect, is debased by a deluge of off-the-wall opinions. Continued discussion should lead to a sharpening of focus, a clearer identification of facts and issues and principles. Instead, we see the discussion shifting to increasingly fuzzy and hysterical notions of "patriotism" and "respect" until people work off their steam and the whole thing dies away. However, as the years go by, I am getting used to this apparent failure of public debate and am no longer discouraged by it. I now see it as the way such discussion must work in the real world of a real democracy. If you wish to advocate for touchy issues, you have to accept being shouted down once, and shouted down twice, and perhaps being shouted down still more, as part of the natural progress of getting the topic onto the public stage.

If your issue is a clear one, then the shouting down will probably involve "fuzzification", and it is always interesting to see how this works out in specific situations. The simplest fuzz, of course, occurs when people not only do not inform themselves of the facts but actually state falsehoods. An example is the claim that the school is failing to teach "respect" for our American soldiers when, in fact, the school actually cited such "respect" in defense of its policy.

Another common fuzz is to shift the issue from specifics to vague notions, like "respect". Here are a couple of ways that the notion of "respect", namely, "respect" for our soldiers in Iraq, for our American military dead, and so on, has been misused in this situation.

First, the appeal to "respect" was rationalization after the act. The Pledge of Allegiance does not refer to the American military or our war dead, and the words of the Pledge do not lead us to reflect on them. A clear way to show respect for those dead would have been a moment of silence for that announced purpose. Perhaps the Pledge should be replaced by such a moment.

Second, "legislated respect" is not respect. School policy is the law so far as students are concerned. If the law says you will stand during the Pledge, then standing is not an act of respect, it is the law. If students are compelled to stand and then told they are showing "respect", we are not training them to be "respectful", we are training them to be hypocrites.

There is another usage of "respect" that, so far as I know, has not turned up at all in the public discussion. That is the term as it is used in the Minnesota statute: "students must respect another person's right to make that choice [of declining to participate in the Pledge]". Unfortunately, the school passed up a perfect opportunity to teach students about that kind of "respect."

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**Instead of being born
again, why not just
grow up?
(Author Unknown)**

Book Review

Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar...Understanding Philosophy Through Jokes

Socrates called philosophy preparation for death. I took one philosophy course and I think there is some truth behind this idea. My experience in class felt like being embalmed. On the other hand, this "philosophy" book is fun. Authors Cathcart and Klein, both Harvard philosophy graduates, use an eccentric approach by examining philosophical principles through jokes in *"Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar..."*. Some jokes work better than others to highlight principles of philosophy, but most are very funny. Many of the jokes could be offensive to the overly sensitive, but that's humor. I'll give some examples of jokes identified by the related philosophical concepts discussed by Cathcart and Klein.

Teleology (Do things have an innate meaning?):

"Mrs. Goldstein was walking down the street with her two grandchildren. A friend stopped to ask her how old they were." She replied, "The doctor is five and the lawyer is seven."

Metaphysics and the concept of infinity:

A doctor tells a woman that she has six months to live. "Is there anything I can do?" She asks.

"Yes there is," the doctor replies. "You could marry a tax accountant." "How will that help my illness?" the woman asks. "Oh, it won't help your illness," says the doctor, "but it will make that six months seem like an eternity."

Logic (Argument from analogy depends upon point of view.):

Three engineering students are discussing what sort of God must have designed the human body. The first says, "God must be a mechanical engineer. Look at the joints" The second says, "I think God must

be an electrical engineer. The nervous system has thousands of electrical connections." The third says, "Actually, God is a civil engineer. Who else would run a toxic waste pipeline through a recreational area!"

Epistemology (The theory of knowledge):

(William James put forward the idea that we choose truth by what difference it makes to us.)

A woman reports her husband's disappearance to the police. They asked her for a description, and she says, "He's six feet, three inches tall, well-built, with thick curly hair." Her friend says, "What are you talking about? Your husband is five-feet-four, bald, and has a huge belly." And she says, "Who wants that one back?"

Ethics:

A man wrote a letter to the IRS saying, "I have been unable to sleep knowing that I have cheated on my income tax. I have understated my taxable income and have enclosed a check for \$150. If I still can't sleep, I will send the rest."

Philosophy of religion:

The Immaculate Conception is one of the central doctrines of the Catholic Church. It says that Mary was born without the taint of original sin (No nasty sex involved!).

Jesus was walking through the streets when he noticed a crowd of people throwing stones at an adulteress. Jesus said, "Let whoever is without sin cast the first stone." Suddenly a rock flew through the air. Jesus turned and said, "Mom?"

(Another joke rips on New Agers' attachment to parapsychology-based phenomena like clairvoyance.)

"My grandfather knew the exact time and the exact day of the exact year that he would die." "Wow, what an evolved soul! How did it come to him?"

"The judge told him."

Meta philosophy (philosophy of philosophy):

A guy walks into a crowded bar and announces that he's got a terrific Polish joke to tell. But before he can start, the barkeep says, "Hold it right there buddy. I'm Polish." And the guy says, "Okay, I'll tell it very, very slowly."

Linguistics and the concept of language fuzziness: How clear should language be?

A 911 dispatcher receives a panicky call from a hunter. "I've just come across a bloodstained body in the woods. It's a man and I think he is dead! What should I do?" The dispatcher calmly replies, "It's going to be all right, sir. Just follow my instructions. The first thing is to put the phone down and make sure he is dead." There's a silence on the phone followed by the sound of a gunshot. The man's voice returns, "Okay, what do I do next?"

Existentialism:

Painter: How am I selling?

Gallery owner: Well there's good news and bad news. A man came in and asked me if you were a painter whose work would become more valuable after your death. When I told him I thought you were, he bought everything you had in the gallery. Painter: "Wow! That's terrific! What's the bad news?" Gallery Owner: "He was your doctor."

Overall, this short book seems to support a significant relationship between philosophy and comedy. I found it an interesting read.

- **Charles Sawicki**

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New American Atheists President

After 13 years as President of American Atheists, Ellen Johnson is leaving that office to take on new opportunities. Ellen stepped in as the President of American Atheists after the disappearance of American Atheists' founder, Madalyn Murray O'Hair in 1995. Since then, Ellen oversaw the relocation of the American Atheist Center to New Jersey, organized the Godless Americans March on Washington, testified before the National Commission on Civil Rights, and made countless media appearances representing the rights and interests of Atheists, Freethinkers, Secular Humanists and nonbelievers everywhere.

Ellen will remain on the Board of Directors and is succeeded as President by American Atheist member Frank Zindler. Mr. Zindler has a distinguished academic career as a former professor of biology, psychobiology and geology. He is a recognized linguist and bible-era historian and has authored numerous books and articles on everything from the alleged historicity of Jesus to the on-going controversy over teaching creationism in our public schools. Mr. Zindler is a member of several learned societies including the American Association for the Advancement of Science, New York Academy of Science, Society of Biblical Literature, the American Chemical Society, and the American School of Oriental Research. He is also a member of the Jesus Seminar, and an expert in a number of esoteric, biblical-era languages. Mr. Zindler is a nationally-recognized figure in the ongoing debate over creationist pseudoscience and evolution and his activism with American Atheists goes back over three decades.

Frank Zindler will serve as President Pro Tem until a suitable replacement for this office is found.

- **Jason Shoенack**

Item from **News of the Weird** (*Minneapolis Star Tribune*, May 22,, 2008):

"School authorities in Mount Vernon, Ohio, began an investigation in April after complaints the

eighth-grade science teacher John Freshwater was injecting his religious beliefs a little too much into the class. In one 'experiment,' Freshwater allegedly tossed Lego pieces into a pile and asked students if the pieces could assemble themselves (or would a 'creator' have to do it), but the accusation that most aroused parental anger was a demonstration of electrostatic electricity, in which he asked for volunteers to take a shock on the arm, which resulted in a distinct 'cross' being burned onto the skin."

- submitted by **John Sherman**

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In light of his problems with preachers and priests, perhaps we should invite Barack Obama to join the Red River Freethinkers. (Just a thought. - ed.)

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A Few Nuggets from Bill

Ten years ago I read an excellent book, *Innumeracy*, by math professor John Paulos (who I think used his middle name also to avoid confusion with a pope). I haven't seen it but I understand he has an atheist book out now, maybe called *Irreligion*. The field is actually getting crowded.

I have never responded to any of [Lee] Paulson's rants and for quite a while I have not even read them. I made an exception and today read his take on *Expelled*. So it is showing in Alex! I hope they are not charging admission. P.Z. Myers (UM Morris) was not admitted when it was shown here.

Bertha must be near Alexandria. The priest there got an injunction to prevent a 225 lb 6 ft 13-yr old from attending mass (Pisses in his pants, etc.). The priest could use *Deut.*: handicapped are not allowed in the congregation of the lord.

- **Bill Treumann**

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 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 Broadway N, in Fargo, next to Monte's restaurant from 1-4 p.m. on Sun. June 15.

Our speaker for the June meeting will be **Lilie Schoenack**, whose topic is, "A Review of Richard Dawkin's Book *The God Delusion*." Dawkins was the keynote speaker at the American Atheist Convention this year.

"Expelling All Reason"

The above is the title of a movie review by Dan Whipple in the *Skeptical Inquirer*, May/June 2208.

The movie, *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*, stars lawyer-economist-actor Ben Stein and is described as "the latest effort by the religious Right to put the alleged debate between evolutionary theory and intelligent design back on the political front burner after its devastating defeat in Dover, Pennsylvania, in 2005."

Whipple describes the movie as "such a morass of innuendo, untruth, irrationality, and fear-mongering that it's hard to know where to start dissecting it."

After half an hour or so of describing the alleged academic suppression of non-Darwinian ideas, says Whipple, "... director Frankowski wanders off to blame evolutionary theory for Communism, the Berlin wall, Fascism, the Holocaust, atheism, and Planned Parenthood.. The portions blaming Darwin for the Holocaust are particularly despicable. ... But genocide and racism were practiced long before the Nazis discovered them and long before Darwin. It can as easily be laid at the door of Christianity, Ghengis Khan, the expansion of agriculture from the Fertile Crescent, the Crusades, or a thousand other causes."

Whipple goes on to describe the movie as "antiscientific and antirational" and says that "Using Darwinian evolution as a springboard [Frankowski] attacks nearly every scientific discipline and the

scientific method as leading inevitably to atheism and global Evil."

The review concludes that Expelled, as entertainment, is dull and depressing, and that now, in the twenty-first century, there are not too many movies as bad as this.

- Chuck Crane

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