

Red River Rationalist

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Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

["Old Books; New Books" reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

Thoughts about straight thinking

Here's a recent oddity from the *Fargo Forum's* letters to the editor: Writer A (10 February) wrote a critique of current U.S. policy that noted "only 70 percent of new recruits to the military are high school graduates. That is the lowest percentage in 25 years." Writer B (23 February) called the claim a mockery of "the intelligence of our brave men and women in the military" and said the study cited by Writer A was backed by "a collection of radicals" called Common Ground. What struck me about the response was, first, that it centers on what appears to be an entirely straightforward statistic, the sort of information about educational background that I would expect the military to collect and report and which seems entirely likely to be true. Second, Writer B does not address whether the statistic is true, in fact, does not show any interest in whether it is true or false or, if true, what the implications might be. It got me thinking about the noise level of public discourse in general.

It's logical, so it's true. One of my conservative Christian friends used to give talks (and probably still does) in which he would first mention that he had studied logic and then proceed to give a "logical argument" demonstrating some tidbit of the Christian position, such as the existence of God. His notion was that the argument must be valid (due to his training), so the result must be true. The fallacy is that logic does not deal with finding truth. Logic is the study of valid implications. Logic studies the path from premises, the starting point of a demonstration, to the conclusion and identifies the "valid paths." A valid demonstration means the conclusions **MUST** be true if the premises are all true. But if one or more of the premises is false, nothing can be said about the conclusions, even if the argument is valid. I found my friend's arguments involved either "premise-packing," where the conclusion is more-or-less obviously hidden in the premises and then triumphantly revealed after a bit of "if X then Y" and "if Y then Z," or "term-milking," where ambiguous terms and concepts such as "cause and effect" or "*nihil ex nihilo*" are creatively interpreted. If someone claims he is right because he is logical, then, whatever the state of his premises or terminology, the one thing I know for sure is that he does not understand logic.

You can't say it's wrong, so it's right. For example, we cannot know what people intend or think or believe unless, in some way, they state it. But talk shows and political commentary is filled with statements about what candidates "intend" or "think" with no basis but speculation, possibly malicious. Or, granted, the basis may have been telepathy, but commentators are too modest to claim such power. They are satisfied with the appearance. We can know something about what Thomas Jefferson thought because he wrote it down (in over 20 thousand letters). But normally the situation is more problematic. If someone cites evidence that is unobservable, unknowable, or similarly uncheckable, such as what another person "intends," then I know (a) that the evidence is worthless and (b) that the someone cannot be trusted to distinguish the worthless from the worthwhile.

It's true, the Big Truth says so. We all hear a familiar example over and over: Such-and-such is true

because the Bible says so. Why are statements from the Bible true? Because it is God's Word, and God does not lie. How do you know the Bible is God's Word? Because the Bible says so. And so on. Of course, the use of references, that is, citing authority, is the way we access the accumulated knowledge of humankind. But it can be done improperly, as in the logical fallacy called the "argument from authority," where a claim is suddenly inserted in the middle of a chain of reasoning on the grounds that it is "authoritative." (The fallacy is that a new premise has been introduced.) The real problems are: What authorities are reliable (so you can cite them)? How do you identify an authority as reliable (when it is cited)?

As for reliable authorities, I once thought there was a great deal of knowledge available to everyone and accepted by everyone. The Encyclopedia Britannica, for example. Fundamentalism has taught me otherwise. The Britannica's article on the archeology of Egypt is a fascinating summary of discoveries, dates, the decipherment of hieroglyphics. But it is at variance with "The Flood" and entirely adequate to infuriate Young Earth Creationists. So much for the Encyclopedia Britannica, biased product of the secular establishment. The absence of broadly accepted sources of knowledge is sad evidence of the fragmentation of American society and of the level of American education. That science provides us tested knowledge in place of arbitrary claims and that scholarship provides us reliable knowledge of the history, language, and attitudes of other cultures in place of mere political propaganda are facts that seem to be missing from public discourse and public perception. The answer is education, education, education. In the meantime, use the encyclopedia of your choice regularly and cite it frequently.

The second issue, identifying an authority as reliable, is impossible in practice, given the infinitude of homegrown institutes, associations, propagandizers, and cranks, all computer-savvy and with terrific web pages. I'm not talking here about the information blizzard in which we all live, but the situation in which a speaker, or a letter to the editor, or a website makes a claim catching our attention and thus raising the question of its reliability. I find myself proceeding something like this: If the language is either ambiguous or emotional, skip it. (Example: claims justified by "religion" or "patriotism".) If the claim attacks a position and relies on the claimant's stating the other side, well, I would want to see how the other side states its position. If the claim has some degree of clarity and definiteness, does there exist some possibility of testing it or checking it? I don't mean actually checking it (unless I want to use it myself), since that would probably involve a serious time investment. But a little reflection often shows that a claim is virtually uncheckable (e.g. a quote without a source), so, however entertaining, it is best ignored.

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***"There's no
nut like a
religious nut."***

Andy Rooney

A Conversation with a Founding Father (FF)

FF: Let's start by calling your first group the Straightforwards -- they think we meant what we wrote. Let's call the other group the Wink-Winks -- They believe we wrote a secular Constitution but (wink-wink) meant it to be Christian. Who's right? Well, look. I was a businessman. There is more money in Wink-Wink -- TV preachin', books, CD's, full pews and political office. Go with the Wink-Winks.

RRF: Then, there was the Treaty of Tripoli. You Founding Fathers really dissed Christianity there with the sentence declaring "the Government is not based on the Christian religion." But, we hear you just slipped that sentence in because you were in a tight spot and did not mean it. Seems like a Wink-Wink again. Who should we believe this time?

FF: I'll say it again. Wink-Winks, good for business. Straightforwards, not so much.

RRF: It seems you did not discuss Christianity while writing the Constitution. What are we to make of this?

FF: Yes, well, that's a problem for the Wink-Winks. How could we have been preoccupied with Christianity if we ignored it? The problem comes from all the notes Madison took during our meetings. Everyone who reads them can see we weren't much into religion.

RRF: We noted that Madison recorded the alcohol consumed at one of your parties.

FF: Oh, yeah. That Madison! I ran into him years later. "Jimmy," I said, "Why did you have to record our drinking -- like the 15 to 20 drinks each we had that night? We want people in 200 years to think we were on our knees prayin', not crawlin' home drunk."

RRF: Thank you for your time, Founding Father.

FF: Let me say one thing more to your folks in 2008. Some of you talk of a place called "heaven". Look, you have vats of Sam Adams Ale 20 feet high. You're already there.

- Jon Lindgren

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"Religion is regarded by the common people as true, by the wise as false, and by the rulers as useful."

(Seneca the Younger)

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Letter to the Editor

I read with interest Charles Sawicki's review of Richard Dawkins book, *The God Delusion*. I'm curious why Dawkins holds no hostility toward moderate religious belief. He seems to be unrelentingly opposed to anything religious, portraying it as superstitious and dangerous. If all religion is utterly unfounded and is a threat to the welfare of humanity, then Dawkins fails in his duty to the world in not

opposing even religion's milder forms.

Could it be that life totally devoid of religious belief holds little promise of a better future? Marx, Lenin, Stalin, Mao, and many others have shown us the savage possibilities of this system.

The noted psychologist, Carl Jung, stated that he had never met a patient over the age of thirty-five for whom a religious view of life had not been part of his recovery of mental health. I wonder, from all of this, if the real problem is actually extremism; that extremism that insists, to the point of violence that "my way is best for you" regardless if my way is religious or atheist.

- **Mark Weise**, Brandon, MN

I would like to address some of the points Mark Weise makes (not that Richard Dawkins needs anyone to speak in his defense; he covers most of these points in his book). I am reading the paperback version, which contains a new preface that deals with many of the criticisms Dawkins had received on publication of his book.

First, I would recommend that any open-minded person get a copy of this book and read it; it is very well thought out, lucid, and well-written. In the new preface, Dawkins replies to those who accuse him of extremism in what he believes. He points out that religious fundamentalists "know what they believe and they know that nothing will change their minds." True scientists, on the other hand, have a passion based on evidence and are willing to change their minds should new, contrary evidence be found.

Dawkins actually does have some hostility toward religion in general. As he points out, though, the hostility he and other atheists have toward religion is limited to words; they do not bomb anyone, behead them, stone them, burn them at the stake, crucify them, or fly airplanes into their skyscrapers, just because of a theological disagreement.

Dawkins concludes his preface with, " ... I believe in people, and people, when given the right encouragement to think for themselves about all the information now available, very often turn out not to believe in God and to lead fulfilled and satisfied -- indeed liberated -- lives.

- **Chuck Crane**

American Atheists National Conference 2008

American Atheists are holding their 34th national conference in Minneapolis, MN this year. The conference is March 21-23 at the Minneapolis Marriott City Center. Here are a few highlights of what's on the agenda:

- **Ellen Johnson** - "President of American Atheists"
- **Richard Dawkins** - "The God Delusion"

- **Lois Utley** - "Medicine and Morality: How Religious Restrictions Can Affect Your Health Care"
- **Panel Discussion** - "Is Atheism a Philosophy?"
- **Mary Stanton** - "Atheist Bill Moore's 1963 Freedom Walk"
- **August Berkshire** and **Steve Petersen** - "Lobbying for Separation of State and Church at Your State Capitol"
- **Dr. Jack David Eller** - "Religion is Not What You Believe: How Religion Works without Belief or Meaning to Colonize Experience"
- **Robert Lanham** - "The Sinner's Guide To The Evangelical Right"
- **Eddie Tabash** - "The Threat of the Religious Right to Our Modern Liberties"
- **Rene Salm** - "The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus"
- **Dr. Lawrence Krauss** - "Much Ado About Nothing: A Cosmic Mystery Story."
- **Frank Zindler** - "How to answer creationists."
- **Dennis Prager** and **Frank Zindler** - "Does The Jewish God Exist?"
- **MAAF Meeting** (Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers)
- **Movie** - "A Flock Of Dodos"

It looks like it is going to be very illuminating. Full details on the conference are here:
["http://www.atheists.org/conference/"](http://www.atheists.org/conference/)

- **Jason Schoenack**

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God wanted to have a holiday, so He asked St. Peter for suggestions on where to go. "Why not go to Jupiter?" asked St. Peter. "No, said God, too much gravity, too much stomping around." "Well, how about Mercury?" "No, it's too hot there." "Okay," said St. Peter, "what about Earth?" "No, no," said God, "They're such horrible gossips. When I was there 2000 years ago, I had an affair with a Jewish woman, and they're still talking about it."

- Author Unknown

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God-o-Meter Lets You Find Out if Your Candidate is Religious Enough

Would you like to find out where your favorite Presidential candidate ranks on God-related issues? Your search is over! Go to beliefnet.com and you will find the God-o-Meter. It features a wheel-of-fortune-like dial with the heads of all the candidates. By each head is a number, from one to ten, with one being a secularist and ten being a theocrat.

As stated on the site: "The God-o-Meter (pronounced Gah-DOM-meter) scientifically measures

factors such as rate of God-talk, effectiveness — saying God wants a capital gains tax cut doesn't guarantee a high rating — and other top-secret criteria (Actually, the adjustment criteria are "http://www.beliefnet.com/story/227/story_22787_1.html"). Click a candidate's head to get his or her latest God-o-Meter reading and blog post. And check back often. With so much happening on the campaign trail, God-o-Meter is constantly recalibrating!"

God-o-Meter blogger Dan Gilgoff is Beliefnet's Politics Editor. A former political correspondent for U.S. News & World Report, he is author of *The Jesus Machine: How James Dobson, Focus on the Family, and Evangelical America are Winning the Culture War*.

You may be surprised to see that Obama and Clinton rank right up at the top (with Huckabee) at nine. Interestingly, the lowest ranking (three) was achieved only by Fred Thompson.

I am exploring the installation of a God-Ammeter (pronounced Gah-DAM-meter) on the RRF website. It would follow a similar one-to-ten rating, with ten being a rationalist and one "hopeless." I must confer with our Webmasters to see if we can make this happen!

- **Chuck Crane**

Be Sure to Get it Right

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said "Stop! don't do it!"

"Why shouldn't I?" he said.

I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!"

He said, "Like what?"

I said, "Well...are you religious or atheist?"

He said, "Religious."

I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?"

He said, "Christian."

I said, "Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant?"

He said, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?"

He said, "Baptist!"

I said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?"

He said, "Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God, or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God!"

I said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!"

I said, "Die, heretic scum," and pushed him off.

(Emo Phillips)

[Thanks to **James Pohl** and **Mikko Cowdery** for the above and many other quips, quotes and jokes

that appear in the Red River Rationalist.]

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.

Elaine and Jon Lindgren will host the vernal equinox potluck on March 16. Their home is at 2001 N. 7th St., Fargo.

Take 19th Ave N., turn north onto 7th St. N. Please note that parking is only allowed on the west side of 7th St. (cars should face south).

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.

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