

# Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

## OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

**Davis Cope**

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

*Edmund Gosse. Father and Son. 1907.*

Edmund Gosse (1849-1928) was a British poet, a literary critic, historian, and biographer. He brought Henrik Ibsen to the attention of the British public and revived the appreciation of John Donne. His achievements were all the more remarkable because he was raised in the seclusion of a Plymouth Brethren home, an intensely conservative and pietistic branch of Puritanism. His father, Philip Gosse (1810-1888), was a marine biologist of note and inventor of the aquarium. He was also a well-meaning fanatic. *Father and Son* is Edmund's account of his childhood from his earliest memories to his departure for London at sixteen, where he obtained a position at the British Museum at eighteen. Edmund wrote a formal biography of his father (*The Life of Philip Henry Gosse F.R.S. (1890)*), the act of a dutiful Victorian son, but a friend urged him to write a more personal account. *Father and Son* is the result, and it is so magnificent a book on so many levels, that I quite expect to review it many times.

The book is written with painstaking objectivity and thoroughness, recording the sorts of childish acts and beliefs that burden the memory of the mature individual. The humor of mutual misunderstanding is continually present. The flow, the grace, the irony, the honesty, the humor of the writing make it a recognized classic. I also believe it is written with controlled fury, a fury so great that only the deliberate adoption of a detached and distant style, modeled perhaps on that of an interested, intelligent, perceptive, and diligent observer of life in an aquarium, could control it.

With regard to its worth, I immediately think of its record of a fundamentalist home, all the more interesting from presenting a child's viewpoint. Current American fundamentalism is the object of increasing study (and very properly so), but it should be remembered that there was a time when fundamentalism was so implicit, so taken for granted, in the Christian community that no identifying name for it was necessary. The Victorian period in Great Britain was such a time, and the memories of those growing up in such an atmosphere provide valuable historical insight into this strange society. It is startling to find the same ideas, even the same phrasing, of today's fundamentalist sermons in these English nonconformist sermons of the 1860s. (For example, after his father has started preaching at the seaside town where they live when Edmund is about ten: "Only those who had given evidence of intelligent acceptance of the theory of simple faith in their atonement through the Blood of Jesus were admitted to the communion, or, as it was called, 'the Breaking of Bread'. It was made a very strong point that no one should 'break bread', -- unless for good reason shown -- until he or she had been baptized, that is to say, totally immersed, in solemn conclave, by the ministering brother." (p.116)

Then, aside from its value as history, there is its picture of the Father, the complete fundamentalist, an energetic and highly intelligent man with strong scientific interests who nonetheless accepts wholeheartedly the crudest, the most primitive, the most simplistic theological position available to Christians, the literal interpretation of Scripture. Indeed, Philip Gosse was quite aware of the scientific developments of those pre-Darwinian days when it was geology, not biology, causing serious problems for the seriously devout, although there were increasing hints of an explanation of that great puzzle, the

origin of species, in non-Biblical terms. That was the moment of Philip Gosse's great insight, his book *Omphalos* (1857), which "he thought, was to bring all the turmoil of scientific speculation to a close, fling geology into the arms of Scripture, and make the lion eat grass with the lamb. ... My Father, and my Father alone, possessed the secret of the enigma; he alone held the key which could smoothly open the lock of geological mystery." (p.105) What was the key? "It was, very briefly, that there had been no gradual modification of the surface of the earth, or slow development of organic forms, but that when the catastrophic act of creation took place, the world presented, instantly, the structural appearance of a planet on which life had long existed." (p.104) In other words, as critics unkindly put it, it was the hypothesis "that God hid the fossils in the rocks in order to tempt geologists into infidelity." The book attained the distinction of being ridiculed by the scientific and religious communities both. But Philip Gosse could not understand the rejection. He knew the Bible was God's Word, he knew the scientific evidence: the explanation follows! "He took one step in the service of truth, and then he drew back in an agony, and accepted the servitude of error." (p.102).

### *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*

## **America's Most Distrusted Minority**

Minneapolis/St. Paul (3/28/2006)

Americans' increasing acceptance of religious diversity doesn't extend to those who don't believe in a god, according to a national survey by researchers in the University of Minnesota's Department of Sociology.

From a telephone sampling of more than 2,000 households, university researchers found that Americans rate atheists below Muslims, recent immigrants, gays and lesbians and other minority groups in "sharing their vision of American society." Atheists are also the minority group most Americans are least willing to allow their children to marry.

Even though atheists are few in number, not formally organized and relatively hard to publicly identify, they are seen as a threat to the American way of life by a large portion of the American public. "Atheists, who account for about 3 percent of the U.S. population, offer a glaring exception to the rule of increasing social tolerance over the last 30 years," says Penny Edgell, associate sociology professor and the study's lead researcher.

Edgell also argues that today's atheists play the role that Catholics, Jews and communists have played in the past—they offer a symbolic moral boundary to membership in American society. "It seems most Americans believe that diversity is fine, as long as every one shares a common 'core' of values that make them trustworthy—and in America, that 'core' has historically been religious," says Edgell. Many of the study's respondents associated atheism with an array of moral indiscretions

ranging from criminal behavior to rampant materialism and cultural elitism.

Edgell believes a fear of moral decline and resulting social disorder is behind the findings. “Americans believe they share more than rules and procedures with their fellow citizens—they share an understanding of right and wrong,” she said. “Our findings seem to rest on a view of atheists as self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good.”

The researchers also found acceptance or rejection of atheists is related not only to personal religiosity, but also to one’s exposure to diversity, education and political orientation—with more educated, East and West Coast Americans more accepting of atheists than their Midwestern counterparts.

The study is coauthored by assistant professor Joseph Gerteis and associate professor Doug Hartmann. It’s the first in a series of national studies conducted by the American Mosaic Project, a three-year project funded by the Minneapolis-based David Edelstein Family Foundation that looks at race, religion and cultural diversity in the contemporary United States. The study will appear in the April issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

## **Untitled (God Died)**

*by Bill Barnes, an ex-Christian*

*God died today in the heart of another man.  
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,  
And in this soil a seed is planted.*

*God died today in the mind of another woman.  
The black dirt, the moist earth,  
From this new garden, wisdom grows.*

*I was always taught that God died that I might live.  
I never realized how true this was.*

*His death nourishes the seeds of wisdom, happiness,  
and freedom.*

*This is a eulogy, a benediction.  
I am saddened by my loss,  
But know a better life is ahead of me.*

*Love and hate marked this relationship.  
I loved this mythical invisible father.  
I hated the crotchety old judge.*

*Like the child of an alcoholic,  
Or a battered wife, who still loves her husband,  
I am glad he’s gone, but I still miss him.*

*The new garden I have has wonderful plants,  
But I still have to pull weeds of doubt and guilt,  
It's my responsibility now.*

*As a child must grow and leave the safety of home,  
I have grown and left the eternal security of heaven.  
I have outgrown my god, and laid him to rest.*

## Who's "One-Sided"?

From time to time a reader of the Red River Rationalist complains that we are too "one-sided,"

In my browsing of the Christian Century and similar publications (note that I did not say "and others of their ilk") I don't see space devoted to any freethinker position and I fail to see why they should provide any. But just in case they and we are wrong, let's give some publicity to some aspects of the Christian point of view.

Here is a short excerpt from a long sermon by the Reverend Jonathan Edwards, delivered to his frightened parishioners: "... easy it is for God, when he pleases, to cast his enemies down to hell. ... every unconverted man properly belongs in hell. God is ... angry with many that are now in this congregation ... the pit is prepared, the fire is made ready, the furnace is now hot, ready to receive the benighted, the flames do now rage and glow ... The wrath of Almighty God is now undoubtedly hanging over a great part of this congregation ..."

The Reverend Isaac Watts, one of the most prolific and beloved writers of reassuring Christian hymns, was perhaps more cheerful. Here's a sample verse: "What bliss will fill the ransomed souls  
When they in glory dwell, To see the sinner as he rolls  
In quenchless flames of hell.

The new complaint may be that these are not typical. But should the Red River Rationalist devote enough space to provide a statistically significant sample of Christian beliefs?

### - Bill Treumann

TREATMENT of the screenplay **KENTUCKY HOME** by **LEWIS LUBKA, 2006**

[Note: A "Treatment" is a condensed version of the screen play, with not much room for dialogue or scene setting, but mainly the story line/plot and some character development. The Kentucky Home treatment will be printed in installments in the Red River Rationalist. This is the fifth and final installment.]

Moore is asked to come to Ratcliff's office where Ratcliff asks him to become state's witness and work with him to clean these red carpetbaggers out of the state. Moore refuses and Ratcliff tells him that he is on their subversive list and being watched closely as a suspect.

The grand jury subpoenas each one of the seven white members of the Moore Defense Committee. They consider Overby the major conspirator since he bought the house for Moore.

Overby is working at his job at the International Harvester plant when a burly deputy sheriff taps him on the shoulder and shows him a bench warrant from the grand jury. He gets in the squad car and is taken to the jury room.

He is sworn in and, without warning, Ratcliff springs the \$64 question, "Are you now, or have you ever been, a member of the Communist Party?" Overby is infuriated since he expected an investigation of the bombing, not his political beliefs. He wants those responsible apprehended and brought to justice. His answer is clear, defiant and direct. "My politics are strictly my own business, and none of yours. The crime is bombing, not beliefs. How would you like it if someone asked you about your sexual preference?"

This question squarely hits home. Ratcliff turns red, stammers and momentarily loses his composure. He immediately terminates the hearing. He feels that he has been outed and it is the beginning of the end of his political career. Six months later he puts a pistol to his head and kills himself.

Overby is cited for contempt of court for refusing to answer the political question and is taken to jail. His lawyer, Bishop Rucker, visits him and advises him to plead the Fifth Amendment. He does this and is released on bail.

The grand jury indicts Overby and the other six whites on the Moore Defense Committee on charges of sedition and conspiracy. They elect separate trials. Overby is the first to be tried. Professional anti-communists like Matt Svetic are brought in by the prosecution as "witnesses". Svetic swears that since Overby had a copy of Marx's *Das Kapital* in his home library it is evidence that he is a subversive despite the city librarian's testimony that it is in the Louisville Public Library and most other libraries around the world.

The Kentucky statutes specify that the crimes Overby is charged with could get him up to 20 years in prison. After deliberating for a short time the jury finds him guilty as charged. As compassionate Christians, and since it is close to Christmas, they give him only 15 years in the pen.

The other six defendants are out on bail while Overby appeals to the US Supreme Court to overturn his conviction. After about 7 months, this Court finds that since the crime of sedition can only be committed against the federal government, state sedition laws are unconstitutional. Overby is sprung from the pen and the rest of the indictments are dismissed. However, the defendants are branded as troublemakers and find it almost impossible to get and keep jobs. One by one they move away. The Overbys have sufficient local resources to survive in Louisville.

The Moore home in Shively is unlivable. One of his white neighbors comes over and sincerely apologizes for the racism and the bombing. They work together to salvage items that still are usable and load them on a truck. The neighbor insists on driving with Moore to his parent's house and unloading the goods there.

Moore negotiates with the insurance company and gets a settlement covering his down payment and some of the damage to his household goods. However, his dream of living in the house on Gruber Lane is gone. He temporarily lives at his parents' home in the ghetto and later buys a house not far from the one he lived in before moving to Shiveley.

And the sun sometimes shines on Sterling Moore's Old Kentucky Home in the ghetto.

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From "Unedited Thoughts" by **Kaz Dziarka** in the September/October 2006 *American Rationalist*:  
"Recently [the] process of the decline of American civilization has dramatically sped up due to the election of the first US president whom many American and foreign intellectuals have privately and often publicly called an idiot or a moron, a moron who believes in all the inanities of a primitive Christian's imaginary world. Which includes the dangerous inanity that one can communicate with 'God' and help fulfill 'His' intentions.... The physical and intellectual decline of America is a national tragedy. Worse than 9/11."

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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.

For the November 19, 2006 meeting, Dr. Lowell Anderson will speak on Islam as a world religion and its impact on culture, belief systems, and family and lifestyles. Lowell has first hand knowledge of Islam, having worked with UNESCO in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. The public is welcome. Please join us for interesting discussion, information sharing, and light refreshments!

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"It is clear that thought is not free if the profession of certain opinions make it impossible to earn a living.

"I am myself a dissenter from all known religions, and I hope that every kind of religious belief will die out. I do not believe that, on the balance, religious belief has been a force for good. . . .

"

- **Bertrand Russell**

### **SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND LUNCH SEMINAR**

Fall Semester 2006

Meetings are Tuesdays at noon in the NDSU Memorial Union.

All meetings are one hour and free. The public is welcome.

Meadow Lark Room = Memorial Union 342/343.

[A campus map can be found in the local telephone directory].

Updated 2006.09.29.

7 November. Meadow Lark. Jon Lindgren. Mayoral Interactions with the Religious Community.

14 November. Meadow Lark. Davis Cope. Testing Fundamentalism: The Literal Interpretation of the Bible.

21 November. Meadow Lark. John Helgeland and Ken Koehler. Two Views on Interpreting Scripture.

28 November. Meadow Lark. Mark Gealy. Book Review: Colin Patterson's "Evolution" (2nd ed.).

The Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar has been sponsored by Red River Freethinkers since spring 2000.

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