

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope. The third part of a discussion of the Dover, PA court case involving Intelligent Design in public education, intended for this issue, is still being prepared.]

THE SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND LLUCH SEMINAR, an ongoing effort in the Fargo-Moorhead community to discuss controversial issues in science and religion, meets Tuesdays at noon through the Fall 2005 semester in the Meadow Lark Room, Memorial Union, North Dakota State University (the November 8 meeting is in the Plains Room). Meetings are free and the public is welcome.

In August 1999, the Kansas State Board of Education voted to substantially downgrade the state science standards. Kansas is the only state in the country with an elected Board of Education, and creationists had attained several positions. A terrific controversy had arisen over a months-long effort to upgrade the state science standards. The Board had appointed a panel of some thirty members (science teachers from around the state, university faculty, etc.) to prepare a new set of standards, and the result was very much in line with the standards suggested by national scientific organizations, such as the National Academy of Science.

The Board, however, refused to accept the draft of its own advisory panel, there was a tremendous muddle, an attempt at standards involving creationist ideas, progress was deadlocked for months, and finally the Board passed a set of vacuous standards that left out much of modern science (The Big Bang theory, for instance).

The situation created quite a flap, including many pro-and-con letters to the editor in the Fargo-Moorhead area, and a visit by Phillip E. Johnson, the "Father of the Intelligent Design Movement" to Fargo-Moorhead in October 1999, where he spoke on the three local college campuses on three successive nights defending the Kansas decision. I attended all three of Johnson's talks. Since Johnson was a law professor at UC Berkley and since I had a vague impression of Intelligent Design as an odd, but apparently well-intentioned, movement to provide a religious response to atheistic interpretations of science, such as provided by Richard Dawkins, I expected presentations that I might disagree with, but could still respect. Johnson was indeed a smooth and polished speaker, and he spoke to packed houses each night. He also stated some of the worst drivel I have ever heard from a public speaker. For example, once he got past the pleasantries of buttering up the crowd, he explained that evolution is a creation myth imposed by atheistic scientists who use their influence with the National Science Foundation to evade criticism and examination of the evidence, etc. As an applied mathematician who has the privilege of working with scientists over many years and seeing how review processes and grant processes work, I regard Johnson's views as asinine.

Be that as it may, the mere fact that Johnson could speak to packed houses (my estimate was about 300 each night) indicated there was serious need for some sort of discussion of these issues from more than one point of view. Hence the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar, which started meeting on the NDSU campus in the fall semester of 2000 under initial sponsorship of Red River Freethinkers. I have

been involved in it since that time and have had the pleasure of sharing the management with Mark Gealy of the Concordia College Physics Department over the past few years, where we have experimented with meeting at NDSU over the fall semester and at Concordia in the spring. This year, however, we expect to meet at NDSU over both fall and spring. Mark has had a longtime concern about pseudoscience disguised as religion and, in fact, gave a Fargo-Moorhead Community course on the creation-evolution controversy at the beginning of 2000, partly in response to Kansas and Johnson.

My goal in SRLS is not the presentation of one view, but the discussion and criticism of different points of view, including creationist ones. This approach is not only necessary for discussion between those of opposing views, it is also in agreement with that noble status of the university as a marketplace of ideas. As Mark Gealy once put it, perhaps the finest achievement of SRLS was to have people of strongly opposed views sitting together in the same room and talking. Furthermore, SRLS is not limited to the creation-evolution controversy, but to religion-science controversies generally, to science and pseudoscience and to religion and pseudoreligion. (As was so clearly brought to my attention by one participant: "If we're going to include pseudoscience, we ought to include pseudoreligion as well.")

My hopes for this academic year are much further discussion of Intelligent Design (what is it? is it in fact an alternative scientific theory to the theory of evolution? are its criticisms of evolutionary theory justified?) and identification of some standard references for SRLS. For example, we need criteria to distinguish scientific knowledge for other types of knowledge or content (in particular, from pseudoscience), and to do this, we need sources from the philosophy of science and possibly from the history of science. We need accurate scientific (and readable) descriptions of the theory of evolution. We need accurate descriptions of Creation Science (i.e. Young Earth Creationism) and Intelligent Design Theory. It should be an interesting year. Give us a visit!

*Philosophical Question:
If you are alone in a forest
and a tree falls on you,
do you make a sound?*

WE ARE AT WAR

With one of their own (and his cronies) in the White House and majorities in both houses of Congress as well as in the Supreme Court, the Righteous Religious are riding high. They see an unprecedented opportunity to push through their agenda to reshape our nation.

A favorite ploy of our ruling elite is to declare war on various nebulous concepts. Borrowing from the past -- **The War on Poverty and The War on Drugs** -- then there was **The War on Crime** and, most recently, **The War on Pornography** (this will, I expect, be about as effective as The War on Drugs and Prohibition).

The big one, of course, is **The War on Terror**. This "war" allows us (as in U.S.) to attack anyone who has something we want OR anyone we just plain don't like, including us (as in you and me).

What we should fear most is the "wars" that have NOT been declared -- and by "we" I refer to moderates, liberals, and progressives (of whatever political affiliation); also freethinkers, secular humanists, and anyone who fears the way our country is presently headed. Following is a short list of some undeclared wars:

The War on the U.S. Constitution was heralded by the passing of Patriot Act I and II and by the abdication by Congress of their responsibility to declare war; **The War on Human Rights** was joined by several provisions of the Patriot Acts and by allowing torture and prisoner abuse; **The War on Social Welfare** is entered by constant pressure to dismantle the social security system; **The War on the Middle Class** is evident in the tax breaks for the wealthy and the corporations, coupled with the shifting of funding for infrastructure and education to state and local governments; both **The War on Fiscal Responsibility** and **The War on Posterity** are obvious as a surplus is turned into huge and growing deficits, which will have to be paid by future generations; **The War on the Impoverished** was demonstrated in the response to Hurricane Katrina; **The War on Education** comes with the deceptively titled "No Child Left Behind" program, with its mandates and lack of funding, as well as the constant push for government funding of "faith-based" programs; **The War on Science** is waged through unrelenting pressure to incorporate into school science classes the oxymoronic "creation science", often now thinly disguised as "intelligent design" **The War on Women's Reproductive Rights** goes on as both the courts and the legislature are packed with "neocons" -- and the list could continue at some length. I believe that we who oppose the Religious Right/Neoconservative agenda must wage a war of our own. I would call it **The War Against Ignorance**. We must act, at every level, to reverse the trend toward the dumbing down of America.

We must ensure that young people who attend our public schools are able to get a good, basic education; this means that we must fiercely resist any attempts to insinuate Biblical Christianity into the science curriculum (this does not mean that schools may never mention religion or the Bible, as these have a place in our culture, history, and literature -- and it is these contexts that they should be studied).

We must do all we can to see that our adult populace is an informed electorate and that they exercise their right to vote. We need our citizens to be able to sort out factual information from media hype; they must be aware that just because someone repeats false information over and over and over, it is still false. We must all remember that "there is no free lunch" and that money from "the government" does not fall from the sky and that if we don't pay the bill, our children and grandchildren must. To sum this all up, we all need to be sure we have a B.S. detector and that is in working order.

- Chuck

Crane

ID, Inc.

MEMO

To: Design Department
From: Engineering
Subject: Your tentative plans

We have studied your recent memo re the new and improved Version 3.1 of species *homo sapiens*, i.e,

- Eliminate all body hair
- Improve brain to facilitate rational thought
- Add one or two eyes in rear of head
- Eliminate blind spots (as in octopus)
- Provide continuously growing teeth (cf.cow). or replacements of (cf. shark)
- Improve separation of passages to lungs and stomach
- Provide better mounting for head
- Introduce pain receptors in lungs
- Eliminate pain receptors where defensive action not possible
- Introduce additional heart on right side
- Eliminate fingernails, toenails, and male nipples
- Increase musculature of lumbar region of spine
- Eliminate the vermiform appendix
- Provide more comfortable route for delivery of babies, either by expanding the pelvic region, or allowing birth to proceed through a greatly enlarged and remodeled naval
- Lower the center of gravity
- Reroute the irethra to avoid the prostate gland
- Prevent the testicles from descending but remodel to allow sperm to survive the higher internal temperature
- Eliminate the smallest toe from each foot

Our department can cope with all of your proposals but perhaps not all at once. Although design is not our concern, might implementing all these at once raise embarassing questions about our previous efforts?

If lowering the center of gravity were to involve greatly increasing the circumference of the legs the result might seem rather unaesthetic. From an engineering point of view, reintroducing a large but graceful tail might be preferable and would also provide superior balance.

What would you think about our re-engineering the entire body to terminate in the manner of Oliver Wendell Holmes' "One Hoss Shay"?

- **Bill Treumann**

What's In a Name?

Fundamentalists have been quite resourceful at times. When their efforts to get "creation science" into main-stream biology textbooks stalled, they came up with the same idea under the new name "intelligent design."

We perhaps need to adopt a similar strategy. Rather than cause a furor among these folks by including the "theory of evolution" in texts, how about calling it the "Law of Incremental Speciation." or perhaps the "Principle of Favorable Genetic Adaptation"? Either of these avoids the specious argument the evolution is "merely a theory." RRR readers are invited to submit their own suggestions.

Will Secularism Survive?

(The following excerpts are from a section with the above title in the Oct./Nov. 2005 issue of *Free Inquiry*).

"In this era of continually rising Christian-right activism, unprecedented intrusions of religious speech and symbols into public institutions, and sweeping changes in the makeup of the U.S. Supreme Court, it seems appropriate to ask, "Will Secularism Survive? -- From the introduction by **Tom Flynn**.

"I find it difficult to marshal an argument in favor of the survival of secularism at a time when our species seems to be displaying an almost universal willingness to follow narrow-minded, short-sighted, and ignorant leaders." - **Richard E. Leaky**

"In my utopia, presidential prayer breakfasts would be abolished and churches would be taxed, but let's keep some perspective. The evangelicals who want Christ to be America's king aren't our oppressors, they are fearful and bewildered reactionaries who see their world evaporating. Does secularism have a future? It is the future" -

Frederick Crews

"Secularism is the only solution for the evolution of humankind. ...the business of organized religion will be diminished as more and more people break the chains of ignorance, open their minds, and question the validity of religious dogma." - **Parvin Darabi**

"Secularism should survive for the simple reason that there is no need for God. God is a persistent memory from the childhood of humanity -- that invisible friend who once provided comfort in a strange and scar world. Humanity has now reached adolescence, a crazy and dangerous time when children are fully developed physically but have not yet learned how to avoid self-destructive behavior. Fortunately, adulthood is just around the corner, provided the teenager survives until then. If humanity ever reaches adulthood, it should dispense with God." - **Victor J. Stenger**

"The idea of a secular state was developed in the West by deeply religious people who wanted to have freedom of religion. That secular states also protect people who are atheist, agnostic, or simply disinterested in religion is merely a by-product of the desire on the part of the religious to worship freely. I am fully confident that, in time, the faithful will once again see that their safety lies in

secularism." - **Joyce E. Salisbury**

"Secularism not only will survive, but it is the likely future for all enlightened, scientific-minded societies. I think humanity is in the midst of a profound transition, similar to past paradigm shifts such as the abandonment of slavery, colonialism, and the rule of kings. A new phase of civilization -- the Secular Age -- is on the horizon. The fact that past Europeans killed millions for religion but now their descendants shrug it off as inconsequential shows the amazing transformation in progress." -

James A. Haught

"The phenomenal growth of the Mormon Church proves that people will believe anything -- no matter how bizarre." - **Earl Lee**

"The real question is 'Will scularism survive in the U.S.A.?'

"I live in the Netherlands, a small but significant country in Western Europe, where secularism is common, and where believers and non-believers live in close harmony, accepting and respecting the totally different views of one another. It is a country where the humanist right of self-determination is indisputable, a fact illustrated by patients' legal rights to ask their doctor for euthansia if their suffering is unbearable. It is a country where enlightenment is still alive. In the proposed Constitution o the European Union, humanism is mentioned as one of the most important roots of European civilization." - **Peter V. Admiral**

The Meaning of God

When you substitute The American Heritage Dictionary definition for the word "god" in the Pledge of Allegiance it is easier to understand why those of us who believe in the separation of church and state think that the pledge should be restored to its original form, without reference to a god, before it can be recited in public schools: I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands; one nation, under a being conceived as the perfect, omnipotent, omniscient originator and ruler of the universe, the principal object of faith and worship in monotheistic religions, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

G. Rudy Di Massa, Citrus Heights, CA

(Letter to the Editor, Sacramento Bee)

- sent by **Ron Frederickson**

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 on the third Sunday of each month. The time and place of upcoming meetings will be posted in the newsletter and on the website.

Red River Freethinkers meet for lunch and discussion **1:00 - 3:00 pm, Sunday, October 16, 2005**, in the Garden Room of the **Trollwood Cafe, 3105 N. Broadway, Fargo**. The program will be discussion and reminiscences of Bill Treumann and his longstanding contributions to common sense in the Fargo-Moorhead area. We will be following up in a more dedicated fashion the July meeting discussion stimulated by a contribution of 1950s newspaper articles on the North Dakota Agricultural College firing of Bill and associates (NDAC is now North Dakota State University). Directions: Take Broadway north from downtown Fargo. The Cafe is in Trollwood Mall, which is between 31st Avenue N and 32nd Avenue N and was previously the Courtyard Cafe..

Bible Verse

Another in our series of limericks to help make Bible study more fun:

***You all know how the Lord is dead set against sin,
But poor timing is really what may do you in:
Raise hell now and just wait
'Til you're nearing the gate
Then repent - and you'll be ushered in with a grin..***

(Ezekiel 33:18-19)

For readers who don't have their Bible handy, the appropriate Bible passages are herewith appended:

18 When the righteous turneth from his righteousness and committeth iniquity, he shall even die thereby.

19 But if the wicked turn from his wickedness, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby.

Readers of RRR are encouraged to submit their own favorite passages from the Bible (preferably KJV) in the form of a limerick.

"Of all religions, Christianity is without doubt the one that should inspire tolerance most, althought, up to now, the Christians have been the most intolerant of all men."

- Voltaire

"The rivers of America will run with blood filled to their banks before we will submit to them taking the Bible out of our schools."

- Billy Sunday

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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