

Red River Rationalist

No. 92 - October, 2006

redriverfreethinkers.org

OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

P. Z. Myers. *Accommodation Isn't Enough: Why Scientists Need to Speak Out Against Religion*. Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar presentation Oct. 3, 2006.

P. Z. Myers is a faculty member of the Division of Science and Mathematics at the University of Minnesota, Morris, where he teaches such courses as Neurobiology, Developmental Biology, and Genetics. He is also a blogger, and last year the very prestigious science journal "Nature" cited his efforts as one of the top science blogs on creation/evolution: <http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula> He is a regular columnist for Seed Magazine, a popular science magazine now available at newsstands. Check: <http://www.seedmagazine.com/magazine> Thanks especially to the enthusiasm and aid of John Pexton, Myers kindly agreed to an SRLS presentation, which I shall review here.

The talk got strong reactions even before he gave it. I send out weekly SRLS announcements to an e-mail list of some 200+ people, spread throughout the community: students, faculty, scientists, ministers, atheists, Christians, Muslims, retirees, business people, etc. People hear about or attend SRLS and sign up, and the list has grown because people rarely ask to be dropped, which seems evidence that the SRLS emphasis on discussion and a broad range of speakers fills a community need. However, after the announcement with Myers' provocative title, two asked to be dropped from the e-mail list. On the other hand, at the meeting itself, two new people signed up.

Myers started his talk with some "poor arguments against religion", which he emphasized he was not making. I sympathized with the need to start off by describing what you will not be saying. One of the misfortunes of being an atheist, as I know from personal experience, is having to listen to Christians tell me, at length, what atheists think, virtually none of which is correct. So he pointed out that he would not be saying that science has "disproven God" (since science does not deal with such issues), that he would not be citing atrocities done by religious people or done in the name of religion as evidence against religion (there is no evidence of a cause-and-effect relation), and that he would not be saying that one cannot be both a Christian and a scientist (there are well-known examples of the combination).

He moved on to "worse arguments for religion", which I appreciated as potentially cutting out some of the trivialities that come up in these discussions. For example, that the Bible must be the Word of God because it says so, or that religion is a source of consolation (mature people would rather hear something true, even if bad news, than something false, however consoling). Some scientists, such as Stephen J. Gould, have argued that the realms of science and religion form "non-overlapping magisteria" (NOMA) and are essentially distinct and non-interfering. Myers thinks that a poor argument for religion, since he doesn't see a basis for granting religion dominion over any aspect of human experience.

Now the main point: Why oppose religion? He began with an illustration about his science teaching. He specifically tells students that there is a universal question that they may ask at any time: **How Do You Know?

As a scientist, there is one answer he is not allowed to give: Because the textbook says so. This is his way of making the point that **Scientific knowledge is based on observation, skeptical inquiry, testing, independent verification, logic, documentation, and reference. That is the type of knowledge that should be imparted in science classes, and it is opposed to religion, where he emphasizes that **Religious knowledge is based on revealed knowledge, dogma, authoritarian dicta, mystery, "inspiration". That is, scientific and religious knowledge are competing, not complementary, positions, a point that also refutes the NOMA argument.

Myers noted that, while some individuals are simultaneously Christians and scientists, that is a rarity. For example, a recent poll of the National Academy of Science, whose members are major scientists, showed 93% to be fully atheist or agnostic. He then critiqued two books by scientists who are also Christians (Kenneth Miller and Francis Collins), where the authors attempt to reconcile science and religion. They fail.

The end of the talk was a bit disappointing. Myers finished by giving the "Top Ten Reasons Religion is Like Pornography", a bit of cutesy sarcasm. I didn't think it was funny. We had a good turnout, some 40 people packed into the room with extra chairs needed. As at any SRLS meeting, they were a slice across the community, holding many different views, possibly holding them strongly, but interested in hearing other views. Myers had taken an unpopular position and had, up to this point, presented it clearly and forcefully. He stated positions he disagreed with, showed that he had thoughtfully examined them, and he stated, without ridiculing or distorting them, why he disagreed. It was a good talk, and I believe he had the unwilling respect of even those in the audience most disagreeing with him. I wish he had finished strongly and left that audience with some memorable bridging of the communication gap between religious and nonreligious. Instead, we got the "Top Ten Reasons Religion Is Like Pornography".

The following discussion raised a good point against Myers' position but, while he didn't actually answer it, I felt he made an equally good point in return. The point raised against him was that he misunderstood religion. He used "religion" and "Christianity" interchangeably, and he seemed to identify "Christianity" with its most extreme forms. (As one questioner put it, was he talking about "religion" or "religious perversion"?) In particular, he identified religion with "knowledge claims", which misunderstands and trivializes the nature of religion. In response, Myers said that he used the term "religion" in the same way that virtually everyone uses it in everyday life throughout the United States, and that is the meaning scientists need to speak against.

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***

Letter to the Editor

I wish to comment upon letters in the most recent issue of RRR. Re the musings of Ms. Sawicki and Dean Will Treumann:

First, Ms. Sawicki imagining that "Heaven" is an "excruciatingly boring place." She is not the first to comment in this fashion. Mark Twain said, "Heaven for climate; Hell for society." As to Xian's fear of death; it is obvious that they are afraid that they have not lived by their self-imposed "regulations" --- that they will be sent to Hell to join their friends in the realm of Satan who is another invention of theirs. "He" (or she) is the "servant" who receives and disposes of the "condemned," according to their beliefs. A nice and neat arrangement between Jehovah and Satan working together.

Robert Ingersoll (and Twain similarly) wrote and spoke eloquently of "the final Peace and Rest of the grave." Both men pointed out that the Xians' fear of punishment in the "afterlife" came about through their Jesus' invention of Hell as a way of pursuing them even after death. As terrible as Jehovah's wrath was to them, "His" punishment ended at the grave.

And Will Treumann's reference to the horrific and undeserved punishment of the Amalakites as well as the Midianites at the decree of Jehovah (later Jesus) "after he got religion" and invented Hell. Twain muses on the kind of "crime" of the Midianites to have brought such punishment on every man, woman, child and all their animals.

At first, Twain wonders if the males among the Midianites may have been practicing Onanism, for which the whole tribe was condemned. "If that was not the indelicacy that outraged the feelings of the Deity, then I know what it was: some Midianite had been pissing against the wall. I am sure of it, for that impropriety which the Source of all Etiquette never could stand. A person could piss against a tree, he could piss on his mother, he could piss on his own breeches, and get off, but he must not piss against the wall --- that would be going quite too far. The origin of the divine prejudice against this humble crime is not stated, but we know that the prejudice was very strong --- so strong that nothing but a wholesale massacre of the people inhabiting the region where the wall was defiled could satisfy the Deity."

This reader is in agreement with Twain's "explanation" of this mass condemnation. Twain goes on to enumerate and describe other similar "indelicacies" for which similar retribution occurred. (Please refer to Letter X, in Twain's Letters From the Earth.)

Yours truly, **TOAOTH** (Rollag, MN)

New Words For an Old Song

[Dr. Gerald Fauske, collection manager, NDSIRC comments: "Find attached new lyrics to that old classic hymn, Rock of Ages. The first three verses drag a bit -- much like the original -- but verse four perhaps makes up for this. I have a firm belief that the way to persuade people en masse in our polarized stealth-theocracy is through humor. Enjoy!]

Rock of Ages

Rock of a-ges, cleft for thee, fossil re-cord there to see.

Tri-lo-bite, T. rex, Lu-cy, in layered stone, success-ive-ly.
Split by wa-ter, lands up-hurled, historic ta-pes-try unfurled.
Rock of a-ges, cleft for thee, mar-vel-ous stratigraphy.

Clock of a-ges, DNA, genetic mar-kers of our way.
Mutations neu-tral, accum-u-late, tick onward at a constant rate.
Split by en-zymes, helix un-sealed, parental lin-e-age revealed.
Clock of a-ges, DNA, tree of life in grand ar-ray.

Compar-a-tive ana-tomy, a science called morph-o-log-y.
Walrus flip-per, wing of bird, in human hands, the bones recur.
Tadpoles, humans, snakes, and whales, in embryo– all have their tails.
Compar-a-tive ana-tomy, shows our common an-ces-try.

Fos-sils, genes, morph-o-log-y, on one result they all agree.
Studies in-depend-ent-ly, give the same phy-log-en-y.
Three sci-en-ces: a u-nit-y, light of reason: a tri-nit-y.
What about the-o-log-y? Left behind– a chim-pan-zee!

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In March, Jamie Raskin was the only professor of constitutional law to agree to testify against Maryland Republicans' proposed anti-gay marriage constitutional amendment. After his testimony, one Republican State Senator told Jamie that maintaining marriage discrimination was purely a matter of following "biblical principles." Jamie responded, in words that should be engraved in every courtroom, state legislature and in our very own congress...and in words that in this era criss-crossed the internet, "Senator, when you took your oath of office, you put your hand on the Bible and swore to uphold the Constitution. You didn't put your hand on the Constitution and swear to uphold the Bible." The response in the hearing room was so raucous and enthusiastic that the chairman of the committee pounded his gavel and said, "this is not a football game."

(sent by **John Sherman**)

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 fourth installment.]

On his way to do guard duty one evening, Overby stops at a roadhouse on Dixie highway not far from the Moore's. He orders a beer and innocently asks the bartender whether the house that the Black family moved into is in the area. The bartender tells him that it's about a mile away and says, "Boy, stay away from there! They got 50 niggers with machine guns."

Most of the people guarding the house, including Moore and Overby, work during the day and are getting worn out from the night guard duty. Since there has been no overt act against the Moores or the house for months, they conclude that the time has come to withdraw the guards. The Moores will have

to live in an unguarded home like everyone else.

A couple of weeks later, Louisville's world famous annual event, the Kentucky Derby, is held. The Moores decide the Derby would be a good family outing. They enjoy the races from the infield and stop for dinner at Moore's father's ghetto home on the way back to Shively. Moore's parents have a mom and pop grocery in the ghetto. Betty's parents have passed on but had a small tobacco farm in Eastern Kentucky.

The Moores return to Gruber Lane in the early evening. It is a bit past the children's bedtime so they quickly move the girls from the kitchen toward their bedroom when there is a huge explosion under the house, blowing up part of the floor and outside wall of the girl's bedroom. Just the rim of the bathtub in the adjoining bathroom remains. The house is a shambles, but the Moores are thankful that no one was hurt.

The police are called and the same two that came out when the brick was thrown are back. They survey the wreckage and the Ku Kluxer, smirk on his face, tells the other that this serves Moore right. He should have known his place.

Eldredge Ratcliff, the Jefferson County prosecutor, sees this case as a windfall for his ambition to become Governor of Kentucky. He is discussing this with his sister who warns him that as a closet gay man he is extremely vulnerable and runs the risk of being exposed. He says he's not worried.

Ratcliff is in a meeting with his aides in the Jefferson County Courthouse in Louisville. They are discussing the bombing of the Moore home. Eldrege puts forth his theory that Moore doesn't have the brains to get a white to buy him a suburban house nor the guts to carry out such project. Therefore, it has to be whites who put him up to it. These whites are on the Moore Defense Committee. They did it as part of a Red conspiracy to create turmoil between the races and foment revolution. Sen. Joe McCarthy has exposed Reds in high places in government and they have infiltrated Louisville. They agree that a grand jury should be convened to investigate the whites on the Moore Defense Committee.

(Continued next month)

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"The religious geniuses of all ages have been distinguished by this kind of (cosmic) religious feeling, which knows no dogmas and no God conceived in man's image; . . . Hence it is precisely among the heretics of every age that we find men who are filled with the highest kind of religious feeling and were in many cases regarded by their contemporaries as Atheists, sometimes also as Saints."

- Albert Einstein

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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 15 October 2006, Dr. Mike Michlovic of the Department of Anthropology, Minnesota State University, Moorhead, will present "The Kensington Runestone". The public is welcome. Please join us for interesting discussion, information sharing, and light refreshments!

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"Religion is all bunk."

- **Thomas Alva Edison**

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.

10 Oct. Meadow Lark. Darin Johnson. The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion. I.

17 Oct. Meadow Lark. Darin Johnson. The Marriage of Sense and Soul: Integrating Science and Religion. II.

24 October. No meeting. Memorial Union closed due to conference.

31 October. Meadow Lark. Armin Ruppert. A Question of Consistency in the Resurrection Accounts.

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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