

SAD NEWS

It is my sad task to inform all readers of the Red River Rationalist that one of our founders, Chuck Crane, died on Tuesday March 30.

Chuck, and a small group of courageous folks, founded Red River Freethinkers on the idea that through fellowship and information, people in our region could live their lives free to investigate and reason about matters of faith in any way they chose, without conforming to the prevailing beliefs of their friends and neighbors.

Chuck was a stalwart member of RRF for many years until his health took a turn for the worse. He, and his wife, Gerre, drove the 200 mile round trip between Alexandria, MN and Fargo, ND every month for several years. They often carried food with them to be enjoyed by all.

In addition, he edited our newsletter, the Red River Rationalist, for nearly all the history of the RRF. Often, he wrote articles himself about issues he found of interest.

One of Chuck's many qualities was his willingness to continue dialogues among his circle of friends who had traditional beliefs about religion.

Shortly before his illness, he and Gerre hosted a gathering of RRF members at their home in Alexandria. True to his nature, he also invited a local couple who held traditional beliefs, but who held an interest in what our group was all about.

Our sympathies and support go out to Gerre and Chuck's family. He will be missed by us all. ■

**Jon Lindgren, President, RRF
Fargo, ND**

Articles in this newsletter do not necessarily reflect the ideas or opinions of the Red River Freethinkers organization.

The mission of the Red River Freethinkers is to advocate for a skeptical view of the role of religion in society and to promote critical examination of religious authority and dogma.

Red River Freethinkers is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization.

Family membership	\$45/year	Membership includes a subscription to this newsletter. Send name, address, phone number, email address and dues to Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107-0405.
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RED RIVER FREETHINKERS

THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST

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ETHNOCENTRIC VIEWS CAN BE FLAT-OUT WRONG

Why is it that people will disagree with scientific evidence, even when there is near universal consensus among scientists on a given topic?

This basic question was looked at in a recent paper available through The Social Science Research Network. (http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1549444).

Although this paper, "Cultural Cognition of Scientific Consensus," did not look at religion specifically, its findings are likely closely related to religion, too.

Looking to verify what has been known as the "cultural cognition of risk," the paper's conclusions assert that "individuals systematically overestimate the degree of scientific support for positions they are culturally predisposed to accept as a result of a cultural availability effect that influences how readily they can recall instances of expert endorsement of those positions."

In other words, a person is likely to accept assertions by those people who already agree with them, or are seen as culturally close in some fashion. If the majority of "experts" a person is exposed to espouses a certain position, they will tend to agree with it, even if those "experts" compose an extreme minority overall.

"If individuals more readily count someone as an expert when that person endorses a conclusion that fits their cultural predispositions, individuals of opposing cultural outlooks will over time form opposingly skewed impressions of what most experts believe. As a result, even when experts by and large agree, individuals of diverse world-views will disagree about the state of scientific consensus," the report concludes.

This idea that people will more easily accept "expert" opinion that is already close to their own opinions is not new. But what is interesting is that this study looked specifically at positions considered risky, like climate change,

nuclear power and gun control. From a certain point of view, religious belief can also be seen in terms of risk--in an afterlife.

In some religions the risk is one of eternal punishment or banishment. In others it's a reincarnation scenario where a person could return as a "lower" form of life, for example. If an expert opinion is interpreted as putting the religious believer at risk for a painful or otherwise less-than-ideal afterlife, the expert will more than likely be dismissed; the expert's opinion is too risky to accept, given the believer's cultural point of view.



This, of course, is likely the seed for the Pascal's Wager argument, which basically asserts that the risk of not believing is too great, even if there is no god to believe in. If this study's conclusions can be applied to religious beliefs--as seems likely--then we now have a wonderful scientific hint at what's going on in keeping believers believing, even in the face of overwhelming evidence contrary to those beliefs. ■

**Brian Magee
Fargo, ND**

POINTS OF INTEREST

- The April RRF meeting will be in the Presentation Center at the Plains Art Museum at 704 1st Ave North in Fargo on Sunday April 18th from 1 to 3pm. Everyone is welcome!
- Every Saturday morning from 11-12pm on KNDS 96.3 FM, catch Kent and Brian on "The Amplified Atheist".
- Leah Hauge's blog, "The Whore of All the Earth", details her story about leaving the Mormon church. A very interesting read!
- Check out the *Center for Inquiry* (CFI) podcast "Point of Inquiry" at <http://pointofinquiry.org>

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KICKING THE 'PH' OUT OF PROPHECY

Everyone 'knows' that Al Gore invented the internet in 1991. How many realize that Harvard mathematician/ song writer Tom Lehrer prophesied the internet in his song *Lobachevsky*, first recorded in 1953 (and available today on YouTube)? The song's protagonist must write a complex mathematical paper: "On analytic and algebraic topology of locally Euclidian parameterization of [an] infinitely differentiable Riemannian manifold." He is in a race to publish first so what does he do? Lyrics follow (please read with heavy Russian accent):

"I have a friend in Minsk, who has a friend in Pinsk,
Whose friend in Omsk, has friend in Tomsk,
with friend in Akmolinsk.
His friend in Alexandrovsk, has friend in Petropavlovsk,
Whose friend somehow, is solving now,
The problem in Dnepropetrovsk.

And when his work is done- Ha ha! — begins the fun.
From Dnepropetrovsk to Petropavlovsk,
By way of Iliysk and Novorossiysk,
To Alexandrovsk, to Akmolinsk,
To Tomsk to Omsk, to Pinsk to Minsk,
To me the news will run,
Yes, to me the news will run!

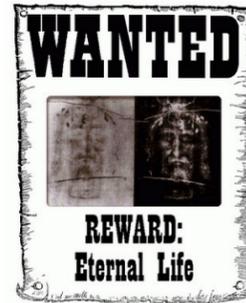
And then I write by morning, night,
By afternoon and pretty soon,
My name in Dnepropetrovsk is cursed,
When he finds out I've published first."

Can a detailed mathematical explanation be accurately communicated and repeated in a consecutive series of telephone conversations? I think not. That leaves the mail. If both authors submit their results to the Soviet Academy of Sciences (one mailing) and each is given equal editorial time, then, the protagonist who gets the results after nine (!) other relays *still* publishes first? That type of speed is only achieved via the internet. What else could it be? The words are right there for us to interpret. Clearly this was Prophecy.

Many times as a kid, and later, I thought that if I were ever to have pets, I would have two black cats. In 2002, a neighbors' neglected cat had a litter of kittens under my sister's porch. My sister went into kitten savior mode. She already had an 18 year old cat. I could not refuse and now I have two black cats. This was self-fulfilling prophecy, no future vision required.

Once upon a seminar, a speaker said: "How many of you were able to choose the place of your birth, Jesus Christ did." At the

time, I thought of a job placement ad: *Wanted*, Messiah, must be born in Bethlehem and of the 'bloodline' of King David, no others need apply. Scripture tells us that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Theologians tell us that scripture interprets scripture. We certainly remember the passage where Jesus' 'father' and mother are searching and find him with temple elders. His reply (Luke 2:49) to distraught parents: "Did you not know I must be in my fathers' house?" Jesus, as a boy, was well acquainted with scripture and the



Prophecies. Let's scroll forward a few years, we have this post-adolescent male steeped in theocratic teaching and who is deciding what to do with his life (hmm. . . *Wanted*, Messiah, must be born in Bethlehem and of the 'bloodline' of King David, no others need apply). The problem with prophecy is interpretation. During the Q&A of the aforementioned seminar, another participant asked, 'What bloodline?' Blood ties in biblical culture were reckoned through male descendents. Joseph (ostensibly) of David's bloodline made no contribution. Strictly speaking then, the Prophecy has not been fulfilled. Oops, looks like a different interpretation of scripture.

According to biblical scholars and referenced in Asimov's Guide to the Bible, Malachi, the last book of the Christian Old Testament and also the last of a series of books by 'the prophets' was written around 460 b.c.e. while the gospels- the first four books of the New Testament were written after 60 c.e. Mark may have been written shortly after 64 c.e., Mathew by 70 c.e., Luke by 80 c.e. and John by perhaps 100 c.e.; not a one of these books of the prophets or the gospels is contemporary with the person of their adoration- either being written many generations before or at least one generation after the time of Christ. It has been suggested that the gospel according to John was written specifically for a Christian community, perhaps to settle doctrinal disputes (Guide to the Bible p. 954). Books are written with previous teachings in mind. So, obviously scripture can interpret scripture and we've got a Prophecy to fulfill! Was John, or whoever, a betting man? Did he imbibe at the Jade Ox Inn? (Keep reading, I predict all will become clear.)

On October 22, 2136 b.c.e., the Chinese astronomers Hsi and Hing, after failing to predict a solar eclipse of that day, were executed by order of Emperor Chung K'ong. Giordano Bruno stated that stars were far away suns, had planets and some of those planets probably had life. He was burned at the stake by order of the Catholic Church on February 17, 1600 c.e. Sometimes you're dammed if you don't and dammed if you do.



When a bookie trolls for victims at events like horse racing, s/he sets up their prey. The bookie gives 'hot tips' and covers small bets of many people, the bookie is obviously giving 'hot tips' on all the horses to different people. If there were for example five races, of those for whom the 'tip' pays off in race one, the bookie covers bets in race two, then race three and finally race four, then, although the betting pool shrinks after each race, its members are more impressed with the prowess of their bookie. Comes race five and there is this poor sot who bets his life savings on a tip from the bookie who he saw WITH HIS OWN EYES predict the outcomes of four previous races. Oh, I may have neglected to mention, as the bookie failed to mention to his clients, that he was working for this other organization that does the fee collection. Not having all the facts affects interpretation and believing in a Prophecy can be dangerous.

Back in the 1990's a marginally famous 'seer' died. The name could be in an anagram at the end of this paragraph, whatever it takes to avoid a lawsuit from zealots. This 'seer' had the habit of writing many, many predictions. Each of these sealed in a secondary envelope within an outer letter. The 'seer' would mail the predictions to various celebrities or famous friends. Always, the letter would come with an admonition not to open the inner envelope unless specifically requested to do so. Occasionally, a recipient received such a request and 'Lo and behold' the prediction from the sealed envelope would somewhat match a current event. Very few ever knew of the many alternative letters until the 'seer' died and inquiring minds wanted to know- that the seer was sightless and the Prophecies phony. Text can interoperate and everyone now knows the perils of the 'Jade Ox Inn.'

In 2008, I heard a seminar speaker say that the troop 'surge' in Iraq was prophesied in the Koran. He said that there was a passage in which the Arabic translates as 'surge.' This is an example of retroactive clairvoyance or 'post-diction,' prediction after the fact. Had he, back in 2002 (the U.S. did not invade Iraq until 2003), announced to the assembled group that in 2007 there would be an increase of U.S. troops in Iraq because he had read it in the Koran, and, that it would be labeled as a 'surge,' I (present time) would be quite impressed. I never did find out why 'surge' referred specifically to U.S. troops or to their being in Iraq. Contrawise, G. W. Bush always tried to justify his actions on theological grounds (according to the president, he was told by Yahweh to invade Iraq). If the seminar speaker in 2008 was correct, then, I suspect that someone in or close to the Bush Administration also made such a connection and used the term 'surge' deliberately to curry favor in the Islamic world. All this speculation is contradicted by the fact that Islamic teaching holds the Koran to be truly accessible only in the original Arabic. Mullahs well know the pitfalls of translational error and now we are trapped in a 'whirling dervish' of theological reasoning. The problem with prophecy is interpretation.



Since any writing discussing prophecy must mention Nostradamus, I'll simply say, study closely these upcoming two concluding paragraphs. If a Prophecy is well known and if it is fulfilled, then, was it a prediction, or do popular writings influence the society in which they were written? If the prophetic writings are little known (or unknown), will they be recognized (or discovered) before the event they prophecy? If they are not discovered, then, was the Prophecy in vain or was there even a Prophecy? If the writings are little known (or are discovered), who interprets them? How likely is it that a Prophecy will be recognized as such unless it is by those most interested in its finding and interpreted by those most likely to benefit from its outcome? What of the redoubtable prophet- what if you are the prophet? Being wrong and reviled as a false prophet, likely does more than change your facebook status. Being right and revealing the prophecy could land you in prison (or worse) as you might influence rather than predict events and then, not only can you be reviled as a false prophet (even though you were right!), you have opened yourself up to charges of influence peddling (or treason)! Being right and remaining silent? Then you can never be recognized for the 'superior soothsayer' you really and truly are and where's the fun in that? What can a prophet do? All they can do is encrypt their writings to escape persecution (can a true prophet even have enemies?), somehow believing future historians will decipher script that their fellow man cannot.

To sum up, the problem with prophecy is interpretation- because, the burden of proof is on the claimant yet the interpreters cannot be fair brokers of the facts. Why cannot they be fair brokers of the facts- *because they are interpreters*. Why are they interpreters- because there is not **one single prophecy** ever written that stands on its own words without interpretation. So, what are the problems with interpretation again? 1) Who gets to write prophecy? 2) When is a writing taken as prophecy? 3) Who gets to decide when writing is prophecy? 4) How can one know whether it is Prophecy, a nefarious scam or the ramblings of a madman? 4) How well known is the Prophecy, how widely distributed? 5) Who is allowed to read it? 6) Who decides when prophecy is fulfilled? 7) Were other prophecies made that have not (yet) been fulfilled, if so, how many? 8) Was each and every one of these prophecies preserved and treated with the same reverence reserved for the one claimed to have come true? 9) Were any prophecies discarded, if so why? 10) When is a Prophecy about to be fulfilled? Remember, each and every portend of a coming event is itself subject to all the points just enumerated. About now the true believer will object crying "foul! How dare you belittle my Beliefs by comparing them with criminal acts, soothsayers, heretical writings or pop culture songs which you have obviously deliberately picked and decided to use for your own particular purpose, you're being too critical. My obvious reply: "show me that one piece of ancient text so unambiguously clear to us yet so completely unintelligible to a past prophets' contemporaries and enemies, perhaps a 20th century English statement familiar world over such as, "Tranquility Base here, the Eagle has landed." ■

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