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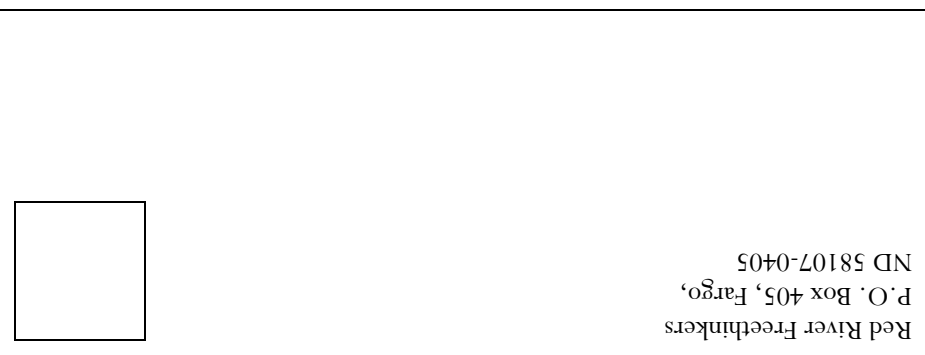
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The mission of the Red River Freethinkers is to advocate for a skeptical view of the role of religion in society and to promote critical examination of religious authority and dogma.

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RED RIVER FREETHINKERS

THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST

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HAVE YOUR EGGNOG AND DRINK IT TOO

It never fails, every year, Christians and nonbelievers clash when Christmas time rolls around. The arguments are all the same, and the results are always the same, and it seems that there are just as many rotten apples in both buckets. The Internet is littered



with stories from bah humbug atheists about how Christmas is a hijacked, originally-pagan holiday, and how it has mutated into a spiritless display of glory for consumerism. There are just as many stories from “don’t rain on my parade” Xmas-philes who flame nonbelievers for not showing the proper type of respect for their particular flavor of Winter holiday. And then there are those millions of Americans who don’t believe in any gods, or who aren’t Christian, but who still celebrate Christmas, because it’s fun; fun to give gifts, fun to receive gifts, and fun to spend time together. I count myself in this last group.

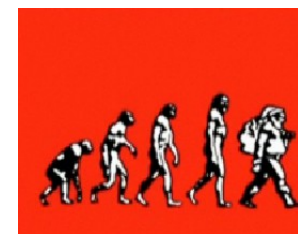


For me Christmas is just a fun holiday, plain and simple. It doesn’t have lofty cosmological meaning or divisive theological implications. For me Christmas is family and food, exchanging gifts,

smiles and laughter, games and music, time off from school, snowy road trips to Grandma and Grandpa’s in Northern Minnesota, cousins, the mysteries of Santa and Frosty, and parents and aunts and uncles all have more fun together than usual.



But for some, there is this seriousness about the roots and meaning of Christmas that can completely ruin the experience for them and for people around them. To those sticklers I say, “lighten up!”. Who cares if some people think of Christmas as a pagan holiday, and some think of it as the day that the son of their God was born, and some people think of it as just a good day for family to get together since a lot of people have the day off.



Why can’t it just be a time for all people to come together, enjoy each other’s company, and show good will towards each other, like it was for me when I was a kid? If you can’t let it be that, then maybe you’re the one being the Scrooge. ■

Jason Schoenack
Fargo, ND

POINTS OF INTEREST

- The December RRF meeting will be a potluck held in the large conference room at the downtown Fargo Public Library on Sunday December 20, 2009 from 1 to 4pm. Free parking is in the lot to the East of the library. Everyone is welcome!
- NDSU and MSUM have had secular student groups in place for some time. Now, one Concordia College student is helping that school to catch up by working to create the school’s first secular group, *Concordia Atheists*.

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

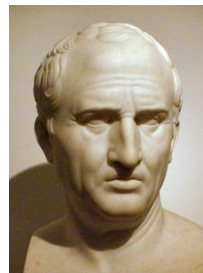
- | | |
|---|---|
| HAVE YOUR EGGNOG AND DRINK IT TOO | 1 |
| ATHEISTS HAVE NO MORALS? | 2 |
| BECOME A MEMBER OF THE RED RIVER FREETHINKERS | 4 |

ATHEISTS HAVE NO MORALS?

This is the second in a series of four essays on common canards advanced to indict atheism. Atheists have no morals? My two black cats, Boris and Natasha have morals. They do not fight over food. They do not fight over toys. They will step over, but not on me- or each other. While they squabble over optimal resting spots and window seats and they will fight. What they do not do is, for example, when Natasha is sleeping in a spot that Boris wants, she is not pounced upon. Although the sleeping cat would be a 'soft target,' she is licked into wakefulness- then the squabbling begins. Am I anthropomorphizing, probably; these rules of cat conduct (no fighting over possessions and right of 'person') happen to coincide with what we would consider moral behavior.



What are morals and how do we distinguish between morals and ethics? Searching many sources reveals differing and contradictory definitions. Tracing word roots, ethics comes from the Greek 'ethos' meaning character, and morals from the Latin 'mos' meaning custom (mores). Other writers distinguish ethics as conduct based upon reason, versus morals as conduct based upon authority. Another definition is that morals distinguishes right from wrong, whereas ethics distinguishes right from right. Finally, morals have been defined as an individual's sense of good conduct versus ethics, societies' consensus of good conduct- an 180° turn about from the root terms. This turnabout is defensible by noting that the Latin word coined by Cicero with the root of 'mos' was 'moralis,' his translation of the Greek 'ethikos.' Morals and ethics, like any subject, holds complexities far beyond the scope of a short essay to address and so our discussion will be narrowed to the premise, its basis and possible refutations.



Because atheists and non-atheists alike live within the same society, both groups share one set of rules- those agreed to as acceptable conduct under the rule of law. United States law is a code of both ethics and morals. Credibility of the claim 'atheists have no morals' cannot then rest with any



agreement upon laws of conduct, but must reside in a different propositions, either a different moral code or different consideration of ethics. At this point, a fundamentalist Christian, usually the one advancing the 'atheists have no morals' claim, might state, 'Of course, because we get our moral code and personal ethics from the bible and the Ten Commandments.' So let's look at this moral code. The version of the Ten Commandments that follows is taken from Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, 1951- the one I was given by my local Lutheran Church back in 1964:

1. I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods before me.
2. You shall not make for yourself a graven image.
3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.
5. Honor your father and your mother.
6. You shall not kill.
7. You shall not commit adultery.
8. You shall not steal.
9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.
10. You shall not covet . . . anything that is your neighbors.

This is a distilled version and I have left out much that would date the text as archaic or that would put the Christian God in an unfavorable light.

The first four commandments are all about honoring God. Where do we see laws like these in human society today? We see them in countries where dictators strive to put on a show to convince others that they are not dictators: the properly cheering artifice of crowds, state holidays to honor a leader requiring participation of the populace- and bad things happen to dissenters. Remember the May Day parades of the former Soviet Union? In North Korea there is deification and leader worship. This is manufactured patriotism or mandated hero worship. Not particularly lofty aspirations for an omnipotent, omniscient god, and a real devaluation of human worth.

The 5th Commandment makes an unsupportable assumption: that one's father and mother are good and honorable people. This is not always the case: spousal or child abuse, incest, parental drug use, etc. and where does that leave the 5th Commandment? Parents are only human, make human mistakes

and should not always be honored. I was fortunate and have/had caring human parents.

Commandments six through nine are good but by no means complete rules of conduct. They can be condensed into the Golden Rule: Do to others what you would have done to you, or the Silver Rule: do not do to others that which you would not have done to you. Golden Rule philosophy traces back to the Egyptian book of the Dead as: "He sought for others the good he desired for himself. Let him pass."



This is *at least* 1350 years prior to biblical writings which the early Catholic Church translated as: "Do unto others as you would have others do unto you." A pity many of the catholic clergy never followed these rules- oh wait, they did. They only forgot to ask if that was what the *other* person really wanted done. But such conduct must have been okay with God as there is no commandment covering behavior that, under U.S. laws lands an individual in prison, puts them on a neighborhood watch list, or merits their wearing an ankle bracelet with GPS so that civil authorities can be omniscient.

The 10th commandment is of a quite different nature than any of the others, namely, how would one enforce thought-crime? Acts can be illegal. Under certain circumstances threats to act are illegal- blackmail for example. Thoughts however, are never completely under conscious control. Seems like an omniscient god might have dreamed up a more operable statement for the 'covet rule.' Here is my version: 'You shall not act to the detriment of other upon the greed you may find in your own heart.'

What about the sins not covered by the Ten Commandments: Rape, Kidnapping, and Slavery. Interestingly, these are numbers two, three and four under secular law rating in severity just below the number one prohibition in secular law- murder (6th Commandment). Rape- see above. As for Kidnapping, the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights lists as one of those rights (Article 3), the right of person, apparently people (and cats) are able to recognize a necessity that the author of The Ten Commandments was oblivious to- the necessity of living free from fear. Complex interactions between members of the human community cannot take place in an atmosphere of fear. Will an artist be expressive if they know their work will be on the bonfire tomorrow? Can one question the ethical principles

of a society if ones' writings are censored by religious or governmental groups, or ones' life is threatened? Will an investor put money into an ongoing project if they themselves must be concerned for their personal safety at every turn? What of slavery? Look to the origin of the Southern Baptist Church; the split in the Baptist community was over slavery. Slavery was condoned by the southern Church and they cited the 10th Commandment for support. "You shall not covet your neighbors' house; you shall not covet your neighbors' wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbors." See, servants are acceptable in the eyes of the Lord! Yet the Southern Baptist Church, in the mid 1990's, corrected their founding doctrine and repudiated slavery. Even churches (reluctantly) admit to the incompleteness of the Ten Commandments as God falls short in his enumeration of rules for conduct.

Which brings us to what I call the Christians' dilemma: Christian morals, defined by the Ten Commandments are incomplete, inaccurate and imperfect. But, they are held to be the words of a perfect god and must be obeyed. Worse, in obedience to those rules, real and permanent harm comes to others. You shall not lie: what about the 'classic' how do I answer the Gestapo officers at the door who is searching for people whose only 'sin' is not being born 'Arian?' The current: You shall not kill has been translated to mean 'no birth control' and so millions (not thousands) in Africa die of HIV. Secular society has formulated far better rules of human conduct. Perhaps we should refer to the Ten Commandments collectively as the Bronze Rule, as that was the time period of their invention. Here is the reasoning given for the 2nd Commandment: ". . . for the Lord your God is a jealous god, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation of those who hate me." No nation on earth has laws that visit wrath upon innocents- even though what constitutes 'innocent' will vary greatly between societies. Atheists have no morals? Hell, Christians have no ethics!

Now we are back at the original assertion. If we amend it to read: "Atheists have no [Christian] morals" it is correct! The Ten Commandments are a Bronze Age relict much like a certain monument- an embarrassment in a society that values people and their well being. Next months' topic "We were founded as a Christian nation." ■



**Gerald Fauske
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