

Memberships Due for 2009

For most of you, your memberships to the Red River Freethinkers for 2009 are due this month. All memberships to this 501(c)(3) organization are tax-deductible to the full extent as allowed by law.

Your contributions are the main source of income for this organization. Without your continued support, we would not be able to continue producing and distributing this newsletter.

Individual Membership	\$30/year
Family Membership	\$45/year
Student Membership	\$15/year
Newsletter only	\$10/year

Send dues, along with name, address, phone number, and email address to: Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405 Fargo, ND 58107-0405.

Your membership dues to the Red River Freethinkers for 2009 have been paid.

You are not yet a member of the Red River Freethinkers for 2009.

NOTE: If you received a complimentary copy of this newsletter and would like to be removed from our mailing list, please contact any of the RRF officers or send an email to info@redriverfreethinkers.org.

<http://www.redriverfreethinkers.org>

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.

Items for this newsletter may be sent to 4330 47th Street S Unit K, Fargo, ND 58104.

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
P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND
58107-0405

RED RIVER FREETHINKERS

President Jon Lindgren
701-232-7868
jon.lindgren@ndsu.edu

Treasurer Carol Sawicki
701-232-5676
csawicki@corpcomm.net

Secretary Lilie Schoenack
701-306-0630
lilieann@msn.com

Interim Program Coordinator
Lew Lubka
701-232-2164
lubka@fargocity.com

Webmaster Eric Ashton
605-306-0815
webmaster@redriverfreethinkers.org

Interim Publicity Director
Mary Cochran
701-293-7188
olliesmaga@msn.com

Newsletter Jason Schoenack
701-306-0815
jschoena@hotmail.com

RED RIVER FREETHINKERS

THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST

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LOST CHRISTIANITIES

"THE BATTLE FOR SCRIPTURE AND TRUTH IN THE EARLY CHURCH" BY BART EHRMAN

The author is an example of why fundamentalists are suspicious of academia. Ehrman became an evangelical Christian when he was 'born-again' at 15 and then attended both the Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College where the Bible is taught as the literal "Word of god". He later earned a Ph.D. at Princeton Theological Seminary on the way to becoming the Chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC at Chapel Hill. After studying the complex process by which Christian doctrine evolved, he became an agnostic. This book describes the messy

process and conflicts through which the New Testament (NT) was cobbled together.

I found this book to be interesting but very detailed, since it covers the history and analysis of more than forty "sacred" documents. I had always pictured Christianity as evolving from an "original" ancient version that differentiated into the many sects we have today. I was wrong; the first 4 centuries AD where characterized by a vast diversity of Christianities that competed for supremacy and hated and attacked each other. In re-

spect, variety is not surprising in a time when communication required difficult travel. In the competition for dominance, evidence shows that many manuscripts were forged and authorship was normally assigned to one of the Apostles of Jesus to support the authority and supremacy of particular beliefs. Enough alternate gospel texts survived to be able to follow the manipulations that produced the official "Word of god". Many

Lost Christianities
continued on page 3)

WE'VE BEEN APPROVED!

The Red River Freethinkers organization has now been approved by the IRS as an official 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

All memberships, bequests and other contributions to the RRF are now tax-deductible. And according to the IRS verification letter, the exemption is retroactive back to **October 10, 2007**, when the State of North Dakota first recognized us as a non-profit.

This means that all membership dollars paid during the past year qualify as deductions on 2008 income tax forms.

We will be mailing out receipts for all donations received from now on. If you need a receipt for an earlier contribution to the RRF, please feel free to contact our Treasurer, Carol Sawicki at csawicki@corpcomm.net, or send a letter to the Red River Freethinkers, P.O. Box 405, Fargo, ND 58107.

And what does this mean for our future? Along with a probable increase in contributions, the RRF will be now eligible to apply for certain grants.

When we have a larger amount of money to work with, we can expand our efforts to educate the community about freethinkers, atheism, separation of church and state, etc. (our non-profit status is specifically as an educational organization.)

So do you have any great freethinker ideas waiting to be made into reality? Bring it to a Red River Freethinker meeting or send us an email or letter.

Carol Sawicki
RRF Treasurer

POINTS OF INTEREST

- *The January RRF meeting will be held from 1:30-3:30pm on Sunday January 18th at the Carlson Library, which is located at 2801 32 Ave South, Fargo, ND. Kathryn Trill will be delivering her talk entitled "God and Science: Totally Compatible Since Ancient Times".*
- *Minnesota Atheists will present Dan Barker, co-founder of the Freedom From Religion Foundation and author of, "Losing Faith in Faith," at the Roseville Public Library at 2pm on January 18 in Roseville, MN. For more information, please visit <http://www.mnatheists.org>*
- *The Philosophy for All Fargo Moorhead meeting for this month will be held on Thursday January 22 at 7pm at the Plains Art Museum. The topic for this month's meeting is "Paradoxical Religion in Danish Cinema".*

INSIDE THIS ISSUE

LOST CHRISTIANITIES	1
WE'VE BEEN APPROVED!	1
"DEAR GOD" BY XTC	2
OBAMA INAUGURATION LAWSUIT	2
MEMBERSHIPS DUE FOR 2009	4

“DEAR GOD” BY XTC

The British band XTC (1976-2005) released a controversial song on their 1986 album *Skylarking* entitled “Dear God”.

The song raised some eyebrows because of its atheistic message. When it was originally released, many record shops in the UK wouldn't stock it for fear of religious backlash.

The lyrics of the song question the value of the bible, express doubt about God's benevolence, and question God's existence.

Sarah McLachlan covered *Dear God* and later included it on her album “*Rarities, B-Sides and Other Stuff*”.

The following are lyrics from XTC's song *Dear God*.

“Dear God, hope you got the letter, and I pray you can make it better down here. I don't mean a big reduction in the price of beer. But all the people that you made in your image, see them starving on their feet, cause they don't get enough to eat from God, I cant believe in you.

Dear God, sorry to disturb you, but I feel that I should be heard loud and clear. We all need a big reduction in amount of tears. And all the people that you made in your image, see them fighting in the street, cause they can't make opinions meet, about God, I cant believe in you.

Did you make disease, and the diamond blue? Did you make mankind after we made you? And the devil too!

Dear God, don't know if you noticed, but your name is on a lot of quotes in this book. Us crazy humans wrote it, you should take a look. And all the people that you made in your image, still believing that junk is true, well I know it ain't and so do you.

Dear God, I can't believe in, I don't believe in, I won't believe in heaven and hell. No saints, no sinners, no devil as well.

No pearly gates, no thorny crown. You're always letting us humans down. The wars you bring, the babes you drown, those lost at sea and never found. And its the same the whole world round, the hurt I see helps to compound. That the father, son and holy ghost, is just somebody's unholy hoax, and if you're up there you'll perceive, that my hearts here upon my sleeve. If there's one thing I don't believe in... its you, dear God.”

OBAMA INAUGURATION LAWSUIT

Dr. Rick Warren of Saddleback Church is scheduled to give an invocation, and the Reverend Dr. Joseph E. Lowery is scheduled to give a benediction, at Barack Obama's January 20, 2009 presidential inauguration.

Officially, Article II of the U.S. Constitution establishes the oath of office for the President of the United States and contains no religious references.

On December 30, 2008 a lawsuit was filed in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia by attorney Robert Ritter on behalf of attorney Michael Newdow to halt prayers and religious invocations at the presidential inauguration claiming that it is a violation of the separation of state and church.

Newdow's lawsuit, titled “*Newdow v. Roberts*”, includes group plaintiffs such as the American Humanist Association, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Atheist Alliance International, and Minnesota Atheists. The lawsuit also features individual plaintiffs such as Michael Newdow, Dan Barker, Annie Laurie Gaylor, and Minnesota Atheists president August Berkshire.

Newdow and others feel that the addition of “so help me God” to the presidential oath of office (spoken by Chief Justice John Roberts) violates the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment.

Jason Schoenack
Fargo, ND



The dinosaurs were wiped out by a giant asteroid.

(*Lost Christianities, continued from page 1*)

tracts were created attacking competing sects, sometimes referring to them as cannibals with bizarre sexual practices (sort of like the attacks of some Christian fundamentalists on Islam after 9/11).

The standard books of the New Testament were not accepted until the synod of Hippo in 393 AD. Ehrman notes that, in the case of the New Testament, there are more than 5,000 full and partial surviving copies in Greek, making it the most common ancient manuscript. Only a few can be dated as early as the 4th and 5th centuries AD. No two copies agree in wording and there are more differences between these copies than there are words in the New Testament. Part of the problem lies in copying errors, and part of it lies in intentional changes made to support particular sects. Copying problems were aggravated because Greek was written as a continuous stream of letters with no breaks between words and no punctuation. No original books of the New Testament exist, only copies of copies of copies of uncertain origin. Leading bible scholars refer to many books of the current NT as pseudonymous (a polite way to say forged!). This chaotic history makes fundamentalists who take the present version of the bible to be the literal “Word of god” seem blind to the history of their own faith. The present version of the NT evolved as the winners rewrote history and destroyed most of the evidence of their competitors. Ehrman refers to these winners as the proto-orthodox Christians who later became the Catholic Church.

Many ancient manuscripts representing the lost versions of Christianity were discovered in the past 200 years. They were apparently purposefully

concealed to avoid destruction. Some Christian sects believed in 2, 3, dozens or up to 365 gods. Some believed Jesus was only a man who god inhabited at his baptism and left on the cross, while others believed he had no physical body so that he could not die for our sins. Some emphasized a single god and found the multiple gods of the Trinity heretical. Aside from the proto-orthodox, Ehrman spends the most amount of time discussing three of the larger sects.

The Ebionites believed that pagan converts had to first become Jews and follow Jewish law before they could become Christians. The Marconites rejected the god of the Old Testament as evil and saw him as creating this malevolent world of pain into which Jesus came bringing a new good god. Finally, there were a wide range of Gnostic sects (mostly in Egypt) that put little emphasis on church hierarchy and saw humans as arriving on Earth through a cosmic catastrophe. They emphasized the importance of the secret knowledge as offering salvation to humans who already had god within them but did not understand this truth. They usually denied the humanity of Jesus.

Ehrman gives an interesting discussion of how history might have been very different if the proto-orthodox had lost and he speculates about why they won. In the first three centuries AD, many other writings, omitted from the NT, were considered to be teachings of Christ. The proto-orthodox were not always dominant, but were better organized and politically positioned with a centralized authority figure in the Bishop of Rome (who later became the Pope). Their form of Christianity also probably found more approval from the imperial govern-

ment, since it is a lot easier to control a religion with a strong centralized hierarchy. The author emphasizes the central role that politics played in the success of the proto-orthodox. In 325 AD, about 5% of Constantine's empire was Christian. Constantine adopted Christianity and by 400 AD the empire was 50% Christian. If Constantine had not converted while he reigned over the Byzantine Empire, the Christian religion could be fundamentally different and much less dominant than it is today.

If the Ebionites had taken over, Christianity would probably have ended up as a small Jewish sect. It isn't easy to get pagan converts to submit to circumcision and Jewish law! Anti-Semitism was integral to proto-orthodox belief but it would have been horrifically intensified had the Marconites dominated. But, in rejecting the Old Testament, they lacked the ancient lineage which pagans associated with veracity. Subjugation of women was inherent in proto-orthodox doctrine. This misogyny persists to the present; where in the USA in the nineteenth century the Catholic Church mounted the strongest opposition to granting property rights to women, while in the twentieth century they robustly resisted giving women the right to vote. This continues to the present in their anti-abortion and anti-contraception activities. In contrast, many Gnostic sects appear to have been egalitarian, supporting equality of the sexes. Gnostics had an esoteric spirituality that raised questions instead of supplying the pat doctrinal answers of the proto-orthodox. This may have made Gnostics less understandable and attractive to the mass of pagans.

I find it both remarkable and appalling to consider the huge effect that the choice of an imaginary mythology can have on human history.

Charles Sawicki
Fargo, ND