

# Red River Rationalist

No. 103 - September, 2007

redriverfreethinkers.org

## Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

**Bart D. Ehrman.** *Misquoting Jesus*. 2005.

Ehrman grew up in an ordinary Kansas family that attended church but wasn't intensely religious. He studied hard at school, had friends, enjoyed sports, had a part-time job. At the same time: "There was a kind of loneliness associated with being a young teenager; but, of course, I didn't realize that it was part of being a teenager -- I thought there must be something missing." He started attending Youth for Christ meetings and was "born again" at the age of 15. The group leader was a Moody Bible Institute graduate, who "could quote an answer from the Bible to every question we could think of (and many we would never think of)." Ehrman entered Moody in 1973.

Moody was fundamentalist: "Only one perspective was taught in these courses, subscribed to by all the professors (they had to sign a statement) and by all the students (we did as well): the Bible is the inerrant word of God. It contains no mistakes. It is inspired completely and in its very words -- 'verbal, plenary inspiration.' All the courses I took presupposed and taught this perspective; any other was taken to be misguided or even heretical."

He quickly learned there was a problem: We have only error-ridden copies of (copies of ... ) the original writings. Other students did not consider this "significant or interesting." Ehrman was fascinated by it. He took plenary inspiration seriously: "... since the very words were [God's] words, and having some other words (those inadvertently or intentionally created by scribes) didn't help us much if we wanted to know His words."

Ehrman decided he would become a Biblical scholar in the field of textual criticism, "a technical term for the science of restoring the 'original' words of a text from manuscripts that have altered them." He finished at Moody, then went to Wheaton College for the background (Greek, Hebrew, Latin, etc.) needed for graduate work in textual criticism.

Learning Greek raised another question. "I came to see ... that the full meaning and nuance of the Greek text of the New Testament could be grasped only when it is read and studied in the original language. ... If the full meaning of the words of scripture can be grasped only by studying them in Greek ..., doesn't this mean that most Christians, who don't read ancient languages, will never have complete access to what God wants them to know? "And doesn't this make the doctrine of inspiration a doctrine only for the scholarly elite, who have the intellectual skills and leisure to learn the languages and study the texts by reading them in the original?"

Ehrman went on to graduate work in textual criticism at Princeton Theological Seminary. Thirty years of scholarly research followed. His book is a summary for the general public of what he has learned about differences and errors in early New Testament manuscripts. It is fascinating. Textual research is detective work plus broad scholarship plus close reasoning. Ehrman has done a masterful job of making it accessible. He explains, for instance, that the writing of New Testament times had neither punctuation nor spaces between words, complicating the act of copying; that copies made from someone reading aloud can result in replacing words by those with a similar sound; that two close together sentences with similar endings might result in scribes accidentally jumping to the second and omitting the intervening material. Scholars find one scribe might add a marginal note, then a later scribe interprets it as an omission and incorporates it into the text. Evidence also shows that scribes actually changed material to harmonize it with another version, or to downplay or to emphasize points

according to contemporary views or disputes. He backs these claims with example after example, chapter after chapter.

He is heading towards a conclusion that will be disturbing, and unacceptable, to some people. But his conclusion is not mere assertion. He lays out the experience of a lifetime of reflection and study. The reader can judge whether Ehrman is thoughtful or bigoted, ignorant or informed, and thus judge something of the worth of his conclusion.

Fundamentalists say the Bible is the work of God. Ehrman concludes the Bible is the work of man. "The New Testament as we actually have it, I knew, was the product of human hands, the hands of the scribes who transmitted it. Then I began to see that not just the scribal text but the original text itself was a very human book. This stood much at odds with how I had regarded the text in my late teens as a newly minted "born-again" Christian, convinced that the Bible was the inerrant Word of God and that the biblical words themselves had come to us by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. As I realized already in graduate school, even if God had inspired the original words, we don't have the original words. So the doctrine of inspiration was in a sense irrelevant to the Bible as we have it, since the words God reputedly inspired had been changed and, in some cases, lost.

Moreover, I came to think that my earlier views of inspiration were not only irrelevant, they were probably wrong. For the only reason (I came to think) for God to inspire the Bible would be so that his people would have his actual words; but if he really wanted people to have his actual words, surely he would have miraculously preserved those words, just as he had miraculously inspired them in the first place. Given the circumstance that he didn't preserve the words, the conclusion seemed inescapable to me that he hadn't gone to the trouble of inspiring them."

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*"From the point of view of a  
tapeworm, man was created  
by God to serve the appetite of  
the tapeworm."*

Edward Abbey

## Book Review

**Christopher Hitchens.** *God is Not Great, How Religion Poisons Everything.*

Christopher Hitchens' new book is an incredibly antagonistic, inflammatory and insightful best-seller. If Sam Harris opened a wound and Richard Dawkins poured lemon juice on it, then Christopher Hitchens grabbed a piece of steel wool and started scratching it raw.

Christopher Hitchens was a skeptic at a relatively young age. He recalls wondering "Why, if god was the creator of all things, were we supposed to "praise" him so incessantly for doing what came to him naturally? This seemed servile, apart from anything else. If Jesus could heal a blind person he happened to meet, then why not heal blindness? What was so wonderful about his casting out devils, so that the devils would enter a herd of pigs instead? That seemed sinister: more like black magic. With all this continual prayer, why no result? Why did I have to keep saying, in public, that I was a miserable sinner? Why was the subject of sex considered so toxic?" These questions as a child obviously led him to some unpopular conclusions as an adult.

As his title implies, Hitchens sees religion as poison. In chapter 2 titled "Religion Kills" he tries to explain a little of why he thinks religion keeps interfering with (and poisoning) the world. "The level of intensity fluctuates according to time and place, but it can be stated as a truth that religion does not, and in the long run cannot, be content with its own marvelous claims and sublime assurances. It must

seek to interfere with the lives of nonbelievers, or heretics, or adherents of other faiths. It may speak about the bliss of the next world, but it wants power in this one. This is only to be expected. It is, after all, wholly man-made. And it does not have the confidence in its own various preachings even to allow coexistence between different faiths."

Hitchens then cites example after example of religion sticking its nose in and poisoning everything. Hitchens makes the point very clearly that religion is man-made and he's also not terribly impressed with the quality of the creation. "Nothing proves the man-made character of religion as obviously as the sick mind that designed hell, unless it is the sorely limited mind that has failed to describe heaven." He's definitely not very thrilled with god's writing ability. He spends three chapters on holy texts: Chapter seven is titled "Revelation: The Nightmare of the 'Old' Testament", chapter eight is "The 'New' Testament Exceeds the Evil of the 'Old' One" and chapter nine is "The Koran Is Borrowed from Both Jewish and Christian Myths". Hitchens ended his analysis of the Old Testament with the following observation: "One could go through the Old Testament book by book, here pausing to notice a lapidary phrase ('Man is born to trouble,' as the book of Job says, 'as the sparks fly upward') and there a fine verse, but always encountering the same difficulties. People attain impossible ages and yet conceive children. Mediocre individuals engage in single combat or one-on-one argument with god or his emissaries, raising afresh the whole question of divine omnipotence or even divine common sense, and the ground is forever soaked with the blood of the innocent. Moreover, the context is oppressively confined and local. None of these provincials, or their deity, seems to have any idea of a world beyond the desert, the flocks and herds, and the imperatives of nomadic subsistence. This is forgivable on the part of the provincial yokels, obviously, but then what of their supreme guide and wrathful tyrant? Perhaps he was made in their image, even if not graven".

Hitchens shows that the imaginations of the people who created religious dogma are no match for the real world. I enjoyed the following paragraph where he tries to convey how much more there is to this world that religion can never touch. "If you will devote a little time to studying the staggering photographs taken by the Hubble telescope, you will be scrutinizing things that are far more awesome and mysterious and beautiful - and more chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding - than any creation or 'end of days' story. If you read Hawking on the 'event horizon,' that theoretical lip of the 'black hole' over which one could in theory plunge and see the past and the future (except that one would, regrettably and by definition, not have enough 'time'), I shall be surprised if you can still go on gaping at Moses and his unimpressive 'burning bush.' If you examine the beauty and symmetry of the double helix, and then go on to have your own genome sequence fully analyzed you will be at once impressed that such a near-perfect phenomenon is at the core of your being, and reassured (I hope) that you have so much in common with other tribes of the human species - 'race' having gone, along with 'creation' into the ashcan - and further fascinated to learn how much you are a part of the animal kingdom as well.

Now at last you can be properly humble in the face of your maker, which turns out not to be a 'who,' but a process of mutation with rather more random elements than our vanity might wish." Hitchens is also not impressed with theist's ideas regarding the afterlife. He considers the idea of heaven terrifying. In his book he referred to it as a "benevolent and unalterable dictatorship". In several interviews since his book has been released he has likened it to spending an eternity in North Korea only the dictator can also read people's thoughts.

Hitchens makes no apologies for his perspective on the affects of religion. "One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody - not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms - had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs)." Great! So let's leave it there!

In interviews since the release of his book, Hitchens has maintained his stance as being unapologetic and delivering the facts of how terrible religion is for society. A particularly interesting evidence of this was in the aftermath of Jerry Falwell's death. Hitchens was interviewed on CNN's Anderson Cooper 360; "Lots of people are going to die and are already leading miserable lives because of the nonsense preached by this man." I think it is very admirable that Hitchens can keep to his convictions even when so many people disagree with him to the point of hating him. I look forward to reading more of his work.

- Lillie Schoenack

## Science, Religion, And Compatibility

Soren Kierkegaard, a 19th century Danish philosopher and a religious man, believed that faith in a god is not the result of reason.

I agree with him on this point.

I've seen lately science and religion trying to be reconciled.

I want to show that these two schools of thought are not compatible.

As difficult as it is to define religion, I'll make a pathetic attempt that is biased toward the ones with which I am most familiar.

Religion is a devotion to a set of beliefs that rely on faith in a supernatural being.

I was raised a Christian, so I know, at least, a lot about one religion.

I went to church and was confirmed.

I know first-hand from my experiences that in class my extensive questions were answered matter-of-factly with no logical bias.

Questions such as, "How do we know that Jesus was raised from the dead?" or, "How does one know the way the world was created from Genesis alone?" all received responses such as, "Jesus is your lord and savior. He will forgive what you have done."

I realize this kind of answer may not be the answer that all Christian denominations give.

However, I think if one wants to answer questions in such a way, it is OK in a religious sense.

It is not OK in a scientific sense.

With science you typically get an idea and perform experiments to see if the evidence generated supports the theory.

You use the theory to better understand the universe and modify it as new evidence emerges.

If the evidence disproves the theory, you throw it out.

Often, religion is based upon faith and faith, by nature contradicts science.

Inherently with faith, ideas are kept for thousands of years with no attempt to justify them through data collection or experimentation.

Science is a whole different field than religion.

Science requires facts.

Science requires experiments that predict something and can be reproduced.

Science uses logic.

When one stops to think about it, religion seems to be the opposite.

Accepting an idea like creationism is one's own choice, and that's OK.

But to trying to prove these kinds of things with science is not possible.

Some people want creationism taught in schools.

If that is to be done, it does not belong in the scientific curriculum because it is not science.

Because there are some problems with evolution, it does not make creationism a viable scientific option. Evolution has been tested and used to make predictions.

It is faith that makes one believe creationism as the way our world came into existence.  
The only reason the story exists is because it was written in a non-scientific book.  
It is not science.  
Please keep these two things separate.

- **Mandy Jensen**

[The above column appeared in the Summer 2007 edition of *The Spectrum*, North Dakota State University's student newspaper. Mandy Jensen organized NDSU's new student group, Atheists, Agnostics, and Secular Humanists. She is a senior in Pharmacy.]

## **Denying Science**

In the May debate involving ten Republican candidates for president, and in response to a direct question, three of the candidates raised their hands to signify that they did not believe in evolution. The three to raise their hands were Sen. Sam Brownback of Kansas, Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas, and Rep. Tom Tancredo of Colorado.

Brownback later issued a statement, to attempt to divert some of the criticism for this stance. His statement said, in part, "While no stone should be left unturned in seeking to discover the nature of man's origins, we can say with conviction that we know with certainty at least part of the outcome. Man was not an accident and reflects an image and likeness unique in the created order. Those aspects of evolutionary theory compatible with this truth are a welcome addition to human knowledge. Aspects of these theories that undermine this truth, however, should be firmly rejected as an atheistic theology posing as science." In other words, religion trumps science.

Perhaps, it should have been a surprise that only three Republicans raised their hands, when you consider the results of a recent Gallup Poll, designed to show how religious political beliefs color the evolution vs. creation issue. The poll shows that the majority of Republicans in the U.S. do not believe that the theory of evolution is true. Neither do they believe that humans evolved over millions of years from less advanced forms of life. The poll findings were that 30 percent of Republicans believe in evolution while 68 percent do not. For Independents, 61 percent believe in evolution and 37 percent do not. Among Democrats, 57 percent believe in evolution and 40 percent do not.

## **Letter to the Editor**

Dear Editor:

When reading in the June/July 2007 issue of *FREETHOUGHT TODAY*, we found Barbara Walker's Op. Ed. piece "The Making of a Skeptic" (First in a series) where she points out, relating to Ten Commandment "rules," the following quotation:

".....suppose a major moral guide of Western Culture had been not the Ten Commandments but the commandments embodied in the famous "Negative Confession" of ancient Egypt, which the deceased must recite before the judgment goddess, Maat, truthfully in order to win entrance into Paradise.

In part, it ran like this: "I have done no evil. I have not inflicted pain. I have made no one weep. I have not done harm unto animals. I have not robbed the poor. I have not fouled water. I have not trampled fields. I have not behaved with insolence. I have not judged hastily. I have not stirred up strife.

"I have not insisted that excessive work be done for me daily. I have not borne false witness. I have not stolen land. I have not cheated in measuring the bushel. I have allowed no one to suffer hunger. I have not increased my wealth at others' expense. I have not taken milk from the mouths of babes."

Walker concludes: "When I first encountered this list of no-nos, I thought what a truly moral society we might have today if the religion of Maat had prevailed instead of the religion of Yahweh."

All well and good, one might say, but for the Jews, Maat's list wouldn't work. There are no thunderous authoritarian commands nor dire consequences, like slaughtering whole tribes. And for the Xtians, Maat has left out stoning, banishing and fire and brimstone and sentencing of souls unto Hell.

When it comes to any religion -- including ancient Egyptians -- there's a whole lot of false witnessing (lying) and hypocrisy going on.

Yours truly, **TOAOTH**

## **Just For Fun**

"If only God would give me some clear sign! Like making a large deposit in my name at a Swiss bank." (Woody Allen)

"If Jesus had been killed twenty years ago, Catholic school children would be wearing little electric chairs around their necks instead of crosses." (Lenny Bruce)

"As long as there are tests, there will be prayer in school." (Anonymous)

"Why should we take advice on sex from the Pope? If he knows anything about it, he shouldn't." (George Bernard Shaw)

If Jesus was Jewish, how come he has a Mexican name? (Anonymous)

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### **SRLS FALL 2007. UPDATED 2007.08.26.**

Meetings are Tuesdays at noon in the NDSU Memorial Union. All meetings are one hour and free. The public is welcome. An NDSU campus map can be found in the local telephone directory.

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- (1) 4 Sep. Lake Agassiz. DAVE DUSHANE. Transgender and the Nature/Nurture Dichotomy. Part 1.
- (2) 11 Sep. Lake Agassiz DAVID DUSHANE. Transgender and the Nature/Nurture Dichotomy. Part 2.
- (3) 18 Sep. Lake Agassiz. MARTIN WISHNATSKY. A Refutation of Human Evolution.
- (4) 25 Sep. Lake Agassiz. OPEN.
- (5) 2 Oct. Lake Agassiz. OPEN.
- (6) 9 Oct. Lake Agassiz. KATHRYN TRILL. An Ancient, God-Centered, Scientifically Compatible Explanation of Creation and How the Universe Works. Part 1.
- (7) 16 Oct. Prairie. KATHRYN TRILL. An Ancient, God-Centered, Scientifically Compatible Explanation of Creation and How the Universe Works. Part 2.
- (8) 23 Oct. Lake Agassiz. OPEN.
- (9) 30 Oct. Prairie. OPEN.
- (10) 6 Nov. Lake Agassiz. OPEN.
- (11) 13 Nov. Lake Agassiz. OPEN.

(12) 20 Nov. Lake Agassiz. GERALD FAUSKE. TBA.

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NDSU PARKING. (An NDSU campus map is included in the FM telephone directory.) Metered parking is available in two areas near the NDSU Memorial Union.

(a) Going south on University (one-way), just past 13th Ave. N. (traffic light), on your right is an entrance "CD Metered Parking". There is only the one entrance/exit. This lot is southeast of the Memorial Union.

(b) Just past the "CD Metered Parking" entrance, on your right, is Administration Avenue, which takes you directly to the lot south of and adjacent to Memorial Union.

(c) 12th Ave. N. is the intersection just past Administration Avenue. Turn right, go to the next traffic light, and turn right onto Albrecht Blvd. Go to the right when Albrecht splits. You are now on Administrative Avenue and can proceed directly to the lot south of and adjacent to Memorial Union.

## Who Said That?

Can you identify the source of these quotes?

Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and Osama Bin Ladin have a lot in common.

Each quote is condensed from a longer statement. Terms specific to Islam or Christianity have been replaced with generic words. Complete, unedited quotes and references are included with the answers at the website of Sarah Ovenall: <http://www.funnystrange.com/quiz/answers.php>

Take the quiz and see if you can identify statements by each of these "great leaders". Thanks to Sarah Ovenall <http://www.funnystrange.com/> for permission to reproduce this quiz.

For each question, choose a) if you think the statement is by Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson, b) if you think it was by Osama Bin Ladin.

- 1) In today's wars, there are no morals, and it is clear that mankind has descended to the lowest degrees of decadence and oppression. (a or b?)
- 2) America is polluting the whole world. (a or b?)
- 3) The government is committed to supporting God's religion, the country remains a strong bulwark for religion, and the people are among the most protective of God's religion, and keenest to fulfill His laws. (a or b?)
- 4) One-world opinion is taking the side of the Palestinians, not the side of Israel. (a or b?)
- 5) There will never be world peace until God's house and God's people are given their rightful place of leadership at the top of the world. (a or b?)
- 6) The government does not cease to cry over matters affecting religion, without making any serious effort to serve the interests of the religious community. (a or b?)
- 7) We are on the brink of our destruction, and if we do not awaken now, it will be too late. We have been victimized by traitorous behavior on the part of our leaders. (a or b?)
- 8) The media strives to keep the people occupied with minor matters, and to stir their emotions and desires until corruption becomes widespread among believers. (a or b?)
- 9) There is no way that a United Nations, treaties, or any other human instrument can bring about peace. Such things mean nothing when one nation desires the land and resources of another. (a or b?)
- 10) We have allowed rampant secularism.... We have insulted God at the highest levels of government. (a or b?)
- 11) One particular report described the gaps and the shortcoming in the philosophy of the government, the situation of the law within the country and the arbitrary declaration of what is lawful and unlawful

regardless of divine law as instituted by God. (a or b?)

12) Priorities of spiritual work are lost while blasphemy and polytheism continue its grip and control. We should be alert to these atrocious plans carried out by the government. (a or b?)

13) America is in imminent peril... rotting from within. (a or b?)

14) The American people have put themselves at the mercy of a disloyal government, and this is most evident in Clinton's administration. The American government is leading the country towards hell. (a or b?)

15) The termites are in charge now, and that is not the way it ought to be, and the time has arrived for a godly fumigation. (a or b?)

16) If America is not suffering the irrevocable judgment of God, she is dangerously close. (a or b?)

17) Americans have committed unprecedented stupidity. We anticipate a black future for America. (a or b?)

18) If the judges appointed by man will not deal with those who take innocent human life, then God is going to enter in and bring justice. And when that happens many of the innocent will suffer along with the guilty. (a or b?)

19) All these crimes and sins committed by Americans are a clear declaration of war on God. (a or b?)

20) A condition like this will bring about the destruction of your nation. It'll bring about terrorist bombs; it'll bring earthquakes, tornadoes and possibly a meteor. (a or b?)

Here are the answers: 1) b, 2) a, 3) b, 4) a, 5) a, 6) b, 7) a, 8) b, 9) a, 10) a, 11) b, 12) b, 13) a, 14) b, 15) a, 16) a, 17) b, 18) a, 19) b, 20) a.

- **Charles Sawicki**

## **Election of Officers**

The annual business meeting of the Red River Freethinkers was held on August 19, 2007. Election of officers was the main order of business. **Jon Lindgren**, who was earlier appointed to be Interim President, was elected President, **Lilie Shoenack** was elected Secretary, and **Carol Sawicki** was re-elected Treasurer.

There were some changes in the "volunteer" positions. **Jason Shoenack** and **Eric Ashton** are the new Webmasters and are in the process of updating the Website. **Lew Lubka** agreed to be Interim Program Coordinator, replacing **Bill Treumann** who has moved to St. Paul where his son lives.

The membership all thank **Davis Cope** for his years of dedication and hard work as Secretary; Davis will continue his leadership of the Science, Religion, and Lunch Seminar. Thanks also to Bill Treumann for his efforts; Bill will stay in touch through e-mails.

It was heartening to see so many new members in attendance at this meeting, especially so many enthusiastic young people. We commend Lilie Shoenack, Jason Shoenack, and Eric Ashton, who are willing to step up and take leadership roles in the organization.

As Editor, I personally thank all of you who take time each month to send something for the newsletter. Special thanks to Carol Sawicki for getting the printing and mailing done.

- **Chuck Crane**

## Recycling

Recently, I was at the meeting of a local discussion group. In addition of the usual suspects, who range from moderately religious to agnostic, we were joined by a couple of religious zealots. As usual, the zealous tended to bring more heat than light to the discussion. I pretty much stayed out of the fray, having learned that appeals to reason are wasted on the "true believers."

As I sat back and listened to the two hotly defend the make-believe world they live in, I could not but chuckle at some of their arguments. A quote I'd read long ago came to mind. It said something like, "The more preposterous the belief, the more jealously it will be defended."

Anyway, later that night, I got to thinking about the really far-out (to me) beliefs that some people are willing to fight and die for -- and also to kill for.

Then I thought about what it must take to be a suicide bomber. Consider all the young Muslims who are willing to blow themselves to bits in exchange for eternity with 72 virgins. The question arises, "where do they get all those virgins?"

And the answer came to me in a flash. When a bomber vaporizes himself, apparently he is made whole again to enter paradise. I guess Allah scoops up the bits and adds water -- kind of like instant soup mix -- and voila! Reconstituted bomber!

But here's the kicker. Any old female available was at one time a virgin, so Allah scoops them up and voila! Reconstituted virgin! But for a lusty suicide bomber, 72 virgins would be used up in the blink of an eye (relative to eternity). There's a bonus though. With Allah's help, they can no doubt be recycled!

### - Chuck Crane

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.

September 16, we will have our annual AUTUMNAL EQUINOX PARTY at the usual time and place. It's potluck, bring an offering and enjoy this celebration of a purely astronomical event for purely secular reasons! Guests are welcome.

## **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

NOTE: If you received a complimentary copy of The Red River Rationalist and would like to be removed from our mailing list, please contact any of the officers.