

Red River Rationalist

No. 102 - August, 2007

redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.]

Letters And Monuments

The last newsletter published a letter to the editor that I wrote as Secretary of RRF and which appeared in the *Fargo Forum* Sunday, 1 July 2007. To my surprise, the central paragraph, which specifically addressed a Forum editorial about the Fargo monuments controversy, had been deleted. On checking, I was told there wasn't room for it. I rewrote the paragraph as the following letter, and the Forum published it Friday, 6 July.

Letters to the Editor *The Fargo Forum* 5 July 2007

The 14 June Forum editorial criticized Red River Freethinkers for offering the city a "sister monument" to accompany the Ten Commandments monument presently on the Civic Center Mall. The Forum says our monument should be refused because accepting it would "open the floodgates to any individual or group claiming to be followers of any religion, sect or cult, no matter how marginal." At the same time, says the Forum, the Ten Commandments monument does not open those floodgates because the court ruled "the monument was as much cultural icon as religious expression."

The Forum misstates the ruling. The court said nothing about cultural icons and did not distinguish a special status for Fargo's monument. The court did address church-state issues and principles to be applied. Those principles insure Fargo's monument does not violate church-state separation. They apply equally well to similar monuments with religious content. The current monument already sets a precedent for the placement of monuments donated by private groups. The precedent has already been set, the restrictions are already off, and the floodgates are already open. RRF was first in line. Our monument was rejected. We hope other groups will try.

RRF supports a strict interpretation of church-state separation: public property should be neutral with respect to religious statements. That is equally fair to all. The court ruling seems to allow the statement of arbitrary religious views on public property by freedom of speech for the donators. That may be unwise, but it is equally fair to all. An insufficiently recognized aspect of this debate is that many Ten Commandments supporters want their one monument and NO OTHERS on public property. The Forum's position that the floodgates must not be opened to "marginal" religions, even marginal Christian sects, is a specific statement of this view. It is not fair. It is true religious discrimination.

Secretary
Freethinkers

Davis Cope,
Red River

"Cruel persecutions and intolerance are not accidents, but grow out of the very essence of religion, namely, its absolute claims." (Morris Cohen, American professor of philosophy)

There Ought To Be A Law...

What would you prefer as punishment if you broke the law? 30 days in jail and a thousand dollar fine or eternity on the end of a giant roasting stick, sizzling over the fires of hell? I would suggest that there are millions of people in America today who would not violate the seatbelt law because they could be fined \$75, but would worship "golden calves" on a daily basis in spite of God's law and the threat of hellfire and damnation forever. What if we went to all the petitioners who want to keep the Ten Commandments prominently displayed on public property, and what if we asked them to sign an initiative petition to establish the very same laws as statutes – but instead of carrying a threat of eternal damnation, these laws, when enacted, would carry a \$1000 fine and 30 days in jail?

Thou shalt not steal and thou shalt not kill and the significant part of thou shalt not bear false witness are already covered by statute, so their penalties would remain what they are under current law. But all the others would be subject to \$1000 fine and 30 days in the slammer. Now let's see who wants to sign the petition!

Thinking of skipping church next Sunday? That'll cost you \$1000 and 30 days. Would you like to watch an unholy program on television or at the movies on a Sunday evening? Get out your wallet and your striped britches, brother, because you're going down.

Hit your thumb with a hammer and let the Lord's name slip out? If somebody hears you, you're going first to the bank and then to jail. Having what you thought was just a frolicsome, harmless roll-in-the-hay with someone you're not married to? If somebody can prove it, you're going to pay with cash and hard time.

If you're wishing you had a nice car or boat or mansion or set of clubs like somebody else has, don't let anybody know what you're thinking, because that, too, will carry the usual penalty.

If you think your neighbor's wife is well formed and aesthetically pleasing, to the extent that you wouldn't mind sharing her, don't confess your admiration to the authorities. It could cost you a cool grand and a month of your young life just for thinking the thought.

And, oh, by the way, almost all gossip involves bearing false witness, because unless you know absolutely, of your own first hand personal knowledge that what you are saying about someone is actually true, it probably isn't. So simple gossip could cost you \$1000 and 30 days – but isn't that better than a trillion years skinny-dipping in a subterranean volcano?

I've saved the first two commandments for last, because they deserve special attention. If you worship golf, television, fishing, auto racing, ham radio, food, wine, fishing, or any of the other false gods that misdirect your adoration from the jealous God of Christians and Jews, you are in violation of the first statute. Woe unto you.

And, by the way, if you erect a graven image, (a likeness of the Ten Commandments for example) you just broke another statute, so ante up some bucks and surrender yourself to the sheriff.

Do you hear yourself saying, "What an idiotic bunch of laws! Why would anybody support such laws?" The plain answer is – they wouldn't.

So the next question is, if they wouldn't support simple laws mandating simple penalties, why would they support the same laws if the penalties were eternal damnation? The answer is – they think they have a loophole.

In magic religious thinking, the penalties seem to be generally reserved for "the others". For the true believers think there is either a loophole in the law to protect them, or they believe Jesus or Mary or somebody may somehow magically intercede, so the offender will never have to spend a moment in incarceration, nor pay a dime out of their pocket in fines.

Then, obviously, the Ten Commandments controversy is not about behavior or abiding by the intent of the Decalogue. So what is it about? British theologian Charles Colton may have answered that riddle 200 years ago when he said, "Men will wrangle for religion; write for it; fight for it; die for it; anything but live for it."

Take time to look up the definition of "graven image". The Fargo monument fits the definition in every way. Even the Biblical patriarchs knew that. They tucked their copy away in the ark of the covenant and stored it out-of-sight in the temple, because they knew that people have to carry their goodness, what they have of it, within them.

- **Mikko Cowdery**, Osakis, MN

Sidney Morgenbesser taught philosophy for many years at Columbia. According to the New York Times Magazine, December 26, 2004, as he was dying from Lou Gehrig's disease he asked "Why is God making me suffer so much? Just because I don't believe in him?"

- **Bill Treumann**

Letter to the Editor

I think you committed a serious misnomer when you chose to call your little newsletter *The Red River Rationalist*. I do not think that you have read your David Hume who long ago demolished rationalism along with metaphysics as bankrupt so far as arriving at truth is concerned. Methinks that you should have named your paper, if you are a confirmed atheist, that is, *The Red River Empiricist* instead.

Our scientific knowledge, according to Hume, is no more a sure avenue to truth than is revelation. "Reason can never discover the nature, the purpose or the plan of the world." he wrote. and added: "We have no knowledge, but only beliefs which we feel are true." Your readers who are looking for a more sure foundation for their atheistic beliefs might find in Hume a better source than any of the rationalist philosophers since he is adamant in asserting that there is no ultimate truth of any kind including scientific.

Just a note from a hard pressed Christian struggling to maintain his faith to some hard pressed Rationalists attempting to do the same.

- **Lee Paulson**, Glenwood, MN

(Ed.. Note: The above was e-mailed to me - and various others. A response by Davis Cope follows. CC)

Regarding Mr. Paulson's letter:

Rationalism is the philosophical view that knowledge can be obtained from reason alone, that we can find truth by just thinking. Euclidean geometry appears to support this view. Starting from a few self-evident axioms, volume after volume of theorems can be derived by reasoning alone, and the truth of their description of the real world appears manifested by their accuracy and usefulness in surveying, navigation, and astronomy. Plato was a rationalist and engraved over the entry to his Academy "Let none enter here ignorant of geometry", one of the earliest examples of an academic prerequisite. Rationalism says that, starting with perhaps a few self-evident truths to prime the pump, reason alone can work out such things as the true structure of the Universe, or the true principles of justice, or the truly best form of government, or the true Nature of God (and God's existence, of course). Notice two claims are actually involved: that Absolute Truths exist and that reason alone suffices to find Them (at

least Some, anyway).

The validity of rationalism seems to have been taken for granted between the time of the ancient Greeks (when there was a definite appreciation for empirical evidence) and about 1600. Philosophers argued about Truth, apparently confident that Truth could be reached by argument. But the new emphasis on experimentation and on detailed and systematic observation of nature raised new problems. For example, the truth that the Earth was at the center of the Universe, a truth obvious to casual observation and supported by many volumes of philosophical reasoning as well as revelation, seemed to fail when tested by new instruments, such as the telescope. This was bad for rationalism.

Still, Newton with his three laws of motion and the inverse square law of gravitation, appearing in 1687, presented a stupendously effective set of kind-of-self-evident axioms. This was good for rationalism. On the other hand, reasoning out the consequences of Newton's axioms required calculus. This was bad for rationalism.

This gives some idea of the setting when David Hume (1711-1776) "demolished rationalism", as the letter puts it, and I think that is a generally accepted description of Hume's accomplishment. But the letter misstates the result. The gist of Hume's argument was that our knowledge comes from experience, our experience is necessarily limited, so we have no means of conclusively recognizing Absolute Truth. In this sense of the word "truth", the letter's statement that "Our scientific knowledge, according to Hume, is no more a sure avenue to truth than is revelation" is fair enough. But if you distinguish the capacity of science and the capacity of revelation to provide knowledge as distinct from Absolute Truth, then Hume definitely comes down in favor of science. He emphasizes that experience can provide us with increasing degrees of certainty, but not an absolute degree. The systematic observation and experimentation of (modern) science is a systematic way of achieving such increasing certainty. With respect to revelation, on the other hand, Hume gave what is regarded as the classic argument against miracles, that the reliability of the reporter must be sufficient to overcome the improbability of the miracle. In short, "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence."

I don't know how Hume regarded Euclidean geometry (now I'm curious and hope to find out). But after his death, it lost its status as an example of "truth through thinking" due to the discovery of non-Euclidean geometry (Lobachevsky, 1829). In Euclidean geometry, for example, the three angles of a triangle sum to precisely 180 degrees; in Lobachevskian geometry, the sum is always less than 180 degrees. However, both geometries are equally consistent logically, so there is no way, on the basis of reason alone, of picking one as "true". We have to measure triangles in the real world to decide which geometry applies. And it is now known that there are many geometries, so the issue of the natural world's geometry is more complicated than described here.

As to the newsletter's name "Rationalist": RRF was formed in 1997, and I was present at the early meetings discussing whether to have a newsletter and what to name it. We were just a bunch of ordinary people puzzling over these formalities. There was no mention whatsoever of "rationalist" in the sense of its technical meaning in philosophy. It was used in its ordinary sense of "relating to, based on, or agreeable to reason", as my dictionary puts it. That's it. Let me add that I had the privilege of growing up (50s/60s) in a town with two newspapers, the *Times* and the *News-Free Press*. I thought the latter name amazingly odd for a newspaper but eventually learned it came from the merger of the *News* and the *Free Press* before the turn of the century. This experience taught me that names, even when deliberately chosen, are not likely to serve as expressions of precisely formulated philosophic positions.

- **Davis Cope**

To the Editor, Fargo Forum

THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA IS NOT IN ANY SENSE
FOUNDED ON THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION

From the Treaty of Tripoli, approved unanimously by the United States Senate, June 7, 1797. Signed by President John Adams.

Why did the Red River Freethinkers choose this text to be engraved on a Sister Monument for the Fargo City mall?

Because we feel that our citizens should be forever reminded that at the beginning of our nation, one's religious beliefs were personal, not public property. At the time that this Treaty was ratified and published, the citizens of the United States appeared to be very comfortable with this statement. Although certainly most of them were Christians, they accepted that their nation was a totally secular one. We have no record of any controversy at the time. The full text was published in several city newspapers, and there were no comments or protests published in any later editions. Imagine what would happen now if the current US Senate were to even to consider a document containing this language.

The thought of moving the 10 Commandments monument off of public land to an equally prominent piece of private property has brought some local citizens to the edge of hysteria. Along with reading the words on the monument which was donated to the city by the Eagles, the Red River Freethinkers would like us also to be able to reflect on how religion was viewed when this nation began.

- Carol Sawicki

"He who begins by loving Christianity better than the truth, will proceed by loving his own sect or Church better than Christianity, and end by loving himself better than all." (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

Timid Scientists?

Victor Stenger, in a commentary titled "Onward Science Soldiers" (*Skeptical Inquirer*, July/August 2007), makes some interesting observations about how scientists in the U.S. deal with religion. He points out that only 7 percent of the members of the U.S. Academy of Sciences say they believe in a personal God (1998 poll). However, most scientists are careful to avoid any conflicts between science and religion, at least partly because this might lead to public disapproval and lack of funding.

Stenger goes on to cite one of the Academy's official statements (1998) supporting evolution, that says, in part, "Science is a way of knowing about the natural world. It is limited to explaining the natural world through natural causes. Science can say nothing about the supernatural. Whether God exists or not is a question about which science is neutral." This, the author states, is untrue.

Stenger mentions how a born-again U.S. president has based his policies on faith rather than evidence and the harmful effects this has had on medical research, disease prevention, education, reproductive freedom, the environment, etc. and concludes that scientists have not directly confronted these issues lest they offend "deeply held beliefs."

In conclusion, the author says religion must no longer be given this free ride. "Let science compete with religion in the marketplace of ideas. Scientists should question religious assumptions just as they question those of other scientists. And they should vigorously protest whenever faith is used to suppress sound scientific results."

- **Chuck Crane**

"Our hope of immortality does not come from any religion, but clearly all religions come from that hope." (Robert Ingersoll)

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.

Red River Freethinkers Board Members

Interim President	701-232-7868	Jon Lindgren jon.lindgren@ndsu.edu
Treasurer	701-232-5676	Carol Sawicki csawicki@corpcomm.net
Secretary	701-293-7188	Davis Cope davis_cope@msn.com

General Contacts

Interim Program Coordinator	701-232-5528	Bill Treumann btreumann@yahoo.com
Web Master	605-280-8930	Neils Christoffersen webmaster@redriverfreethinkers.org
Interim Publicity Director	701-293-7188	Mary Cochran olliesmaga@msn.com
Newsletter	320-763-5666	Chuck Crane cranes@rea-alp.com

Items for newsletter may be sent to P.O. Box 995, Alexandria, MN 56308

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 August 19, we will have our annual business meeting. As many of you know, we are mighty active (see USA Today, 9 July 2007, for example). Members are urged to attend and suggest, discuss, volunteer, and, of course, update their membership dues! We will be tossing around a lot of ideas. Come and toss a few, too! Also this month, Chuck Crane, noted non-religious activist, will present "Is Martin Wishnatsky real?"

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.