

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

Old Books; New Books

Davis Cope

Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope.

Our valiant newsletter editor, Chuck Crane, has dangled the irresistible temptation of "Presidential politics" as a topic for newsletter contributions. He asks: Has Obama made a sharp right turn? If so, does this mean that not voting at all is the proper reaction? Should a third party candidate be supported? Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, and I have taken the bait.

There is a notion in this country that we are an example of political and social excellence for the rest of the world, that we are a "democracy"--the very best thing to be -- and other nations are not, that we support "free enterprise" -- insuring the effectiveness of our best efforts to contribute to the common good--while other nations do not, that we are "free" and other nations are not. Most citizens of the United States take pride in their country, and if they were asked for reasons, the response would, I think, often be along such lines.

There are problems with these notions. Democracy has been taken as the sine qua non of political systems for a century and more, so that even the most tyrannical countries hold elections. (OK, OK, so King Saud doesn't.) But these countries have a one-party system. When voters are limited to a yes/no vote on one option, democracy is limited to reinforcing totalitarianism. Our country has a two-party system. Voters have two options. Therefore, perfect freedom is achieved. That's the content to our example of political excellence.

Government is, of course, actually concerned with many areas, each a mass of complex issues: fiscal policy (what to tax and how much, maintaining and extending the infrastructure of the nation, subsidizing business development and innovation, finding and developing and managing and sustaining natural resources -- such as the electromagnetic spectrum -- for the common good, subsidizing education and scientific research and the arts, etc.), social policy (making, enforcing, and interpreting laws, protecting civil rights, maintaining social order, aiding the sick, the incapable, the injured, the poor, etc.), foreign policy (immigration, protection of our citizens and businesses in other countries, international cooperation for the general good, war and peace and showing the flag, etc.), and so on. Our two parties go down the long, long list of these issues, taking opposing positions or at least proclaiming the other wrong. The voter can then choose between hodge-podge A and hodge-podge B. Mind you, the voter is perfectly free to choose one, or the other, or neither (but not both -- that would be illogical).

This two-party system seems to be an accident of U.S. history. The Founding Fathers had experience with the party system of British politics and thought it a bad thing, a sorry factionalism for which there would be no grounds in the brave, new United States. However, in a remarkable instance of spontaneous generation, factions formed almost immediately in the new government, creating our first political parties, the Federalists and the Republicans. These have morphed and split and reformed and changed, and we have had powerful third (and more) parties from time to time, but two parties seems to be our accepted standard. I mean, of course, two effective parties. Every Presidential election has several parties running candidates, but only two parties will get more than 1% of the national vote.

Other nations have genuine multi-party systems, where individual parties typically have relatively well-defined sets of primary goals. Voters have a means of supporting their main concern, civil liberties or social justice or Big Business or imperialism or whatever. Generally, no single party is

powerful enough to dominate, and coalitions are necessary to achieve a majority. Voters have an improved chance at seeing their goals implemented as parties trade off secondary interests to achieve primary goals.

I think our two-party system is substantially imperfect, and we are reminded of its shortcomings every four years, when the topic of a third party turns up. If we started asking about the nature of that party, I think we would find one person has such-and-such a reason, another person has a different idea, and so on. The actual desire is for several third parties, for a genuine multi-party system with six or more viable parties. I also think such a change is, unfortunately, not possible. It is too big. Too many interests would have to give up too much power. The third parties that pop up from time to time provide voters with an alternative choice but not an achievable one. They only draw votes away from the two parties and, however satisfying on election day, it may well become evident over the next four long years that those votes could have been better used.

So my thoughts on Presidential politics are these:

We need to accept that we live under a two-party system. It is much better than a one-party system but not as good as a multi-party one. A third party is not a serious step towards a true multi-party system. It is a distraction from achieving what is possible with what we have.

We need to be willing to work within our two-party system. It's the only option we have to achieve something positive, however limited. It's the only option we have to avoid something worse. I don't see this as unfair or depressing or a reason for pessimism or cynicism. A two-party system may not be optimal, but it has elbow room for advancing the common good a little bit. If you can't do a lot, do a little.

We need to understand the complexities and contradictions involved in running for public office (and serving in one). The simplest instance probably occurs when the person privately disagrees with his or her required public duty or responsibility. There is nothing dishonest or hypocritical about this. The public person is not the same as the private person. Another instance is campaign statements. These are made during the stress, pressures, and limited information of a campaign, they must never offend a large number of voters, and they must be uttered with confidence, solemn or cheerful as the occasion requires. This is where the two-party system has some value, small though it may be. Identify the sane candidate. A two-party system automatically provides a 50-50 chance of doing so, and careful attention to campaign statements may improve those odds.

Finally, vote. However discouraged you may be about the system, however futile participation in it may seem, vote anyway. I have confidence in the readership of this newsletter, and I believe your vote will, in God's mysterious way, negate the ballot and frustrate the designs of some mean-spirited idiot.

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If Jesus returns to earth, he better have one hell of a website

The name Lewis Black probably doesn't ring a bell, unless you've been watching The Daily Show with Jon Stewart on Comedy Central for the last several years.

Lewis Black is a Grammy Award-winning American stand-up comedian, author, playwright and actor. Black earned a Masters in Fine Arts at the Yale School of Drama in 1977. He is known for his comedic style which can be likened to an angry mental breakdown during which he ridicules history, politics, religion, trends and cultural phenomena. Ok, he's a pissed-off Jewish comedian.

In June 2008, Black released a book called "Me of Little Faith". This rant on religion is part recycled

stand-up material, part biographical testimony. He takes aim at the Catholic church, Mormons, people who commit suicide in the name of faith, Jews, Jesus, God, and of course, TV evangelists. Black says that religion is "taken too seriously, and anything that takes itself too seriously is open to ridicule".

"After millennia of religion being used as a club either to scare the shit out of children or to send them to war, someone's got to search for organized religion's funny bone".

I had to get this book after reading in a review, "this book is NOT for religious people". Black uses a dark, cutting, and sarcastic tone with religion that religious readers might feel shows insufficient respect for their religion, their Gods, their holy books, or their airborne pasta-based deities.

"He better have one hell of a website, and he better come armed with some bigger, better and splashier miracles. Just walking on water isn't going to cut it anymore."

Some parts of the book turn briefly personal, covering his semi-Jewish upbringing and talking about his brother who died young and the aftermath of those experiences. During those times, Black gave a lot of thought to the meaning of life and became openly disgusted by how organized religions have been cashing in on the mystery and keeping the embers of discrimination burning.

"The match is hatred, and the kindling is crafted from ignorance."

I bought the audiobook version (read by Black) and listened to it over a weekend road trip in mid-July. To fully experience Black's perspective, I highly recommend the audiobook version.

For times when you're in the mood for some light, non-technical theology-humor, this book is a godsend.

- Jason Schoenack

More on Pledge of Allegiance Dispute

[The following is the text of a letter to Davis Cope on his *Red River Rationalist* article]

I read with interest and horror your report on the pledge of allegiance dispute in Fargo....there was a famous legal case decided by the US Supreme Court in 1943, which found for some Jehovah's Witness students who refused to recite the pledge. The opinion of the court was written by Justice Robert H. Jackson, later involved in the prosecution of the Nazi war criminals at Nuremburg. You will find a Wikipedia entry on the case: *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*.

I forward below* some sections of Jackson's opinion for the court, which seem to me truly one of the great texts for civil liberties and human freedom ever written by any court.

The upshot is THIS: No school, administrator, teacher, or ANYONE can compel students to stand, recite or repeat anything they do not wish to, PERIOD. I hope if the matter is not so settled and understood there, you might circulate Jackson's text to all concerned, especially to those in the families of the young people who are defending their rights.

Thanks so much for keeping me on the list to receive the newsletter...I read each one, and have archived all issues since the beginning...

Regards, **Fred**

Whitehead, Kansas City, Kansas

[*The extract, which was appended by Mr. Whitehead, is from Findlaw, the first Google listing if you search for *Barnette* 1943 and has the opinions and the dissents]

Our Hearts Were Young and Homosexual?

One News Now, a Christian news service, regularly switches out the term "gay" for "homosexual" on syndicated content it receives. An article about Olympic track and field star Tyson Gay was no exception: "Tyson Homosexual easily won his semifinal for the 100 meters at the U.S. Olympic track and field trials," the article stated. "On Saturday, Homosexual misjudged the finish in his opening heat and had to scramble to finish fourth, then in his quarterfinal a couple of hours later, ran 9.77 to break the American record that had stood since 1999. Asked how he felt, Homosexual said: 'a little fatigued.'"

[The above item was in the "No Comment" page of *The Progressive*, August, 2008 and was also featured in "Headlines" on the Jay Leno's "Tonight Show" on July 28,2008]

Monument Update

Your Executive Committee met our Attorney to discuss our on-going case to place our monument next to the Ten Commandments on the City Hall campus. As we have reported earlier, there is a monument case scheduled for the U.S. Supreme Court this fall. The ACLU also has a case moving through the courts. There are complicated maneuvers going on which might delay both of those cases. Any decision in our case may be delayed until these cases are decided.

We have filed our Complaint. The City of Fargo has replied. The City has changed its strategy a bit since we last went to court on this issue. They have hired two attorneys from the Twin Cities rather than have the City Attorney's office do this work. We will do our best to keep all of you informed about the case.

- Jon Lindgren

Some Comments on Politics

I refer to the current political system as Republicats.

Both draw huge sums of money from the same pool, Rx, defense, oil, NAM, and banks; hence what little difference exists between is so small it is hardly worth mention. All that matters in politics is votes. Truth means nothing.

I sat and watched WCCO out of Minneapolis. On it was a segment called "Reality Check." WCCO examined the truth behind the "secret ballot" voting for unions which claims Coleman is for it, Franken is against it. WCCO's conclusion --- as represented it was a lie. The ad had everything in reverse and turned out to be sponsored by those supporting Coleman.

The group mentioned is also against labor.

Now here is the kicker. Not five minutes after airing their (WCCO) assessment, they ran the ad and continue to run the ad. I wrote WCCO and asked, given what I stated, how I could ever watch WCCO

again and think that I was watching a credible source of information. I have not heard back.

- **David Johnson**, Forman, ND

A long and wicked life followed by five minutes of perfect grace gets you into Heaven. An equally long life of decent living and good works followed by one outburst of taking the name of the Lord in vain - then have a heart attack at that moment and be damned for eternity. Is that the system? ~ Robert A. Heinlein

If God doesn't like the way I live, let him tell me, not you. ~ Author Unknown

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Morality?

Many religious persons are convinced that religion teaches morality -- in fact, that religion is *necessary* to be a moral person .

In light of this, I find it interesting that *Freethought Today*, published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation, has two full pages of fine print each month for the "Black Collar Crime Blotter." This just lists various religious leaders who have been charged, convicted, or sentenced of various crimes. I list a mere sample of those convicted, from the latest issue.

A youth minister, 46, from PA: raping two boys and molesting a third. A Rev., 71, from VA: incest (having sex with his daughter). Religious leader, 47, from OH: 15 felonies including two counts of rape of a child under 13. Youth camp leader, 61, from VA: five counts sexual abuse. House of corrections chaplain, 72, from NH: two counts aggravated sexual assault. Pastor, 50, from WA: attempted rape, sexual assault; admitted he drinks and uses crack cocaine. Rev., 76, from AZ: rape and sexual assault. Rabbi, 62, from NY: improperly touching two first graders. Rev., 53, from AZ: six counts sexual conduct with a minor -- committed sex acts on three boys under 15. Rev., 53, from CO: indecent exposure; had history of being naked (said "I didn't want to sweat in my clothes").

Bear in mind that these are religious leaders -- then tell me where you want to send your kiddies to learn morality!

- **Chuck Crane**

Should Freethinkers Always Have an "Open Mind"?

Bernard Katz poses this question in an article in the July/August issue of *American Rationalist*.

This struck a chord with me, as I have friends (one in particular) who are continually berating me and the rest of our group for not being more open-minded to the claims of religion. According to them, we are willing to examine only one narrow-minded view. Apparently they feel we should have more theological content.

Katz points out that there are many things on which we should indeed have closed minds. Just take a look at the table of contents of any book about the paranormal or hoaxes.

Our minds should be closed to many things, such as King Tut's curse, the Bermuda Triangle, flat earth or hollow earth theories, perpetual motion machines, psychic surgery, astrology, pyramid power, mermaids, unicorns, dragons, and a whole host of related things.

In religion, there are many more things we can close our minds to: talking snakes, talking donkeys, faith healing, Noah's ark, Christian Science, Scientology, the shroud of Turin, the Bible as the word of God, the reality of angels and demons, witches and warlocks, and heaven and hell -- to name just a few.

So we can proudly be freethinkers and still close our minds to nonsense that has long ago been proven to be just that.

- **Chuck Crane**

Red River Freethinkers are 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 1:00 p.m. on the third Sunday of each month. The location for each meeting will be posted in this space in an upcoming newsletter.

This month's meeting will be held in the Atomic Coffee shop on 222 N Broadway in Fargo from 1-4 p.m on Sunday, August 17th.

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
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