

Red River Rationalist

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redriverfreethinkers.org

OLD BOOKS; NEW BOOKS

[Reviews books or anything else interesting to Cope]

The Acts of the Apostles. By Luke (or maybe God).

It's election year, so the usual list of proposed Constitutional amendments will be placed before Congress (anti-abortion, defending marriage, protecting the flag, etc.). There will be the usual posturing ("Senator Hollow is speaking to you today, my friends, from the front lines in the defense of Old Glory!") and the usual letters to the editor ("Senator so-and-so supports burning the flag that our troops have fought and died for!"). The Senate will vote down the amendments (that is, they have in the past), and the respective pockets of single-issue voters will lash themselves into a fury and run off to the polls to save the country.

Many of these amendments seemed contrived to draw political support from conservative Christians, which gets me to thinking about religion and politics, and that always reminds me about the Book of Acts and its wholehearted endorsement of communism.

It also brings to mind that curious procedure of choosing amongst candidates by casting lots, which was used to determine the Divine pleasure in filling out the Twelve Apostles after Judas left. You pray over the lots (Acts 1:24-25: "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place."), cast them, and God's wishes are made known quickly, clearly, and in a seemly fashion. God could have identified his selection by a halo, but casting lots was the custom. The procedure has fallen sadly out of fashion, and I can't really see why. It seems tailor-made for choosing a Pope, and I suspect it would freshen up the Southern Baptist Convention.

But back to communism. Acts is full of all sorts of interesting stuff about the earliest days of the Church: sermons preached, miracles performed, demons cast out, dead raised, and other early administrative details. I'm concentrating on Acts 4:32-5:11, which starts off: "Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common." A beautiful description of changed lives resulting from the acceptance of Jesus Christ, and powerful evidence for the profoundness of the change, the surrender of private property itself, that ne plus ultra of conservatism, for the public good.

But, objects Mr. Conservative, religious ecstasy may very well cause such regrettable lapses, yet the failure to acknowledge such absolutes of the human condition as private property must have had the most pernicious consequences! The divine Word, however, states the consequences were most beneficent. We read: "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." From each according to his means, to each according to his needs. Karl Marx himself could scarcely have put it better.

I have to admit that, as a child growing up in fundamentalist Tennessee in the 1950s, I found this part of Acts puzzling. I knew that Communism was very, very bad (everybody had to use the same

toothbrush), but the Bible here sounded exactly like Communism insofar as words had any meaning, and I had some vague notion that Christianity, or at least some branches of it, found self-denial and altruism admirable (monasteries, ascetics, hermits, that sort of thing). But I cannot remember ever hearing this bit about early Christian communism either read or discussed in sermon or in Sunday School, although I can remember the reading of the first verses of Acts 2 (speaking in tongues at the Pentecost).

I now know, of course, that communism/socialism is very much a part of the Christian tradition, that the United States -- thanks to the First Amendment -- has been a haven for many of the humbler movements (the Hutterites, for example), and that Christian Socialist political parties have been a significant part of European politics for over a century. I didn't hear about such things because conservative Christians and fundamentalists not only avoid contact with humanity's intellectual heritage, they even avoid an honest facing of questions raised by the Bible itself.

But to continue. The Church eliminated "need" by communal ownership of property and was on its way to establishing Heaven on Earth. What went wrong? Well, it turns out that this first success was followed by a second success, which apparently negated the whole effort! We read: "But a man named Ananias ... sold a piece of property; with his wife's knowledge, he kept back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles' feet." This, of course, is not cricket, and the Apostle Peter confronts him and says so: " '... You did not lie to us but to God!' Now when Ananias heard these words, he fell down and died." That's not all. "After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened." Peter confronts her, and -- poor woman! -- she supports her husband. "Immediately she fell down at his feet and died."

The early Christian community is thus doubly blessed. Want is eliminated by communism, and perjurers fall over dead. The ideal Christian is emerging: a group of well-nourished people expressing themselves very, very carefully. Yet what was the effect? "And great fear seized the whole church and all who heard of these things." And that's it! The next we hear about the early Church, it is squabbling about food distribution, and the Twelve Apostles themselves throw up their hands and cry (Acts 6:2): "It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait on tables."

- **Davis Cope**

*Pledge of Allegiance
(1924 - 1954)
I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America,
and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation,
indivisible, with liberty and justice for all*

(Ad)Verse

The Blind Men and the Elephant

I'm sure most of you are familiar with this poem (written by John Godfrey Saxe) where six blind men set out to "observe" an elephant. The first man feels the side and decides the elephant is like a wall; the second grabs a tusk and says the elephant is like a spear; the third comes to the trunk and is sure the

elephant is like a snake; the fourth comes to the leg and is sure the elephant is like a tree; the fifth finds an ear and determines that the elephant is like a fan; and the sixth seizes the tail and announces that the elephant is like a rope. This all led to a loud argument between the six. I wonder, though, how many of us remember the concluding verse?

*So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an elephant
Not one of them has seen!*

* * * * *

What It's Like to be an Atheist

In an Op-Ed article, "Reply to a Christian" (*Free Inquiry*, June/July, 2006), Sam Harris explains to a Christian how it feels to be an atheist:

"You believe that the Bible is the inerrant word of God and that Jesus is the son of God -- and you believe these propositions because you think they are true, not merely because they make you feel good. You may wonder how it is possible for a person like myself to find these sorts of assertions ridiculous. I am confident that I can give you a very clear sense of what it feels like to be an atheist.

"Consider: every devout Muslim has the same reasons for being a Muslim that you now have for being a Christian. And yet, you know exactly what it is like not to find these reasons compelling.. On virtually every page, the Qur'an declares that it is the perfect word of the Creator of the universe. Muslims believe this as fully as you believe the Bible's account of itself. There is a vast literature describing the life of Muhammad that, from the Muslim point of view, proves his unique status as the prophet of God. While Muhammad did not claim to be divine, he claimed to offer the most perfect revelation of God's will. He also assured his followers that Jesus was not divine and that anyone who believed otherwise would spend eternity in hell. ...

"Why don't you find these claims convincing? ... Please take a moment to reflect on this. You know exactly what it is like to be an atheist with respect to Islam. ... Understand that the way you view Islam is the way every Muslim views Christianity. And it is the way I view all religions. ..."

TREATMENT of the screenplay **KENTUCKY HOME** by **LEWIS LUBKA, 2006**

[Note: A "Treatment" is a condensed version of the screen play, with not much room for dialogue or scene setting, but mainly the story line/plot and some character development. The Kentucky Home treatment will be printed in installments in the next few issues of the *Red River Rationalist*.]

This drama is based on events in Louisville, KY 1953-54.

Sterling Moore is a thirty-three year old, tall, handsome, articulate, light-skinned Black veteran of World War II. During the seven years since his military discharge he has built a successful electrical contracting business in Louisville, KY. His attractive wife, Betty, 30, is a high school history teacher. They have two young daughters.

Although Louisville calls itself a "gateway" to the South, it is legally segregated. During the Civil War, it had two governments, one Confederate, the other on the Union side.

While Moore was in the military, he dreamed that when he came home he would buy a house in the suburbs with a back yard where his children could play and he could garden.

Also living in Louisville are whites who oppose segregation. The NAACP has a branch and a few whites attend meetings. A white couple, Lewis and Amanda Overby are believers in racial equality and occasional attend meetings. The Moores and Overbys have briefly met at a NAACP meeting.

Overby is a skilled welder. A good looking man, he came to Louisville on a construction job and stayed after the job was over. His father was a trade unionist and radical thinker who emigrated from Eastern Europe as a young man and Americanized his name. He married an emigrant woman who he met while they were studying English at night school.

Overby met Amanda, a stunningly beautiful woman, at the KY State Fair. They had many interests in common: dancing, art, music, literature, and a belief in equality for all. They soon fell in love. Amanda is a newspaper reporter. Her father is a physician and her mother is a college professor.

Amanda's family has anti-slavery roots going far back in history. One ancestor had a connection to John Brown and another was an officer in the Union Army.

Although Moore wanted to live outside the ghetto, he claimed he was not a political activist. He hoped he could somehow get a house in the suburbs without challenging the system. He just wanted to move wherever he could afford a house.

While he dreamed of an egalitarian society, he realized that this was a long way off. So he started house-hunting. His wife realized that his path would lead him into conflict with the white power structure which didn't want a challenge to the status quo. Also, that he would upset certain Blacks who had a comfortable niche within the segregated society. Betty recites an old ghetto rhyme, "if you're white, you're right, if you're brown, hang 'round, but if you're Black get back, get back!" They chuckle nervously because it is true.

Moore is very self-confident and characterizes himself as "never backward about being forward". He looks through the ads in the real estate section of the Courier-Journal, the major newspaper of the area and marks three possibilities.

He telephones each of the three advertisers and tells them he is on his way to check them out. With his family, he drives to the places. At the first, the owner tells him it has already been sold, at the second, the owner tells him he is taking the house off the market because his daughter is moving in, and at the third, he is threatened with violence. This is very disturbing, but he is not ready to quit.

One of his electrical jobs is an emergency. A white woman with young children is without electricity in Shively, a developing suburb on the edge of Louisville. It is a Sunday and the woman has called several electrical firms in the phone book. Moore was the only one to respond. He checks out the situation and restores power to the home.

He is driving homeward and passes a subdivision being developed and sees a newly-built house with a FOR SALE sign and a real estate company's telephone number. He jots it down. As soon as he gets home he tells Betty about the house. When he describes it, she shows a bit of interest.

First thing the next morning, Moore phones the number that was on the FOR SALE sign. A realtor, Don Wallace, answers and agrees to meet him that afternoon at the house. The realtor is waiting as Moore's car pulls up. Moore walks over to Wallace's car. Wallace tells him that he will be completely honest. An unwritten law or "gentleman's agreement" forbids him to even show the house to a Black.

(Continued next month)

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.

For **16 July 2006**, we will attempt our "Critical Discussion Group", a meeting format popular with many humanist and atheist groups. Please bring your suggested topic for suitable intellectual discussion, or general trouble-making.

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"I use the word 'Humanist' to mean someone who believes that man is just as much a natural phenomenon as an animal or a plant; that his body, mind, or soul were not supernaturally created but are products of evolution, and that he is not under the control or guidance of any supernatural being, but has to rely on himself and his own powers."

- **Julian Huxley** (1877-1975)

When Religion Turns to Science

The results of the research called the STEP trial (Study of the Therapeutic Effects of Intercessory Prayer) have now been widely reported. This study was conducted by six academic medical centers, including Harvard and the Mayo Clinic and was designed to demonstrate the effects of distant prayer on 1802 patients who had undergone coronary bypass surgery.

The study was a randomized double-blind controlled trial and utilized three Christian prayer groups -- two Catholic and one Protestant. The patients were divided into three groups: one group received intercessory prayer after being told they may or may not receive prayer; the second group did not receive prayer after being told they may or may not receive prayer; and the third group received intercessory prayer after being told that they definitely would receive it.

The results of the trial were clear and unequivocal: intercessory prayer had absolutely no beneficial effects of any kind. In fact, group three (who had been told they were being prayed for) had worse outcomes than the other two groups(!)

Interestingly, this \$2.5-million study was primarily funded by the John Templeton Foundation, which spends millions each year to promote religion and superstitious beliefs. Yet, when the results were

published, several religious leaders said it did not shake their confidence in prayer and that they "didn't need a prayer study to know that prayer works."

This raises the question: Why spend millions of dollars and several years on a study if you are going to ignore the results? You may be sure that, had the results been otherwise, they would have received banner headlines in all the religious publications.

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