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Folklore at UNT

by John Blanton

Tyson Gibbs is Professor of Anthropology at The University of North Texas (UNT) at Denton, Texas. He is currently teaching a course in folklore, and, it being Halloween, he invited in a Wiccan and a UFO advocate to enliven the discussion. To enliven the discussion even more, he invited me to critique the other two presentations.

Presenting the background on Wicca was Donna Smith, which is not her real name. She asked that her anonymity be preserved, except I guess for the 30 or so attending the presentation.

It wasn't hard to grasp the fundamentals of Wicca. It's a religion, much like all the others. It's not Satan worship. That's something else. It's derived from the Druids (they're from England, you know), but we still haven't figured out the origins of the Druids. Smith considers herself a witch, but that's just a popular term. She advised us that when thinking about witches it's best to put aside visions of Margaret Hamilton and Judy Garland. Additionally, there's a lot of symbolism in Wicca, and Smith elaborated on that for us. Like I said, it's a religion.

The presentation on UFOs and extraterrestrial alien lore was presented by Cynthia Wooten, who did not request that her anonymity be preserved. Under the name C.L. Turnage¹, she has written a number of books on what I call *alternative worlds*. Apparently in these alternative worlds just about anything imaginable is possible. Let's have a go at some of it:

- ⇒ ETs are on the Moon and Mars.
- ⇒ Extraterrestrials wrote the Bible Codes.
- ⇒ The Moon was once inhabited (see above).
- ⇒ The Moon has a thin atmosphere, and the lunar sky is dark, because there is no ozone.
- ⇒ Europeans apparently can talk about all this stuff on the Moon, but we (Americans) can't.
- ⇒ There are clouds on the Moon (she showed a photo).

EVENTS CALENDAR

November Program

Global Warming

November 9 (Saturday), 2:00 pm, at
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas
(Center for Non Profit Management)

Free and open to the public

The North Texas Skeptics will present a panel discussion on "Global Warming."

Are concerns about global warming based on real science, or is the issue contrived by people who just want to control our lives? Participants from the North Texas Skeptics, including some who are scientists, will discuss the underlying science.

Phone the NTS Hotline at
214-335-9248 for information.

For information and schedule of our monthly Social and Board of Directors Meeting check Upcoming Events on our Web site at ntskeptics.org, or call the NTS Hotline.

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- ⇒ There is a giant formation of a face on the surface of Mars, at
 Cydonia.
- ⇒ Numerous photos from Apollo flights and the Russian Phobos
 Mars probe show orbiting spacecraft.
- ⇒ Mars is not a dead planet. There are even 300-foot tall trees
 growing on Mars.

There was more. But wait. Don't be too skeptical. Wooten showed
 photos, and it's hard to argue against evidence like that. See, for example,
 the article on "Photo Fakery" in the September issue of this newsletter.

It came time for me to speak, and I had a few questions about the sym-
 bolism of Wicca. Smith had mentioned a couple of things:

- ⇒ The circle is a form of protection, like when a Texas Ranger has
 a star with a circle around it for a badge, and that gives him
 added protection.
- ⇒ Black is a protective color. Can't argue with that. If I were
 hiding out in the dark I would want to wear black.
- ⇒ Everything in the world is classed as either male or female.

I first asked the students in attendance just how reasonable it seemed
 that a circle around something can provide protection. How can you test
 that if you want to? I encouraged a scientific approach.

Regarding the sex of objects I noted we've seen this before. New
 Age advocate Scott Allen told us this a couple of years ago.² I had to ask
 this time: How was the universe organized before the advent of sex? I
 mentioned that sex has existed on the Earth only about a billion years.
 Shortly after that came freshmen. That always gets a chuckle on a col-
 lege campus. Of course, I think I got it backwards. First freshmen, then
 sex.

In my usual, quiet, and sophisticated manner, I discussed the presenta-
 tion on *alternative worlds*. OK, maybe I did get a little loud and obnox-
 ious.

Not only does the Moon have a thin atmosphere, it has no atmosphere at
 all. Of course, having no atmosphere means also having no ozone, but hav-
 ing no atmosphere is what makes the lunar sky dark.

Wooten had pointed out the significance of peaks and other surface
 relief features within the craters on the Moon. This was evidence, she
 said, that these were not impact craters. Impact craters would have
 smooth bottoms. To the contrary, I explained. The impact of a large ob-
 ject at such high speed partially liquefies the materials, and the surface
 within the impact zone rebounds, usually forming a central peak and pos-
 sibly other ripples.

Regarding the aliens' writing the Bible Codes, I asked the students to
 go to our Web site and check out Greg Aicklen's presentation on the
 topic from a few years ago.³ The Bible Codes are a figment of the imagi-
 nation of the original researchers who claimed their significance, and
 their conclusions have been soundly debunked. If the Bible Codes are
 just a manifestation of what you would expect when searching a large

body of text with a computer, then what was it the aliens did, and what is its significance?

The final stage of the discussion involved the three presenters' sitting up front while the students fired questions at us. I think it was because I was the loudest that I got the most questions. However, this was a fairly sharp class, and one of the students had a question for Wooten I had been anxious to address.

Wooten had mentioned the troublesome practice of aliens mating with humans and producing hybrids. The student rightly asked how this would be possible, since it is highly unlikely (read *impossible*) there would be a close enough genetic match to produce a working model through sexual reproduction. Wooten's response was one I could not argue with. The aliens, she told us, had previously visited Earth and copied DNA from our recent ancestors. They had taken this back and created alien forms from it, and it was those alien forms that are mating with all those abductees you read about. Say, maybe she's onto something.

Dr. Gibbs asked me why I should always rule out the possibility of ghosts. For example, he said, if there were a locked room on campus, and we were sure nobody had gone in there, but when we unlocked the room all the furniture had been rearranged, how would we explain that?

My response was that you should not make up explanations off the top of your head when a more rational cause is available. I used a favorite example of mine. I come home to my locked house to find my TV set is gone. Two possibilities: Aliens from Mars (from Cydonia, no less) have come to this planet and have passed through the walls of my house without leaving any marks. They have altered my TV set so it, too, can pass through the wall, and they have taken the TV back to Mars (to Cydonia). Or, somebody picked the lock and went in, stole the TV, and locked the house. If you are going to imagine ghosts did something, why stop there. Why not imagine space aliens or al Qaeda operatives. When you start to make up explanations rather than look for the truth there is no good place to stop.

One student was troubled by my completely rational and objective approach. "You must have been young once," she said (ouch, that hurts). "Don't you ever have any fun?"

Yes, there is lots of fun, I explained. For example, there's George Lucas. He makes all those wonderful movies, and I've seen them all, and there's magic and space aliens, and wonderful special effects. And it's all fiction. We must continue to make the distinction between fiction and reality. Don't get the two mixed up.

Something came up a couple of times: "If you assume you know everything, how are you ever going to investigate new phenomena and make new discoveries?"

You *should* investigate new phenomena. The operative word here is *investigate*. What's going on, instead, is acceptance without investigation. Conjecture is fine, but you can't live on conjecture forever. Eventually you need something solid. You need as a goal to achieve reality.

Dr. Gibbs noted that scientists should not get too wrapped up in their own methods (I'm paraphrasing here). Other cultures have had alternate belief systems that worked for them for 1000s of years. And their belief systems worked just as well for them as ours do for us. They had cures for cancer that worked just as well as modern cures.

I had to think very hard to make sure I understood this statement correctly. I did. A professor at a major university is telling us that modern cancer cures (and other trappings of today's civilization) work no better than the superstition-based practices of primitive cultures (including, I suppose, those of my own ancestors).

There's a movement going around called *post modernism*, and this is its face. It's not just on college campuses in the soft sciences, but it pervades a vast region of today's society, including its upper stratosphere. I gave a talk to a group in North Dallas where house numbers increment by 50, and mature adults are attending in the middle of the afternoon, because they don't need to work. A former Cambridge professor writes books espousing the most bizarre nonsense, and these worthy citizens nod approvingly.⁴ Science, we are told, is just another way of knowing. It's no better than any other way. A stronger statement of the principle is that all people's beliefs are equally valid. Going one further, I translate this to mean the truth is what you want it to be. Or, as comedian Henry Gibson put it over thirty years ago, "A lie is as good as the truth if you can get someone to believe it."

Well, we can put all that behind us. I, for one, am glad Professor Gibbs set the record straight and told his students what a bunch of hooey this post modernism is. At least that's the way I interpreted what he said. And my opinion, as we all know, is just as valid as anybody else's. □

References

- 1 Books and articles by Turnage/Wooten can be found at <http://members.tripod.com/~adapa/>
- 2 "Aliens, angels and archetypes" in the November 1998 issue of *The Skeptic*.
- 3 "A Skeptical Look at The Bible Code" in the March 1998 issue of *The Skeptic*.
- 4 "The amazing ideas of Rupert Sheldrake" in the January 1998 issue of *The Skeptic*.

Editorial

One less elephant

by John Blanton

The story is an old one, so I will try to keep it short.

The young son asks his father, “What holds up the Earth?”

The father explains, “The Earth rests on the back of a huge elephant.”

“But, father, what holds up the elephant?” the child asks.

“The elephant is standing on the back of a very large turtle” the father explains, proud to pass on the wisdom of the best minds of the day.

“But what holds up the turtle?” the child persists.

“Why, son. From there on down it’s turtles all the way.”

More recently Dayle Shockley has written in *The Dallas Morning News* “Humans aren’t accidents.”¹ Shockley is a writer and motivational speaker. A review of her writing indicates she is politically conservative and strongly religious. Her writings tend to reflect an otherwise level-headed approach. But, like many deeply religious people, she rejects totally natural explanations. It is unacceptable for her to believe that humans and this wonderful universe just evolved. So she posits an elephant, instead. Only she uses the word “creator.” “Believing that human beings and all of the wonders of this magnificent world just evolved—or are the result of some cosmic explosion—seems much more unlikely and requires much more faith than does believing in a Creator,” she says in her *News* column.

Now I must say a creator is a great and wonderful thing. A creator is all powerful. With a creator everything is possible. The creator explains all that is otherwise impossible to understand. When the mysteries of the universe become too deep, or when the chain of reasoning becomes overwhelmingly complex, it’s only necessary to invoke a creator, and you’re done. Home by five o’clock even.

That’s because the creator does everything you want it to do, and the creator does not need to be explained. The creator is the final explanation. And the best part about the creator is that one must not attempt to explain the creator. I have this on good authority from people who have told me about the creator. Besides, anybody who attempts to explain the creator will quickly find himself up to his neck in turtles.

It’s fortunate for many of us that our jobs do not require a lot of deep thinking. Most routine tasks can be accomplished by following established policy and social norms. Even otherwise very intelligent people routinely slough off the heavy lifting and go for the easy answer. Shockley is fortunate in being able to do this. She has not followed her chain of reasoning to its logical conclusion. If she had she would have realized that invoking the creator does not explain anything. She has invented an explanation that in turn needs to be explained. Something that by definition “explains everything” actually explains nothing. It is the ultimate excuse—the intellectual equivalent of “The dog ate my homework.”

Where would we be today if our men of science invoked the creator whenever faced with a difficult problem? For one thing we would probably be a few hundred years back, back to the time when demons and black magic were the explanation for human afflictions, and doctors did not desire to search any deeper.

In the less distant past people traveled west to search the gold fields of California. Some, learning there was gold near Pikes Peak in Colorado, decided to stop there and go no farther. They never made it to California. From this, according to a popular legend, we get the word “piker” for someone who strives by half measures. In science we call these people “creationists.”

Which gets us to the main story. There is a movement under way by creationists to introduce a concept called *intelligent design* into the science curricula in public schools. Having failed more primitive approaches, they now want to dress creationism up in a “cheap tuxedo”² and pass it off as legitimate science. They have even renamed the creator. It is now a *designer*.

For example, biochemist Michael Behe believes biochemical processes are too complex to have evolved by natural selection. He wants us to stop searching for the ultimate answer and just accept the designer.³

Mathematician and philosopher William Dembski asserts the information required to construct a complex living organism (such as himself) is too much to have come by natural means. He wants us to accept the designer.⁴

For these creationists there’s no need to drive all the way to California. It’s easier to just stop at Pike’s Peak and declare an

elephant. Fortunately, real scientists are not fond of elephants of the allegorical kind. They like to keep on driving in search of the real thing.

An example: Twelve years ago I was attending a creationist meeting when the theme went something like this: “We know the sun is not powered by nuclear fusion, because a fusion reaction would produce a lot of neutrinos, and scientists are measuring only a fraction of the neutrino flux that would be expected from a fusion source. Without a nuclear power source the sun would have run out of gas a long time ago if it really were billions of years old. Therefore the sun is not billions of year old, and there has not been enough time for evolution. So Darwin was wrong, and Genesis is correct.”

Some people call me skeptical, but I know you can't beat an argument like that. Since I was a little vague on the nature of neutrinos at that time I decided to do something about it. Later that year I went back to college, and after four years I had a masters degree in physics. In the mean time scientists had learned more about neutrinos, as well.

This year Dr. Raymond Davis, Jr. and Dr. Masatoshi Koshiha won the Nobel prize in physics “in recognition of their ground-breaking research into the emission of neutrinos produced by nuclear fusion reactions in the center of the sun. The observation of these neutrinos demonstrated conclusively that the sun is powered by the fusion of hydrogen nuclei into helium nuclei.”⁵

My guess is the creationists are now off looking for another gap in current scientific research for their creator to hide in.

In the mean time, real science continues to advance, despite the efforts of the creationists to beg for “alternative explanations.” Real scientists have learned to not accept the easy answers, the answers that are not answers at all. They have learned to ask “why?” with relentless persistence. They have also learned, when they don't understand something, to just say “I don't know.” Before they get to the first elephant. □

References

- 1 “Viewpoints” column in *The Dallas Morning News*, 5 October 2002.
- 2 A phrase coined by Leonard Krishtalka, who directs the Natural History Museum at the University of Kansas.
- 3 Behe's *irreducible complexity* is explained in his book *Darwin's Black Box*.
- 4 Dembski discusses his concept of *specified complexity* in his book *No Free Lunch: Why Specified Complexity Cannot Be Purchased Without Intelligence*.
- 5 “Nobel Prize in Physics: Raymond Davis, Jr. for Contributions to Neutrino Research and Our Understanding of the Sun,” http://www.upenn.edu/almanac/v49/n08/nobel_davis.html

What's new

by Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the *What's New* column at <http://www.aps.org/WN/>. Following are some clippings of interest.]

IBM time bomb: advertising gimmick or quark-gluon plasma chip?

Of course, I saw at once that the full-page ad for a time machine in Tuesday's *New York Times* was a spoof. But I looked up at the TV and there was Fritz Mondale, running for the US Senate from Minnesota. Whoa! Is this possible? My only time machine is the WN archives, so I typed in “teleportation” and was taken back to 1996. An ad in *Scientific American* said: “IBM scientists have discovered a way to make an object disintegrate in one place and reappear intact in another” (WN 26 Jan 96). So how are people supposed to distinguish what is real and what is just advertising hype? I looked for other big ads that are too preposterous to believe. I came up with “Vitamin O” (WN 27 Nov 98), perpetual motion (WN 5 Nov 99), and Yogic flying (WN 28 Sep 01). These are at least as preposterous as time machines, but they weren't mere gimmicks. They were intended to defraud a gullible public.

Herbal hype: CBS news does an accurate take on supplements.

Sales of herbal medications have soared since passage of the 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act, which allows natural supplements to be marketed without proof of safety, efficacy or purity. The media, riding the wave of popularity of alternative treatments, seemed to reinforce the supplement-lobby hype. But since the NIH Center of Complementary and Alternative Medicine began rigorous testing of supplements, the media has discovered what the responsible community has been saying all along: this stuff is untested, impure and often harmful (WN 23 Aug 02). The shift was evident on Monday's CBS Evening News with Dan Rather, which spent almost 4 minutes on the dangers of supplements. That's a long time by network news standards.

Scud defense: build them now; maybe we can test them later.

During the Gulf war, the military failed to destroy a single mobile Scud missile. Concerns about the vulnerability of U.S. troops to Iraqi Scud missiles in a new conflict led Congress to approve funding for increased production of the advanced Patriot missile, known as the PAC-3. Moreover, the Pentagon

would like to shift money from other missile programs to further accelerate production. The only problem is that the PAC-3s don't seem to work either, having fared badly in tests between February and May (WN 17 May 02). There are proposed fixes, but they haven't been tested at all. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld nonetheless is leaning toward increasing PAC-3 production, in the hope that the planned fixes will work if we ever get around to testing them. If we don't get around to testing, what's the problem?

Pseudo secrets: was that really John Podesta?

So now who's opposing government secrecy? Well, it's not exactly on the same level as the Pentagon Papers, but at a press conference on Tuesday, the Sci Fi Channel released a report on "Science and the Failure to Investigate Unidentified Aerial Phenomena." Among those calling for the government to give us all the information on UFOs was John Podesta, Chief of Staff to President Clinton and now a Washington lobbyist. Meanwhile, Robert Gentry, "world renowned nuclear physicist," is suing Cornell, NSF and Los Alamos over censorship of scientific evidence against the big bang.

Global warming: The climate of the talks has changed.

The latest round began this week in New Delhi. The focus is on ways to adapt to change, rather than cutting emissions (WN 14 Jun 02).

Patently absurd: there are a lot of screwy patents out there.

The standards have been too lax, and the Patent Office knows it. Patents are reexamined in extreme cases, such as hydrinos (WN 6 Sep 02) and the motionless electromagnetic generator (WN 23 Aug 02), but it's rare. However, a provision

in the Patent and Trademark Office Authorization Act making it clear that it's never too late to reexamine a patent if substantial new questions of patentability are raised, should help (WN 6 Sep 02).

Theological gynecology: purging science advisory committees.

Every administration seeks to load advisory committees with like-minded experts, but the practice seems to have reached a new level. In a particularly controversial case, W. David Hager, an obstetrician-gynecologist who strongly opposes abortions, has been asked to serve on the FDA panel that reviews reproductive health drugs. Hager is the author of *As Jesus Cared for Women*, in which he promotes the healing power of faith in Jesus.

Creationism: Ohio plan is not very intelligently designed.

A committee of the Ohio Board of Education has recommended that science classes emphasize both evolution and the debate over its validity. Individual school districts would decide whether to include intelligent design in the debate. The plan would imply that creationism in whatever guise is a scientific alternative.

Liar, liar: Academy panel discovers the polygraph tells lies.

The polygraph looks for abrupt increases in heart rate, blood pressure and perspiration. The polygraph is, therefore, a highly reliable detector of orgasms. But does it detect lies? Only if you're lying about having an orgasm. After a hundred years of exonerating the likes of Aldrich Ames and ruining the careers of nameless thousands, the Wen Ho Lee case led the Administration to call for a huge expansion of polygraph testing. To its credit, the DOE called instead for testing the polygraph. The

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

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National Academy of Sciences convened a study panel, and its report was released this week. The report confirms, as WN has maintained, that no spy has ever been caught using the polygraph (WN 05 Apr 02). "Too many loyal employees may be falsely judged deceptive, or too many major security threats could go undetected," the report said, warning against reliance on the tests. The next day, New Mexico senators, Jeff Bingaman (D) and Pete Domenici (R), called on DOE to abolish the tests. And that's no lie.

The Prize: opening new windows on the universe.

This year's prize went to senior physicists. Riccardo Giaccone, a US citizen who was born in Genoa and studied in Milan, was awarded half the prize for founding X-ray astronomy. He was the first to detect a source of X rays outside the solar system and constructed the first X-ray telescope. He is a Fellow of the APS and President of Associated Universities Inc. The other half of the prize was split between Raymond Davis Jr and Masatoshi Koshiba. Davis was the first to detect solar neutrinos, thus proving that solar energy comes from fusion. A Fellow of the APS, he is Professor Emeritus in the Dept. of Physics and Astronomy at the Univer. of Pennsylvania. Masatoshi Koshiba, a citizen of Japan, confirmed Davis's results, constructing Kamiokande, the world's largest neutrino detector, leading to the field of neutrino astronomy.

Herbal low: FDA stops sale of street drug substitutes.

The dietary supplement industry has been almost above the law since passage of the 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act. The only restriction is that natural substances not be marketed as cures for anything. But the FDA says that herbal substances marketed as street drug alternatives are not meant to supplement the diet. The FDA now says selling a combination of ephedra and caffeine as "herbal ecstasy" (WN 16 Aug 02) is against the law.

Alternative medicine: it's not easy being blue.

When anthrax struck, we were assured AM could help. Short on antibiotics? Take colloidal silver. There are a few teeny side effects: you can develop argyria, a permanent condition that turns your skin blue. The Libertarian Senate candidate in Montana was one of those who turned blue. Oh, and it doesn't prevent infection.



Bob Park can be reached via email at opa@aps.org

Skeptical ink: fun time for Skeptics.



Which two creationists are exactly alike?

Golla and Blanton

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