



# *The North Texas*

# Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

## Science teaching in Texas under attack

By John Blanton

There's something about a case of the crabs. You may be clear of eye and pure of heart, but you still feel you somehow brought it on yourself.

It's much the same with creationism.

Reports are now coming in from Austin, and it's beginning to look like another bad case.

The Texas Board of Education is reviewing science textbooks, and creationists are making their pitch for "intelligent design" (ID). Even if you are familiar with creationism, ID may be new to you. Leonard Krishtalka of the Natural History Museum at the University of Kansas has suggested we think of ID as creationism dressed up in a cheap tuxedo. ID is creationism pitched by college-educated zealots, but it's still the same song. Wherever there's a gap in scientific knowledge or there exists poor public understanding, the creationists look to fill the void with metaphysical explanations.

Applying the methods of epidemiology to the case in Austin, we see a common factor with recent cases in Alabama, Georgia, Kansas, and Ohio, where the Discovery Institute (DI) has weighed in. DI is well funded, religiously bent, and anti-evolution. Knowing they will be unable to void the teaching of evolution, they insist we teach alternatives. Do you need a hint?

Tugging at science for support, DI has staked out a field of study about an inch square and a millimeter deep. As far as we can tell, the DI Fellows hold legitimate Ph.D.s, but they don't seem to do any real ID science.

## EVENTS CALENDAR

### September Program

Saturday, September 13, at 2 p.m., Center for Community Cooperation, 2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas (Free Admission)  
For more info: (214) 335-9248

#### The Ghost Children of San Antonio

Did a train hit a school bus full of children in San Antonio over 50 years ago? Do the ghosts of these children haunt the site of the tragedy and routinely intervene to save others from their fate?

Danny and Ginny Barnett went to extraordinary effort to uncover the story. What happened when the skeptical pair journeyed to the Alamo City to observe the production of a TV program about the legend is becoming a legend, itself.  
Danny Barnett will tell what happened.

### Social dinner and board meeting

September 27, at 7:30 p.m., at the Black-eyed Pea Restaurant, Forest Lane in Dallas (one block west of Central Expressway). Let us know if you are coming. We sometimes reschedule or cancel these events.

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 reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings  
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They have published books, however, and there is a really slick video,  
*Unlocking the Mystery of Life*, which is being shown around to marvel  
 the unsure.

Stand by to see more of these than you care to in the near future. In  
 the event you miss the main show you can view our copies for free. The  
 NTS library has the video and a number of books by DI Fellows Michael  
 Behe, William Dembski, Dean Kenyon, and Jonathan Wells. We also  
 have at least one book each by DI Advisor Phillip Johnson and by Loose  
 Cannon Michael Denton.

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## As far as we can tell, the DI Fellows hold legitimate Ph.D.s, but they don't seem to do any real ID science.

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Meanwhile, NTS Board member Greg Aicklen (also a real Ph.D.) has  
 signed up to testify before the BOE in Austin on 10 September. The  
 schedule is he gets three minutes to explain what's wrong with ID.  
 That's about five hours less than he needs, but it will have to do. Be-  
 sides, he will have a lot of company, though not all he wants (see para-  
 graph 1).

So far, the current textbook issue has received scant media attention  
 in the NTS area. The biggest ripple has been an op-ed piece in *The Dal-  
 las Morning News* by SMU geology professor Louis Jacobs. In it he ar-  
 gued "A top-notch science curriculum would leave out the  
 misrepresentations and misunderstandings of intelligent design, empha-  
 size chemistry, physics and biology, and include earth sciences equally."  
 He passed on the temptation to slam the creationists, a right he has  
 earned by virtue of his previous encounters with them.

Others have not been so gentle.

Under the heading "I'm for ideas, not myths," Mark Johnson has  
 written a letter published on-line in *The Magnolia Potpourri*:

The reason that ID is not getting equal time is not because stu-  
 dents don't deserve equal time of ideas. I am all for equal time. In  
 a religious mythology class teach the 7 day creation myth right  
 along side with the primordial parents, egg at the bottom of the  
 ocean, slain monster or any other thousands of creation myths.

"Our economy is increasingly driven by science and technology, and  
 to undermine the study of science threatens our children's ability to com-  
 pete for jobs and our state's ability to compete for business," says David  
 Vom Lehn in a press release from the Texas Freedom Network. Con-  
 tinuing that theme, Texas Freedom Network Chairman Rev. Dr. Larry  
 Bethune said "Individual religious beliefs about the origin of life are sa-  
 cred and illuminating, and they should be studied in homes and religious

congregations, just as evolution is studied in science classrooms and laboratories. ... The question for the State Board of Education is not religion or science, but which should be taught in science classrooms. ... As a Texan, a pastor and a father of two high school boys, I want the strongest possible science curriculum and textbooks available to them."

Also from the TFN release:

"There is no debate about evolution in college textbooks, where scientists select the best books for use," said Dr. David Hillis, Alfred W. Roark Centennial Professor of Integrative Biology at the University of Texas. "The debate is at the level of secondary school textbooks, precisely because that is where non-scientists can exert influence. These objections to the textbooks are not about science or facts; they are about pushing a political and religious agenda."

"Our kids are already falling behind the rest of the nation in science education," said Amanda Walker, a Texas certified high school Biology teacher. "To water-down our textbooks is irresponsible and reckless."

The Associated Press reports that a "group of teachers, scientists, parents and religious leaders on Wednesday launched a campaign they say is an effort to protect the accurate teaching of evolution in high school biology textbooks." Amanda Walker is quoted as saying "Evolution is the most crucial concept we teach in biology. It is the cornerstone for understanding the living world." She is part of the "Stand Up For Science" campaign, which is preparing for the adoption of biology texts in November.

The NTS has been following the textbook issue in recent weeks, and links to pertinent news sources are in our on-line Skeptical News page at

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/TexasTexts.htm>.

We will continue to track new items as they come out and expand the page. Check back in the following weeks to keep up-to-date on the story.

So, that's the past. For the future the Discovery Institute and its supporters have plans to de-emphasize the teaching of natural processes in the sciences and especially in evolution. If they can get textbooks to mention an "intelligent designer" so much the better in their view.

This is a widely popular view, and not just in Texas. Surveys typically show a preference for teaching "alternative theories" of 50% or more in the US. Although there are surely some liberal creationists out there, belief in creationism tends to correlate strongly with political conservatism. A research paper by

NTS Advisor Raymond Eve and others seems to bear this out.<sup>1</sup> Also, a President who actively promotes a conservative religious view and an opposition party that shows no inclination to oppose creationism are strong indicators of the public mood. Bob Dylan would have said "You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows."

The front line of defense here is the same as it has been in the prior cases. The science teachers, particularly the biology teachers like Amanda Walker, are pressing the argument for good science. The National Center for Science Education (NCSE), with the indefatigable Eugenie C. Scott, is providing campaign advice and expert testimony from a deep reservoir of world-ranked scientists. Of course, it doesn't hurt that Nobel Laureates Ilya Prigogine and Steven Weinberg, both supporters of evolution, work just a few blocks north of the where the textbook hearings are held.

This may be all good for our side, but in the mean time Texas is being compared to other places. Places like Alabama, Georgia, Kansas, and Ohio. And worse. Acid-penned skeptic Robert Park of the American Physical society (of which I am a member) likes to pick out a few overripe targets for ridicule each week in his on-line editorial (<http://www.aps.org/WN/>). This week the state of Texas came into his crosshairs. Here is our medicine. We may as well take it now:

#### **Intelligent design: who designed the state of Texas?**

Even as the state Board of Education is selecting textbooks to be used in Texas science classes for the next decade (WN 11 Jul 03), there is a petition movement in Montgomery County, TX to require equal time for teaching Intelligent Design. In a poem, familiar to school children in Texas, the Devil asks the Lord if he had anything left over when he created the land. "The Lord said, 'yes I had plenty on hand, but I left it down by the Rio Grande.'" The devil proceeds to use the left-over land to build his own Hell Texas.

I feel sure that in some way this is all my fault.



#### **Reference:**

- 1 Raymond A. Eve, Ladorna Goff, and John Taylor, "Comparing Wiccans and Creationists: Differential Heuristics for Truth as Demonstrated in Two Marginalized Religious Aggregates," presented at American Association for Public Opinion Research, Montreal, Canada, 2001

## Book Review

# Science and Religion

## Are they compatible?

Reviewed by Prasad Golla

**Paul Kurtz (editor), Prometheus Books, ISBN 1-59102-064-690000**

A collection of 39 essays – largely from *Skeptical Inquirer* and *Free Inquiry* monthly magazines, and some speeches given at conferences – are compiled and edited by Paul Kurtz, who also provides the introduction and the after-thoughts essays. Eminent scientists and philosophers—and an essay by William Dembski, who is an Intelligent Design proponent—contributed these brilliant essays and speeches.

The essays together explore the question of the relation, whether there is one at all, between religion and science. What is the nature of this relation for now and the future, while the past history was undoubtedly acrimonious? They are non overlapping magisteria, argues Stephen Gould. Some others argue that they are incompatible because they deal with different realms, that of the natural and the supernatural. While some others point out that they address different needs of humans—religion is needed for moral and ethical requirements, they argue. Isn't secular humanism sufficient? For had not religion provoked and justified violence in the past, and continues to do so today?

Debates between religion and science are indeed a recent phenomenon. For science, as we know it, is itself a few centuries old. When religion ruled this earth before that, inquisitions and religious prosecutions were the order of the day. Minor transgressions against the Church did not go unheeded. Giordano Bruno was put at stake and burnt. Galileo was prosecuted. (Interestingly, one of the essays in this collection explains that it was as much of Galileo's mistake as the Catholic Church's.) Issues which are considered scientific facts, and those that the Church happily agrees with, were opposed vehemently in the past.

Kurtz points out that this nature of the Church in labeling natural rationalizations as blasphemous continues to this day; even in this "land of the free." Scientific explorations, and criticisms, into the religious realm are hence restricted. Where one can have an almost free reign into criticizing superstitious thought such as astrology, crystal & magnetic therapy, telepathy, UFOs, etc., one is not at freedom to voice one's opinions openly at, what I consider, the natural extension to these superstitious beliefs, namely reli-

gious dogmas. It's as if any thing related to God – or gods – is off limits to reason.

I wonder about the religious and scientific compatibility on almost a daily basis. I work at a telecommunications research facility where my peers are research scientists. They represent various cultures, nationalities, and religions, and speak various languages. But the only language we can "speak" at work is that of science. We are wise enough not to discuss our "personal" beliefs, for we can never come to a joint agreement. Why are these supposed "men of science" so diverse in their beliefs and yet can only agree when it comes to science?

This compilation of the most important issues regarding the relationship between the two most important forces in our lives, science and religion, is a great read for everyone, and especially a skeptic, since unlike other run-of-the-mill books in this genre, which need a leap of faith to understand their arguments, these essays take a strict scientific approach. Kurtz explains the issues involved—literally, what is at stake? The essays are analytical, lucid, clear, and most importantly devoid of being didactic or overbearing. They provide, in the least, a good introduction to the latest status quo between religion and science. □

## Debate with a creationist

NTS Board member John Blanton will debate creationist Jason Gastrich at the October meeting.

Gastrich has contacted the NTS and offered to debate us on the topic of creationism versus evolution. He was asked to pick one of the sides to argue for, and he chose creationism. Blanton will debate Gastrich by phone, since Gastrich lives in California. We will place the call on speaker phone so all can enjoy the discussion. Gastrich and the NTS will each make audio recordings, and Gastrich will make the recordings available on his Web site.

Gastrich has previously debated atheist's and others on creation, evolution, sin, prophecy and many other topics. He has attended various Bible schools and has obtained a Master of Arts in Bible and Theology.

Besides working on a Ph.D. in biblical studies Jason Gastrich is currently running for Governor of California.

## 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.]

### Intelligent design: the Devil went down to Texas.

A plague of Biblical proportions threatens civilization. The frog population may not explode, nor the Mississippi turn to blood, but school boards across the land are being stalked. The name of the beast is Intelligent Design (ID), and it seeks to rip evolution from children's textbooks. ID recently turned up in Texas, where the State School Board has begun to review biology textbooks. It is such a huge market that what happens there will determine textbooks in dozens of other states. The Seattle-based Discovery Institute (DI) is behind the effort to rid the books of "factual errors" (evolution). The Board of Education holds its next public hearing in September; if Texas scientists make themselves heard, instead of wailing and gnashing of teeth, there will be rejoicing in the states.

### Full disclosure: scientists or "academic entrepreneurs"?

In letters sent yesterday to editors of both *Science* and *Nature*, a group of 30 prominent scientists urged the journals to require authors to disclose any financial ties to companies or products that stand to benefit financially from their articles. It was on the letterhead of the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a nutrition advocacy organization, and cited specific examples of recent articles or editorials that omitted disclosure. The APS Guidelines for Professional Conduct are Clear: "Any professional relationship or action that may result in a conflict of interest must be disclosed."

[www.aps.org/statements/02.2.html](http://www.aps.org/statements/02.2.html)

### Dietary supplements: 9 years and 100 deaths later.

The 1994 Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act left the industry almost unregulated, exempting manufacturers from proving safety or effectiveness. If you have never used the WN search engine, start now. Go to [www.aps.org](#), type in "Dietary Supplement." The current scandal involving the herbal supplement ephedra erupted with the death of Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler (WN 14 March 2003). It may bring about a change; Secretary of Health and Human Services, Tommy Thompson, asked the Congress on Wednesday to revise the law to give the FDA greater authority.

### Climate change: now here's the plan, we study the problem.

Yesterday, the Administration released its Climate Change Science Program, a draft of which was circulated in December (WN 6 Dec 2002). The White House is sticking to its standard solution: wring your hands about the problem and call for more research. In all, the various agencies spent a year and a half putting the plan together. The aim is to address the most crucial questions in the next four years. It's hard to object to a call for more research, but we seem to be using science to stall action.

### Infinite energy: revolutionary aircraft is powered by gravity.

An ad in the *Wall Street Journal* last week sought investors for a fuel-less aircraft. The idea is refreshing; unlike free-energy scams that tap the zero-point energy, or shield gravity, Hunt Aircraft Corp. proposes to do it the old-fashioned way, i.e., violate Conservation of Energy. Helium bags lift the winged craft vertically, whereupon the helium is compressed to make the craft heavier than air. It then glides downward. At low altitude, the cycle is repeated. Aha!, you say, compressing the gas takes work. These guys aren't that dumb. As it glides, a wind-turbine will generate the power. The inventor has applied for a patent, but our research uncovered the shocking similarity to Tom Swift's "Black Hawk" airship described in *Tom Swift and His Electric Rifle* (Grosset & Dunlap, New York, 1911).

### Climate study: embraced by White House, but trashed by editor.

The widely held view that the 20th Century was the warmest of the millennium is disputed in a study by two astronomers, Soon and Baliunas of Harvard-Smithsonian, published in the January issue of the journal *Climate Research*. Both authors are associated with the conservative George C. Marshall Institute, known for its Star-Wars believers and warming deniers. The Bush administration took the unusual step of inserting a reference to the Soon-Baliunas paper in the EPA's recent report on the environment, replacing a statement that temperatures have risen significantly in recent decades. The editor-in-chief of *Climate Research*, Hans von Storch of the University of Hamburg, believed the review process of the Soon and Baliunas paper was flawed and wanted to publish an editorial to that effect; von Storch was prevented from doing so by the publisher and has resigned in protest. Meanwhile, other papers strongly dispute the Soon-Baliunas study.

### Political science: is the administration distorting science?

The short answer is, "every administration does." But a report by the minority staff of the House Government Reform Committee, released yesterday, says it's gotten worse. To the surprise of no one, White House spokesman Scott McClellan

dismissed the report as political, which of course it is. However, the NY Times quotes McClellan in an incredibly revealing description of administration policy: “The administration looks at the facts, and reviews the best available science based on what’s right for the American people.” That final clause, “what’s right for the American people,” is chilling.

### Political climate: what’s right for the American people?

One of the purported abuses cited in the minority staff report involved the insertion into an EPA report of a reference to a paper by Soon and Baliunas that denies global warming (WN 1 Aug 03). To appreciate its significance, we need to go back to March of 1998. We all got a petition card in the mail urging the government to reject the Kyoto accord (WN 13 Mar 98). The cover letter was signed by “Frederick Seitz, Past President, National Academy of Sciences.” Enclosed was what seemed to be a reprint of a journal article, in the style and font of *Proceedings of the NAS*. But it had not been published in PNAS, or anywhere else. The reprint was a fake. Two of the four authors of this non- article were Soon and Baliunas. The other authors, both named Robinson, were from the tiny Oregon Institute of Science and Medicine in Cave Junction, OR. The article claimed that the environmental effects of increased CO2 are all beneficial. There was also a copy of *Wall Street Journal* op-ed by the Robinsons (father and son) that described increased levels of CO2 in the atmosphere as “a wonderful and unexpected gift of the industrial revolution.” There was no indication of who had paid for the mailing. It was a dark episode in the annals of scientific discourse.

### The isomer bomb: how a dentist’s x-ray machine went to war.

Well, maybe not quite. A news story in this week’s issue of *New Scientist* magazine reports that the Department of Defense is currently pursuing an isomer bomb, which would supposedly release its energy in the form of gamma rays from the decay of a nuclear isomer of Hf-178. Indeed, such nuclear isomers are on the Militarily Critical Technologies List. The claim is that decay can be accelerated by irradiation with low-energy x-rays. We’re told that the scientist who did the research used an x-ray machine borrowed from a dentist friend. A JASON panel determined that the idea is theoretically implausible and the evidence shaky at best. A group that attempted to reproduce the effect in a carefully controlled study at the Advanced Photon Source found nothing.



(Andrew Essin contributed to this issue of What’s New.)

Bob Park can be reached via email at [opa@aps.org](mailto:opa@aps.org)

## We get letters

By John Blanton

Let’s take a quick look in the NTS mail bag and see if there is anything worth telling. Nope.

Here it is anyhow:



First, an e-mail from wise guy:

The only good skeptic is a truthseeker, not a critic.

Thank you, wise guy. We are going to send you our Golden Pen award for originality and succinctness. Please send us your e-mail address, since you forgot to provide one with your note. We are preparing your plaque right now, and we need to know: Do you want your name capitalized or not?



From Ron Mangum.

I would love to accept your offer on the ten thousand dollars and actually take your money. I can provide you and your “skeptics” with undeniable proof of my own abilities as I have been a guest on 2000 plus radio shows and have irrefutable proof of what I have done and can do. You can go ahead and make the check out to Ron Mangum and I will give proof. Contact me at [toll-free number].

Ron Mangum turns out to be Psychic Ron, and we did contact his toll-free number. He has suggested his paranormal abilities are amply demonstrated by various newspaper clippings and radio show transcripts.

We don’t like to be hard-nosed about our \$10,000 paranormal challenge, so we are considering just writing Ron the check right now. If he uses it to purchase a spelling checker it will be worth every penny.



Sage Harkin also wrote concerning our \$10,000 challenge. We had a nice dialog about his friend’s ability to detect whether batteries are charged (or discharged). When it did not appear we were coming to any kind of agreement on a demonstration or even on how this ability is supposed to work, we told him we would allow that his friend probably could perform as claimed. In the absence of new information or a demonstration in person we would not consider following up. He sent us a short note:

# Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.

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Paranormal has often been described as the unexplained. I am sure there is nothing unexplainable — it's just that common society has not learned the uncommon laws of phenomena. But you still express a wish to "see" these uncommon abilities demonstrated. Did you folks never wish to have them explained?? If not, it's ironic because you do spend a great deal of time explaining things away. I got to know a great deal by practicing both: Try to prove or explain, and then try to disprove with explanation. This weeds out personal bias, and from developing multiple points of view, yields a more realistic understanding.

I have many abilities, but I still require a contract up front.

Until next time, Sage

As an aside, it seemed to me over the course of our correspondence that clarity is not one of Sage's abilities.



The foregoing is just a sample of what we receive regularly. Our reaction is summed up nicely, I think, by a signature file from another skeptic. Dave Palmer always closes his notes to the Skeptics List with the following:

As much as the author would like to spend precious minutes of the rapidly-dwindling time remaining in his life responding to your kind and thoughtful letter about how he is going to spend eternity in a lake of fire being eaten by rats, he regrets that he is unable to do so, due to the volume of such mail received.

Y'all keep them cards and letters (and e-mail) coming.

## Skeptical Inquirer magazine

### The Magazine for Science and Reason

For a fast-growing number of discriminating persons, the *Skeptical Inquirer* is a welcome breath of fresh air, separating fact from myth in the flood of occultism and pseudoscience on the scene today.



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