



*The North Texas*

# Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

## Not so sacred visions

By John Blanton

*[The following originally ran in The Dallas Morning News on 27 March 2005.]*

In 1429 a French teenager convinced church scholars and the future Charles VII that God had commanded her to drive the English from France. That Jeanne d'Arc actually spoke to God - or even that God exists - may be debatable, but the consequences are not.

A French army under her leadership turned the tide against the English in the Hundred Years War, and history was changed forever. While the French may have had reason to embrace the Maid of Orleans' claim of divine guidance, the English were less than amused. They laid hands on her and burned her at the stake after a 14-month trial for heresy and witchcraft.

Fast-forward to the 21st century, in which we have abandoned the burning of witches, but our credulity is still being stretched by claims of heavenly conversations and miraculous visions. How then are we to take stories such as that of six young schoolchildren who reported an apparition of the Virgin Mary in 1981 near Medjugorje in what was then Yugoslavia? And what of the supposed miracles that have become associated with this and similar places such as Lourdes, Fatima and the shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe near Mexico City?

For the faithful, apparently, little coaxing is necessary. Thousands visit these sites every year for spiritual inspiration and to seek miraculous cures. The pope has visited the Guadalupe shrine four times, and the Feast of Our Lady of Guadalupe is celebrated every 12th of December.

But did these miraculous sightings and dialogues with God actually occur, or are they the result of self-delusion or even deliberate deception? In one scheme of things it may not matter. The historical result is the same as if they did happen. These days the British pound isn't recognized on the Champs-Elysees, and the poor in spirit and body still flock to the shrines. No other proof is needed.

### EVENTS CALENDAR

#### April Program

##### Membership Meeting

Saturday, April 9, 2 p.m.  
Center for Community  
Cooperation,  
2900 Live Oak Street, Dallas

Check the NTS Hotline or our  
Web site for information about  
the April program.

##### Board Meeting and Social Dinner

Saturday, April 23. 7 p.m.

Zocalo Mexican Grill 6615  
Snider Plaza University Park,  
TX 75205

Let us know if you are coming.  
Send e-mail to  
[mselfby@ntskeptics.org](mailto:mselfby@ntskeptics.org), or  
phone 214-335-9248. We  
sometimes cancel these events  
or even change the location at  
the last minute.

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 members receive the NTS newsletter and may attend  
 NTS functions at which admission is charged at no or  
 reduced cost. In addition, members will receive mailings  
 on topics of current interest or social events.

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Except, there are some for whom the truth is not a sometime thing. For these people “extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.” This is the mantra of “rational skeptics,” some of whom are even organized. We skeptics want you to carry rationality to its logical conclusion and give weight to the least convoluted explanation. It’s an idea elaborated by William of Occam way back even before my time, and it’s called “Occam’s razor.”

In the case of miraculous sightings we may ask you which is simpler to believe: That a woman who has been dead for nearly 2,000 years has now become visible to a selected few individuals and only to them, or that these are just made-up stories, born of either design or an overwhelming need to believe. And not really true. Not true in the same sense as “I did not have sexual relations with that woman...”

So, what if these stories are not true? Does it make a difference in the course of history? And why do skeptics even give them a second warming? Besides, doesn’t trampling on these sacred toes amount to religion-bashing?

To answer the last, let me tell you what rational skepticism is not. It is not anti-religion. We skeptics don’t want to tell people how to manage their souls. However, we do insist that the physical realm needs to be approached through critical study and reason. We maintain that wishful thinking does not translate into reality. The late Daniel Patrick Moynihan is noted for saying, “Everybody is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts.”

Whether you, as a devout person, would be offended by this stance depends on your approach to religion and how seriously you consider the consequences of mistaken belief. If you need to hang your faith on fake miracles, you may be overlooking the moral benefits of your religion’s teachings. Maybe your faith can benefit from skepticism on your own part.

Outside of that, skeptics take up these issues partly because they object to the outrageous abuses perpetrated on behalf of the shrines. Confusing belief in miracles for religious faith, the gullible are induced to place reliance on magic above common sense. Tragically, real people with real medical problems every year abandon helpful medications and prosthetics at these sites under the delusion they have been healed.

Maybe a moral compass will be found among the abandoned items as well.



*John Blanton is a member of The North Texas Skeptics (www.ntskeptics.org), an organization devoted to the rational and scientific investigation of paranormal claims. His e-mail address is skeptic@ntskeptics.org.*

# The Third Eye

## News and Commentary from the Weird World of the Media

By Pat Reeder (with Daniel Barnett & Laura Ainsworth)

Pardon me for diving right into the news, but the first item in this abbreviated edition of *The Third Eye* reminds me of watching Raymond Bird, our Jardine's parrot, perform his best T-Rex impersonation on a helpless peanut (or finger). Back in January, scientists in China announced the discovery of the skeleton of a prehistoric mammal with the preserved remains of a tiny dinosaur in its belly. This supports the proposed dinosaur-bird connection by reinforcing my theory that dinosaurs tasted a lot like chicken.

The mammal has been identified as *Repenomamus robustus*, which lived around 130 million years ago, weighed about 15 pounds, and measured just under two feet long. Under its ribs in the location of its stomach, scientists identified the chewed-up remains of a psittacosaur, also known as the "parrot dinosaur" because it had a small head with a curved, horny beak. As the caretaker of 13 parrots, I'm guessing that *Repenomamus* only ate the parrot dinosaur to shut him up. Scientists are excited by the find because it contradicts conventional evolutionary theory that mammals during this period were tiny creatures that spent all their time cowering in the shadows, trying to avoid becoming a velociraptor's version of KFC. But of course, we already knew prehistoric mammals ate dinosaurs because Fred Flintstone started every show by ordering drive-in brontosaurus ribs.

Another ancient find on the other side of the world turned out to be anything but ancient. *Las Ultimas Noticias* reports that some "ancient Incan ruins" near Chucuito, Peru, are actually only 12 years old, and only Michael Jackson thinks that something is "ruined" by the time it turns 12. The site was said to be a place where Inca women would go to cure infertility, and the "ruins" attracted millions of visitors each year. But it turns out they were actually built by the villagers in 1993 to get the Peruvian government to invest money to attract tourists. It was the only ancient ruin built entirely out of Formica, which the locals claimed the Incas invented. The site will probably now be converted into an "Ancient Incan Casino."

Returning to current events, Andrew Fischer of Omaha, Nebraska, proved that at least someone on eBay is actually using his head by auctioning off his forehead as advertising space. Fischer received \$37,375 to advertise SnoreStop, a homeopathic

snoring remedy (and I really don't want to know what they mix with water to come up with that). Fischer will display the SnoreStop logo on his forehead for one month. This news prompted Danny Barnett to tell me he thinks he's in the wrong line of work. He said if SnoreStop were to offer him \$37,375 to advertise their concoction on his forehead, he'd happily reply, "Nothing to it! Just like your remedy!"

And now for another installment of "Your Tax Dollars At Work." Two NASA scientists recently told officials that they have found strong evidence that life may exist now on Mars, hidden away in caves and sustained by pockets of water. (Great, we're going all the way to Mars to look for pond scum when we already have so much of it here.) These scientists said they have no direct proof, but they claim that methane gas signatures in the Martian atmosphere that are signs of possible biological activity are remarkably similar to methane signatures found on Earth. So Mars is just like Earth: the passing of gas is now considered to be a sign of civilization.

Well, time to go. I have to circulate a petition to extend the Kyoto Treaty to Mars.



### Future meeting dates

Unless otherwise indicated, all our meetings will be held at—

Center for Nonprofit Management  
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas  
(corner of Live Oak Street and Liberty Street)

- April 9, 2005
- May 14, 2005
- June 11, 2005
- July 9, 2005
- August 13, 2005
- September 10, 2005
- October 8, 2005
- November 12, 2005
- December 10, 2005

## Web news

by John Blanton

*The World Wide Web is a wonderful source of information and news. Some of it is true, and some of it is not.*

### Clarkston High fuels debate over origin of life

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-03-30.htm#debate>

<http://www.lmtribune.com/03302005/northwes/243940.php>

By Kathy Hedberg

Don Dotson is a teacher with a *very* open mind.

Clarkston science teacher Don Dotson says he sees a number of flaws in the Darwinian theory of evolution, which is commonly taught in public schools.

"I find it very difficult to espouse one theory that appears to have a number of flaws," Dotson said Tuesday.

Dotson, who has taught at the school for 20 years says he likes to explain the pro's and con's of both "Intelligent Design" and evolution.

Bruce Alberts with the National Academy of Sciences wants academy member "to confront the increasing challenges to the teaching of evolution in public schools."

Hedberg may be contacted at [khedberg@lmtribune.com](mailto:khedberg@lmtribune.com)

### Faith healer's popularity reflects belief in alternatives

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-03-30.htm#faith>

<http://www.cleveland.com/news/plaindealer/index.ssf?/base/news/1112092347119352.xml>

by Harlan Spector

Plain Dealer Reporter

For Dr. Issam Nemeah one form of alternative medicine is praying.

While academics debate the influence of prayer on health, Nemeah's healing ceremonies throughout Greater Cleveland revive questions about whether miracle cures are possible or provable.

Experts dispute claims that Nemeah and his team have cured people of "multiple sclerosis and other ailments." They say none of his cases have been clinically proven.

To believers, science is not the way to assess God's work.

"People in the hospital, 80 percent of them pray to get better," said Joan Fox, a researcher at the Center for Integrative Medicine at the Cleveland Clinic. "So why when we have a Dr. Nemeah who prays over us, are we amazed?"

Fox has a \$300,000 grant from the National Institutes of Health to investigate whether people's frame of mind can affect their health. She is studying "energy healing" in prostate cancer patients.

Christian faith healing in America began with 19th-century evangelists, and experienced a rebirth with Oral Roberts' radio broadcasts in the 1950s, according to a January report in CQ Researcher, a publication of Congressional Quarterly.

"Since then," wrote author Sarah Glazer, "healers and TV evangelists like Pat Robertson have found a durable following for their reputed ability to call on God to raise crippled congregates from their wheelchairs or let blind men see."

Regular churchgoers live longer, according to Glazer. She also conceded that healthy people can make it to church regularly (while the sick and poor don't get out so much).

To reach this Plain Dealer reporter:  
[hspector@plained.com](mailto:hspector@plained.com), 216-999-4543

### The evolutionary revolutionary

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2005-03-30.htm>

[http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/03/27/the\\_evolutionary\\_revolutionary?mode=PF](http://www.boston.com/news/globe/ideas/articles/2005/03/27/the_evolutionary_revolutionary?mode=PF)

By Drake Bennett

**In the 1970s, Robert Trivers wrote a series of papers that transformed evolutionary biology. Then he all**

**but disappeared. Now he's back—and ready to rumble.**

Trivers likes to get out into the field and do original work. At an early age he taught himself calculus and other things, growing bored with the daily grind in the process.

Trivers's work grew out of an insight made by the Oxford biologist William D. Hamilton, who died in 2000. In a 1964 paper, Hamilton proposed an elegant solution to a problem that had rankled evolutionary theorists for some time. In a battle of the fittest, why did organisms occasionally do things that benefited others at a cost to themselves? The answer, Hamilton wrote, emerged when one took evolution down to the level of the gene. Individuals were merely vessels for genes, which survived from generation to generation, and it made no difference to the gene which organism it survived in.

According to this logic, the degree to which an organism was likely to sacrifice for another should vary in direct proportion to the degree of relatedness: Humans, for example, would be more likely to share food with a son than a second cousin, and more likely to share with a second cousin than someone wholly unrelated.

Hamilton called the concept "inclusive fitness."

In 1976, the Oxford zoologist Richard Dawkins would popularize Hamilton's ideas in his book "The Selfish Gene." But more than anyone else, it was Trivers, then a graduate student, who grasped the profound implications of Hamilton's work. In a way, Trivers's legendary papers of the early 1970s were simply a series of startling applications of its logic. □

## 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.]*

### **Pigasus: it's April first, the pig that flies is on the wing.**

Yes, it's the day the coveted Pigasus Awards will be announced. The winners are informed by ESP, but their names came to me last night as I slept, as in a dream. The lucky winners will receive handsome trophies of the Flying Pig via psychokinesis. If they don't get delivery they should look inwardly. All the winners and details will be posted today on Randi's web site <http://www.randi.org/jr/040105capitalizing.html>.

### **Higher authority: evangelicals rely on the Bible for guidance.**

It's not just creationism. The success of the religious right in the last election seems to have led them to test the limits. In Colorado, the State Supreme Court took a man off death row after it was disclosed that in imposing the death penalty, the jury had consulted the bible (Leviticus 21:24, "an eye for an eye..."). In pharmacies around the country, devout pharmacists are refusing to fill prescriptions for birth control and morning-after pills because of their religious beliefs. But surely the strangest case is that of John Brown, an evangelical Christian from Dallas, who founded Zion Oil. It has always seemed ironic that the "chosen

land" should be the only place in the Middle East that doesn't sit on a sea of oil. Brown is convinced that passages in the Old-Testament pinpoint the exact spot to drill: a field near Afula. In Deuteronomy 33:24 Moses said, "Most blessed of sons be Asher... may he dip his foot in oil." Asher's plot of land looks like a foot to Brown, and he has a license to drill under the toe. This sort of Bible Code led the faithful to sink millions in Brown's plan. Lo, there came oilmen from the West.

### **Joe Newman: legendary inventor of "the energy machine" returns**

On Monday, he held a press conference here in the National Press Building. Joe made one contribution to society in his lifetime, by suing the Patent Office for denying him a patent. The 1986 decision in *Newman v. Quigg* (the Patent Commissioner) is now cited as the authority for denying patent applications for perpetual motion machines out of hand.

### **Freedom element: do you know how easy it is to sell baloney?**

In his 2003 State-of-the-Union address, President Bush called for building a Freedom Car, "powered by hydrogen and pollution free" (WN 31 Jan 03). Baloney, but people didn't ask where the hydrogen will come from. They asked if it's safe. Hey, it's fuel —fuel burns. However, Dr. Addison Bain insists that in the 1937 Hindenburg disaster, it was the paint that burned, and compared it to rocket fuel. More baloney, but guess who bought it (APS News July 2000)? However, A.J. Dessler, D.E. Overs and W.H. Appleby found the burn rate of an actual piece of Hindenburg fabric to be thousands of times too slow. The fire consumed the Hindenburg in 34 seconds. If the 800 foot-long craft was painted with solid rocket fuel, it would have taken 12 hours to burn end to end. Dessler is a PhD physicist

(Duke), 26 years as Professor of Space Physics and Astronomy at Rice (15 years as Dept Chair), directed the NASA Marshall Space Sciences Lab (4 years), and is Sr. Scientist at Univ of Arizona, Lunar and Planetary Lab. What about Dr. Bain?

### **Diploma mills: maybe they can get together for class reunions.**

In his memoir, *The Freedom Element: Living with Hydrogen*, Doctor Bain says he is a former manager of hydrogen programs at Kennedy Space Center, but what is he a “doctor” of? He writes of being “teary-eyed” at finally becoming a PhD, but nowhere mentions his alma mater. Even the bio on the jacket of his book gave no clue. A Google search turned up nothing after Flathead High School in Montana. Someone suggested we try California Coast University, a “distance-learning” university in Santa Ana. That’s where Lynn Ianni, the therapist for “The Swan” on Fox Television, became Doctor Ianni in 1998. Although CCU has no campus, that’s not a problem; it has no courses. There, in the same graduating class with Dr. Ianni, getting a Management PhD, was Dr. Addison Bain. Now look at me, would you? Here I am getting all teary-eyed too.

### **Science by intimidation: does being right count for nothing?**

The 2003 IMAX film “Volcanoes of the Deep Sea,” sponsored by NSF and Rutgers, would seem to be just the sort of documentary that science centers thrive on. Not exactly. It was turned down by a dozen Science Centers, mostly in the South, because of a few brief references to evolution. There goes the profit margin. The result is that IMAX films just aren’t made if the science might offend the religious right. It’s worse in schools. Even if there is no prohibition on teaching evolution, teachers leave it out rather than listen to all the complaints. In the 1925 Scopes trial, Clarence Darrow said, “John Scopes isn’t on trial, civilization is on trial.” It still is. And it’s losing.

### **Fiction: an imaginative creation that does not represent truth**

The Index of Forbidden Books was abolished by Vatican II, but Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, who used to be the top enforcer in the Vatican, still harbors nostalgia for the old days. “Don’t buy and don’t read” *The Da Vinci Code*, he instructed Catholics. That should help sales, as though it needed help. Some scientists would put Michael Crichton’s novel, *State of Fear*, on an Index. It’s standard Crichton, i.e. the bad guys are scientists. In *Jurassic Park*, for example, scientists discovered the secret of life – and used it to make a theme park. Scientists in *State of Fear* predict global-warming catastrophes; when it doesn’t happen, they create disasters. Well, at least scientists are powerful bad guys. But Crichton laced the book with genuine citations and graphs from the literature, creating a sense of authenticity, but some say, crossing a line. It is pretentious, but it’s fiction.

### **Hydrogen: the Hindenburg disaster retold – and retold again.**

Everyone has seen the horrifying film of the 1937 Hindenburg disaster. A 1/28 scale model of the giant airship, made for a Hollywood movie, hangs in the National Air and Space Museum. A plaque said “It’s hydrogen exploded.” That’s incendiary language to the National Hydrogen Society, which promotes hydrogen as a fuel. Dr. Addison Bain, a founding member, undertook his own investigation of the accident, declaring, “Hydrogen does not explode.” He claimed it was the fabric covering the airship that burned. The Department of Energy bought it, the Air and Space Museum revised the plaque, the media did specials on it. Alex Dessler, a physicist and former director of the Marshall Space Flight Center did not buy it. He led a group that found Bain wrong on every point. So who is Dr. Addison Bain? Stay tuned. □

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

## **The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal**

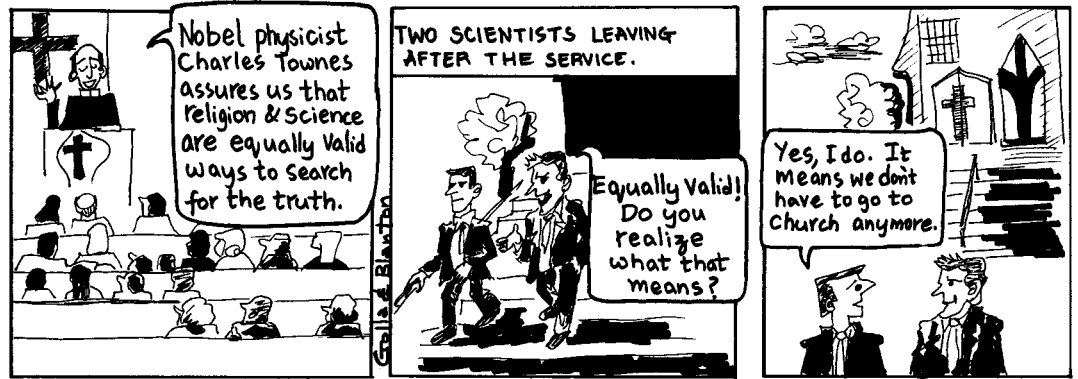
encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community, the media, and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues.

### ***The Skeptical Inquirer***

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## Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2005. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted



## IMAX and creationism

By John Blanton

In March the hot news locally was that science might get left holding the bag at the IMAX theater at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and history.

The Dallas Morning News ran a commentary in their *Points* (editorial) section by NTS member and technical advisor Raymond Eve. Ray is a professor of sociology at the University of Texas at Arlington, and one of our resident authorities on creationism. He has published on modern day cults and also on the creationist movement. He is co-author of *The Creationist Movement in Modern America*.

"Imagine my amazement when I ran across a recent newspaper article that told me I could not see the science film 'Volcanoes,' scheduled for the IMAX theatre at the Fort Worth Museum of Science and History. The Museum dropped the film because of disturbing content. It seems that the film contains a few very peripheral comments suggesting that biological evolution might be an actual fact.

"We are not talking about scenes of apes evolving into humans before our eyes, but rather a few remarks about

how deep ocean vents hot water vents may be the origins of the first living cells. A few people invited to preview the film had taken offense at the use of the e-word (evolution) and the slightest hint that humans were not created directly by the hand of God, independent of the rest of all living things."

The Fort Worth museum was not the only IMAX to drop *Volcanoes*. Apparently it was time for the tail to wag the dog for a change.

Ray had seen this kind of creationist thinking before. He previously researched a Satanist-inspired panic in a small Texas town and learned that many, otherwise straight, citizens feel that evolution is directly linked to Satanism, as well as prostitution, pornography, homosexuality, and drug abuse. I would like to throw in athlete's foot, as well.

A sizable portion of Christian fundamentalists believe that the loss of inerrancy of the Bible in all matters will undermine the factual basis for Judaism and Christianity, and with it the moral underpinnings of society. They are loathe to surrender the stories in the Book of Genesis and the "facts" that come packaged with those stories. The origin of the Earth has to be recent, and the Flood of Noah has to be real. Modern theories of geology and cosmology have to give way. IMAX was a push-over by comparison.

As it turned out, something that can be shoved one way can be ratcheted back the other. Immediate objections

from many supporters of science—and also from a few who just don't like creationists—drew a quick response. The Charlotte, North Carolina, Discovery Palace, among others, quickly announced the film was back on the schedule. The Fort Worth theater and others announced they would also reverse their decision to drop "Volcanoes." According to the Revolutionary Worker (#1274, April 10, 2005, posted at <http://rwor.org/a/1274/aliens-deep-imax-attack.htm>):

"In the case of Fort Worth, news got out about the rejection of the film, and it caused such an uproar that a few days later—in a welcome development—the museum reversed their decision, issuing a public letter stating: "We want to ensure that the public knows the Museum supports the position that evolution is a major unifying concept of science. We use scientific evidence in our wide-ranging presentations and interpretations of how life has changed over time." But the fact that the film was pulled—even temporarily—because a few Christian fundamentalists in a focus group objected is a warning of the anti-scientific atmosphere that is being imposed on the country."

The lesson here seems to be that science in the public forum is a market and it swings to market pressures. Like any other industry, the theaters hear your voice. They also hear your silence. □

North Texas Skeptics  
P.O. Box 111794  
Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794

**FIRST CLASS**

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