



The North Texas

Skeptic

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Challenge activity

by John Blanton

From time to time we report on the North Texas Skeptics Paranormal Challenge. With the intent of basking in the limelight of James Randi's million-dollar paranormal challenge, a few of us scraped together enough nickels to fund our own \$12,000 challenge. We have had a few takers.

Recall four years ago Russell Shipp came to us with his plan to move matter with his mind. We still have our \$12,000.¹

Later Greg Nichols and Greg Willis asked us to examine their magical substance that made wine taste better. Even when applied to the *outside* of the glass. I sadly reported how we failed to meet Messrs. Greg's testing standards and how we were roundly scalded for our trouble.²

Rechey Davidson was able to locate objects inside my house in Dallas while he, Davidson, was a few counties over. So he claimed. We conducted a preliminary test in which Mr. Davidson went twelve for twelve, which is something in itself. Twelve straight misses was an improbable occurrence for this test.

More recently we received this:

Carl Ritchie wrote:

Hi, I'm not one that goes looking for underground streams and rivers etc. but I am the best you ever saw when it comes to finding water lines, power lines and telephone lines etc..

I am 100% in finding what I just mentioned, I don't know if you call it dowsing or what but I know what I can do and am very willing to prove it.

EVENTS CALENDAR

March Program

Saturday 17 March 2007,
at 2 p.m.

Center for Nonprofit
Management, 2900 Live Oak
Street in Dallas

Quantum Mechanics for Dummies

NTS president John Brandt will
explain what makes quantum
mechanics so weird.

Non-skeptics are always telling
us that "Quantum Mechanics"
permits (fill in your favorite
impossible thing here: PK,
precognition, transmutation of
elements, etc.) Why? What is it
about quantum mechanics that
makes so many folks believe it
makes the impossible possible

NTS Social Dinner

Saturday 24 March 2007,
at 7 p.m.

Good Eats 6950 Greenville
Avenue, Dallas

Let us know if you are coming.
We need to reserve a table.

Check the NTS Hotline for more
information at 214-335-9248.

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 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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Do you or don't you believe what I just said???

David Ritchie

After I got over the idea of a person named Carl signing his name
 "David" we got down to business. It's come to this. Carl Ritchie says
 he has followed my advice and tested himself back in Missouri. He says
 he passed his own test, and he is ready to come to Dallas and show us his
 stuff.

From: Carl Ritchie

Subject: Re: DOWSING

To: "John Blanton" <skeptic75287@yahoo.com>

Hi John, I guess I'm ready to come and take your prize money,
 I hate to, but you know how it is, I need a little more money to
 finish up my project I'm working on, ha ha ha .

The number one thing I would love to take the test on would be
 buried power lines [alive or dead] it doesn't matter but if you
 want you can bury one or two and run current through them and
 I will tell you which one has current at any time or not, or we
 can just use dead power cables like you would use for power to
 your house, I would want them to be fairly long, say 40 or 50 ft,
 if you want to use buried water lines that's o.k. too., we can
 work out the details when you get ready to lose that prize
 money.

Best Regards

Carl David Ritchie

P.S. For the protocol test you can bury some before I even get
 in town, bury them, then plow, disc and rack the ground so no
 one can even tell if anyone has even been in the field.

The weather is getting better for an out-of-doors test, so the
 Challenge underwriters are trying to figure out (as we always do) who
 does what. Then we will get all set up and invite Mr. Ritchie down for a
 show and tell. You will read about it here.

You can read more about the North Texas Paranormal Challenge and
 past Challenge activity on our Web site:

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/challenge/challenge.htm>

References

- 1 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2003/2003may/may2003.htm#mind>
- 2 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2004/2004march/march2004.htm#challenge>

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.

Other titles on the evolution debate

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-02-26.htm#titles>

<http://www.kansas.com/mld/eagle/entertainment/books/16777058.htm>

Jeremy Manier of the *Chicago Tribune* has written a short bibliography for those interested:

The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief by Francis Collins; Free Press.

The author, a giant in genetics research and leader of the Human Genome Project, describes how he came to see his Christian faith as intertwined with his scientific passions.

Life's Solution: Inevitable Humans in a Lonely Universe by Simon Conway Morris; Cambridge University Press.

Rejecting intelligent design and the idea of evolution as an aimless process, the Cambridge paleontologist argues that evolution has trends, suggesting that "the Universe is a set-up job."

He also lists the following. Read up, skeptics.

The Sacred Depths of Nature by Ursula Goodenough; Oxford University Press.

Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion by Edward Larson; Harvard University Press.

The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins; Houghton Mifflin.

Letter to a Christian Nation by Sam Harris; Knopf.

Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon by Daniel C. Dennett; Viking Adult.

God's Universe by Owen Gingerich; Belknap.

Living With Darwin: Evolution, Design and the Future of Faith by Philip Kitcher; Oxford University Press.

Finding Darwin's God: A Scientist's Search for Common Ground Between God and Evolution by Kenneth Miller; HarperPerennial.

Museum wants police power

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-02-26.htm#museum>

<http://news.cincypost.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20070223/NEWS01/702230373>

We have been following this story for a while. It appears that last things are coming to a head. Creationist Ken Ham's Answers in Genesis (AiG) has been building the granddaddy of all creation evidence museums outside Cincinnati, in Kentucky, actually. Opening is scheduled for this May, and AiG is expecting a barn burner of a turnout.

By Shelly Whitehead Cincinnati *Post* staff reporter –

Administrators of Answers in Genesis's Creation Museum in Petersburg, Ky. have asked Gov. Ernie Fletcher to grant special police powers to their onsite security force.

Museum officials say they need the gubernatorial action so their 10- to 20-person security team can gain access to better training and equipment to ensure they can handle the crowds and traffic anticipated when the facility opens May 28.

I'm thinking about waiting this one out. I suspect that by May 29 the crowds will have thinned considerably. I've been to the creation museums at Glen Rose and at the Institute for Creation Research (near San Diego), and there was no line.

I could be wrong. A wise man once said that nobody ever went broke underestimating the intelligence of the American public.

Airline redraws logo as superstitious customers curse 13-ball design

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-02-26.htm#13>

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/airlines/story/0,,2018241,00.html>

This is the 21st century, right? Guess again.

Raf Casert for *The Guardian* –

Thirteen dots looked just right to the designer Ronane Hoet. Together they had the perfect balance to form a

stylised “b” for the new Belgian carrier Brussels Airlines and the number also matched the destinations it flew to in Africa, a key market. “It was harmony,” she said, wistfully.

This week, however, Brussels Airlines workers were adding a 14th ball to the logo on the tail and sides of an Airbus 319 in response to complaints from superstitious customers in the US and Italy.

I have previously commented on an airliner that had no row 13. Also concerning a new symphony hall in Dallas with no isle 13.

We can be assured that none of these people make decisions involving people’s lives or the destiny of nations. Right?

Sober explains what is wrong with “Intelligent Design”

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-02-26.htm#sober>

The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) keeps us informed about the Intelligent Design (creationism) scene. This is from their weekly newsletter:

Writing in the *Quarterly Review of Biology* (March 2007, vol. 82, no. 1, pp. 3-8), Elliott Sober answers the question, “What is wrong with intelligent design?” in a particularly clear and informative way. Sober focuses on what he calls “mini-ID”: the claim “that the complex adaptations that organisms display (e.g., the vertebrate eye) were crafted by an intelligent designer.” After discussing problems with two standard criticisms — that it is unfalsifiable and that it is refuted by the many imperfect adaptations found in nature — Sober argues that mini-ID cannot be tested against evolutionary explanations of adaptations, writing, “When scientific theories compete with each other, the usual pattern is that independently attested auxiliary propositions allow the theories to make predictions that disagree with each other. No such auxiliary propositions allow mini-ID to do this.” Sober concludes, “It is easy enough to construct a version of ID that accommodates a set of observations already known, but it also is easy to construct a version of ID that conflicts with what we have already observed. Neither undertaking results in substantive science, nor is there any point in constructing a version of ID that is so minimalistic that it fails to say much of anything about what we observe. In all its forms, ID fails to constitute a serious alternative to evolutionary theory.” A Supporter of NCSE, Sober is Hans Reichenbach Professor and Henry Vilas Research Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

For Sober’s article (PDF), visit:

<http://philosophy.wisc.edu/sober/what's%20wrong%20with%20id%20qrb%202007.pdf>

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Americans lag only Turkey in discrediting evolution

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-02-26.htm#2>

http://www.fogcityjournal.com/news_in_brief/bcn_evolution_070217.shtml

When you’re number two, you try harder. Apparently Americans try harder.

By Jeremy Lipps, Bay City News Service –

SAN FRANCISCO (BCN) - A leading American scientist claims that European science understanding is more evolved than the United States, where only 40 percent of Americans believe in evolution, just half the 80 percent rate of several European nations.

Jon Miller, a professor in political science at Michigan State University who spoke at the American Association for the Advancement of Science symposium in San Francisco Friday, said religion and politics play major roles in undermining the hard earned knowledge that led to the widely accepted theory of evolution.

Miller points a finger at “by the book” religions like those practiced by fundamentalists in the United States and Iraq.

“Fundamentalists in this country say everything you need to know is in the Bible, period. Islamists say everything you need to know is in the Koran, period,” Miller said.

According to Miller, the United States ranks second in discounting evolution, just after Turkey.

Two evolution theories drive debate

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-02-26.htm#debate>

http://www2.ljworld.com/news/2007/feb/19/2_evolution_theories_drive_debate/

Edward Humes has written *Monkey Girl*, about the *Kitzmiller vs. Dover* trial that ended in December 2005. Creationists were soundly defeated, and the whole episode had echoes of the Scopes trial of 1925.

By Edward Humes – Special to the *Los Angeles Times*

When I first arrived at the Ronald Reagan Federal Building and Courthouse in Harrisburg, Pa., for what was billed as the second coming of the Scopes “monkey trial,” a man mingling with the media gaggle handed me an invitation to a lecture titled “Why Evolution Is Stupid.” The fellow advised me to come hear the truth about Charles Darwin’s dangerous idea. Then he jerked a thumb toward the courtroom and said, “You’re sure not going to hear it in there.”

I had gone to Harrisburg just more than a year ago to research a book, expecting cutting-edge arguments for the theory of evolution pitted against an upstart movement called “intelligent design,” which claims there is evidence of a master designer inside living cells. And hear them I did, in frequently riveting (and occasionally stupefying) detail, as the judge considered whether teaching intelligent design in public schools breached the wall separating church and state.

And yet that invitation and the angry, volatile town meeting it led me to that week proved even more enlightening. It showed me an essential truth of the culture wars in the United States: There are really two theories of evolution. There is the genuine scientific theory, and there is the talk-radio pretend version, designed not to enlighten but to deceive and enrage.

The talk-radio version had a packed town hall up in arms at the “Why Evolution Is Stupid” lecture. In this version of the theory, scientists supposedly believe that all life is accidental, a random crash of molecules that magically produced flowers, horses and humans — a scenario as unlikely as a tornado in a junkyard assembling a 747. Humans come from monkeys in this theory, just popping into existence one day. The evidence against Darwin is overwhelming, the purveyors of talk-radio evolution rail, yet scientists embrace his ideas because they want to promote atheism.

These are just a few highlights of the awful and pervasive straw-man image of evolution that pundits harp about in books and editorials and, yes, on talk radio, and this cartoon version really is stupid. No wonder most Americans reject evolution in poll after poll.

But then there is the real theory of evolution, the one that was on display in that Harrisburg courtroom, for which there is overwhelming evidence in labs, fossils, computer simulations and DNA studies. Most Americans have not heard of it. Teachers give it short shrift in schools because the subject upsets too many parents who only know the talk-radio version. But real evolution isn’t random; it doesn’t say man came from monkeys. Those claims are made up by critics to get people riled up — paving the way for pleasing alternatives such as intelligent design. □

What’s new

By Robert Park

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

FIRST AMENDMENT: HIGH COURT TAKES ON FAITH-BASED INITIATIVES.

Early in his presidency, George W. Bush issued an executive order creating a White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives that gives billions of dollars to religious groups of its choosing without oversight. No politician dares to challenge it, but a group of atheists who pay taxes sued in federal court, arguing that it violated the “establishment clause” of the 1st Amendment. An appeals court ruled that the case can go forward. However, the White House director short circuited the process by asking the Supreme Court, stacked with conservatives, to weigh in. The issue is whether taxpayers have standing under the establishment clause to challenge the way the executive branch uses money appropriated by Congress. The Court heard oral arguments this week and is expected to rule before adjourning for the summer.

SUPERSTITION: MAYBE, “THE LOST TOMB OF A GUY NAMED JESUS”?

The documentary, “The Lost Tomb of Jesus,” airs on the Discovery Channel, Sunday. It claims to have found a tomb in Jerusalem that held the remains of Jesus, his wife Mary Magdalene, their son Judah, his mother Mary, and assorted other family members. Coming just before Easter, it outraged the faithful who point out it couldn’t be the same guy, that one

ascended bodily into heaven. The War Between Religion and Science, ignited by the Intelligent Design movement, is heating up. According a front page story in today's Weekend Journal section of the *Wall Street Journal*, it's now generational. The story says that the new thing in adolescent rebellion is to be excessively devout, driving liberated parents nuts.

OF PANDERING AND PEOPLE: WHO WILL CAPTURE THE CREATIONISTS?

Even as these words are being turned into electrons, Senator John McCain is in Seattle delivering the keynote luncheon speech to the Discovery Institute. Eighteen months ago, just as the Dover School Board trial involving "intelligent design" was about to start, McCain came out in favor of teaching "all points of view," (WN 2 Sep 05). We have no idea what he is saying now, but it doesn't really matter; McCain is a master at the art of changing positions between breakfast and lunch. Apparently, however, he has decided, for the moment, to challenge Sam Brownback for the support of creationists.

POWER OF PRAYER: AUTHOR OF COLUMBIA STUDY COMMITS PLAGIARISM.

More than five years ago WN called attention to a paper in the *Journal of Reproductive Medicine* in which researchers at Columbia claimed prayers doubled the success of in-vitro fertilization (WN 5 Oct 01). If total strangers on their knees halfway around the world could suspend the laws of nature, it would be the end of science. WN suggested we pray the study is wrong. Behold! Our prayers were answered: The lead author took his name off the paper and resigned as chair of gynecology; another author landed in prison on an unrelated fraud conviction.

The editor of *JRM* still refused to retract the article. This week, the remaining author, a businessman who owns fertility clinics in Los Angeles and Seoul, was charged by the editor of *Fertility and Sterility* with plagiarizing the work of a student in Korea on a different paper. The avenging angel was Bruce Flamm, M.D., UC Irvine, who has hounded the authors, Columbia, and *JRM* relentlessly since the paper was published.

"BLIND FAITH: THE UNHOLY ALLIANCE OF RELIGION AND MEDICINE"

Ironically, even as the fraudulent prayer study was going on in the Columbia medical school, a professor of behavioral medicine at Columbia, Richard Sloan, wrote an important book condemning those who pander to a superstitious public by claiming to show that religion is good for your health (St. Martin's Press, 2006).

PASCAL'S WAGER: UK HIRED PSYCHICS TO FIND OSAMA BIN LADEN.

The *Daily Mail* has obtained a 2002 Ministry of Defense report. Because of the "high value" of finding Bin Laden, MoD resorted to the use of "novices" when "known psychics" refused.

UNCONSCIOUS: PRINCETON ENGINEERING ANOMALIES RESEARCH (PEAR).

The closing of the PEAR laboratory at Princeton, after 28 years of non-accomplishment, may be a sign of declining interest in the paranormal, or it may just be an anomaly. Either way, Princeton University endured the embarrassment without compromising on the principle of tenure, which protects the right to hold minority views. Science is conditional. If someone comes up with better measurements or a better analysis, the textbooks are rewritten. The problem is that in the paranormal world, nothing ever gets better. In recent years, PEAR became the focus of the Global Consciousness Project, involving a hundred or so researchers at dozens of sites around the world, looking at the output of random number generators (RNGs). Exciting huh? They report "deviations from randomness" before major disasters, such as 9/11 and the "Christmas tsunami" in the Indian Ocean. They believe this is evidence of global consciousness. Or maybe RNGs are causing disasters (WN 18 Feb 05) ?

INCONSISTENT: HOW TO GET THE BRONTOSAURUS ONBOARD NOAH'S ARK.

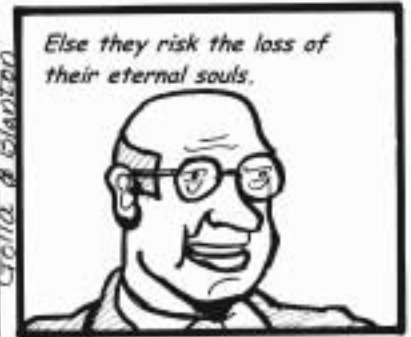
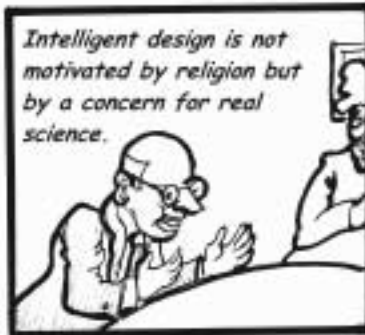
"Scientist of faith" is an oxymoron. The University of Rhode Island recently accepted the dissertation of a doctoral candidate in paleontology, Marcus Ross, who just happens to also be a young-Earth creationist. His thesis is on mosasaurs, that lived 65 million years before Ross believes Earth was created. How does Ross deal with this? He says he uses different paradigms. Most scientists who regard themselves as religious, and there are many, interpret the scriptures metaphorically. Even so, they often partition their lives, treating faith as a virtue on one side of the partition, and a scientific sin on the other. Dr. Ross, meanwhile, now teaches earth science at Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. He can't do much harm there. Wonder what paradigm he uses? As the song goes, "Brother can you paradigm?"

REPLACED: NEW KANSAS SCHOOL BOARD SETS NEW SCIENCE STANDARDS.

Tuesday, the Kansas board of education scrapped creationist-inspired science education standards that represented Darwinian evolution as scientifically controversial.

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.
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Only adopted in November 2005 (WN 11 Nov 05) the anti-evolution standards had not yet had any effect. Instead, the voters replaced the school board, and the new board replaced the science education standards. We can only imagine what new strategy creationists will come up.

UNCLEARED: LIKE THAT OTHER FUSION, BUBBLE FUSION DRAGS ON.

A year ago Purdue announced a full review of the “bubble fusion” claims of Rusi Taleyarkhan, but four months later a story in Nature raised serious questions about the pace and secrecy of the review. This week, the university seemed to clear him, but supplied little detail. Taleyarkhan says he feels vindicated. Others are not so sure. It doesn’t seem quite over.

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

Future Meeting Dates

March 17, 2007	August 11, 2007
April 21, 2007	September 8, 2007
May 19, 2007	October 13, 2007
June 16, 2007	November 10, 2007
July 14, 2007	December 8, 2007

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal

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