



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

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.

First allow me to apologize, because this month's column is going to be wall-to-wall creationism. Nah. Forget about the apology. Creationism, this day, this year, is where the rubber meets the road as far as skepticism is concerned. Nothing in the way of superstition, pseudo science, and outright hoaxery is as up front and materially threatening as creationism. Let the games begin:

Canned for panning

My cute headline aside, the facts of the matter are this: The Director of Science at the Texas Education Agency was asked to resign or face being fired. She used Agency e-mail to recommend a talk by Barbara Forrest on "Inside Creationism's Trojan Horse." Forrest, along with Paul Gross wrote *Creationism's Trojan Horse: The Wedge of Intelligent Design*, a book very critical of the Intelligent Design variation of creationism.

TEA employee Monica Martinez wrote a memo recommending Comer be fired. Martinez contended Comer's e-mail was an endorsement of Forrest and the topic of her talk. Martinez further asserted the TEA should remain neutral on issues like the conflict between creationism and evolution.

The validity of the first point, that employees should not use their position to promote a political position, is a matter for the lawyers to decide. Whether the TEA should be supporting Forrest on Intelligent Design is another matter. The TEA should be coming down really hard on creationism. Let me put it this way:

There is another Texas agency, Child Protective Services, part of Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Do you suppose CPS should be taking a position on

EVENTS CALENDAR

2008 Elections

Saturday 12 January 2008
at 2 p.m.
Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Board meeting and election of board members and officers

Also, it's party time again. Bring
snacks and drinks. Paid up
members can vote.

NTS Social Dinner

Saturday 16 February 2008
at 7 p.m.
Good Eats
6950 Greenville Avenue in
Dallas

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

214-335-9248

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the conflict between child protection and pedophilia? Should an
 employee of CPS recommend an authoritative talk on ways to protect
 your children from pedophiles? Maybe not.

Here is a snapshot of the media coverage:

Official leaves post as Texas prepares to debate science education standards

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-12-07.htm#fired>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/03/us/03evolution.html>

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL
Published: December 3, 2007

HOUSTON, Dec. 2 — After 27 years as a science teacher and 9
 years as the Texas Education Agency’s director of science,
 Christine Castillo Comer said she did not think she had to
 remain “neutral” about teaching the theory of evolution.

“It’s not just a good idea; it’s the law,” said Ms. Comer, citing
 the state’s science curriculum.

But now Ms. Comer, 56, of Austin, is out of a job, after
 forwarding an e-mail message on a talk about evolution and
 creationism — “a subject on which the agency must remain
 neutral,” according to a dismissal letter last month that accused
 her of various instances of “misconduct and insubordination”
 and of siding against creationism and the doctrine that life is
 the product of “intelligent design.”

...

Debbie Ratcliffe, a spokeswoman for the state’s education
 agency in Austin, said Ms. Comer “resigned. She wasn’t
 fired.”

“Our job,” Ms. Ratcliffe added, “is to enact laws and
 regulations that are passed by the Legislature or the State
 Board of Education and not to inject personal opinions and
 beliefs.”

According to Comer, education officials “seemed uneasy over the
 required evolution curriculum.” Comer’s stock response to inquiries had
 always been “that the State Board of Education supported the teaching of
 evolution in Texas schools.” Then, earlier this year, Comer was
 instructed to stick to the exact language of the high school biology
 standards, omitting any note of support for evolution. The exact
 language [quoted from the *New York Times*] is:

“The student knows the theory of biological evolution,” the standards
 read, and is expected to “identify evidence of change in species using
 fossils, DNA sequences, anatomical similarities, physiological
 similarities and embryology,” as well as to “illustrate the results of
 natural selection in speciation, diversity, phylogeny, adaptation, behavior
 and extinction.”

The chairman of the elected State Board of Education is Don McLeroy, a dentist who has professed favoritism for Intelligent Design. The Board will meet in February to review the Texas science standards, which have been in place since 1998. We have previously noted McLeroy's position on Intelligent Design at the textbook hearings in 2003.¹

The Discovery Institute, the center of all this controversy, has been notably silent. DI's take on Intelligent Design is published blog style at <http://www.evolutionnews.org/>. A quick search in mid December did not reveal any postings on the Comer dismissal.

Surprise, Skeptics. Texas is a politically conservative state, and, for the moment, political conservatism in the United States equates to religious conservatism. McLeroy is not the only creationist on the Board of Education, so you will have to get ready for a bumpy ride.

Biologist fired for beliefs, suit says

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-12-07.htm#woods>

http://www.boston.com/news/local/articles/2007/12/07/biologist_fired_for_beliefs_suit_says/

Nathaniel Abraham's research specialty is zebra fish, and he was hired to work in the laboratory of Mark E. Hahn at the prestigious Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution. Abraham's work was to include developmental biology, and all apparently went swimmingly until Abraham let slip he is a creationist. Abraham further expressed a disinclination to work on the evolutionary aspects of the research. Finding no further use for Dr. Abraham, Dr. Hahn let him go. That was three years ago.

Woods Hole states creationist stance at odds with work

By Beth Daley

Globe Staff / December 7, 2007

The battle between science and creationism has reached the prestigious Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, where a former researcher is claiming he was fired because he doesn't believe in evolution.

Nathaniel Abraham filed a lawsuit earlier this week in US District Court in Boston saying that the Cape Cod research center dismissed him in 2004 because of his Christian belief that the Bible presents a true account of human creation.

Abraham, who is seeking \$500,000 in compensation for a violation of his civil rights, says in the suit that he lost his job as a postdoctoral researcher in a biology

lab shortly after he told his superior that he did not accept evolution as scientific fact.

"Woods Hole believes they have the right to insist on a belief in evolution," said David C. Gibbs III, one of Abraham's two attorneys and general counsel of the Christian Law Association in Seminole, Fla.

Evolution is a fundamental tenet of biology that species emerge because of genetic changes to organisms that, over time, favor their survival. Creationists reject the notion that humans evolved from apes and that life on Earth began billions of years ago, but Gibbs said Abraham "truly believes there was no conflict between religion and his job."

Woods Hole officials released a statement saying, "The Institution firmly believes that its actions and those of its employees concerning Dr. Abraham were entirely lawful," and that the center does not discriminate on the basis of religion.

Religious persecution aside, I think Dr. Abraham has a good point. I am semi-retired. I take odd jobs doing software for major defense companies and others. Maybe I should reveal my disbelief in the pumping lemma and decline to work on any software design involving finite automata theory. Maybe I could ask for \$500,000. Maybe I could live on Social Security.

Denied tenure, astronomer alleges intelligent design witchhunt

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-12-07.htm#witch>

<http://blog.wired.com/wiredscience/2007/12/denied-tenure-a.html>

We have the video *The Privileged Planet* based on the book by Guillermo Gonzalez and Jay Richards. It's a plea that the universe is specially designed for important creatures such as ourselves. This is a view I might seem to share. I think of all the events that conspired to ensure my existence on this planet. I think of the close calls I have had, including my grandfather's being shot (while he was still a teenager). I was surely destined to be here. Else, you would not now be reading this bit of silliness.

By Brandon Keim December 05, 2007 | 3:24:22 PM

Guillermo Gonzalez, an Iowa State University astronomer allegedly denied tenure because of his belief in intelligent design, has announced his plans to sue the university.

Religious conservatives have rushed to his aid, and the Discovery Institute — an intelligent design think tank to which Gonzalez belongs — released email

excerpts of tenure discussions that suggest the university's decision was based on Gonzalez's beliefs, not his science.

There it goes again. Religious conservatives are coming to the aid of a creationist, all the while the Discovery Institute denies the religious basis of Intelligent Design. These creationists need to get their playbook in order.

Assertions by fellow creationists that Gonzalez is a stellar researcher dim in the light of scrutiny. His peers pulled in \$1.3 million on average each during a time Gonzalez came up with \$22,661 in outside research funding. Also, Gonzalez published no significant research during his stay at Iowa State, and he had only one graduate student who completed a dissertation.²

Aside from that, did his support for creationism dim his prospects. His peers say no, the Discovery Institute says yes. I say maybe. Remember this, tenure, once granted, is a job for life. You can't be fired without great cause. The people who decide whether you get tenure include the tenured professors in your department. Scientists who vote you into the club will have to work with you for a long long time. Regarding how his views on science and creationism played with his colleagues, keep this in mind: There are only so many times you can show up with your fly unzipped before you are no longer invited to the party.

Matzke drubs Behe in Trends in Ecology and Evolution

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-12-07.htm#matzke>

"Evolution education update" is a weekly newsletter from the National Center for Science Education (NCSE). You can subscribe by sending them an e-mail. Their Web site is at <http://www.ncseweb.org/>. You can also join and help support the teaching of evolution.

Here is a recent update on Nick Matzke's critique of Michael Behe's irreducible complexity:

Adding to the chorus of informed criticism of Michael Behe's latest book, *The Edge of Evolution* (Free Press, 2007), is Nick Matzke, writing in *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* (November 2007; 22 [11]: 566-567). In his brief review, Matzke focuses on Behe's central thesis, that "anything as complex as a three-protein complex is beyond the reach of random mutation aided by natural selection," and contends that Behe's argument "collapses at every step," concluding that "Behe is driven not by a truly scientific investigation, but instead by metaphysics." Writing on The Panda's Thumb blog (October 27, 2007), Matzke commented, "There are a great many things wrong with Behe's book, and attempting to hit the most important points

effectively, with just 750 words to work with, was quite a challenge."

Because a preprint version of his review was available on-line, both on the Trends in Ecology and Evolution website and at The Panda's Thumb blog (October 30, 2007), before the official version was published, Behe was able already to respond to Matzke's review on his own blog. In Matzke's rejoinder posted on The Panda's Thumb (November 6, 2007), he summarizes, "By my count, Behe only bothered to give it a try on 3/8 points, only gave it a significant shot on one, and was easily shot down on all three. If anyone wonders why Behe has repeatedly failed to convince when he has informed opposition — for example, in the scientific community, or in court — now you have your answer. He gives excuses rather than answers, and when problems are pointed out, he mostly just hopes that his fans will remain ignorant of them."

Now a graduate student in the Department of Integrative Biology at the University of California, Berkeley, Matzke worked for NCSE from 2004 to 2007. While at NCSE, he coauthored articles for *Nature Immunology*, *Nature Reviews Microbiology*, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (USA)*, and *Not in Our Classrooms*, and contributed a chapter to the new edition of *But Is It Science? The Philosophical Question in the Creation/Evolution Controversy* (Prometheus Books, forthcoming). *Seed* magazine profiled him in 2006 as one of its nine "Revolutionary Minds." And he was the lead NCSE staffer working on the *Kitzmiller v. Dover* case, providing a wealth of scientific expertise and practical advice to the legal team representing the ultimately victorious plaintiffs.

For Trends in Ecology and Evolution's website, visit:

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01695347>

For Matzke's posts about his review on The Panda's Thumb blog, visit:

<http://www.pandasthumb.org/archives/2007/10/behe-review-in-tree.html>

<http://www.pandasthumb.org/archives/2007/10/full-text-of-th.html>

<http://www.pandasthumb.org/archives/2007/11/behe-replies-to.html>

Rio Rancho school board rescinds policy on intelligent design

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-12-07.htm#riorancho>

<http://www.kdbc.com/Global/story.asp?S=7447183>

The Associated Press reports on another failed (barely) attempt to introduce creationism into a public school curriculum.

Associated Press - December 4, 2007 8:05 AM ET

RIO RANCHO, N.M. (AP) - The Rio Rancho school board has dissolved a policy allowing alternative theories of evolution to be discussed in public school science classes.

The board voted 3-2 last night in favor of rescinding the policy.

The board had voted 3-2 on August 22nd, 2005, to approve the policy.

[Two] of those board members supporting the policy are still on the board.

Rock of ages, ages of rock

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-12-07.htm#rock>

<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/25/magazine/25wwln-geologists-t.html>

Not all young Earth creationists sport mail-order Ph.D. degrees. For over four decades the likes of Henry Morris and Duane Gish have exercised their academic credentials to speak for the “science” of Genesis. Despite the rise of old Earth creationism and Intelligent Design, a younger generation of YECs can still command a sizable audience.

By HANNA ROSIN

Published: November 25, 2007

On a muggy afternoon in July, a group of geologists from around the country put on some bug spray and fanned out along one of Ohio’s richest fossil beds. The rock walls were slippery and steep at points, and some people came in their dress shoes straight from the conference that brought them together. But no one seemed daunted; when let loose on the rocks they behaved like children with a piñata, filling their pockets with local specimens and cooing over their treasure. “Ahh, that’s a beautiful brachiopod!” or “A fine trilobite! Let me see that.”

A brightly painted sign in the state park explained that 450 million years ago these ancient creatures lived at the bottom of a warm, shallow sea during the Ordovician period. But none of these geologists believed it. As young-earth creationists, they think the earth is about 8,000 years old, give or take a few thousand years. That’s about the amount of time conventional geology says it can take to form one inch of limestone.

Creationist ideas about geology tend to appeal to overly zealous amateurs, but this was a gathering of

elites, with an impressive wall of diplomas among them (Harvard, U.C.L.A., the Universities of Virginia, Washington and Rhode Island). They had spent years studying the geologic timetable, but they remained nevertheless deeply committed to a different version of history. John Whitmore, a geologist from nearby Cedarville University who organized the field trip, stood in the middle of the fossil bed and summarized it for his son.

“Dad, how’d these fossils get here?” asked Jess, 7, looking up from his own Ziploc bag full of specimens.

Whitmore, who was wearing a suede cowboy hat, answered in a cowboy manner — laconic but certain.

“From the flood,” he said.

...

Hanna Rosin, a contributing editor for The Atlantic, is the author of “God’s Harvard: A Christian College on a Mission to Save the Nation.”

Evolution battling intelligent design in Florida schools

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2007-12-07.htm#florida>

<http://blog.wired.com/wiredscience/2007/12/evolution-battl.html>

Texas is not the only state facing a battle over creationism in the schools. Previously Florida schools got an F in science from the Fordham Institute. At the time evolution was a science that had no name.

By Brandon Keim December 05, 2007 | 12:14:07 PM

The next intelligent design showdown will take place in Florida, where opposition is mounting to state-mandated emphasis on the importance of evolution to science education.

The controversy comes on the heels of a Texas education official’s firing for forwarding an email critical of intelligent design, which holds that some phenomena are too complex to be explained except by Godly manufacture. In a landmark court case in 2005, intelligent design was officially designated as religion rather than science, but its proponents continue to fight.

In October, Florida proposed new standards for science education, designating evolution as something every student should understand. “Evolution is the fundamental concept underlying all of biology and is supported by multiple forms of scientific evidence. Organisms are classified based on their evolutionary history. Natural selection is the primary mechanism leading to evolutionary change,” read the guidelines.

It was a big step forward: two years ago, when the Fordham Institute, an education think tank, gave Florida's science curriculum a grade of F, the standards didn't even mention evolution by name. But opposition is growing.

Polk County school board members want Intelligent Design to be taught as an alternative to evolution. Board member Donna Callaway said evolution "should not be taught to the exclusion of other theories of the origin of life." She added "[T]here will be times of prayer throughout Christian homes and churches directed toward this issue," effectively destroying the illusion that creationists truly think this is an issue of one scientific theory over another.

References

- 1 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2003/2003december/december2003.htm#politics>
- 2 See the Wikipedia entry at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guillermo_Gonzalez_\(astronomer\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guillermo_Gonzalez_(astronomer))

The Alamo Ghost Hunt

by John Blanton

Headling toward San Antonio? Don't miss this. Here's an advertisement I picked up in the Alamo City:

Our 9 pm Tour is about the Ghost in San Antonio. There are many Ghost here, not willing to leave for their final destinations. San Antonio is known to be one of the most haunted places on earth!!

What To Expect On The Alamo Ghost Hunt

You actually get to ghost hunt with people who have led more ghost hunters through the battle grounds of the Alamo than anybody else in the world. Hear true historically correct stories about the ghost that haunt the battle ground, 12 battles have been fought in and around this area. Walk over top of San Antonio's past residents. Visit the wall entombed with some of San Antonio's past hero's.

We Bring The Newest Equipment Ghost hunting has to offer. Use the same equipment you see used on TV. We bring enough equipment for the whole crowd

to have a ghost hunting experience. We ghost hunt during the tour. We don't ask you to wait around to use the equipment after you have already been on a hour and a half walking tour. We bring more equipment than any other Ghost Tour!!

Be Sure To Bring A Camera Here are some of the places you will be visiting – The Alamo Plaza Area, the cities oldest hanging tree, and an old Spanish Palace. Battlefields, Old Hotels, Hospitals, and Cemeteries are the best places to find Ghosts. This tour has them all.

No Camcorders or Electronic Recording Devices Allowed

Reservations Required Call210-336-7831

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.]

FAITH: THE WAR BETWEEN SCIENCE AND RELIGION.

It's time we had a little talk. The New York Times on Saturday published an op-ed by Paul Davies that addresses the question: "Is embracing the laws of nature so different from religious belief?" Davies concludes that, "until science comes up with a testable theory of the laws of the universe its claim to be free of faith is manifestly bogus." Davies has confused two meanings of the word "faith." The Oxford Concise English Dictionary on my desk gives the two distinct meanings for faith as: "1) complete trust or confidence, and 2) strong belief in a religion based on spiritual conviction rather than proof." A scientist's "faith" is built on experimental proof. The two meanings of the word "faith," therefore, are not only different, they are exact opposites. Davies, who won the 1995 Templeton Prize is not the only physicist to make that mistake. "Many people don't realize that science basically involves faith" Charles Townes said in his 2005 Templeton statement. On laser physics I would happily defer to Townes, but this is a matter of the English language. Here we defer to the dictionaries. The judges who awarded Townes' the 2005 Templeton Prize cited a single line from his 1966 article The Convergence of Science

Skeptic Ink

by Prasad Golla and John Blanton.
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and Religion: "Understanding the order in the Universe and understanding the purpose of the universe are not identical, but they are also not very far apart." They are a universe apart, (WN 11 Mar 05). In any case, the "purpose" of the universe is not on the science agenda. Suicide bombers no doubt believe they are part of some divine "purpose."

THE FAITH WAR: WHAT CONNECTS SCIENTISTS OF FAITH?

I count 8 physicists among the 34 recipients of the Templeton Prize, and a couple more had degrees in physics. It was initially the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, and the first winner in 1973 was Mother Teresa. Winners have included Jews, Hindus, and Buddhists. Billy Graham got it in 1982, Charles Colson of Watergate fame in 1993 and Paul Davies in 1995. But in 1999 Ian Barbour, a student of Fermi, was the recipient. A professor of physics and theology at Carleton College, Barbour was credited with initiating a "dialog between science and religion." Templeton admired Barbour, and coveted his dialog. The scientific revolution, after all, led to the fantastic growth in the world economy that made him a billionaire. Templeton believes God has chosen him to show the world that, as he put it, theology and science are two windows on the same landscape. So he changed the name to the Templeton Prize for Research or Discoveries about Spiritual Realities. It is the largest prize for intellectual accomplishment in existence, chosen to be bigger than the Nobel. Since that time, six of the last eight winners of the Templeton Prize have been physicists. They all relied on the anthropic principle in their Templeton Prize statements.

ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE: SOME THINK IT PROVES THERE IS A GOD.

It argues that the universe has been "fine-tuned" to make life possible. In the so-called strong form: "The fundamental parameters of the universe are such as to permit the creation of observers within it." I believe an equivalent wording would be:

"If things were different, things would not be the way things are."

"SNAKE OIL SCIENCE: THE TRUTH ABOUT ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE"

By R. Barker Bausell (Oxford, 2007), is now in book stores. A "research methodologist" at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, Bausell was Research Director of an NIH-funded CAM Research Center. He explains how the placebo effect is packaged and sold to a gullible public and a frightening number of health professionals, with particular emphasis on acupuncture.



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

North Texas Skeptics

Future Meeting Dates

January 12, 2008

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February 9, 2008

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March 8, 2008

June 21, 2008

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