



The North Texas

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Response to Chuck Gafford

by John Blanton

In August Chuck Gafford was kind enough to contribute a follow-up to his item “*Expelled Review*” that appeared in the July issue. Readers may want to take note of some points from his response.¹

First, I agree with Chuck that Ben Stein does not make a good case that scientists and professors lost their jobs or tenure because they embraced Intelligent Design (ID). Like most viewers of *Expelled*, Chuck came away with the conclusion Ben Stein was promoting. I am guessing Chuck Gafford has since taken the time to read my response. I pointed out postings by the National Center for Science Education (NCSE) and others. NCSE has published a detailed critique of Ben Stein’s claims, showing they are largely overstated or even wrong.²

I do dispute one of Chuck’s points. He mentions “the most vocal of the ID people are ‘young-earth creationists’ including the Discovery Institute.” My own observation is the Discovery Institute people are ‘old-earth creationists.’ Phillip Johnson is considered the founder of the ID movement, and in his writings, public statements and correspondence he never disputes the old age of the earth.

Johnson and the other principals of the movement even seem to sign up to Charles Darwin’s conclusion that life forms on this planet share a common ancestry. Which leads the rest of us to wonder, why are the young-earth creationists being so cozy with these radical upstarts?

I will answer my own question: The young-earth crowd got bounced severely in federal court in 1981. Judge William Overton ruled in *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education* that young-earth creationism was strictly religious. It was not only religious, it was the very narrow religious view held by those who promoted Arkansas Act 590 requiring “creation science” be given equal time with evolution in the public school science curriculum.

Now young-earth creationists are taking refuge under the big tent offered by ID, which does not make outrageous claims about the age of the earth and creation of everything in one great performance of stage magic. ID incorporates the intelligence to

EVENTS CALENDAR

September Program

Saturday, September 20, 2008
2 p.m.
Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Something’s Happening Here

What it is ain’t exactly clear.
It starts when you’re always
afraid...

The NTS will give the latest
lowdown on conspiracy theories.
Who’s saying what, and why.
And whether you should really
be afraid.

Social Dinner/Board Meeting

Saturday, September 27, 2008
7 p.m.
Queen of Sheba Restaurant
14875 Inwood Road, Addison

Let us know if you are coming.
We need to reserve a table.
NTS Hotline 214-335-9248

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hide the magic deeply within the cells of living matter. Now the magic is deep down, where the science is cutting edge. The standard issue school board member or elected politician is not comfortable at these depths and can be easily persuaded by the arguments of these new creationists.³

More recently, ID has experienced its own Arkansas moment, getting similar treatment in the case *Tammy Kitzmiller, et al. v. Dover Area School District, et al.* In 2005 Kitzmiller and others sued after the ID crowd attempted to impose an extra burden on teaching evolution. In that case federal judge John E. Jones III noticed that, as in Arkansas, ID is creationism, and the school district's actions had a narrow religious motivation.

Back to Chuck Gafford: Chuck advances the notion that belief in a young earth is based on misinterpreting the Bible. I disagree with Chuck on that. Proper reading of the Bible will lead any reader to conclude the earth is about 6000 years old.

In his correspondence with me Chuck has reiterated the claim that the six days mentioned in the Bible should not be accepted as 144 hours. He misses a great point.

Bishop Ussher used the lineage of Adam to Solomon plus the *Early Age of Kings* and the *Late Age of Kings* to get the 4004 BC number.⁴

Stop right there.

That gets the first person, Adam, only a few thousand years ago. Forget about whether the Bible refers to real days or "time periods."

I like to ridicule these numbers with statements like "We have library books overdue longer than this." That is figuratively speaking, of course. We have recorded history that goes back more than 6000 years. People lived on the American continents 15,000 years ago. These are years with 365-366 days and days with 24 hours. Where was Adam when ancestors of the Anasazi were crossing from Asia onto the North American continent?

Anyhow, Chuck agrees the earth is billions of years old, even though his reasoning may be off.

Chuck states "The idea of a 'Designer' is not [necessarily] a discussion of theology rather than science, but rather to a review of any valid theory based on factual information." He has made similar statements previously in his correspondence, often with references to fractal geometry, but has never clearly elaborated his case. I encourage Chuck to take some time from his busy schedule and provide details. We will publish a concise write-up if he will contribute one. I, for one, will look forward to reading it.

References

- 1 See "Chuck Gafford Responds" at <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2008/2008august/august2008.htm#Gafford>

- 2 NCSE exposes *Expelled* at <http://www.expelledexposed.com/>
- 3 Flash announcement. We may now have a vice presidential candidate who does not require all that much depth. Stand by. If this ticket wins in November skeptics may be in for at least four more years of fun and games.
- 4 Wikipedia has a nice description at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ussher_chronology

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.

Skeptics, this will be an all-creationism column.

Creationists lose, again

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-08-17.htm#UC>

The National Center for Science Education reports on the latest development in the lawsuit against the University of California system. UC had decided not to accept high school science credits from sub-par religious schools. Particularly, UC objected that these schools used a biology text from Bob Jones University that takes an unscientific approach to the subject.

The Association of Christian Schools International, the Calvary Chapel Christian School in Murrieta, California, plus a collection of students, sued the UC system in 2005. They charged the UC system violated their religious rights that are protected by the First Amendment to the Constitution.

In addition to a host of procedural considerations, the latest ruling addressed the university system's decision to deny approval for a biology course submitted by Calvary Baptist School (not to be confused with the Calvary Chapel Christian School), which used the A Beka text *Biology: God's Living Creation*. The book was evaluated by Barbara Sawrey, who described it as taking an "overall un-scientific approach to the subject matter;" her opinion was echoed by the defendants' expert witnesses Donald Kennedy and Francisco J. Ayala (a Supporter of NCSE), who stated that neither the A Beka text nor Bob Jones University Press's *Biology for Christian Schools* is appropriate for use as the principal text in a college preparatory biology course. Kennedy wrote, "the problem is not ... that

the creationist view is taught as an alternative to scientific explanations, but that the nature of science, the theory of evolution, and critical thinking are not taught adequately."

Michael Behe, a proponent of "intelligent design" creationism, served as an expert witness for the plaintiffs, but his defense of the textbooks was unavailing. In his ruling, Judge Otero wrote, "Plaintiffs offer little admissible evidence to the contrary. Plaintiffs' Biology expert, Dr. Michael Behe, submitted a declaration concluding that the BJU text mentions standard scientific content. ... However, Professor Behe 'did not consider how much detail or depth' the texts gave to this standard content. ... Therefore, Professor Behe fails to refute one of Professor Kennedy's primary concerns that the nature of science, the theory of evolution, and critical thinking are not taught adequately. Accordingly, there is no genuine issue of material fact as to this issue. Defendants had a rational basis for rejecting Calvary Baptist's proposed Biology course."

Due north

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-08-17.htm#58>

<http://torontosun.com/News/Canada/2008/08/06/6364086-sun.html>

It's only a line drawn in the earth. Often not even that. In some places it's hard to know where it is. It's the forty-ninth parallel, and it separates Canada from the United States. But what a difference.

In the U.S. polls consistently show the majority believe in creationism, or at least do not believe in evolution.

An Angus Reid online poll shows 58% of Canucks think humans evolved from less advanced life forms over millions of years, and 22% believe God created people in their present form within the last 10,000 years.

Surprise, to me at least, support for evolution is highest in Alberta in Canada's Wild West.

"The old view on evolutionary theory isn't necessarily the case any more. There's considerably more opportunity to be educated about belief instead of being indoctrinated about it."

About two-thirds of respondents aged 15-34 believe in evolution, but only 51% of those over 55 accept it.

Men (69%) and those with at least one university degree (71%) were more inclined to buy into evolution, while people from Alberta (40%) and members of the Conservative Party (29%) back creationism the most.

Household income apparently plays a role in belief, too. In homes with annual earnings over \$100,000, about 66% accept evolution.

Maybe the lesson is, accept evolution and get into a higher tax bracket. Or move to Canada.

Creationism on the campaign trail

<http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2008-07-31.htm#politics>

http://cjonline.com/stories/073108/sta_311695380.shtml

It is still Kansas, and the campaign topic is still creationism.

Barbara Hollingsworth did a survey for *The Capital-Journal*.

Ask Republican candidates for the Kansas State Board of Education about the issues they think are most important and you will hear about the teacher shortage or engaging students with vocational education.

On the campaign trail, however, many voters are using evolution as their litmus test.

Bill Pannbacker is a Republican candidate in the District 6 seat for the Board of Education. He is alone among four Republican candidates in Districts 4 and 6 clearly opposing creationism.

“Science is the study of naturally occurring events,” he said in response to a *Topeka Capital-Journal* questionnaire. “Supernatural events are a matter of faith.”

Republican Kathy Martin, is an incumbent and Pannbacker’s opponent.

Somebody called it the elephant in the room,” said “I don’t see that as ever completely being resolved.”

...

Martin, who voted for the 2005 standards, worries that evolution is sometimes taught as a sort of dogma. Attempts to keep certain criticisms of evolution out of classrooms — arguments that many scientists say are bogus — seems a lot like censorship to Martin.

“Why would anything in science ever be limited?” asked Martin, a 62-year-old retired teacher from Clay

Center who still substitutes. “In a way, that’s what a certain group of scientists are wanting to do.”

Alan Detrich is running for the District 4 seat.

[He] argues there is no evidence to support the theory of evolution. He creates religious art out of dinosaur fossils (Detrich lists as occupation as “fossil hunter”) and in 2006 described to The Associated Press how using the fossils in his art is a good way to prompt talks about evolution.

Topeka dentist Bob Meissner, Detrich’s opponent, is not so much a committed creationist. Even so, “his campaign has accepted a donation from the Free Academic Integrity and Research Committee, a political action committee that has supported evolution critics in past state board elections.”

In case you are curious, the primary elections were 5 August. Here are the results from the *Kansas City Star* at <http://www.kansascity.com/news/politics/elections/story/735813.html>:

District 4: In the Republican primary, Robert Meissner had 76 percent of the vote compared with Alan Detrich’s 24 percent with 259 of 275 precincts reporting. The winner will face Democrat Carolyn Campbell in November.

District 6: Republican incumbent Kathy Martin had 52 percent of the vote compared with her primary opponent Bill Pannbacker’s 48 percent with 435 of 441 precincts reporting. The winner faces Democrat Christopher Renner in November.

So much for “the study of naturally occurring events.” Texas, you are up next.

Overheard at Mensa

The guy tells me he wants to sue, so I ask what the problem is.

He says he bought this healing crystal to heal his arthritis. He still has arthritis, and he thinks he got cheated.

So, I ask him if this healing crystal came with any kind of warranty. He said yes it came with a money-back warranty.

Well, did you complain?

Yes, I did.

Did they offer to refund your money?

In fact, they did.

So, what’s the problem?

I don’t want my money back. I want my arthritis cured.

Prasad Golla at Mensa

by John Blanton

Mensa is an organization of people with IQ measurements in the top 2% of the population. That doesn't mean they are completely up on rational skepticism, so they invited NTS board member Prasad Golla to give a short talk.

Prasad has a Ph.D. in electrical engineering, and I was present a few years back when he presented his dissertation



Skeptical activist Prasad Golla speaks to Mensa

Photo by John Blanton

defense and transitioned from Mr. to Dr. Golla. I knew from that presentation Prasad would have no problem filling his allotted time.

Rather than risk missing some obscure skeptical point, Prasad decided to address all of them. The presentation ran to nearly two hours.

He covered medicine alternative, cold fusion and transubstantiation,

Randi, Houdini, Sheldrake and resonance morphological,

Hoaxes and conspiracies, pseudo history plus pseudo archaeology,

Channeling and prophesying, and some fairies out in Cottingley,

Parapsychology and psychics, and crypto zoology,

Cranks and cults and astrology and even some ufology,

Reincarnation, creationism plus religion and also mysticism.

His presentation was the very model of modern rational skepticism.



NTS August program

by John Blanton

Alison Smith early grew skeptical and has turned skepticism into her principal activity. She shared her skeptical experiences with us at the August meeting.

What a nice crowd there was, too. I was sure there were not that many skeptics in all of Dallas, so some of them must have driven hundreds of miles through a vast wasteland of credulity to attend.



Alison Smith is not trying to channel departed NTS members. She is concentrating to make a point.

Photo by John Blanton

Alison eventually found herself working as an intern for the James Randi Educational Foundation where she was soon putting in a large part of her time. Eventually she was on the payroll, which means she is now getting paid for doing what she was doing all the time anyhow.

It is an enviable life style. Who else has the time and wherewithal to spend a night in a famous San Antonio haunted hotel, let alone several nights in a row? Plus other supposedly magical places around the country. She says she hasn't been to Sedona, Arizona, yet, but that's coming. We look forward to her report.

I am assured Alison will be back to speak to us again in the future.

Editorial

Politics and skepticism

The NTS is not a political organization. We do not deal with political issues. So, here goes:

The nomination of Alaska governor Sarah Palin for vice president of the United States resurrects the conflict of science and politics, otherwise known as religion.

While Palin may not be the Anita Bryant of the twenty-first century, her religious fundamentalism is considered by political pundits to give Senator John McCain a boost with the Republican Party's right wing. Her cozy relationship with creationism is considered by scientists and other skeptics to bode ill for the future of science education.

In past statements, Palin has expressed no concern about teaching creationism in the public schools, using the shopworn phrase about "teaching both sides."

Flash!

More bad news, Skeptics. None of the major candidates has taken a strong stance against creationism. Senator Barack Obama, who seems to wear his religion on his sleeve, has expressed some encouraging thoughts. In an interview with the *York County Record* in Pennsylvania he is quoted:

And I think it's a mistake to try to cloud the teaching of science with theories that frankly don't hold up to scientific inquiry.

That was then. The general election is just beginning. When the race gets tight and votes get scarce, will these nice sentiments hold up to political reality? Are we again going to hear, "I believe there is room for both sides."

My fondest hope would be to hear something like this from a candidate:

I am running for President of the United States. I do not want to be your preacher. I do not want to be your spiritual advisor. And you don't want that, either.

You do not want the United States government for a church. The government is completely unfit for this duty. We are not very nice people. We take your money. We listen in on your phone conversations. We kill people.

Vote us into office then run as fast as you can and hide under your bed. Stay as far away from us as you can.

But, I dream too much.

I do recall, earlier, a candidate speak up for evolution. That was Hillary Clinton in *The New York Times*:

In the telephone interview after the speech, Mrs. Clinton also tacitly criticized opponents of evolution.

Those were nice words and very encouraging. And next year Mrs. Clinton is going to be... Yes! United States senator from the state of New York.

The American people have spoken.

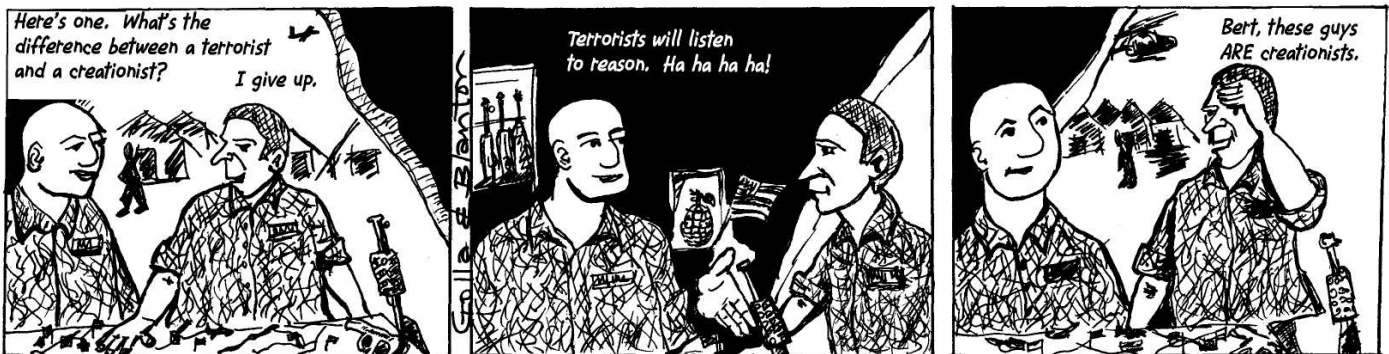
It is time now, Skeptics, that I really put the fear of God into you. Have you considered why we do not now teach wall-to-wall creationism in the public schools? It is not by the overwhelming intellect of the American voters. Also it is not by the crushing weight of the scientific evidence, for which the majority care little if they even understand it. It is by the thinnest of threads that public education hangs above the pit. It is a few micrograms of ink on paper:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

It is this phrase in the First Amendment. Time and again court battles against creationism have come down to the finish. The creationists have presented their evidence. The scientists have presented their evidence. Then the lawyers throw up these words up on a projection screen. The judge's gavel comes down.

Creationism is religion. You can't spend public money to promote religion.

Skeptic Ink — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2008. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted



It's not about truth. It's not about science. It's not about evidence. It's because over two hundred years ago some men with long memories cringed at the thought of another state-run theology.

Imagine the consequences had the drafters of the Bill of Rights looked at their watches and said, "It's getting late. Let's go out for a beer. We can put off religious freedom until the next session." Talk about a broken thread.

Now do you believe in God?

John Blanton

This editorial comment is the opinion of the author and does not represent the viewpoint of The North Texas Skeptics or its members. But it should.



North Texas Skeptics

Future Meeting Dates

September 20, 2008

October 18, 2008

November 15, 2008

December 20, 2008

January 17, 2009

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.

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