



The North Texas Skeptic

Volume 23

March 2009

Number 3

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Jack Hittson

In February our long-time friend and NTS Board member Jack Hittson passed away after a bout with liver cancer. He was 83. The world is a worse place for this loss.

We first met Elizabeth Hittson in 1992 when she attended the CSICOP conference we were hosting. We had a table set up to hand out NTS promotional literature and to accept new memberships. Elizabeth signed up, and for several years we knew her as a faithful member and reader of our newsletter. Since 2000 Elizabeth has been on the NTS Board, soon joined by Jack, as well. It has been a wonderful association.

Jack came of age when the world was at the brink, and darkness threatened. He served during World War II, training as a military pilot. He later said the precipitous defeat of the Japanese Empire likely saved his life, and he later finished up his military career as a medical officer.

Jack subsequently served in France, where he and Elizabeth started a life together. Their lives also included service in Panama and Alaska before they settled in Texas where Jack entered private practice as a dentist. They raised four children, who now enjoy professional careers of their own. Last November Jack and Elizabeth celebrated the election of a daughter to the Texas Legislature.

Talking to Jack one came to realize here was a man who lived and introspectively observed, and who came logically to reject the vast body of ignorance and superstition that pervades. His rejection was not categorical. He continued to study, to learn and to question. He was, however, never able to reconcile basic human intelligence with the popular acceptance of creationism and similar nonsense. He assiduously excluded from his life the pretenses of conventional religion.

We ask now, how can we replace a man like Jack Hittson, and the answer is we cannot. We can only make new ones by learning and by living his example. □



Jack Hittson

EVENTS CALENDAR

March Program

Saturday, March 21, 2009,
at 2 p.m.

Center for Nonprofit
Management
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Expelled

The NTS will present a review of the creationist video *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*.

Actor and TV personality Ben Stein stars in this creationist critique of modern science and its rejection of Intelligent Design. In the video, Stein makes odious comparisons of "Darwinism" with the Holocaust and with the brutal Stalinist regime.

The NTS Board meeting and social dinner

Saturday, March 28, 2009
7 p.m.

Caribbean café
1000 Webb Chapel Road
Carrollton, Texas 75006

Phone: (972) 418-7071

North Texas Skeptics

Officers

President	John Blanton
Vice President	John Brandt
Secretary	Mike Selby
Treasurer	Barbara Neuser

Staff

Newsletter Editor	Keith Blanton
Webmaster	John Blanton
Meetings and Social Director	Claudia Meek

Board of Directors

Erling Beck, John Blanton, John Brandt, Elizabeth Hittson, Jack Hittson, Claudia Meek, Barbara Neuser and Mike Selby

Directors Emeritus Tony Dousette, Ron Hastings, Mark Meyer, John Thomas, Joe Voelkerling, and Mel Zemek

Scientific and Technical Advisors

Joe Barnhart, Professor of Philosophy
 Raymond A. Eve, Ph.D., Professor of Sociology, UT Arlington
 Timothy N. Gorski, M.D., Physician
 Ronnie J. Hastings, Ph.D., Science Teacher
 Anthony P. Picchioni, Ph.D., Licensed Professional Counselor
 James Rusk, Director, Russell Planetarium
 Lakshman S. Tamil, Ph.D., Engineer
 John Thomas, Attorney

The North Texas Skeptics is a tax-exempt 501 (c) (3) scientific and educational organization. All 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.

Our newsletter, *The North Texas Skeptic*, is published monthly by The North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794.

Permission to reprint: Articles in *The North Texas Skeptic* may be reprinted without further permission, provided that *The Skeptic* is credited as the source, the mailing address above is listed, and a copy of the publication containing the reprint is sent to the Editor. Opinions expressed in *The Skeptic* are those of the individual authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of The North Texas Skeptics. Contents and logo © 2009 by North Texas Skeptics.

Academic freedom

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.

This continues the special series of Web News devoted to the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin. 150 years after Darwin published his seminal work *On the Origin of Species*, his ideas and those of scientists who continue research into the theory of evolution continue to come under attack.

Opposition to evolution comes partly from some who sincerely dispute the idea that natural selection is the complete answer. Most opposition, however, comes from creationists, who believe only supernatural forces can account for the origin of life and the diversity of modern life forms.

Some opponents to evolution proudly call themselves creationists, but a growing number want to distance themselves from the absurdities of Genesis. *Intelligent Design* is the name preferred by these modern day creationists, who need to maintain an appearance of objective science. An analysis to any depth reveals a religious basis.

A continuous string of defeats on all academic fronts and in the courts in concert with a rising chorus of stinging denunciation from main stream science have sent these modern creationists scurrying for more palatable explanations and justifications. Their recent approach is to invoke *academic freedom*.

Here is a brief scan of Web news illustrating this point of attack on main stream scholarship and science. But first, a summary of academic freedom from Wikipedia:

Academic freedom is the belief that the freedom of inquiry by students and faculty members is essential to the mission of the academy. They argue that academic communities are repeatedly targeted for repression due to their ability to shape and control the flow of information. When scholars attempt to teach or communicate ideas or facts that are inconvenient to external political groups or to authorities, they may find themselves targeted for public vilification, job loss, imprisonment, or even death.

Let's see where the creationists take this.

Academic freedom in Oklahoma

<http://www.ntsketics.org/news/news2009-01-10.htm#Oklahoma>

Senate Bill 320, prefiled in the Oklahoma Senate and scheduled for a first reading on February 2, 2009, is apparently the first antievolution bill of 2009. Entitled the “Scientific Education and Academic Freedom Act,” SB 320 would, if enacted, require state and local educational authorities to “assist teachers to find more effective ways to present the science curriculum where it addresses scientific controversies” and permit teachers to “help students understand, analyze, critique, and review in an objective manner the scientific strengths and scientific weaknesses of existing scientific theories pertinent to the course being taught.” The only topics specifically mentioned as controversial are “biological evolution, the chemical origins of life, global warming, and human cloning.”

It would appear the concept of academic freedom is being turned on its head. External political forces are seeking to soften teachings they find uncomfortable.

Scientists do not find much controversy in biological evolution, the chemical origins of life and global warming, but some others do. As far as human cloning is concerned, it's not sure how much educational systems have to do with the topic, but it was something convenient to tack onto the bill.

Creationists and others at odds with modern science have found it beneficial to invoke academic freedom when arguing their case. The truth is out there, they say. However, an oppressive scientific establishment and its friends in an authoritative educational system are suppressing this knowledge and denying students' their due academic freedom.

There's more.

Academic freedom in Florida

<http://www.ntsk skeptics.org/news/news2008-03-15.htm#bill>

TALLAHASSEE — The religiously tinged evolution-questioning theory of Intelligent Design could more easily be brought up in public-school science classrooms under a proposed “academic freedom” legislation being pushed by conservative lawmakers.

And it's not just the ACLU saying it anymore.

A leading voice for the Intelligent Design movement acknowledged as much Wednesday by saying that the theory constitutes “scientific information,” which the bill expressly and repeatedly says teachers should present in questioning and criticizing evolution without fear of persecution.

The remarks by Casey Luskin, an attorney with the Seattle-based Discovery Institute, were made during a press conference with actor-columnist-speechwriter-

gameshow host Ben Stein, who's exhibiting a documentary in support of the legislation.

Casey Luskin blogs tirelessly for the Discovery Institute on their Evolution News site. Luskin is a master propagandist. A good read and an education into the methods of Intelligent Design advocates would be to follow his responses on a weekly, almost daily, schedule in defense of ID. You can find his postings at the following URL along with those of other DI propagandists:

<http://www.evolutionnews.org>

It's significant that the Florida case involved Ben Stein. Stein narrates and is featured in the video *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed*. In the video Stein promotes the assertion that academic freedom is being suppressed on college campuses and elsewhere. The “elsewhere” includes a government research institute and a city newspaper. While these areas may not strictly fit the “academic” label, the idea is the same. An oppressive scientific establishment or other authority is “expelling” those who dissent from Darwinism.

The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) has published a review of Stein's claims and found them to be short on facts. In his turn, Casey Luskin has posted a response to the NCSE, a response that has to be read and parsed to be properly appreciated.

You can find the NCSE's Expelled Exposed site at the following URL:

<http://www.expelledexposed.com/>

You can find Casey Luskin's response here:

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2009/02/expelled_exposed_exposed_your.html

Ben Stein devotes time in *Expelled* testing out the supposition that Darwinist teachings have provided comfort and support for Nazism, the brutal Stalinist regime, and the Holocaust. While this issue is a bit separate from that of academic freedom, it is significantly a new creationist tactic and one we expect to see elaborated in the future.

Prasad Golla will present a review of the *Expelled* video at the NTS meeting this month. Don't miss it. Prasad has a great appreciation for social history, and he can be expected to provide a useful analysis of Stein's audacious claims.

Academic freedom in Louisiana

<http://www.ntsk skeptics.org/news/news2008-07-04.htm#Louisiana>

Sean Cavanagh tells the story on the Education Week Web site. Here are some pertinent paragraphs from his post:

Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal has quietly signed into law Senate Bill 733, which allows local education agencies to use supplemental classroom materials that will help students “analyze, critique, and review” scientific theories, including evolution.

...

The new law, titled the Louisiana Science Education Act, says that the state board of education shall “allow and assist” teachers and administrators who want to promote critical thinking of scientific theories “including, but not limited to, evolution, the origins of life, global warming, and human cloning.” The legislation goes on to state that while teachers are expected to teach the material presented in standard textbooks supplied by their school systems, they can supplement those materials with resources that help students “understand, analyze, critique, and review scientific theories in an objective manner” unless otherwise prohibited by the state.

...

A federal judge in Pennsylvania, in a landmark decision, ruled in 2005 that intelligent design was a religious concept, not a scientific one, and that the Dover, Pa., school district’s attempt to require that students be introduced to it was unconstitutional. One of the judge’s conclusions was that the Dover policy was singling out evolution for special scrutiny or criticism, when the theory is, in fact, one of the foundational principles in all of science.

...

In the time since the more recent Dover court fight, bills have emerged in several states that have sought to present critiques of evolution as a matter of “academic freedom.” So far those bills have not gathered the support necessary to make it into law, and they have drawn opposition from scientists, who see them as a backdoor way of promoting attacks on evolution in public school science classes.

Academic freedom in Texas

Yes, these chickens have come home to roost. *The Houston Post* reported on the tussle between science and religion that’s been going on for several weeks at the Texas Board of Education. Here is an excerpt from the *Post* report.

<http://www.ntsk skeptics.org/news/news2009-01-24.htm#academic>

AUSTIN — Science and religion collide on Wednesday when the State Board of Education takes a preliminary vote on curriculum standards that could impact

the teaching of evolution in Texas public schools for the next decade.

The argument hinges on a single word: weaknesses. A panel of science experts has recommended that teachers no longer be required to present the “strengths and weaknesses” of various theories, including evolution.

Instead, the proposed science curriculum standards would encourage students to use critical thinking, scientific reasoning and problem solving to analyze and evaluate scientific explanations.

Some parents and experts insist that the “weaknesses” of scientific theory be taught as a matter of academic freedom, scientific inquiry and a search for truth.

The Center for Science and Culture at the Discovery Institute is the premier booster for Intelligent Design, and Stephen C. Meyer is director and Senior Fellow. He is also a big proponent of “academic freedom,” and he commented on the Texas creationism hullabaloo, as reported in *The New York Times*.

<http://www.ntsk skeptics.org/news/news2009-01-24.htm#Meyer>

Stephen C. Meyer, an expert on the history of science and a director at the Discovery Institute, denied that the group advocated a Biblical version of creation. Rather, Mr. Meyer said, it is fighting for academic freedom and against what it sees as a fanatical loyalty to Darwin among biologists, akin to a secular religion.

Academic freedom everywhere

Kenneth Riden is a Richmond resident and former clergyman. Late last year he posted his assessment on Pal-Item.com. He considers that academic freedom requires removing restrictions to teaching alternatives to evolution (“Darwinism”).

<http://www.ntsk skeptics.org/news/news2009-01-01.htm#academic>

In the famous monkey trial for the freedom to teach evolution in the public schools, Clarence Darrow argued that it was “the height of bigotry” to teach only one view of the origin of life.

If so, then teachers today should have not only the freedom to teach evolution, but also to teach all relative scientific theories that contradict evolution. This is the argument behind academic freedom legislation now moving forward in several states calling for a science standard that would make “teaching the controversy” a required part of any science curriculum.

This would level the playing field and go a long way toward resolving the growing political and moral di-

vide in our nation. Many see the teaching of only one aspect of chemical evolution as reverse bigotry. It allows the use of tax-supported schools to force the acceptance and social practices of a conflicting one-sided world view on society against its will and right. This is what is broken in America that must be fixed if unity and tranquility are to be restored to our nation.

Also, for the first time in our nation's history, academic freedom would provide a wholly neutral classroom environment free from religious or antireligious overtones. Students could then begin to think freely and objectively about all aspects of evolution and take informed positions for or against based on the evidence fairly and accurately presented. And they would do so with the conscience knowledge that science has neither proved nor disproved evolution.

This would put the possibility of moral accountability on the table for serious consideration. I believe this alone would precipitate a renaissance of moral conscientiousness and accountability resulting in a new regard for life and human relationships and restore honor, unity, and pride to our nation.

Academic freedom with its call for fairness and integrity in the classroom is a national cause whose time has come. Parents and clergy must begin to step up to the plate, become fully informed on the relevant theories being taught in school, and assume total responsibility for the moral and spiritual development of their children.

But they must be allowed to do so without fear of their children being wrongly and unfairly taught in school that science has proved their faith false and their religious beliefs archaic. Surely all fair-minded persons, religious or otherwise could agree to such a tradeoff to right what is wrong in America and reunite our estranged society.

Mr. President-Elect, I commend you on your desire to improve education, reduce abortions, and to bring this nation together again. I do believe these are changes that matter most. To fix what is broken in America and restore moral accountability to our nation from the Oval Office, to the halls of Congress, to Wall Street, to Main Street (and its classrooms), and everywhere in between, we must change the divisive and unfair way evolution is taught in our public schools and in higher academia.

This would change the debate over our First Amendment right of religious liberty that our founding fathers considered to be the cornerstone of freedom, and which at the price of blood they assayed to preserve for all posterity by the single greatest legislative document ever conceived by mortal men The Constitution Of The United States Of America.

America's social ills and a failing economy are but symptoms. The disease is a lack of moral accountability and the bigotry of circumventing the rights and will of the American people by any means for any reason by any person or any group.

Riden seems to have invented yet another definition for bigotry. Given the opportunity, deciding to reject a demonstrably false and unreliable course of study is now bigotry. If this is to be called bigotry, then what is left that is not?

Having said that, Riden goes a little beyond and lets the cat out of the bag. He drops the hint that religious faith is at stake here. Whatever happened to the goal of teaching scientifically valid explanations?

Discovery Institute embraces academic freedom

Yes, I know. And the Taliban embraces women's rights.

In the boldest display of brass since "I am not a crook," the Discovery Institute made a point of striking back at ceremonies honoring Darwin.

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2009/02/discovery_institute_honors_cha.html

Discovery Institute Honors Charles Darwin With Academic Freedom Day

Discovery Institute today announced the launch of Academic Freedom Day in honor of Charles Darwin's 200th birthday on February 12, 2009.

"We're celebrating Charles Darwin's birthday by supporting what he supported: academic freedom," said Robert Crowther, Director of Communications at Discovery Institute. "Like Darwin, we recognize the importance of having an open and honest debate between evolution and intelligent design."

In his revolutionary *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin wrote, "A fair result can be obtained only by fully stating and balancing the facts and arguments on both sides of each question." This quote is the cornerstone of the Institute's Academic Freedom Day efforts.

The Institute's Center for Science and Culture is sponsoring Academic Freedom Day, assisting student groups, clubs, and individual students to organize Academic Freedom Day Events centered on Darwin's birthday and his fair-minded approach to freedom of inquiry.

These events will give students and youth workers a way to express their support for free speech and the right to debate the evidence for and against evolution.

In preparation for Academic Freedom Day, the CSC has launched academicfreedomday.com, a website where students and others will be equipped to support academic freedom and fight censorship in tangible ways, like signing the academic freedom petition on evolution, wearing Academic Freedom Day t-shirts, entering the academic freedom on evolution video and essay contest, screening movies like *Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed* starring Ben Stein and *Icons of Evolution*, and starting Intelligent Design and Evolution Awareness (IDEA) clubs.

"With the release of *Expelled* last year, we found that many young people want to know what they can do to stand up for academic freedom," Crowther explained. "Now we're equipping them to make a difference in science education across the country."

For more information on Academic Freedom Day, visit www.academicfreedomday.com.

Posted by Robert Crowther on February 4, 2009

I have a recurring dream. I dream the sun has come up, and the creationists have seen the light. They realize Intelligent Design is a hoax, and thousands of real scientists aren't making this stuff up. They close down their propaganda mill and get to work in laboratories doing real science.

And I have nothing to look forward to the rest of the day.

That's when I wake up screaming.

Fortunately for skeptics, it's only a dream. The fun continues next month.



Future Meeting Dates

21 March 2009

8 August 2009

18 April 2009

12 September 2009

16 May 2009

10 October 2009

13 June 2009

14 November 2009

11 July 2009

12 December 2009

Myth and circumstance

by Erling Beck

This month I went to a cousin's birthday party and during the evening I conversed about several topics that were of concern to my friends and family. Most of the things we talked about weren't problems that merit any time worrying about (are microwaves safe and should we worry about Teflon utensils when we cook our meals with them).

Later, I was asked to intervene again in the microwave safety discussion. A young and attractive suburban mother was a strong advocate against the use of microwaves. I tried to explain that the fear of microwaves is due to misinformation, that the energy is non-ionizing and the heating is the result of molecular friction. She listened politely and then declared, after I was done with my technical jargon, that she was still not convinced. Then someone said, "Hey! Can you believe that there are some people that don't want their kids to get vaccinated?"

This month has to be a very difficult one for the anti-vaccination movement. Good. They have done enough damage already. It has been known for a while that the paper that produced the MMR vaccine-Autism link was flawed and that more robust studies disproved it—a dozen of them. But now there are some allegations that data in the paper may have been faked.¹ This paper produced alarming consequences with the decline of vaccination rates. For example, the BBC has reported a rise of 36% in the number of measles cases in England and Wales for 2008.²

In the legal front there was another victory for reason. The vaccine court ruled that the scientific evidence did not support a link. The litigating families were divided into three categories according to their respective claims. The scientific and medical evidence prevailed and showed that there was no probable link in each of the three categories:³

1. MMR vaccine can combine with thimerosal-containing vaccines to cause autism
2. Thimerosal-containing vaccines can cause autism
3. MMR vaccines, without any link to thimerosal, can cause autism

The court victory is a Pyrrhic victory. Courts would not have to intervene if the media would support good science and stop fomenting fear mongering. The anti-vaccinationists have already started to spin their conspiracy theories, and let's not forget the great tragedy of the families that have children who suffer from autism—the causes are still not well understood by the medical community. The anti-vaccination protagonists are attributing harm to something that is not only harmless, but may

Skeptic Ink — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2009. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



be extremely necessary, as in the case of early childhood vaccines.

Later, I learned that the mother in the party was against vaccinating her children. I hope a person with better communication skills than I can convince her of the safety—the necessity—of vaccines for her children. □

References

1. MMR doctor Andrew Wakefield fixed data on autism.
http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/health/article5683671.ece
2. Rise in measles 'very worrying'.
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7872541.stm>
3. Vaccines didn't cause autism, court rules
<http://www.cnn.com/2009/HEALTH/02/12/autism.vaccines/index.html>

What's New

by Robert Park

ISS NODE 3: HOW ABOUT UNITY, HARMONY AND ROBOTICALLY?

The public is asked to pick a name for the third node of the International Space Station. "The name should reflect the spirit of exploration and cooperation embodied by the space station and follow in the tradition set by Node 1-Unity and Node 2-Harmony." Node 3 will house life support equipment like the unit that converts, uh, number one and number two to drinking water. Six rectangular windows and a circular over-head (sic)

window will provide an "unrivaled" view of Earth. In fact, the ISS is unsuited for high-resolution observations: Earth is half in the dark and the center of gravity is constantly shifting due to rotating machinery and astronauts bumping around. To always observe a full Earth in high resolution the observer must be a robot at the Lagrange-1 point. Putting astronauts on space stations is like putting little human tellers inside ATM machines. While we're at it, we could hang people up all over the place to snap surveillance photos. It would provide full employment.[WN Feb 20]

STIMULUS: \$21 BILLION OUT OF \$787 BILLION FOR SCIENCE.

If we got that big a fraction of the total federal budget we wouldn't know how to spend it, and we may not know how to spend this. It's great news, but science can't afford to screw up the allocation. Initially the bill ignored NSF completely; it wasn't the science lobbyists that got the numbers up, it was Republican Sen. Arlen Specter almost single handedly. (Sorry I was a little late but I was on the road.)[WN Feb 20]

AUTISM: A SPECIAL FEDERAL COURT EXONERATES VACCINES.

On Thursday, three special masters demolished arguments that childhood vaccines, MMR in particular, cause autism. Brian Deer reported in the *Sunday Times* of London that Dr. Andrew Wakefield, the British physician who set off the vaccine panic, "manipulated and altered data" (also known as "lying") in a 1998 *Lancet* paper. The scientific case has been eloquently made by Paul A. Offit, *Autism's False Prophets*, (Columbia University Press, 2008), who donated all royalties to autism research.[WN Feb 13] □

Bob Park can be reached via email at whatsnew@bobpark.org

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

FIRST CLASS

Address Correction Requested

Application for Membership

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
E-Mail address _____
Home Phone _____ Work Phone _____
Occupation _____
Special expertise and/or interests _____

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Membership agreement:

Yes, I agree with your purposes in exploring paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible and scientific point of view, and while I do not endorse the a priori rejection of paranormal phenomena and pseudoscientific claims, I believe that such claims must be subjected to the fair and systematic testing which rational enquiry demands.

Signature _____ Date _____

Indicate your choice:

Member: A voting member and newsletter recipient. Family privileges included.
Annual dues \$35.00

Newsletter recipient: No membership privileges. Annual subscription rate \$15.00

Receive a \$5 discount on either of the two newsletter subscription levels above by choosing to receive your newsletter by e-mail only.

Introduce a friend to *The North Texas Skeptic*: Let us send a **FREE** three-month gift subscription of *The Skeptic* to this individual (or institution).

Enclosed is a tax-deductible donation to The North Texas Skeptics in the amount of \$ _____.

Bill me: Please bill me for the choices I have made above.

www.ntsketics.org