



The North Texas

Skeptic

Volume 24

October 2010

Number 10

<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

Conservapedia

by John Blanton

It might be wiki, but it's not Wikipedia. It may not even be a pedia. It's Conservapedia.

Suppose you have a science book, and you can never work the problems at the end of the chapter. Suppose, again, that you are a book publisher. The temptation is great. You have power.

You can write your own book, and you can edit the solutions in the back of the book to match your own. You can be a contender!

Now you get the idea behind Conservapedia.

I don't know when it first came about that conservative politics and a conservative outlook on life diverged from physical reality, but Conservapedia seems designed to meet this need. Some with a conservative bent find it more convenient to bend reality rather than to deflect their world view.

You can find Conservapedia at <http://www.conservapedia.com>. Check it out. Here is a choice entry:¹

The theory of **evolution** is a naturalistic theory of the history of life on earth (this refers to the theory of evolution which employs methodological naturalism and is taught in schools and universities). Merriam-Webster's dictionary gives the following definition of evolution: "a theory that the various types of animals and plants have their origin in other preexisting types and that the distinguishable differences are due to modifications in successive generations..."^[2] Currently, there are several theories of evolution. Since World War II a majority of the most prominent and vocal defenders of the evolutionary position which employs methodological naturalism have been atheists.^[3] In 2007, "Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture...announced that over 700 scientists from around the world have now signed a statement expressing their skepticism about the contemporary theory of Darwinian evolution."^[4] In June of 2010, Creation Ministries International launched their "Question evolution" campaign. Creationist high

EVENTS CALENDAR

October program

Saturday, October 16
2 p.m.
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

Potpourri

AltMed, spontaneous human combustion, ghost hunters.
John Brandt will present a potpourri of skeptical stories.

NTS board meeting and social dinner

Saturday, October 23,
at 7:00 p.m.

Ryan's
909 Tripp Road
Mesquite, TX 75150

If you plan to attend, please call.
We sometimes cancel or change these events.

214.335.9248

North Texas Skeptics

Officers

President ····· John Brandt
 Vice President ····· Mike Selby
 Secretary ····· David Price
 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,
 Prasad Golla, Claudia Meek, Barbara Neuser,
 David Price and Mike Selby

Directors Emeritus Tony Dousette, Ron Hastings,
 Jack Hittson, Mark Meyer, Curtis Severns,
 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
 © 2010 by North Texas Skeptics.

school students are going to wear “Question evolution”
 t-shirts to their high schools and Bible believing churches are
 going to encourage them to do so.[5]

In all these excerpts I have left in the footnote references. The reader
 will need to go to Conservapedia and follow the links.

Take a look. No longer is evolution defined as the best and most re-
 liable explanation for biological diversity. It is merely this and little
 more:²

Evolution (also known as **biological evolution**, **genetic evo-
 lution** and **organic evolution**)[1][2] is the change in the in-
 herited traits of a population of organisms through successive
 generations.[3]

Here is another sample:³

Dr. **Jonathan Wells** is a biologist who objects to the way
 evolution is taught in America. His book, *Icons of Evolution*,
 criticizes ten major distortions of science which evolution ad-
 vocates and especially biology textbooks use to support stan-
 dard evolutionary theory.

No longer is *Icons of Evolution* a creationism apologetic that has
 been heavily debunked by mainstream scientists, and no longer is there
 any question about the ten icons. These icons *really are* “distortions of
 science.” Conservapedia says so.

That entry links to Wells’ book.⁴

Icons of Evolution is a book by Jonathan Wells which argues
 that “the best-known “evidences” for Darwin’s theory have
 been exaggerated, distorted or even faked.”[1][2][3][4]

Wells explains his title in the book’s introduction:

These examples are so frequently used as evidence for Dar-
 win’s theory that most of them have been called “icons” of
 evolution. Yet all of them, in one way or another, misrep-
 sent the truth. (p. 7)

No question about it. These examples “frequently used as evidence
 for Darwin’s theory” all “misrepresent the truth.” Isn’t it great to be a
 publisher?

Wikipedia has its own entry for Conservapedia:⁵

Conservapedia is an English-language wiki project written
 from an American conservative Christian viewpoint. It uses
 editorials and a wiki-based system to generate content. It was
 started in 2006 by home schoolteacher and attorney Andy
 Schlafly, son of conservative Catholic activist Phyllis
 Schlafly,[3][4] to counter what he called the liberal bias of
 Wikipedia.[5][6] The project has generally received negative
 reactions from the mainstream media, as well as from various
 figures from both ends of the political spectrum, including

commentators and journalists.[7][8][9][10][11] It has been criticized for bias and inaccuracies.[10][12][13]

We have previously touched on the Sternberg affaire. Two years ago we gave Richard Sternberg a fairly rough ride on these pages, because, despite assertions to the contrary, it would appear his expulsion as depicted in the *Expelled* video was greatly exaggerated.⁶

Conservapedia serves to rehabilitate:⁷

Dr. Sternberg became the victim of retaliation by evolutionists after he allowed the publication as managing editor of an article by an advocate of intelligent design in a scientific publication,[2] despite the fact that Dr. Sternberg followed all the standard peer review procedures for publication in the journal, the "Proceedings of the Biological Society."^[3] Three qualified scientists, all of whom are evolutionary and molecular biologists teaching at well-known institutions, approved the paper. The Journal issued a statement in which it stated that "The Council, which includes officers, elected councilors, and past presidents, and the associate editors would have deemed the paper inappropriate for the pages of the Proceedings because the subject matter represents such a significant departure from the nearly purely systematic content for which this journal has been known throughout its 122-year history". [4]

Expelled gets a much better trip in the pages of Conservapedia than it gets anywhere in mainstream journalism or in the halls of academia:⁸

The film clearly shows that scientists and educators who promote intelligent design are persecuted by the scientific establishment.[7] Examples given by the film include Richard Sternberg, a biologist, journal editor, and research associate at the National Museum of Natural History, and Guillermo Gonzalez, a pro-intelligent design astrophysicist denied tenure at Iowa State University in 2007.[5]

There is a temptation to extrapolate on this trend by Conservapedia to treat creationism favorably. However, a quick glance through relevant pages shows little in the way of overt support for creationism outside the realm of Intelligent Design. For example, the entry related to Big Bang cosmology is fairly straight-forward, if brief. To be sure, young-Earth creationism does not receive the rough treatment in Conservapedia that it can expect almost everywhere else.

The correlation between political conservatism and anti-intellectualism has been observed before. We are not shocked when a conservative talk show host gives a free pass to some guest espousing creationism. Ann Coulter's book *God-*

less: The Church of Liberalism drips in scathing commentary directed at the science behind biological evolution.

The conservatism correlation is not pure, however. If we are free to separate *social* conservatives from *fiscal* conservatives, then the relationship starts to fragment. Social conservatives tend to embrace a fundamental religiosity that cannot tolerate the godless nature of modern science. Fiscal conservatives are not necessarily bound to the social conservatives' spiritual world view, but they do tend to hold hands with the socials in those cases where scientific research points toward curtailing profitable business practices. For example, the science behind global warming would get hardly any notice from fiscal conservatives were it not for the implication that business as usual needs to change.

And since nature does not see fit to supply anybody's needed facts, Conservapedia was created to fill the gap. We hope you will read and enjoy.



References

- 1 <http://www.conservapedia.com/Evolution>
- 2 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evolution>
- 3 http://www.conservapedia.com/Jonathan_Wells
- 4 http://www.conservapedia.com/Icons_of_Evolution
- 5 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conservapedia>
- 6 <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2008/2008june/june2008.htm#expelled>
- 7 http://conservapedia.com/Richard_Sternberg
- 8 <http://conservapedia.com/Expelled>

Future Meeting Dates

- **16 October (NTS program meeting)**
- **23 October (NTS social dinner)**
- **13 November (NTS program meeting)**
- **20 November (NTS social dinner)**

Designs on SMU

by John Blanton

The promised Intelligent Design tea party at SMU came off on schedule in September. Billed as “Four Nails in Darwin’s Coffin,” the festival promised “...four new arguments against Darwin’s theory will be revealed...” Also promised was a showing of the creationist video *Darwin’s Dilemma* and presentations by creationists Douglas Axe, Stephen Meyer, Richard Sternberg and Jonathan Wells. A period for questions and answers followed the presentations. The event was “sponsored and organized by SMU’s Victory Campus Ministries.”¹

Victory Campus Ministries seems to be a religious student organization at SMU, and their sponsorship brings up the recurring suggestion that Intelligent Design is favored more by religious belief than by hard science. The Seattle-based Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture (CSC) is the main driver behind the Intelligent Design movement in this country, and the CSC’s continued insistence that Intelligent Design is motivated by scientific rigor is regularly undercut by its association with religious organizations and by public comments coming from principals of the CSC.²

Occasional statements from the CSC attempt to put across the idea that an anti-religious bias fuels opposition to Intelligent Design. However, an examination of the real world presents a clearer picture. This country has a number of prominent colleges and universities that are founded and supported by main stream Christian religious sects. These include SMU, Baylor, TCU and Brigham Young. Evolution is taught and strongly supported in the science departments of these institutions, and Intelligent Design is regularly shown the door.

The CSC previously held their *Darwin vs. Design* conference at SMU in April 2007. At the time the creationists offered to debate SMU scientists, but this fabulous gift was declined. Instead, several of the SMU profs penned an op-ed piece in *The Dallas Morning News* expressing their disdain for creationism in any disguise. They explained, in part:³

This country has a number of prominent colleges and universities that are founded and supported by main stream Christian religious sects. These include SMU, Baylor, TCU and Brigham Young. Evolution is taught and strongly supported in the science departments of these institutions, and Intelligent Design is regularly shown the door.

In the 150-odd years since Charles Darwin started us thinking about such things, no scientific David has yet been found that can slay Darwin’s Goliath.

As predicted, the CSC worked to exploit the luster of its association with this respected university. Following the event, the CSC’s *Evolution News* blog site carried the headline “**Standing Room Only Crowd Treated to Serious Discussion of the Scientific Demise of Darwinism.**”

The post was short on details, but it did provide the following:⁴

What do hox genes, gene duplication, evo-devo and ontogenetic information all have in common? They were among the subjects raised—in some detail—by audience members during the Q&A portion of *4 Nails in Darwin’s Coffin: New Challenges to Darwinian Evolution* event at SMU last night.

Since I was unable to attend the presentation, I will have to rely on second hand reports from Skeptics who were there. Possibly the CSC will post a transcript. In that case, there will be additional details for your enjoyment and entertainment in a future issue.

The NTS previously reviewed the keynote video *Darwin’s Dilemma*. Check out the newsletter item and follow the links to additional comments from real scientists.⁵

John Blanton is NTS Web Master □

References

- 1 http://www.evolutionnews.org/2010/09/four_nails_in_darwins_coffin_p038471.html
- 2 Victory Campus Ministries has a descriptive Web site at <http://www.smupulse.com/>
- 3 http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/dn/opinion/viewpoints/stories/DN-wise_05edi.ART.State.Edition1.44e6403.html
- 4 http://www.evolutionnews.org/2010/09/sro_crowd_treated_to_serious_d038641.html
- 5 See the review in the July 2010 newsletter here: <http://www.ntskeptics.org/2010/2010july/july2010.htm>

SMU professors speak out against Darwin presentation

by John Blanton

Following the presentation on Intelligent Design by the creationist Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture (CSC), eight Southern Methodist university (SMU) professors penned an op-ed piece for the SMU *Campus Daily.com*. They had the following to say, and more:¹

Last Thursday evening, the SMU community witnessed another dishonest attempt to present a particular form of religion as science, entitled “4 Nails in Darwin’s Coffin: New Challenges to Darwinian Evolution”. It was designed and presented by Seattle’s Discovery Institute (and its subsidiary the Biologic Institute). This was a follow-up to their equally dishonest 2007 presentation “Darwin vs. Design”.

So much for mealy-mouth college professors struggling to make a point. They went on to note they “were outraged by the dishonesty of Thursday’s presentation, but not entirely surprised by it.” Neither were we (surprised). We have been tracking these people who now compose the CSC since 1992. In March of that year SMU hosted a conference titled *Darwinism: Science or Philosophy*. Sponsors included the Foundation for Thought and Ethics (FTE) and the Dallas Christian Leadership. FTE is the group that publishes the creationist text *Of Pandas and People* and is a long-time supporter of Intelligent Design. Many of the creationists who participated in 1992 conference went on to form the kernel of today’s CSC.

The SMU piece is signed by the following:

- Edward Countryman · · · · · History
- Justin Fisher · · · · · Philosophy
- Randall Scalise · · · · · Physics
- Steven Sverdlik · · · · · Philosophy
- John Ubelaker · · · · · Biology
- Pia Vogel · · · · · Biology
- Ronald Wetherington · · · · Anthropology
- John Wise · · · · · Biology

“4 Nails” in Professor Response

The sponsor of the creationist presentation at SMU was PULSE. PULSE also goes by the name of *Victory Campus Ministries*.²

Jerret Sykes heads up PULSE at SMU, and he had his own response to the professors’ posting.³

This past Monday, eight different SMU faculty members submitted an opinion article entitled “SMU professors speak out against Darwin presentation.” They argued that the presentation “4 Nails in Darwin’s Coffin: New Challenges to Darwinian Evolution” put on by Discovery Institute (DI), was a “dishonest attempt to present a particular form of religion and science.” This allegation was then followed by a few dishonest, misunderstood and slightly biased claims of their own.

This is good. It appears the gloves have come off, and we are through pussy-footing around this matter of Intelligent Design pseudo science. We hope to hear more about this matter.

Jerret made four points in his posting, including the claim that these CSC creationists are not pseudo scientists. He provided an e-mail address, and I took the opportunity to invite further comment. I said, in part:

I am the Web master and also on the board of directors of The North Texas Skeptics. My job is often to respond to public statements related to creationism, astrology, psychic powers and similar matters.

I picked up on your response to the op-ed piece by the SMU professors published in *Daily Campus.com*, and I am going to have some comments about the event, the professors’ response and your response.

I commented on Jerret’s assertion that CSC fellows are not pseudo scientists, and I emphasized the obvious correlation between acceptance of Intelligent Design and religious faith. I concluded:

Unless convinced otherwise, I will point out to my readers the fact that ID really has a religious basis and only a somewhat negative relationship to real science.

If you care to contribute a view point we will be willing to publish it.

Hopefully we will be able to print something from Jerret Sykes in a future issue.



References

- 1 See the piece on our Skeptical News page at <http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2010-10-03#smu>
- 2 <http://www.smupulse.com>
- 3 Jerret's response is here: <http://www.ntskeptics.org/news/news2010-10-03#nails>

The facts of life

Could an organization dedicated to a biblical interpretation of biological origins, Earth geology and cosmology develop a serious program of science education? Furthermore, if such a thing were attempted, would anybody outside a small circle give the whole enterprise a second look? Sometimes in a great while the obvious answer is the correct one.

We previously reported on the attempt by the Institute for Creation Research (ICR) to obtain state accreditation for a Master of Science degree at its new Dallas headquarters. After succeeding in a similar endeavor at its previous home in Santee, California, the ICR relocated and attempted to set up shop in like manner here in Dallas. The Texas Commissioner of Higher Education rejected the ICR's request, and the ICR sued. As we reported, a federal judge rejected their request, in strong terms.¹

Most recently, reality has set in. The ICR has faced up to the facts of life and has ended its futile quest. On the ICR Web site Henry Morris III, in more words than necessary, has pulled up tent stakes:²

ICR will have more to say on the ramifications of these issues next month. However, please know that, while ICR's legal battle is over, we will not retreat from other public efforts to fight the "Dragon" and his minions. The battle is raging as never before. Evangelicals are intimidated by anti-Christian court victories. Pastors are running from the controversy, and errant "evangelical" groups like the

BioLogos Foundation are funded by evolutionists, which emboldens them to attack those who hold fast to the inerrant Word.

The ICR will continue its evangelical mission, and its School of Biblical Apologetics will continue to offer appropriate degrees. These degrees do not require any sort of accreditation. □

References

- 1 http://www.ntskeptics.org/2010/2010july/july2010.htm#_Level_of_competence
- 2 <http://www.icr.org/article/5527/>
The National Center for Science Education has a more comprehensive item on this story at <http://ncse.com/news/2010/09/icr-concedes-defeat-over-its-graduate-school-006160>

I am a native Texan. My father was a native Texan. My grandfather was a native Texas. His mother, my great grandmother, was a native Texan. So there are some things that sort of bring a lump to my throat. Maybe not the fondest kind of lump:

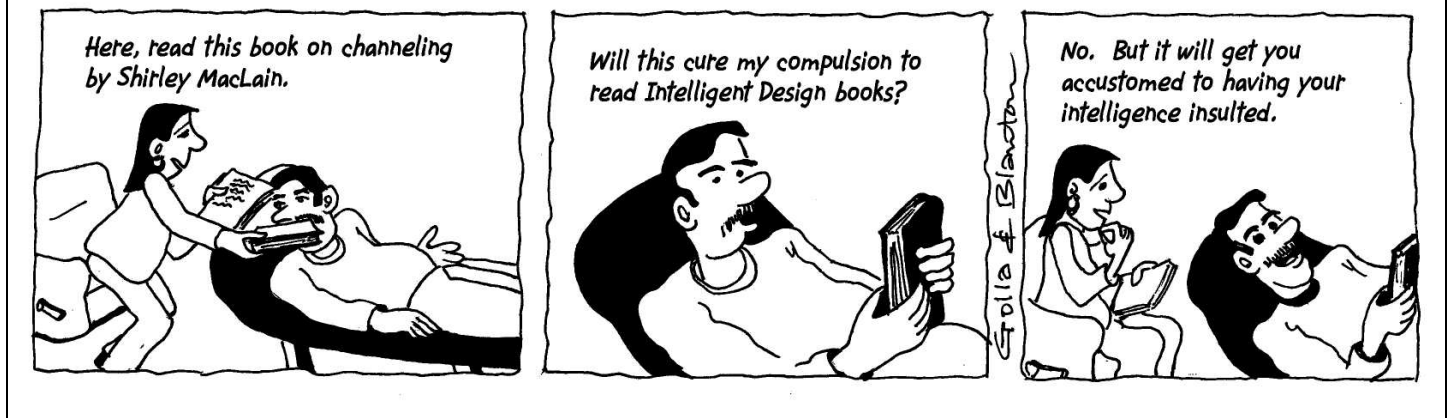
"I am a firm believer in intelligent design as a matter of faith and intellect, and I believe it should be presented in schools alongside the theories of evolution. The State Board of Education has been charged with the task of adopting curriculum requirements for Texas public schools and recently adopted guidelines that call for the examination of all sides of a scientific theory, which will encourage critical thinking in our students, an essential learning skill."

Rick Perry, Governor of Texas

Enough said.

John Blanton
Skeptical Web master

Skeptic Ink — by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2010. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



What's new

By Robert Park

[Robert Park publishes the What's New column at <http://www.bobpark.org/http://www.bobpark.org/>]

E-news: Is it news, or is it entertainment?

Print news seems headed for extinction, displaced by virtually instantaneous e-news. E-news comes to us from all over the world by way of satellite communications and is relayed by hundreds of TV channels, Google, Wikipedia, countless blogs, cell phones, smart phones, tweets, etc. Most of these sources don't even have an editor. Timely information is important, but some of it is simply wrong. Is this part of some sinister plan? There is no plan. Trust me, E-news sources simply evolve. It's remarkably similar to Darwinian evolution. Science creates mutations in the form of new communications devices, and the public does the "natural selection" by deciding which devices they prefer. The public, however, often prefers to be entertained rather than informed. Thus it is that the respected news industry is being subsumed within the entertainment industry. In the Age of Science more news time by far is devoted to celebrity gossip.

Conservapedia: countering the liberal bias of Wikipedia.

An English-language wiki project written from an American conservative- Christian viewpoint, Conservapedia was started in 2006 by home school teacher and attorney Andy Schlafly, son of conservative Catholic activist Phyllis Schlafly, to counter what he calls "the liberal bias of Wikipedia." The extent of my own liberal bias can be judged by the fact that I was unaware of Conservapedia until it was pointed out to me by a WN reader

last week. He was calling my attention to conservative hatred of Einstein and his theory of Relativity. As Conservapedia put it: "The theory of relativity is a mathematical system that allows no exceptions. It is heavily promoted by liberals who like its encouragement of relativism and its tendency to mislead people in how they view the world." This hopeless confusion of physical theory with Christian-conservative moral values extends to a list of 28 counterexamples.

Stephen Hawking: his brilliant theory of how to market a book.

Send copies to all the pompous nincompoops it will offend. That's it! They will sell it for you. BBC News today [Sept 3] published their reactions to Hawking's new book in which he says that science can explain the origin of the universe without invoking God. This is "naturalism," the dominant philosophy of science in the 21st century. It restates the first law of science discovered by Thales of Miletus in 585 BC: for every observable effect, there is a physical cause. I don't have Hawking's book, so I don't know exactly how he said it, but I would have preferred to say: "invoking God would not help me to explain the origin of the universe." Hawking explains that the existence of gravity means the universe created itself from nothing. The first offended pompous nincompoop was Chief Rabbi Lord Sacks in the *Times*: "What would we do for entertainment without scientists telling us with breathless excitement that God did not create the universe as if they were the first to discover this astonishing proposition." Yes, and did you learn anything?

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

The North Texas Skeptics, P.O. Box 111794, Carrollton, Texas 75011-1794 (214) 335-9248

Indicate your choice:

Member: A voting member and print newsletter recipient. Family privileges included. Annual \$50.00

Member: E-mail version only. Same as above, but newsletter is delivered by e-mail. Annual \$30.00

Newsletter recipient: No membership privileges. Annual subscription for print edition is \$25.00

Non-member: Who chooses to receive just the e-mail version. Annual subscription \$10.00

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 \$_____.

www.ntskeptics.org