



The North Texas

Skeptic

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<http://www.ntskeptics.org>

The end of the world

by John Blanton

It's about that time again.

The end of the world, that is. The EoW seems to come around from time to time. There seems to be no end to it. The world, that is. If The World had the staying power of the EoW, nobody would be worrying about the EoW.

We've seen it before. We can start with Ezekiel. Wikipedia has a good description. According to the Talmud, Ezekiel "prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple." He apparently did this on a regular basis but never got the date right (it was about 587 BCE).

William Miller prophesied the second coming of Christ. A good account is again to be found on Wikipedia. See the references.

In 1822 Miller said Christ would return "on or before 1843." None of Miller's predicted dates ever panned out and his early large following eventually thinned out. The Seventh Day Adventist Church derives from the surviving Millerites.

So much for the past.

We come now to the 21st century, in which we now find ourselves the beneficiaries of millennia of intellectual progress. And Rome goes bananas over an arcane earthquake prediction.

Raffaele Bendandi was a real scientist, and around 80 to ninety years ago he promoted the notion that the positions of the sun and the planets could foretell earthquakes. Mussolini honored him at the time. Bendandi died in 1979, but his ideas linger.

As 11 May approached this year, thousands of people in Rome prepared for a predicted earthquake. BBC has reported that "there has been an 18% increase in the number of city employees in Rome applying to take the day off."

There was a slight problem with this predicted earthquake. Apparently Bendandi never predicted an earthquake for 11 May of this year.

EVENTS CALENDAR

June Program

Saturday, June 18, at 2:00 p.m.
Center for Community Cooperation
2900 Live Oak St.
Dallas

The NTS will host a Skype presentation. The topic has not been decided at publication time.

Board Meeting and Social Dinner

Saturday, June 25, at 7:00 p.m.

NTS social dinners tend to be enlightening with lively discussion on any number of controversial topics. Come out and meet the skeptics. You can join up at the meeting.

Check back on our Web site for the location of the June meeting.

<http://ntskeptics.org/>

214-335-9248

it's 21 October, and it's the real thing. People are not going to just disappear. This is going to be the real EoW.

I stop here to remind readers that the NTS is not an anti-religious organization. We are not here to debunk people's faith, which for many is the basis of morality. It's when religious belief crosses the line into the physical world that the NTS gets interested. A few examples would include creationism, faith healing and reincarnation.

Harold Camping's tomfoolery would be another example. And it's not Camping that we target. It is those believers who cross the line that divides privately-held notions and potential self-destruction that gain our interest. There are a number of roads to ruin, and allowing somebody else to do one's thinking is one of the lowest.

We think of the Heaven's Gate cult of 14 years ago and, worse, the Jonestown tragedy of 1978. Closer to home was the self-immolation of the Branch Davidian cult of 1993. In all instances people abandoned a real-world view in return for a certain amount of mental comfort. To the extent people naturally need some level of reassurance outside their own selves, some of this reliance may be unavoidable. The process seems to go awry when people narrow their focus and lose sight of physical reality.

The most an organization like the NTS can do is to act as a catalyst that constantly puts out a different message, a signal that reason and self assessment will assist in seeing the true picture. People may argue about what constitutes the "true picture," but a good assessment is that a view from reality points the way from self-destruction. The fate of the Heaven's Gate cult provides a sharp picture of self-delusion and destructive thinking. Members packed their bags and took poison as they prepared to meet a spacecraft that was following the comet Hale-Bopp. Their bags were discovered near their bodies, still packed and ready for the imagined trip.

Back to earthquake predictions. It appears Bendandi got a better deal. More recently seismologists in Italy are being charged with manslaughter for failing to predict a fatal earthquake last year.

Seismologists and a government official from Italy are being tried for manslaughter after failing to alert citizens of the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake that killed approximately 300 people.

Those being tried are six seismologists and one government official who did not warn citizens of the L'Aquila earthquake in time, which took place on April 6, 2009. The seismologists are responsible for assessing the risk of an earthquake occurring in a certain area.

I guess the moral is "Do your job, stay out of trouble."



References:

For Wikipedia's take on Ezekiel, see

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ezekiel>.

For Wikipedia on William Miller see

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Millerites>

The eBible Fellowship site is at

<http://www.ebiblefellowship.com/outreach/tracts/may21/>

For the *LA Times* story see

<http://articles.latimes.com/2011/may/22/local/la-me-rapture-20110522>

For the latest from Italy see this:

<http://www.dailytech.com/Italian+Seismologists+Tried+for+Manslaughter+in+LAquila+Earthquake+Disaster/article21753.htm>

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.

This is a special public education tomfoolery edition of Web News.

The National Center for Science Education (NCSE) has been tracking the Louisiana anti-evolution (translate that to *anti-science*) law. Here is a little background.

In 2008 Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal signed into law the so-called Louisiana Science Education Act. This law stipulates, in part:

The State Board of Elementary and Secondary Education, upon request of a city, parish, or other local public school board, shall allow and assist teachers, principals, and other school administrators to create and foster an environment within public elementary and secondary schools that promotes critical thinking skills, logical analysis, and open and objective discussion of scientific theories being studied including, but not limited to, evolution, the origins of life, global warming, and human cloning.

Such assistance shall include support and guidance for teachers regarding effective ways to help students understand, analyze, critique, and objectively review scientific theories being studied, including those enumerated in Paragraph (1) of this Subsection.

The keen reader will have already spotted the significant phrases in the first paragraph. For the others I will enumerate. They are *origins of life*, *global warming* and *human cloning*. These are topics of intense interest in national and local politics. What we have here is an attempt to manipulate science education to promote a favored viewpoint. This is not science.

Jindal, the state of Louisiana and those who promoted this item came in for some not so good-natured attention. As the NCSE told the story at the time:

Bill Barrow of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* broke the story on June 27, 2008, observing that "Gov. Bobby Jindal attracted national attention and strongly worded advice about how he should deal with the Louisiana Science Education Act," and that he "ignored those calling for a veto and this week signed the law that will allow local school boards to approve supplemental materials for public school science classes as they discuss evolution, cloning and global warming."

Not surprising, this law found little support in the scientific community. In fact, it found none if you discount the proclamations of the pseudo scientific Discovery Institute Center for Science and Culture (CSC). The NCSE continued their coverage with mention of that esteemed body of creationists:

Discovery Institute vice-president John West insisted that the bill would not be used for such purposes. "This bill is not a license to propagandize against something they don't like in science," West told the *Times-Picayune*. "Someone who uses materials to inject religion into the classroom is not only violating the Constitution, they are violating the bill."

Neither did the bill sit well with reasonable folks in Louisiana, of which there turned out to be many. The culmination this year has been a broad-based movement to take down this public embarrassment. The NCSE summarizes in their free weekly newsletter:

Continuing support for Louisiana repeal effort

Adding their support for the effort to repeal Louisiana's antievolution law are the New Orleans City Council and the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Senate Bill 70, would, if enacted, repeal Louisiana Revised Statutes 17:285.1, which implemented the so-called Louisiana Science Education Act, passed and enacted in 2008. The American Institute for Biological Sciences, the American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology, the American

Society for Cell Biology, the Louisiana Association of Biology Educators, the Louisiana Science Teachers Association, the National Association of Biology Teachers, and the Society for the Study of Evolution together with the Society of Systematic Biologists and the American Society of Naturalists, as well as forty-three Nobel laureates, have already endorsed SB 70.

At its May 5, 2011, meeting, the New Orleans City Council unanimously passed Resolution R-11-207, supporting SB 70. According to the summary of the council's meeting, "This act [the LSEA] undermines the teaching of the scientific theory of evolution in the Louisiana public school science curriculum. This theory of evolution is a widely and commonly accepted scientific study and the basis for biology, medicine, biochemistry, agriculture, ecology and other scientific studies." Council member Gisleson Palmer was quoted as saying, "The Louisiana Science Education Act inhibits science focused students of all ages and inadequately prepares them for jobs in the science field. With the New Orleans Medical Corridor poised for tremendous growth, this law also profoundly impacts our ability to fill jobs in the cutting-edge science fields with students educated in our state's public schools."

In a letter to the sponsor of SB 70, Karen Carter Peterson (D-District 5), dated April 19, 2011, the American Association for the Advancement of Science's chief executive officer Alan I. Leshner wrote, "I write in support of your effort to repeal the Louisiana Science Education Act (LSEA). The LSEA features language that could be used for the insertion of religious or unscientific views in science classrooms. The bill disingenuously implies that particular theories, including evolution, are controversial among scientists. In reality, the science of evolution underpins all of modern biology. The principles behind it have been tested and retested for decades, and it is supported by tens of thousands of scientific studies. Evolution informs scientific research in a broad range of fields such as agriculture and medicine, work that has an important impact on our everyday lives."

For the summary of the New Orleans City Council's meeting, visit:
<http://www.nolacitycouncil.com/news/meetingsummary.asp?id={D5BF04A0-905F-4FAA-B525-9142A973504F}#story7>

For the letter from the AAAS's Alan I. Leshner (PDF), visit:
http://lasciencecoalition.org/docs/AAAS_LSEA_Repeal_4.19.11.pdf

And for NCSE's previous coverage of events in Louisiana, visit:
<http://ncse.com/news/louisiana>

The NCSE newsletter is thoroughly enlightening and is a must-read for all interested in the creationist movement,

regardless of which side you are on. See the link below for information on how to obtain your subscription.

Meanwhile, in Texas, the government is having its own fun with science and politics. The Texas Politics blog had this to say about two of the governor's science and education appointments:

Gov. Rick Perry's appointments of John Bradley as head of the Forensic Science Commission and Gaile Lowe as State Board of Education chair are officially toast, Senate Nominations Chairman Bob Deuell, R-Greenville said.

Lowe was first elected to the State Board of Education in 2002. She had previously served on the Lampasas (Texas) Independent School Board of Trustees and was involved in school volunteer work. She was also a charter member of the Lampasas Republican Women, and seemed to view her participation on the State Board of Education as an opportunity to inject conservative politics into Texas Schools. Two years ago the Huffington Post published a diagnosis of Lowe's agenda:

**Gail Lowe: Perry Picks
Creationist To Run State
Education Board**

**The Huffington Post Rachel
Weiner**

**First Posted: 07/12/09 10:19
AM**

Updated: 08/12/09 05:12 AM

Texas Gov. Rick Perry (R) has chosen Gail Lowe, an outspoken creationist, to run the state's Board of Education.

It was actually the less controversial choice. Cynthia

Dunbar, reportedly under consideration for the post, believed government should be guided by a "biblical litmus test" and thought public education was a "subtly deceptive tool of perversion." (She home-schooled her own children.) She has also endorsed conspiracy theories suggesting President Obama is not a natural-born citizen.

Lowe, on the other hand, thinks evolution should be taught and "kids ought to be able to hold religious beliefs and still study science without any conflict." But in 2008, she took the position that "biology textbooks which do not teach both the scientific strengths and weaknesses of the theory of evolution must be rejected by the board." She has voted against new textbooks that do not contain those "weaknesses." She is a newspaper editor, not a teacher.

Lowe will replace Don McLeroy, another self-described creationist and dentist whose reappointment was blocked

by Democrats. He had been chairman of the board since 2007 and will remain a member.

Don McLeroy is a story unto himself. He has been on the Board since 1998. In 2007 Governor Perry appointed McLeroy as chairman and again in 2009. However, by 2009 even the Republican Texas Senate had enough of McLeroy's foolish antics and rejected the nomination. Wikipedia provides a description that is typical of McLeroy:

In 2005, McLeroy conducted a sermon in his church, talking about the Board of Education, saying naturalism is "the enemy" and he said: "Why is Intelligent Design the big tent? Because we're all lined up against the fact that naturalism, that nature is all there is. Whether you're a progressive creationist, recent creationist, young earth, old earth, it's all in the tent of Intelligent Design." [16] An mp3 of the sermon remains online [7] as well as McLeroy's powerpoint [17] and notes. [18]

If you think you have had enough of creationist foolishness, you need no longer feel alone. Apparently even conservative politicians are growing weary of campaigning uphill in order to coddle to this down market constituency.

*Apparently even
conservative politicians
are growing weary of
campaigning uphill in order
to coddle to this down
market constituency.*

Across the country we are seeing success from a determined movement of advocates for real science. In Florida the Florida Citizens for Science is "a diverse group of concerned parents, educators [and] employers" organized to "defend and promote good science, especially in the public school classroom." The Louisiana Coalition for Science "is a group of concerned Louisiana residents working to protect the teaching of science in Louisiana." The "Texas Freedom Network is a

nonpartisan, grassroots organization of more than 45,000 religious and community leaders. Based in Austin, the Texas Freedom Network acts as the state's watchdog, monitoring far-right issues, organizations, money and leaders. The organization has been instrumental in defeating initiatives backed by the religious right in Texas, including private school vouchers and textbook censorship at the Texas State Board of Education."

NTS members in Texas can work with the TFN through donations and by joining. See the link below for an introduction. You can also observe from the sidelines by subscribing to the TFN newsletter. It is mailed out five times a week and typically features a hilarious "Quote of the Day." If you enjoy the antics of home-grown and other creationist crazies, then some of these quotes will make your day.



References:

Please see a copy of the Louisiana Science Education Act at the following link:

<http://www.legis.state.la.us/billdata/streamdocument.asp?did=482728>

You can follow NCSE's coverage of this story at this link:

<http://ncse.com/news/2008/06/louisiana-governor-signs-creationist-bill-001437>

Subscribe to the NCSE weekly newsletter:

<http://ncse.com/ncse-news-list>

The NCSE appreciates your membership and your support:

<http://ncse.com/join>

Here is a link to the Texas Politics blog:

<http://blog.chron.com/texaspolitics/>

You can find Rachel Weiner's post at the following link:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/07/12/gail-lowe-perry-picks-cre_n_230167.html

The Texas Freedom Network carries a critique of Lowe's public service at this link:

<http://tfninsider.org/2008/10/08/gail-lowe-straight-talker/>

Wikipedia's entry for Don McLeroy is here:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Don_McLeroy

The footnotes in the McLeroy article relate to an article in The Texas Observer:

<http://www.texasobserver.org/blog/index.php/2007/08/03/missing-links/>

McLeroy's sermon MP3:

http://www.grace-bible.org/downloads/sermons/Intelligent_Design/DM05404_Intelligent_Design_Theory_Primer.mp3

McLeroy's PowerPoint presentation:

http://www.grace-bible.org/downloads/sermons/Intelligent_Design/DM05404_Intelligent_Design_Theory_Primer.ppt

Notes to the PowerPoint Presentation:

http://www.grace-bible.org/downloads/sermons/Intelligent_Design/DM05404_Intelligent_Design_Theory_Primer.htm

Latch onto the Texas Freedom Network through this link:

<http://www.tfn.org>

Challenge activity

by John Blanton

Does anybody really know what time it is?

(Does anybody care?)

In fact it was 4:30 in the morning. I know, because I had to turn on the light to find my telephone.

It was George Rhodes phoning from California, where it was only 2:30 a.m. He wanted to have a go at the \$12,000 Paranormal Challenge. I agreed that would be a good reason to wake somebody up at 4:30.

George said he could make it rain. Thinking about my grass turning brown in San Antonio, I focused my attention immediately. Tell me more, I pleaded, but send me an e-mail. He said he already had. That was the end of my sleep that morning.

Apparently George is shift-key challenged. Here is the subject line of his e-mail:

**I AM READY FOR The North Texas Skeptics
Paranormal Challenge I HOPE WE CAN DO THIS
SOON.**

I do, too, just as soon as I can find my socks.

The remainder of his note was mostly a copy and paste of the Paranormal Challenge protocol description from our Web site. You can see it here:

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

I responded immediately, before the sun and sanity returned:

George,

Thanks for contacting us. We are eager to evaluate your paranormal ability.

Please respond to this with a description of what you will be able to do. Also describe how you plan to demonstrate your claim.

In our phone conversation you said you are a rain maker. You said you have the ability to make it rain. Please provide additional details, and we will arrange for you to give a demonstration.

Skeptic Ink – by Prasad Golla and John Blanton. © 2011. Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.



We require all claimants to provide a demonstration before we engage in serious discussion. This prevents all of us from wasting time and resources setting up a test that will fail. We have required these demonstrations in the past, and no claimant has ever demonstrated anything worth testing. Hopefully you will have greater success.

All correspondence related to the North Texas Paranormal Challenge will be posted on our Web site and published in our newsletter.

Best regards,
John Blanton

(etc.)

When I received George's response I knew we were doomed. For some reason I recalled the time I took my car in to have the oil changed, and they did not put in any oil. This was going nowhere.

I AM IN CALIFORNIA I WILL MAKE IT RAIN HERE LIKE I ALWAYS DO. I WILL PUT SPIRITUAL FRICTION ON THE UPPER ATMOSPHERE AND BRING IN A STORM.
THE NEWS CASTERS ARE QUICK TO ALERT PEOPLE CAUSE THEY GOT ALL THE RADAR TO SEE WHAT I DID AND TELL EVERY ONE WHAT IS ON ITS WAY. SOME PEOPLE ARE GETTING NEW ROOFS SO IT HELPS IF THEY HAVE A LITTLE TIME TO PREPARE.
I AM A SEVENTH SON, SO I CARE ABOUT MT BROTHERS AND SISTERS, AND WE ARE ALL RELATED IN USA, SO I TRY NOT TO MESS UP THE PLACE.
I AM NOT THE ONLY RAIN MAKER, I HAVE MET OTHERS THEY WERE NOT SEVENTH SONS. I RESPECT THEM AND THERE PRIVACY AND I DON'T MESS WITH THEM CAUSE THEY ARE BIGGER THAN ME.
A WISE OLD LADY THAT I WOULD TALK TO WOULD SAY THEY HAD MORE BEE'S IN THE HANNY , THAT IS WY THEY CAN MAKE THINGS HAPPEN FASTER THAN I COULD.
THERE ARE ALSO OTHER ANIMALS THAT I KNOW OF THAT CAN DO THE SAME AND THEY DON'T HAVE A

CARE OR EVEN KNOW THAT THEY ARE CAUSING DISTRACTION AND DEVISTATION ON LAND OR AROUND THEM.

I HAVE ALSO MET SUN DANCERS TO, THEY FILL SO GOOD TO BE AROUND.

WHEN I WAS YOUNGER, I WOULD GO TO PLACES THAT COULD HANDLE IT AND DOULD USE MUCH WATER, JUST TO SEE WHAT I WAS CAPABLE OF.

I WOULD PRAY TO GOD TO FIND SOME ONE LIKE ME. I FELT ALONE, AND A CHANE OF EVENTS HAPPENED THAT ONLY GOD COULD HAVE MADE IT HAPPEN, CAUSE I TOLD NO ONE MY PRAYER.

I replied and received another response from George Rhodes, and sent a (hopefully) final note:

George,

Again, thanks for the response. However, I will need more from you before I can conclude your proposal is worth pursuing. When you can put together something better, get back to me, and I will give your proposal another look.

All correspondence related to the North Texas Skeptics Paranormal Challenge will be posted on our web site and published in our newsletter.

Best regards,
John Blanton

Subsequent responses from George Rhodes have been similarly uninformative. I have posted the correspondence with George Rhodes in the Paranormal Challenge section of our Web site at the following URL:

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



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

FIRST CLASS

Address Correction Requested

.....
Application for Membership

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____
Email 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

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