



The North Texas

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By design

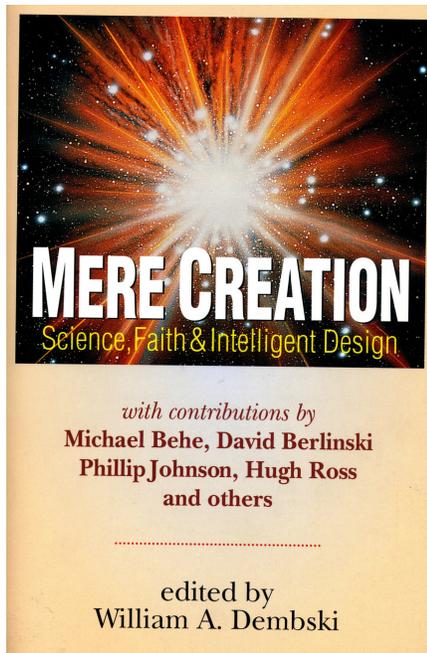
by John Blanton

The word has been out for some time now. Intelligent design is not creationism. Also, it is about science, not religion. All this we were told as early as six years ago when parents of school children sued the Dover, Pennsylvania, school board. The trial is referred to as *Kitzmiller v. Dover Board of Education*.

Board members William Buckingham and Alan Bonsell kicked off the process after discovering that the school's biology program ignored religious truths and taught evolution as fact. Initially they were less circumspect in voicing their motives. The *Topeka Capital-Journal* carried the Associated Press story:

Board members have been less guarded, and their comments go well beyond intelligent design theory. William Buckingham, the board's curriculum chairman, explained at a meeting last June that Jesus died on the cross and "someone has to take a stand" for him. Other board members say they believe that God created Earth and mankind sometime in the past ten thousand years or so.

The board's initial contact with the Discovery Institute was encouraging, and they may have thought they would receive DI support. But that is another story. In any event, the DI advised its fellows not to offer their testimony at the trial, and three, including Stephen C. Meyer and William Dembski did withdraw their early offer to speak for Intelligent Design.



EVENTS CALENDAR

October Program

Saturday, 15 October at 2 p.m.
Center for Community
Cooperation
2900 Live Oak Street in Dallas

For the program meeting we are going to be working on the bylaws. The agenda will also include blog logistics.

214-335-9248
skeptic75287@yahoo.com

Board Meeting and Social Dinner

Saturday, 22 October at 7:00
p.m.

Place to be announced. The plan is for Indian food. Check with us for the actual location of the social dinner.

214-335-9248
skeptic75287@yahoo.com

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The creationists lost big time in the *Kitzmiller* decision, but the DI escaped the exposure of a public humiliation. After dodging the bullet the DI came back and attempted to reap some glory. They now want to hold up *Kitzmiller* as an exemplary for official suppression of science. Following the judge's decision the DI's Evolution News Web site carried this item:

“The Dover decision is an attempt by an activist federal judge to stop the spread of a scientific idea and even to prevent criticism of Darwinian evolution through government-imposed censorship rather than open debate, and it won't work,” said Dr. John West, Associate Director of the Center for Science and Culture at Discovery Institute, the nation's leading think tank researching the scientific theory known as intelligent design. “He has conflated Discovery Institute's position with that of the Dover school board, and he totally misrepresents intelligent design and the motivations of the scientists who research it.”

This, and similar advertisements since 2005 have sought to reassure outsiders that the DI has only real science at heart. For a distinctly creationist organization this would seem to be a sound strategy. Heartfelt Christians do not need any coaxing, but public officials sworn to uphold the law will be reluctant to promote any pseudo science based on religion. Judge John E. Jones has now ruled this is against the law.

When given the opportunity these new age creationists disdain any comparison of Intelligent Design with biblical literalism and young Earth creationism. The effect has been that we see others reciting the “true science” mantra when given the public ear. To maintain this image the new age creationists have continued their campaign of truth management toward some success. If only they had started much earlier.

Spiritual they may be, but the new creationists are not psychic. The future was not theirs to see. In those early times the consequences of their actions somehow escaped them. If only they had known. If only they had not written *The Book*.

The problem with *The Book* begins with *The Title: Mere Creation*. I have wondered since whether they would have chosen something different if only they had known.

Mere Creation sprang out of a conference in 1996 at Biola University in Los Angeles. The conference was sponsored by the Christian Leadership Ministries and was attended by two hundred academics who had issues with natural causes in general and Darwinian evolution in particular. Editor Henry F. Schaefer assures readers that almost none of the attendees advocated a literal interpretation of Genesis and were certainly not creationists of the young Earth sort.

Schaefer wrote the forward to *Mere Creation*, and his diagnosis of its fertilization does little to dissuade the reader that legitimate science is the primary goal. It is difficult to read several paragraphs without getting the idea that Christian religiosity is a common thread. From page 10:

To unite on a common ground. The Christian world is badly riven over the “creation-evolution” issue. Yet a surprising amount of common ground unites many (if not all) of the feuding parties. The conferees should seek a way of approaching the origins issue that will unify Christians. The conferees should provide a means to discover shared principles and ideas by letting disputants spend time together amicably in a private setting where reputations are not on the line. The conference would also seek to formulate a general position statement on origins

(“Mere Creation”) that could be widely endorsed by Christians. (To preserve freedom of inquiry, conference participants decided against formulating such a position statement. William Dembski’s introductory chapter in this volume is the closest thing to such a statement.)

From the book it is as though every time the DI issues a public proclamation that Intelligent Design is not a religious concept, the rank and file plus the leadership of the Intelligent Design movement say, “Not so fast, there.”

Searching out a contributor having few bones with the religious position of Intelligent Design, I settled on the piece by contributor Del Ratzsch. Here is Ratzsch’s portfolio from the book on page 463:

Del Ratzsch, Ph.D. (philosophy, University of Massachusetts, Amherst), professor of philosophy at Calvin College, author of *Philosophy of Science* and *The Battle of Beginnings* (both InterVarsity Press). Much of Ratzsch’s work over the last seventeen years at Calvin College has sought to relate science and religion (and more recently creation and evolution) in a way that is philosophically informed, scientifically defensible and theologically meaningful. Although Ratzsch is optimistic that design theory can avoid past mistakes in the creation-evolution controversy, he stresses that fundamental clarifying work remains to be done in this area.

If I were inclined to find religious undertones to Ratzsch’s work, I would pick up on his various references to religion, theology and creation in the above. What is more significant are references within Ratzsch’s contribution, *Design, Chance & Theistic Evolution* at page 289.

While some contributors to *Mere Creation* are circumspect with respect to who is the designer behind Intelligent Design, Ratzsch is clear on this point. The intelligent designer is *God*. On page 292:

Implications: Relations

Although the preceding points are all closely linked, they are distinct and for the most part are not coextensive. Most important for the moment is that neither counterfactual, artifactuality nor intervention entails nomic discontinuity. Consider this sort of case: Suppose that emergence of a specific innovation in some organism requires a subtle alteration at a particular gene site. Spontaneous decay of a specific atom at that site would, via purely natural processes, trigger the desired alteration. Spontaneous decay of that atom is completely within the bounds governing natural law, and there is a specifiable probability of its doing so. However, suppose that if left to itself it will not decay. God, being omniscient, knows that, so he intervenes, decreeing the decay. All then proceeds as indicated. (This approach to biological history may be called quantum progressive creation, although some persons who call themselves theistic

evolutionists fit here. Some discussion of this general idea is in *Ratzsch* 1996a, 186-88.)

God receives little attention in Ratzsch’s narrative up to this point, but here it seems impossible for him to avoid the topic. If an atom is to decay when it was not *supposed* to, then God is the only cause that comes to mind.

Ratzsch falls into a trap that even some physicists are unable to avoid. When he speaks of an atom decaying, Ratzsch is implying an atom of some radioactive isotope. It is well understood that such atoms have a certain probability of undergoing spontaneous decay within a given time interval. For example, an atom of a given radioactive isotope will decay within the next two weeks with a fixed probability. This property is often expressed as the half-life of the isotope. Specifically, carbon 14 is radioactive and has a half-life of 5730 years. If you were to isolate a single atom of carbon 14 and then lay bets on whether it would still be there 5730 years from now, you would win half the time. Another result is that if you have a pound of carbon 14 in a container and looked in on it 5730 years later you would have only one half pound of the stuff. The other half pound would have decayed to nitrogen 14.

What is critical in all this is that there is nothing that can be said of exactly when or if a specific atom will spontaneously decay. You cannot examine an atom by any means and say, “This atom will decay at 9:15 p.m.” Ratzsch’s idea that an atom was not supposed to decay at a specific time to enable a genetic change, but was enabled to do so by God, is completely off track. Spontaneous radioactive decay is completely spontaneous and is also a prime exhibitor of the definition of the term *spontaneity*. It is also a good place to hide an intelligent designer, be it God or some other interested person. Natural spontaneity is a fabulous magician’s hat. The magician can pull out of it any desired object.

More on *Design, Chance & Theistic Evolution*. Page 304:

Subjunctive governance. Now it may well be that there are counterfactuals of nature that are not only true but known by God. Here is a simple example. Given the fundamentally indeterministic character of the basic natural laws, there would be no way (remaining within the context of those laws) to create some radioactive atom that would be causally guaranteed to decay exactly at 2 p.m. Yet it is possible that that atom, so created, would in fact spontaneously decay at precisely the moment. Of course it might very well not. But suppose that the truth of the matter was that it would do so. Were it going to do that in fact, God would know that fact. Thus, although its creation plus complete specification of relevant conditions plus the relevant laws would not entail that it would decay at that moment, it is nonetheless true that

(2) Were God to create that atom in the specified state and in the specified conditions, it would in fact decay at that precise moment.

Here Ratzsch has taken on a big load and has passed it on to God. If I desired, I could read the preceding in the following way:

1. It is not within that natural world that an atom can be engineered to decay at a certain time.
2. However, God knows a way around the rules.
3. If an atom is about to decay *spontaneously*, God will know this (he is, after all, God).
4. Regardless of all that, if God wanted to, he could create an atom to decay at a precise moment to facilitate the creation of a beneficial genetic trait.
5. God, who has his hands (?) full managing all the thousands of atoms in the universe, is unable to aid an innocent child dying of hunger and in great pain. This is because God so loves us all, that he takes great care to mete out punishment to the innocent in order to keep erstwhile sinners in line.

I added item 5 out of some meanness that exists within me. It is meant to show where Ratzsch's argument naturally leads, and it also illustrates why sincerely religious and caring people cannot stomach the perversion of the Christian faith practiced by these people who will hold on to ancient myths at any cost.

Of course, Ratzsch is not alone in letting slip the agenda behind Intelligent Design. Phillip Johnson is considered to be the godfather of the Intelligent Design, but he has never disguised his disdain for what he calls materialism, and what scientists call the real world. Johnson's contribution is an afterward titled *A Call to Separate Materialistic Philosophy from Empirical Science*. That seems to really be the subtitle to "How to Sink a Battleship." Johnson highlights three events of recent time for their impact on public thinking. Some are of interest, but not for the reason Johnson intended. He summarizes on page 446:

These three events symbolized a tremendous change in the ruling philosophy in the United States. Science now teaches us that a purposeless material process of evolution created us; the artists, poets and actors teach us that biblical morality is oppressive and hateful; and the courts teach us that the very notion of god is divisive and so must be kept out of public life. The pledge of allegiance may say that we are "one nation, under god," but we have become instead a nation that has declared its independence from God.

Reading this it is hard to escape the idea that what matters most to Johnson is God or at the least morality. Johnson, like many Christians and even Jews and Muslims, find it impossible to disconnect God from morality. Anything that obsoletes God will undermine morality and must be rejected at any cost. That cost seems to include a large number of scientific truths.

I had promised myself I would not dwell on Johnson's three recent events, but I cannot pass by his attention to the stage play and motion picture *Inherit the Wind* by Jerome Lawrence and Robert Lee. Johnson and other creationists like to attack the story as a perversion of the 1925 Scopes trial. Johnson and others portray *Inherit the Wind* as an attack on Christianity and a propaganda piece for evolution. In fact, Lawrence and Lee wrote the play in 1955 as a statement on government oppression, such oppression being manifest at the time as attacks on free speech and free association by members of Congress and by a number of laws passed during the time. The Scopes trial was an example in recent history of the government's attempt to dictate scientific truth or at least the public dissemination of such. The writers never intended their play to represent the real story of the trial, and they did what all authors do in such a case. No names of actual people were used, and even the play's story line does not track the actual events. You will not hear this from the creationists. They have their own story to press.

William Dembski has been called by his associates "the Isaac Newton of information theory." While Dembski may or may not take this attribution to heart, he seems not to have denied the honor. I have previously referred to Dembski as Intelligent Design's brain trust. Out of all the crackpot ideas and defenses of Intelligent Design, Dembski's argument from information theory seems to be the best supported by logical explanation. This is unfortunate for the Intelligent Design movement.

If Dembski could leave his case at the information theory argument, he could do more to defend Intelligent Design from accusations of religious proselytizing. Dembski appears to be a deeply religious man, and it also appears to be beyond his powers to escape the religious argument. If he and others, writing nine years prior to the *Kitzmiller* decision, could have foreseen the consequences of this failure, they would have treaded more carefully on this hallowed ground.

Dembski's position, exposed in *Mere Creation*, may be coming back to haunt him and the Intelligent Design movement. Page 13:

Why should Christians bother with "mere creation" when they already have a full-fledged doctrine of creation? Sadly, no such doctrine is in place. Instead we have a multiplicity of views on creation, many of which conflict and none of which commands anywhere near universal assent. As a result the Christian world is badly riven about creation. True, Christians are united about God being the ultimate source of the world, and thus they are united in opposing naturalism, the view that nature is self-sufficient. But this is where the agreement ends.

I and other readers may wonder if Dembski meant to put a comma between "True" and "Christian" in the above. I have noticed references by other creationists, including the new age Intelligent Design creationists, that Christians, who accept purely materialistic processes, including Darwinian evolution, are not true Christians. I repeat the phrase "at any cost."

Page 14:

Within Western culture, naturalism has become the default position for all serious inquiry. From biblical studies to law to education to science to the arts, inquiry is allowed to proceed only under the supposition that nature is self-contained. To be sure, this is not to require that we explicitly deny god's existence. God could, after all, have created the world to be self-contained. Nonetheless, for the sake of inquiry we are required to pretend that God does not exist and proceed accordingly. Naturalism affirms not so much that God does not exist as that God need not exist. It is not that God is dead so much as that God is absent. And because God is absent, intellectual honesty demands that we get about our work without invoking him (except, of course, when we need to pacify our religious impulses). This is the received wisdom, and it is pure poison.

As a defense for the case that Intelligent Design does not represent a religious agenda, this is right up there with "the dog ate my homework." I have wondered whether Dembski and the others would have been more cautious in laying out their argument for Intelligent Design in this book if they had known how this kind of thing would play later in the courts.

Despite their prior proclamations of faith, the DI fellows continue to deny the equivalence of Intelligent Design and creationism. David Klinghoffer is a senior fellow at the DI Center for Science and Culture, the main proponent of Intelligent Design in the United States. He blogs regularly for the Evolution News and Views Web site. Here is what the DI has to say about Klinghoffer, among other things:

He is the author most recently of *How Would God Vote?: Why the Bible Commands You to Be a Conservative* (Random House, 2008.) His previous books are *Why the Jews Rejected Jesus: The Turning Point in Western History* (Doubleday, 2005), *The Discovery of God: Abraham and the Birth of Monotheism* (Doubleday, 2003) and the spiritual memoir *The Lord Will Gather Me In* (Free Press/Simon & Schuster, 1998), a National Jewish Book Award finalist. His forthcoming book is *Shattered Tablets: What the Ten Commandments Reveal about American Culture and Its Discontents* (Doubleday, 2006). A former literary editor of *National Review* magazine, Klinghoffer has written articles and reviews for the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post*, *Seattle Times*, *Commentary*, and other publications.

<http://www.discovery.org/p/209>

This list of Klinghoffer's publications pays special tribute to his devotion to real science and the absence of a religious agenda.

Searching for an example of the conflict between the DI's claimed denials of religious intent and their actions, I had to

spend 30 of the few seconds remaining in my life to find this Klinghoffer posting:

Garry Trudeau Joins a Special Club with an Unfortunately Large Membership

David Klinghoffer September 28, 2011 11:49 AM

It's the club of those scientists, journalists and other "thinkers" who feel entitled to condemn and mock intelligent design without having first bothered to do even a little homework on their own and learn what ID actually says. The revered "Doonesbury" cartoonist comes out today with a strip where fictional reporter Rick Redfern asks real-life Texas governor Rick Perry, "You've dismissed evolution as 'Just a theory that's out there.'"

Perry replies: "Yes, I believe in intelligent design."

Redfern: "But that's just creation renamed to get into the classroom. Evolution is the foundation of all life sciences. Without it, whole fields -- from biology to genetics to ecology -- can't exist."

The strip goes on from there and doesn't get any funnier than that. It reminds us of how grateful we are for every honest and informed critic of ID who, no matter how harsh he may be in his dismissal, has at least taken the trouble of first getting minimally acquainted with ID and then straightforwardly describes the idea before attacking it. To **equate intelligent design with creationism** is to reveal, without shame, that you're too lazy to invest that modest effort -- either that, or you're too dishonest. [emphasis added]

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2011/09/garry_trudeau_joins_a_special_051401.html

A point to note is that when the new age creationists argue that Intelligent Design is not creationism, what they really mean is that Intelligent Design is not the same as the story of creation given in Genesis, which is, in fact, the case. Having made a strictly true statement, they let it drop at that. They do not proceed to complete the statement with, "However Intelligent Design encompasses the creation of the world and all life forms by some supernatural being [we call God]." The supernatural creation of the world and all life forms is what is universally (except within the public proclamations of the new age creationists) accepted as the definition of *creationism*. Maybe what I should have said is *Mere Creation*.

I advise all interested readers to read some or all of *Mere Creation*. It's a wonderful book to illustrate the double talk of the new age creationists. I bought my copy some years ago, but Goggle has a searchable scan of the entire volume online. See the link below.



References:

The Discovery Institute gave their assessment of the Kitzmiller decision on their Web site:

http://www.evolutionnews.org/2005/12/dover_intelligent_design_decis001761.html

The Topeka Capital-Journal had the AP story here:

http://cjonline.com/stories/122704/pag_districtissues.shtml

See *Mere Creation* on line at:

<http://books.google.com/books?ei=0wuHTr6XCyAgYgSetY2TCA&id=uD6KDrWLSu0C&dq=isbn%3A0830815155&q=ratzsch#v=snippet&q=ratzsch&f=false>

Skeptics in the pub

by John Blanton

Settled into my new digs in San Antonio and free of my entanglements with Dell, I had a chance to attend a Skeptics-In-The Pub meetup.

Gary Laun seems to be the driving force here, and he described the organization as a “cult of personality.” The group is shaped by and reflects Gary’s essence.

I bounced a few e-mail questions with Gary, and recorded his responses:

Currently, the S.A. Skeptics group is a once-a-month Skeptics-In-The-Pub style meetup and is primarily a social group so like-minded individuals can get together and discuss anything they want from science to health to politics to religion. The plan is to begin incorporating lectures or topical discussions to start the meetups, eventually leading to community outreach and more public displays of skeptics in action (for lack of a

better term): think of what Atlanta, Australia, Merseyside Skeptics groups are doing with letter writing against homeopathy, Powerband bracelets, etc. However, we are not yet at that point. The ultimate goal of the skeptics group is to promote critical thinking and science.

The group itself was originally started as an alternative to the Atheist meetup, which at the time apparently was having some inter-personal excitement. When I took over, I wanted it to be more complementary. The skeptics group does a lot of unofficial cohabitating with the Science Cafe (who promote science lectures regularly throughout the year), F.A.C.T., and Atheist meetups.

"You referred to it as a "cult of personality" in that you organized it to reflect your own position on these matters."

In fact, that was kind of a joke, in that I am one of five organizers for the group but I am currently the only one planning meetups (two of the organizers are very busy doing other work, however). We did have a book discussion group (run by group member Enrique, who also does the books and mountain bikes meetup) but due to a fall off in interest, it is on hold.

"Besides the paranormal, what issues do you deal with?"

We deal with any uncritical-thinking topic we come across, from health scams (like homeopathy, Next Gen Water, acupuncture, massage therapy, etc... not to say that all are scams, but there is a lot of non-scientific thinking going into some of the outlets) to political topics that are based on bad reasoning, to science claims good and bad. Religion discussions are kept to discussing specifics and not general bashing.

"Are you anti-religious?"

The group itself I am trying to make a-religious, in that it ignores the elephant in the room to allow people to begin to take steps into critical thinking if they've never had the opportunity or to learn or hone up on how to make a cogent argument. I myself am not religious at all and



photo by John Blanton

Gary Laun (standing) keeps the San Antonio Skeptics organized.

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



don't care if anyone else is, as long as they aren't using it as a reason for their actions. There is a lot of talk at the meetups about religion, but we try to keep it from degenerating into bashing and more on talking about the claims made and whether they stand up to reason or investigation.

"Are you political?"

The group itself, as it is not a non-profit (though I am looking into making it so) is not politically active in the public sense, but will discuss topics as they come up. Considering the current batch of Presidential contenders, we may have an interesting year ahead.

"Do you have plans to expand and become active (promote an agenda or advocate for or against certain things)?"

Yes, that is the plan. I hope to make the S.A. Skeptics a resource that media can come to if they need an "alternative opinion" to, say, a Virgin Mary on a tortilla or a word of caution about a new ionized water miracle cure machine.

We also have the Skeptic Wire podcast, which is the unofficial podcast of the S.A. Skeptics, mainly because we can be rude and snarky and don't necessarily reflect the views of the group. The four hosts are myself, David Harcourt (the guy in the white shirt with whom you spoke...I think), Donna Swafford (who sat next to you: the anthropologicalistically-educated film producer), and Greg Perrine (who was at the opposite end of the table).

I hope that answers your questions, feel free to ask more.

Meet up with the SA Skeptics here:
<http://www.meetup.com/San-Antonio-Skeptics/>

In September the pub was Tex's Sports Bar and Grill, making its home at the Hilton Hotel on the 410 loop. There was not a

bad turnout for a Thursday night with a dozen or more skeptics showing up for food, drinks and some casual conversation.



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