

The SKEPTIC

The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

Volume 1 Number 2

www.ntskeptics.org

Fall 1987

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Comments from the Chair

By Ron J. Hastings, Ph.D.

As initial chairperson of the newly reformed North Texas Skeptics (NTS), allow me to welcome everyone into the group. I hope this column will become a forum of thoughtful commentary and a source of information and enjoyment. I solicit your input in improving this column.

To acknowledge everyone who has contributed to our transformation from DSTOP to NTS by name would be too space consuming, for that would include everyone from the Board of Directors to each and every attendant to our summer meetings. But special thanks must go to those patrons who have given more than their share financially to boost our initial efforts. However, no dollar amount could account for the time and effort expended by Jim Smith and Vicki Hinson-Smith. Without them we would not be here organized as we are. Our fine initial newsletter was solely Vicki's "labor of love" which set a standard more than worthy of all our efforts. Thanks patrons, Jim, and especially Vicki!

It might be well to remind ourselves that though we are indeed among the growing number of local groups sharing the views of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), we should not be described as an affiliate or branch of CSICOP. We, the other local groups, and CSICOP function as mutually supportive, yet mutually autonomous, organizations. I hope all of you subscribe to and read CSICOP's journal *Skeptical Inquirer* (SI). If nothing else, each of us would do well to promote others' reading of SI, which comes to so many as a breath of fresh air among the smog of tabloids and irresponsible media coverage.

The goals of our NTS Charter parallel those of CSICOP and are excellent answers to questions of what NTS is all about. Rather than repeat them, let me suggest a mnemonic way of expressing them: IESI (pronounced eye-ee-see?). "I" for information -- working toward being a clearinghouse for public information of science and paranormal claims. "E" for education -- promoting public education of science and its methodology. "S" for scientific inquiry -- expounding in

various ways the reliability of scientific knowledge. And "I" for investigations -- calling for and exhibiting systematic, careful, fair, and open-minded inquiry.

The efforts of local groups such as ours and the growing number of subscribers to *SI* are indications that "debunking" is no longer a dirty word and that skeptics are not seen in as harsh a light as before. Carl Sagan, in a *Parade* article early this year reminded all of us the importance of skepticism. "The collective enterprise of creative thinking and skeptical thinking together keeps the field (of science) on track."

We are not evangelists, but neither are we passive bystanders. But that nonetheless leaves lots of room for us to define just how active we will be. That definition is entirely up to us.

Let us all work together to make NTS not only effective, but also fun. My own experience has shown expressing IESI is not only rewarding, but quite enjoyable.

WELCOME TO NTS.

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Co-Chairman's Report

By Mark Mateer

Much has happened in the last three months for the North Texas Skeptics. Our first three meetings were quite enjoyable and entertaining, and we have more of the same to look forward to in the fall. An article on chairman Ron Hastings and NTS in the *Dallas Times Herald* gave us some good publicity and got our name around. At about the same time we got some real excitement on the creationist front. The Reverend Baugh of mantrack fame has claimed to have found a human tooth of Cretaceous age in the banks of the Paluxy River, a claim carried by one local television station as a major scientific discovery. Rather than let another creationist claim go unchallenged for years as in the past, NTS Chairman Hastings has jumped into the fray and found out some very interesting facts about the whole affair, which got the *Times Herald* involved in the case. Perhaps Ron can be coaxed into telling the members his story at a later meeting. It is hard to overemphasize the importance of Ron's work. Much of the reason that coverage of evolution has been reduced in school texts across the nation is because of the creationist "evidence" from the Paluxy River. By preventing these new irrational claims from going unchallenged, we may save many educators a great deal of trouble in the future. A letter of criticism was also sent to the TV station in question asking that they be a little more reasonable in the future.

Those of you listening to the KERA radio talk show at 7:00 p.m. on Monday, August 17 heard our secretary and treasurer, John Thomas, go head to head with a local astrologer on the importance of the new age "harmonic convergence" that took place recently. John did an excellent job and elicited a thoughtful response from many listeners. It was painfully obvious from the conversation that the pseudo-scientific viewpoint is extremely weak. If this is truly the nature of the paranormal community in our area we may be in better shape than we thought. Perhaps the most important point of all in this affair was that we did not contact KERA, they contacted us! Our name has already gotten around. It is now up to us to proceed with as much integrity as we can to keep the ball rolling.

One major item still needs to be addressed, that is the bibliography of rationalist literature. We need to get the bibliography out quickly as a main target is school libraries and school begins soon. We currently have a great deal of material but need more to have a truly complete listing. If anyone has any material that they consider useful for our purposes please send the publication title, author, publisher, and other useful information to our address at P.O. Box 815845, Dallas, TX 75381-5845. I will put together what we have by the middle of September regardless. I am looking forward to seeing each of you at our fall meetings.

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Supreme Court quashes creationists

In June the U. S. Supreme Court affirmed a trial court decision that the Louisiana Balanced Treatment Act violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. The Louisiana Act forbade teaching in the theory of evolution in public schools unless accompanied by instruction in "creation science," which was statutorily defined as "the scientific evidences for [creation or evolution] and inferences from those scientific evidences". The Act required that curriculum guides be developed for creation science, but said nothing about comparable guides for evolution. Research services were provided for creation science but not for evolution. Only "creation scientists" could serve on the panel that supplied the research services.

The act forbade school boards to discriminate against anyone who "chooses to be a creation scientist" or to teach creationism", but failed to protect those who teach evolution. Louisiana officials defended the Act on the ground that its purpose was to promote a legitimate secular interest, namely academic freedom. Lower courts concluded that the Act did not serve to protect academic freedom, but had the purpose of discrediting evolution by counterbalancing its teaching at every turn with the teaching of creation science. The District Court held that there could be no valid secular reason for effectively prohibiting the teaching of evolution and further held that the teaching of creation science contemplated by the statute involved teaching tailored to the principles of a particular religious sect or group of sects. The District Court granted the plaintiffs a summary judgment declaring the act invalid and enjoining Louisiana officials from implementing it.

After reviewing the legislative history of the act, the Supreme Court affirmed the judgment of the District Court by a seven to two vote, with Justice Brennan writing the majority opinion. Justice Scalia wrote a lengthy dissenting opinion in which Chief Justice Rhenquist joined.

The reasoning of the dissent is interesting and should give opponents of creationism pause. The problem for the dissenters arose in the necessary finding by the majority that the Louisiana legislature adopted the act without any valid secular purpose and for the purpose of advancing religion. The Act was carefully crafted by supporters to meet this test. It did not mention religion or religious doctrine. Its stated purpose was to promote "academic freedom" and "fairness" in the treatment of competing theories of the origin of life. The District Court, the Court of Appeals and seven members of the Supreme Court had no trouble finding that the real purpose which motivated the Louisiana legislators was to combat the teaching of evolution, which they felt was hostile to the religious view that a supernatural being created human kind. However, the District Court did not tear the testimony of witnesses in a trial on the merits; rather, it held as a matter of law, based on the legislative history and the affidavits of the parties, that the Act violated the establishment clause. The Act had never been implemented, nor had it been interpreted by the Louisiana Supreme Court. Thus there was no evidence of the meaning of the Act under Louisiana law, nor of the practical effects of its operation.

The dissenters pointed out that the Louisiana legislature heard a great deal of testimony from witnesses with impressive academic credentials to the effect that creation science was strictly scientific; that hundreds of respected scientists believed in creation science; that evidence for creation science was as strong as evidence for evolution; and that creation science could be presented without religious content. On the other hand, the plaintiffs simply dismissed the testimony of these witnesses as "pure fantasy," but they did not submit evidence of that to the District Court. The dissenters felt that the Supreme Court could not hold, on this record, that the Louisiana legislature intended the Act to promote or advance religion, and that therefore the case should be remanded to the District Court for a full hearing of the evidence. This represents a strict view of the role of the federal courts in striking down state laws, but such a view is likely to be seen more often in future Supreme Court opinions.

The moral for opponents of creationism is that we cannot simply assume that any educated person will recognize creation science as nonsense and understand its origins in fundamentalist religion. Judges may become more and more willing to let democratically elected legislatures experiment with laws that arguably violate the establishment clause. Creationism must be challenged and defeated on its merits - in the schoolhouse, the statehouse, and only as a last resort, in the courthouse.

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"Glen Rose Man" identified, something "fishy" going on?

By Ronnie J. Hastings, Ph.D.

In what must be seen as a pleasant surprise, Rev. Carl Baugh, of recent "Glen Rose Man" fame, took his "human" tooth to the Balcones Lab near Austin for identification in early July, 1987. Rarely does Baugh behave so scientifically, so this action alone is to his credit. But his trip probably is indicative of his supreme confidence that he has a genuine human tooth from Cretaceous deposits, a piece of evidence that will at last "topple evolution" as his "mantracks" so miserably failed to do by turning out not to be mantracks at all. Unfortunately for Baugh, once again, his evidence does not seem to merit such confidence.

Communication from paleontologist Wann Langston, Jr. states that the other fossilized teeth Baugh brought in addition to the "human" tooth were clearly grinding teeth of pycnodonts, Mesozoic bony fishes related to modern gars and bowfins. Worn-down incisors of pycnodonts, possessing a couple of cusps, would indeed have a superficial resemblance to human dentition in the eyes of the zealous and the uninformed; his "human" tooth is most likely such an incisor. Remains of pycnodonts have been found in the lower Cretaceous deposits of central Texas and, though long known, have not been widely studied. It is also known that Cretaceous precursors of the modern sheepshead fish had broad incisors. Such remains in the Glen Rose limestone are compatible with the well-known lower Cretaceous ecology of a large, flat marine tidal basin upon which the dinosaurs trod at low tide. Baugh's new teeth were allegedly found in a marl layer covering a limestone deposit preserving unmistakable dinosaur prints (the same layer in which Baugh claims "mantracks," rather featureless isolated depressions alongside dinosaur trails, some of which were probably made by the dinosaur's tail or other appendage).

As "Nebraska Man" turned out to be a pig's tooth, it looks as if "Glen Rose Man" will turn out to be a fish's tooth.

Oh yes, there was no indication that Baugh also took his new "trilobite," allegedly from the same marl layer, for identification. I wonder why?

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Book Reviews

Books of the "New Age"

"The Aquarian Conspiracy"

by Marilyn Ferguson

J. P. Tarcher, Inc 1980

"Crystal Power"

by Michael C. Smith

LLEWELLYN Publications 1987

Much attention has been paid recently to what is called the "New Age" movement. Unfortunately the media treatment of

this movement has left much to be desired from the standpoint of accurate information. It was obvious however that much of the "New Age" revolves around ideas that appear to be recycled from earlier pop philosophies and pseudo-fads. With this in mind I tried to find a book to review that represents a taste of what the New Age is about. This proved to be difficult, as the subject is somewhat slippery. Eventually I decided on two. The first, "The Aquarian Conspiracy," is supposedly something of a Philosophical statement of the movement's principles, while the second, "Crystal Power", is a "practical" handbook on one of the auxiliary practices of the movement, the use of mineral crystals to focus psychic power (No, I am not kidding).

Of the two, "The Aquarian Conspiracy" is by far the most interesting. Its premise is the inevitability of social change based on the actions of a conspiracy of enlightened individuals. This conspiracy, armed with the philosophical and technological power of a new understanding of nature which the author claims is just now coming into being, will sweep aside old institutions and problems and lead us to a new age of enlightenment. The author's connection with this conspiracy began through her publication of a newsletter called the "Brain / Mind Bulletin" which supposedly follows current advances in brain research. She soon began receiving mail from her readers that made her aware of a network of believers that shared similar convictions. As her interest and connections increased she sent a questionnaire to her correspondents to gauge their interests and beliefs. Out of her 185 replies she formed the outline of her belief in the conspiracy.

At the core of her book is one of the oldest ideas in human experience, that of Holism. Holism is the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, that reality cannot be broken down. In opposition to holism is the idea of Determinism. Determinism asserts that collections of objects can be understood in terms of the properties and interactions of the individual components, or that the whole is equal to the sum of its parts. There is obviously more to it than this but for the sake of this review the contrasts between holism and determinism can be stated simply. Each view of reality has its own advantages and problems. This argument on the ultimate nature of reality has been raging in philosophical circles for centuries.

While the history of the debate is interesting it is not generally seen to be of much consequence to the scientific method. When Isaac Newton formulated his ideas of motion and gravitation, he assumed that objects were whole structures having properties such as mass, velocity, rotation, etc. In short, he viewed objects holistically. This was not out of a preference for holism but rather a useful simplification, as no understanding of the structure of matter was needed for his theories. Today we know that matter is composed of organized arrangements of atoms which are themselves organized arrangements of subatomic particles which are themselves made up of smaller units (maybe). We do not know where the bottom level is or even if there is a bottom. What is important is that at each level of organization it is possible to use either view of nature effectively. Atoms can either be holistic wholes or deterministic collections depending on what you are trying to explain. The ultimate argument of holism versus determinism is not of much practical importance to the work of science. Both can be used effectively.

Ms. Ferguson denies the existence of this flexibility. To her, holism is universally correct and all attempts at determinism are flawed. She presents this as the need to establish a new paradigm, or way of thinking. The new paradigm will allow us to change the world. The question she fails to address is what exactly is the bottom layer? Where does one draw the line? Eastern religions have covered this ground long ago and are apparently the source of her ideas. In Zen Buddhism, the location of the bottom layer is taken care of by extending holism to the extreme. All nature is one and all appearance of change, difference, and structure are just illusion. In other words, the top and bottom layers of reality are the same. "The Aquarian Conspiracy" hints at this idea but never comes right out and says it. It seems to want to use some of the ideas of eastern religions but not all of them, for this reason you might call the philosophy of the book "wishy washy Zen."

Based on these ideas, several themes are presented which evidently form the "party platform" of this conspiracy. Some of these themes are:

- The bankruptcy of western thought and culture.
- The inadequacy of current religions.
- The existence and importance of psychic power.
- The need for restructuring society away from undefined material values.

Needless to say making a convincing case for such sweeping statements in a little over four hundred pages is quite a task. Her solution is simple and time tested. Rather than trying to prove these ideas are true she simply assumes they are and then argues their consequences. This to me is the major failing of the book; it is based on circular argument. This is not very surprising but it is disappointing , as the book could have been challenging to the critical reader if a stronger approach had been taken. Much of my interest was lost at this point as it was obvious that the book was aimed at the gullible reader.

In keeping with the author's belief in non-traditional approaches , the book is structured in a very non traditional way. For the first five chapters , which make a kind of introduction, the text is punctuated by a seemingly unending series of quotes. These quotes appear so fast and so completely out of context that it is impossible to judge whether they actually support the author's position or not. Another difficulty arises in that the subject seems to change from paragraph to paragraph. The end result is that little is said that can be judged as true or false, but the correct impression is given (I guess).

Using this style, Ms. Ferguson devotes the remainder of the book to those subjects that the Aquarian philosophy feels are in desperate need of revitalization. These include science , politics , religion, education, economics and medicine, among others. In all of these chapters the approach is the same. If society can rid itself of logical , deterministic , non-mystical thinking, enormous strides can be made.

Unfortunately I am not qualified to comment on many of the subjects the author considers . On those subjects with which I am somewhat familiar her understanding seems to be flawed. In particular , her opinions on the meaning and significance of special relativity, (quantum mechanics and evolution by natural selection seem to be mystical in their origins. I am not referring to picky details which could be debated by the experts but basic concepts of the theories which are obvious to any one with a general knowledge. On page 158 of the chapter titled "Liberating Knowledge" the author makes the statement "Darwin's theory of evolution by chance mutation and survival of the fittest has proven hopelessly inadequate to account for a great many observations in biology". One can only marvel at the audacity of such a preposterous statement. I believe that most of the scientific arguments in the book can be dismissed as unimportant.

In summary, what looked at first to be a challenge to the premises of western thought from a holistic perspective quickly degenerates into a jumble of inaccuracies and mysticism. The ideas of Zen itself are fascinating and challenging. Though alien to western thought, Zen is intellectually sound from its own standpoint and worthy of respect. If the author had used this start and kept with it the book would have been much more interesting. In spite of all this, I believe this is an important book as it demonstrates the weak ground on which the new age movement is based.

(Crystal Power reviewed next issue)

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Fellows elect new board

Liaison needed

A meeting of the fellows of NTS was held on July 22, 1987. The Board accepted with regret the resignation of James P. Smith as Co-Chair and Vicki Hinson-Smith as Liaison. The Board also accepted with regret the resignation of Mary Hunter as Secretary. The Board appointed Mary Hunter as Archives Chair and Mark Mateer as Program Chair.

The Board nominated Mark Mateer as Co-Chair and John A Thomas as Secretary.

By mail-in ballot, Mateer and Thomas were elected to their respected posts.

The Board left the position of Liaison temporarily open. It was the consensus of the Board that a member with some experience with newsletter production and media relations should be recruited for this position. Note that this is not

necessarily the same position as NTS spokesman. A spokesman may be appointed on an ad hoc basis.

Anyone interested in taking charge of newsletter production and in assisting NTS with the production of reports and press releases may call John Thomas at (214) 265-0640.

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North Texas Skeptics fall calendar

September - Mark Mateer, a metallurgist at ARCO Oil and Gas, will speak on the currently hot subject of New Age crystal power. As the so-called New Age movement gains momentum and notoriety, it is promoting several claims involving mineral crystals and psychic powers -- a combination of psychic belief with technology. Hear it all Sunday, September 27 at 2:00 p.m. at Building K of Brookhaven College, 3939 Valley View Lane in Farmers Branch. Enter near the flagpoles and look for the NTS signs.

October - Dr. Ron Hastings will discuss the "Glen Rose Man" that creationist Rev. Carl Baugh has constructed from the find of a single tooth near the Paluxy River. Using excellent color photos of the tooth, and other evidence, Ron will show why the find is anything but "uniquely human." This will be a good example of challenging pseudo science claims on the merits. Sunday, October 18 at 2:00 p.m.

The location is not set at this time. Everyone will be notified of the location by postcard.

November - Dr. Frank Harrold, an anthropologist at UTA, will speak on the culture of the paranormal belief systems. Dr. Harrold has made a study of paranormal and fringe science beliefs and can offer some insights as to why irrational beliefs persist and what can be done about it. Why do they believe that stuff? Sunday, November 22 at 2:00 p.m.

The location is not set at this time. Everyone will be notified of the location by postcard.

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