
The South Shore

Skeptic

Volume 13, No. 4

January/February, 1997

The Next South Shore Skeptics Meeting

Friday, March 21

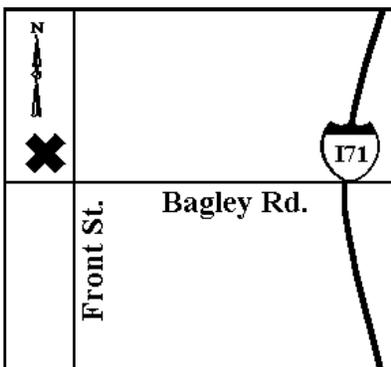
a

Date: Friday, March 21
Time: 7:30 PM
Place: Room 18
The Life Sciences
Building
Baldwin Wallace
College

The March meeting of The South Shore Skeptics will

feature a discussion entitled "Why We are Here: the reason The South Shore Skeptics exist" and also perform a resurrection. We will bring back an old speaker via videotape.

For more information telephone Page Stephens at 676-4859



In This Issue

Friday, March 21st Meeting	----- 1
Human Belief and Skepticism	----- 3
Review of January Meeting	
<i>Creation Controversy</i>	----- 7
Surfin' the Internet	
For Skepticism	----- 8
Evolution not a fairy Tale	----- 10

The South Shore Skeptic is the newsletter of The South Shore Skeptics, a non-profit organization with aims similar to those of CSICOP: The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.

We are located in northeast Ohio and dedicated to science education and the investigation of paranormal and pseudoscientific claims.

Our activities include investigating pseudoscientific claims, presenting lectures, publishing *The South Shore Skeptic* six times a year, and maintaining the Skepticism SIG on the Cleveland Free-Net, a free access community based computer bulletin board.

We also provide the public and news media of Northeast Ohio with scientific perspectives on pseudoscientific topics.

Membership in *The South Shore Skeptics* costs \$15.00 a year. The money is used to pay for the publication and distribution of *The South Shore Skeptic* both to members and to the media. We also send two free copies to everyone who asks for information about our activities.

If you would like to receive two free copies of *The South Shore Skeptic*, care to take part in our efforts by joining us as a member, or submit an article for publication in *The South Shore Skeptic*, write us at:

The South Shore Skeptics
P.O. Box 5083
Cleveland, Ohio 44101

If you would like to take part in our activities on The Cleveland Free-Net, dial 1-216-368-3888, with your computer modem, and take part in our discussions.

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Journalistic Contributions to *The South Shore Skeptic* are Welcome

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For Cleveland Free-Net users, my local address is: aa470

You can send me files or ASCII text on line to my Internet address:

aa470@cleveland.freenet.edu

Human Belief and Skepticism

by Page Stephens

Part 2 -- Adaptation and Belief

If as noted in part one of this article, human beings learned culture perfectly, there could be no socio-cultural change. In fact we don't just learn; we learn imperfectly and intellectually innovate. In general, however, faced with similar technological / socio-cultural / environmental situations, we tend to produce similar socio-cultural formations at least on a functional level. Thus we find socio-cultural formations world wide which are broadly similar, a similarity which can not be attributed simply to the exchange of ideas since many groups existed in isolation from each other.

I won't deal with such similarities in particular except to say that anthropologists have used such terms as "band," "tribe," "protostate," and "state" to name them although these terms are very inexact. Such terms as "family," "lineage," "class," "clan," etc. have been used to describe similar formations within larger societies.

In general, social divisions - there are analytical exceptions - are associated with ideologies that define their existence and socio-cultural limits.

The question which now arises is what happens to a socio-cultural group when it is faced with change, whether sudden in terms of conquest or more slowly in terms of technological evolution, environmental disruption or whatever.

If the group's ideology is not directly contradicted by the requirements of the new environment, it may slowly adapt to the new situation. If the new situation directly contradicts the demands of the existing ideology then a different set of forces come into play.

They pray to the gods or propitiate the spirits which they think control their society, but these entities no longer answer. They use the old non-religious cultural formulae that used to do them so much good, but they no longer work. This can be, to put it mildly, very disconcerting. It is obvious that the old ideas no longer work, but how do they find new ones which do work? One thing they can do is to suggest that their society is failing because they and or others, more probably others, have failed to keep to the good old ways. Another is to suggest that their cultural

ideals have been wrong all along and that they have to discover a new path to truth.

One fascinating area of anthropological study is that of the movements which come into existence when one society is conquered by another. With the old cultural certainties in disarray, people in the conquered group often form groups based on new cultural formulae or resuscitations of older forms. Some spectacular cases of this have occurred in the Pacific where groups of islanders have invented "cargo cults" which basically insist that their conquerors have magical control over the ships and airplanes which bring the cargoes they use to subjugate them. Therefore they attempt to control the airplanes themselves beseeching them to bring the cargoes to them and not to their overlords. One group suggested that the missionaries who had taught them the magic of the Bible had cut out the pages that showed them how to control the cargo carriers before they had given it to them. There are other variations on this theme including the advent of prophets, etc. but the process is very common.

In some cases, of course, re-vitalization movements do not come into existence but nevertheless as per Dr. Richard Lowenthal's study of the Tharaka in Kenya, the conquest situation can lead to profound changes in social structure.

This leads us to a consideration of more complex state societies which are more deeply divided internally.

In general, as long as things are going well most members of socio-cultural subgroups adhere to the dominant, i.e. most generally inclusive ideology of their society whatever it might be. They also have their own subgroup cultural norms which define them as different from other people in society.

This is all right during times of "normalcy" or whatever you want to call it when a subgroup finds that its ideals and the more general national ideals do not directly contradict each other.

The problem comes when for any number of reasons the higher level society fails to satisfy a significant number of people with different positions in society. We now have a situation similar to the one we find in conquered societies. The old cultural ideals no longer work and have to be replaced.

Once again there are several things people can do.

If enough people are dissatisfied, of course, you have a

revolution which overthrows the society in terms of new social formations.

But what if only some people with differing positions and cultural norms find themselves dissatisfied.

One of their options is to abandon the more general national ideology and try to universalize the ideology that represents the ideals of their particular subgroup. This explains the reason so many people in the US have recently become enamored of ideologies which suggest that "the family" as they define it is the basis of US society, that the only true family is the one defined by the Bible, that the US has been taken over by subversives, etc. It also explains the reason that biblical literalists have decided that they are under attack by a secular government which has abandoned the religious ideals purportedly believed in by the founding fathers.

The interesting thing about these claims is that they, like the claims of the Salem witch hunters need have no relation to reality. As noted previously, the family is not and never has been the basis of US society and even if it had been, it had no relation to that of a polygamous group which practiced the levirate as per different passages in the Bible. What do you think that a born again social reforming Christian might say if he were told

he had to marry his deceased older brothers' wives as per commands in The Old Testament.

What the people of these groups do is to mistake their own life styles and cultural ideas as objectified in their own cultural practices as "biblical" when in fact they are anything but. They are not alone in this because other socio-cultural subgroups do the same thing in terms of their own ideologies. Thus we have not only born again Christians suggesting the absolutism of their beliefs but also born again members of every existent form of religion and for that matter those who reify the non-religious ideals of their own socio-cultural group.

It is in this context that we have to deal with the problem of the "creation science" movement. For a variety of historical reasons evolution has become a touchstone for the opposition to changes in US society which directly affect many groups. One interesting example of this process begins with the "Boy Orator of the Platte," three time Democratic candidate for president, William Jennings Bryan. Bryan was not only a populist reformer but also the foremost defender of Biblical creationism of his time. Thus he combined progressive politics with conservative religion.

The thing you have to remember about Bryan is that his constituency consisted of farmers who had been under economic pressure almost continually from the 1870s to for that matter today. They were being forced into bankruptcy at ever increasing rates and had legitimate complaints about the ways they were being treated by the banks, the railroads, etc. This led Bryan and his followers to adopt an ideology which combined reforms necessary to preserve their way of life with a religious conservatism based on their cultural ideals.

Today's creationist movement on the other hand no longer consists of farmers who need to reform government but on groups which no longer share common complaints. Thus they have nothing except their cultural ideals to preserve. This brings the conservative nature of their ideology to the forefront, and they tend to be socially and politically as well as religiously conservative.

The obverse side of this coin consists of those who find not only the national ideologies inadequate but also the ideologies of their subgroup. Therefore they create new ideologies which explain the world better to them. The former group tends to include in its membership less educated people who are aware of the fact that the world - socio-

culturally defined - doesn't live up to their expectations but to whom their socio-culturally defined traditional values are the most important things in their lives.

The latter group tends to consist of more educated people who are aware of the inadequacies of the national ideals. These people tend to create de novo new ideologies which represent their point of view. This is the reason that we find the feminist movement has spawned so many New Age ideologies.

Some years ago Ms. Magazine devoted an entire issue to goddess worship and other forms of irrationalism such as New Age. The authors of the various articles in that issue of MS suggested not only that women had special powers men did not have but their special insights into the nature of the world via their healing powers etc. had been suppressed by the males who had taken over the control of society from the ancient matriarchy which had once been the status quo.

The writers for that issue of Ms. were correct when they said that women had been treated unfairly by both historical and contemporary societies. They were wrong, however, when they suggested that there ever was such any such thing as an ancient matriarchal society, that members of their sex have

some special knowledge of the nature of the universe which men do not share, and that the some ancient goddess had given them special powers that men do/did not have.

There is no archaeological or socio-cultural evidence whatsoever which suggests that ancient matriarchies ever existed or that if they did women would have been any kinder or more gentle than the men who dominated such societies would have been. There is also no scientific evidence that women have healing powers men do not have or that women have or ever had any special knowledge of a godhead whether male or female.

What this part of the women's movement did in this case was not to study the scientific evidence for or against the existence of ancient matriarchal societies, but rather to distort whatever evidence does exist in order to create their own new age mythology which explains to them the reason that they are not merely victims of a contemporary sexist society but because of women's innate powers they are better than the males they consider to be their oppressors. A similar thing is going on in the current revitalization movement among some Americans of African descent which suggests among other things that without the help of African immigrants to the Americas,

native Americans could never have built pyramids and for that matter that the ancient Egyptians were Black and not White, whatever those latter two terms mean in biological terms since neither the term "black" nor "white" has any definable relationship to genetic reality any more than the terms "Caucasian" or "Negro" do.

One of the more interesting ideas this movement suggests is that ancient Greek philosophy is nothing more than a pale imitation of ancient African religious ideas.

There is no evidence for this.

The people who lead both movements represent subgroups in US society and not higher and thus more inclusive levels of socio-cultural integration. These subgroups in US society depend for their existence on cultural claims which they and only they know to be true.

Both groups as per the *Institute of Quotation Science* (as some of us call the Institute of Creation Science) rely for the validity of their ideology not on either a scientific or historical study of the phenomena under discussion, but on either long since discarded anthropological texts - this part of the women's movement relies heavily on 19th century anthropology - or broad based comparisons of native American pyramids with the pyramids of Egypt - the African

American revitalization movement. As a friend of mine of Amerindian descent once said, "What these people are saying is that my ancestors didn't have enough intelligence to learn how to pile stones on top of each other until the Africans taught us how to do it."

On the other hand, there are similar movements among native Americans based on spurious claims of the tribal and cultural affiliations of prehistoric populations. These have lead to lawsuits against various museums in the US designed to force them to return native American remains for a "proper" burial according to the practices of the group which brings the lawsuit.

This movement is similar to one in Israel which suggests that every human bone found in Israel from neanderthaloid on up should not be studied but reburied according to contemporary Jewish funerary ceremonies.

A final note on the nature of ideology in complex societies.

Subgroups get in trouble when they suggest that the gods or cultural ideals they believe in should be substituted for the official, and of necessity general idea of an undefined god or cultural ideal since a god of all the people has to include the beliefs of everyone not merely a single subgroup.

This means that any officially recognized god of the US must be by its very nature remain undefined so that every person who worships it in that society can add their own content to the term in order to allow Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, new agers, etc. to consider themselves to think that they worship the same entity or cultural ideal.

If you observe closely, such issues as constitutional amendments to allow school prayer do all right until someone tries to specify the prayer. Creationists can even get into trouble when they try to specify the exact details of creation, age of the earth or length of the seven days of creation, and people like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson disagree fundamentally on issues of theology.

In doing so, all of these groups give us anthropologists a lot of interesting forms of human behavior to observe.

Ms. Torassa wrote a story last year in the Plain Dealer regarding two physics teachers at Lakewood High School that had been presenting creationism viewpoints during their instructions in physics.

continued on page 10

Lakewood Creation Controversy

Review by Bill Bazik

A talk by Ulysses Torassa given at Balwin-Wallace College, Berea, Ohio, January 21, 1997 for the South Shore Skeptics.

Ulysses Torassa is a science and technology writer for The Cleveland Plain Dealer (Ohio's largest daily newspaper.)

The story caused an uproar among teachers and concerned parents. South Shore Skeptic's Page Stephens immediately called activist Charles Hughes who, it turned out, was already planning a campaign to correct this abuse of Lakewood's curriculum. Members William Voss and Calvin Wight joined Hughes at an open-to-the-public meeting at the School. Due to their speaking out, along with many others, this situation at Lakewood High has been corrected.

Ms. Torassa was alerted to this misuse of teaching positions by a friend that called her attention to an article in the Lakewood High School newspaper. Apparently a "World View" teaching concept has been given as part of the physics course. Students had been told evolution doesn't make sense and told human footprints had been found alongside of fossil dinosaur footprints. In fact, on a list of topics given students to stimulate thinking, only the speed of light topic dealt with pure physics. Since creationism books are hard to find,

copies were supplied for re-searching the topics.

It should be noted that students not accepting creationism views were not discriminated against grade wise. It should also be noted Ms. Torassa believes instructor Mark Misniewski is absolutely sincere in his beliefs and truly believes the material offered stimulated thinking. She also feels about 50% of the students sided with creationism and, for example, believe that oil is only 6,000 years old and that the speed of light is slowing down. And these are college bound students!

When Ms. Torassa asked for questions, Page found it difficult at times to restore order.

Among the points made by talk attendees was that creationists often appeal to the typical American's sense of fair play by claiming "shouldn't both sides of the story be told?" Dr. Bauer replied to this by asking which other side - how about Indian accounts of creation? Cal Wight said he has found it difficult not to believe in evolution when dogs, plants, etc., have been purposely

"evolved" by breeders for centuries. Sigrid Miller argued physics should be taught as knowledge while creationism should be taught as philosophy.

One member noted two versions of "evolution" are given in Genesis. Others cited that if the principle of teaching "both sides" is to be observed, should it not be applied to the Holocaust? Should not English instructors insist on continually making comparisons to other languages? Page noted that biology texts of the 1950s and 1960s did not feature evolution; it was the Russian Sputnik that stimulated improvements in teaching science. Another commenter expressed the view that the study of physics is the most dangerous threat to religion.

Have you ever wished for a really good explanation of rationalism that you could show to people? Have you ever wanted a summary of some particular skeptical topic?

You'll find both at the James Randi Educational Foundation

continued on page 11

Surfin' For Skepticism
Meaty Reading on the Web

by Jim Kutz

Web site (www.randi.org), and a great deal more.

Randi's summary of rationalism is illustrated by links to the Skeptic's Dictionary by Robert T. Carrall, which is actually a mini-encyclopedia of over 180 short articles on everything from firewalking to psychic surgery. The entire collection of articles can be downloaded for easy reference, along with "The Skeptic's Refuge", including comprehensive resource lists.

Randi's Web page also offers a laconic guided tour down the paths of "Non-Science and Non-Sense"

Not only does Randi *tell* you about paranormal claims -- you can click on names like Uri Geller and the Maharishi, to read their own claims on their own Web pages (some of which you have to see to believe). If your spoon won't bend afterwards, Randi will tell you how to bend it *his* way (the comedic method).

The Randi Foundation is also offering prizes of up to \$500 for the best student essay. Their Web page will also carry announcements of the coveted Pegasus flying pig awards, for "the most inane

wastes of time on paranormal endeavors."

As a gift for your neighborhood psychic, you can print out the Randi Challenge, which now carries a prize of one million, ninety seven thousand dollars "to anyone who can demonstrate any psychic, supernatural, or paranormal ability of any kind under satisfactory observing conditions."

Interestingly, the successful psychic wouldn't have to wait for the pledges to be collected. The challenge rules state:

"The total pledged amount will be paid within seven days by the J.R.E.F., and the J.R.E.F. will attempt to obtain the pledged funds from the pledgors. This will facilitate the payment of the pledged sum to the claimant."

If you prefer Randi's more anecdotal notes, they're archived at:

www.mindspring.com/~anson/randi-hotline/ or you can subscribe by e-mail at randi-hotline-request@ssr.com.

The CSICOP Web site carries selected articles from the Skeptical Inquirer ([\[csicop.org/si\]\(http://www.csicop.org/si\)\). There's also a search engine for the back-issues, and a preview of the next issue's table of contents.](http://www.</p></div><div data-bbox=)

The Skeptic Society Web page (www.skeptic.com) carries selected articles from Skeptic magazine, and links to various local skeptical groups.

Reason Magazine (www.reasonmag.com) carries skeptical libertarian articles.

The Journal of Irreproducible Results (www.jir.com) is mainly satire.

Anson Kennedy of the Georgia Skeptics maintains an archive of skeptical newsletters from various groups (currently under revision) ftp://ftp.netcom.com/an/anson/Skeptic_Newsletters/

For those interested in learning more about scientific investigation and scientific method, the Society For Amateur Scientists

(www.thesphere.com/sas/) takes a hands-on approach, with an emphasis on locating the know-how and tools needed for do-it-yourself research on any subject. This site includes a great many links to free scientific information provided by various institutions in specific fields.

A variety of 'voice in the wilderness' publications, a few of them skeptical, offer samples through The Electronic News-Stand (www.eneews.com).

The South Shore Skeptics discussion forum is accessible from the Web (<telnet://freenet-in-a.cwru.edu>), choose the "guest" option, 'go skeptic' and select the open "discussion" area. Over 14,000 articles have been posted by users since 1990, many skeptical of unwarranted assumptions in public policy.

Here are some additional Web addresses. This list is by no means complete, but you'll quickly find links to other sites not listed here.

- www.mj12.com/~anson/georgia-skeptics/ Georgia Skeptics Newsletter
- <http://paul.spu.edu/~jlowder/sr/sr-index.html> The Skeptical Review
- www.duke.edu/~dpk/iufog/zines/sgj.html Swamp Gas Journal
- www.skeptics.com.au/ Australian Skeptics
- www.wimsey.com/ British Columbia_Skeptics
- www.paradise.net/~bejar/cairo.htm CAIRP (Argentina)
- <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/ctskeptics/> Connecticut Skeptics
- <http://iquest.com/~fitz/fmsf> False Memory Syndrome Foundation Home Page
- www.rpi.edu/~sofkam/ISUNY/ Inquiring Skeptics of Upper New York (ISUNY)
- http://members.aol.com/mt_rsn/ Montana Rationalists and Skeptics Network
- www.natcensci.org/ National Center for Science Education
- www.primenet.com/~ncahf/ National Council Against Health Fraud
- www.liii.com/~nyask/ New York Area Skeptics
- www.utdallas.edu/orgs/ntskoptics/ North Texas Skeptics
- www.spis.co.nz/spis/ NZCSICOP (New Zealand Skeptics)
- www.skepsis.no/english/ Norwegian Skeptics
- <ftp://ftp.primenet.com/pub/lippard/> Phoenix Skeptics
- www.reall.org/ Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land
- <http://bcn.boulder.co.us/community/rms/> Rocky Mountain Skeptics
- www.cse.ucsd.edu/users/dnoelle/sdari/ San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry
- <http://libertel.montreal.qc.ca/info/sceptiques/> Sceptiques du Quebec
- <http://libertel.montreal.qc.ca/info/sceptiques/international.htm> Montreal Skeptics
- www.helsinki.fi/~sjhiltun/skepsis.html Skepsis (Finland)
- www.physto.se/~vetfolk/index.html Vetenskap och Folkbildning (Sweden)
- ftp://ftp.netcom.com/pub/anson/Skeptic_Newsletters Skeptical Group Newsletters
- <ftp://ftp.rmii.com/pub2/factnet> FactNet Cult Information FTP Site
- news.bit.listserv.skeptics@BITNET.SKEPTIC mailing list
- www.junkscience.com/ The Junk Science Page
- www-usacs.rutgers.edu/~trott/books Skeptics Used Book Exchange

The following was a letter to the editor published in the Mansfield, Ohio News-

Journal, February 8, 1997, p.6A. It seemed to be in keeping with the SSS ❖ January meeting topic, "Lakewood Creation Controversy."

This responds to Mr. Mollica's letter of Dec. 15.

What is a mutation? One definition is a large-scale cata-

Evolution not a fairy tale
by Andrew Lutes

strophic change, as in the cited two-headed snake. But scientists also use the term to refer to small scale genetic changes at the microscopic level. Most of the small mutations are neutral, neither harmful nor beneficial. When enough accumulate to become apparent on the overall organism, then the organism's circumstances and use of the change determine its effect. An apparent defect may be turned to good use.

He cites statistics to show that mutations acting totally at random could not produce enough beneficial change to form new species in the space of the universe. But the figures proceed from a false premise. They assume that all mutations have an equal chance of occurring in an exponential fashion, as in a totally random process. Evolution does not proceed

totally at random. The mutations are produced randomly, but the Selection process is not random. Natural Selection and other evolutionary influences cull out unbeneficial changes, give beneficial changes the reproductive and statistical edge, enabling evolutionary change to occur within the space of the universe.

To repeat: even if most mutations are harmful, genetic diversity enables enough beneficial ones to occur to drive evolution. The error in saying that there couldn't be enough beneficial mutations to produce evolution is in assuming that all mutations have an equal chance of occurring. They don't. Harmful mutations end a line of occurrences, while beneficial ones keep a line going, enabling further beneficial ones to occur while the harmful ones die off.

Punctuated Equilibrium theory, formulated by S. Gould and N. Eldredge, which predicts changes taking thousands of years followed by millions of years of sameness, is not the same as R. Goldschmidt's hopeful monster theory, which predicted radical changes more rapidly. Punctuated Equilibrium does have examples of new creatures occurring, as in types of snails and trilobites. Anti-evolutionists are wrong when they say they know that no

new species have ever developed.

Evolution, and its theories are not fairy tales. They are well confirmed scientific principles.

Andrew O. Lutes
Mansfield

I have given you a few examples of the ways that human cultural ideas are related to the socio-cultural formations in which ❖ they exist in my two articles.

Human Belief and Skepticism

continued from page 6

Believe me when I say that I have only begun to deal with a few of the problems which face anthropologists every day when they try to discover the nature of human socio-cultural formations.

This article expresses the personal views of Page Stephens, Ph.D.

A view was offered that many of the papers written by creationists could be ❖ given as from the "Institute for Quotation Research."

**Lakewood Creation
Controversy**

continued from page 7

Another cited that the entire cosmology of the Christian Bible consists of five words: "He made the stars also." Why do creationists avoid citing the Tibetan Monkey God? Dr. Rickards suggested the crux of the issue is that evidence is evidence and faith is faith.

With 90% of the population ignorant regarding science and some tenured teachers espousing creationism, how can schools preserve intellectual integrity? Only history will record if science continues to improve the world or if we retreat to fixed views and

"magic." The battle did not end at Lakewood High, it continues across the nation.

A brief account of this controversy appears in an article by Page Stephens in the Spring 1996 (Vol. 16, No. 1) issue of NCSE (National Center for Science Education) publication.

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E-mail: ulysses@torassa.com



If you have an idea for a story regarding science or technology (particularly if it has a Cleveland connection) contact Ulysses Torassa at The Plain Dealer:

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