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Contents

- [Churchgoing Atheists?](#)
 - [March AOF Program](#)
 - [President's Desk](#)
 - [January AOF Program](#)
 - [Atheist TV Programs for Your Viewing Pleasure](#)
 - [Darwin's Ship](#)
-

Churchgoing Atheists?

by John C. Reiger

Can one be an atheist and an Episcopalian? Apparently the answer is yes, according to a recent news story about a small group of enthusiastic Episcopalians in Washington DC who love the ritual, staging and drama of the church but just don't believe in god. I knew that the Unitarians were tolerant about matters of belief, but Episcopalians? But then I remembered my own experience with Episcopalian tolerance.

I grew up in an Episcopalian family. Everyone went to church. Everyone believed in God - or seemed to. I did have some doubts, but mostly I was apathetic not atheistic at the time. It all seemed the very epitome of Norman Rockwell American Christianity. There were no atheists there that I know of, or heard of. The very idea of an atheist in church seemed ludicrous. It still seems a bit weird.

My own falling away from faith and the church was gradual but fairly complete by the time of my first marriage, scheduled for the local Episcopal church. Disliking subterfuge and hypocrisy, I gently informed Father Gary of my disbelief. He took it quite well (this was in the sixties) and, after assuring himself of my good moral character and sincere commitment to the marriage, said my lack of belief didn't disqualify me from a church wedding. "Cool," I thought; these Episcopalians were great folks. They, or Father Gary at least, seemed to be demonstrating the best aspects of Christian magnanimity. I later learned that Father Gary was eased out of that church; seemed he was a little too much of a social activist for that conservative congregation.

I hope the Washington DC congregation is tolerant of atheists in their midst because there does seem to be a need in many people for pageantry and ceremony. And the high churches like the Catholics and Episcopalians are full of it (pun intended). The churches also provide a social outlet and a rationale for life that many find lacking in a secular existence. It is a shame that they

have to believe in fairy tales and other less salubrious things that go along with church attendance.

Perhaps those Washington DC atheists are on to something. Could they be the beginning of a richly ceremonial, non-doctrinaire church?

March AOF Program

On Sunday March 8th AOF will hold its next general membership meeting. The meeting will feature Annie Laurie Gaylor, activist feminist and freethinker. Her visit coincides with women's history month. Annie Laurie will show slides and discuss her precedent shattering book, *Women Without Superstition, No Gods - No Masters*. Autographed copies of the book will be available for purchase at \$25 each. AOF members will recall Ms. Gaylor's husband, Dan Barker, who visited us in 1996 to engage in a debate concerning the existence of god.

Women Without Superstition features such famous freethinking feminists as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Sanger, and Emma Goldman, and includes modern day feminists such as Katha Pollitt, associate editor of *The Nation*, Barbara Ehrenreich, author, and Sonia Johnson, ERA activist, as well less well known women such as Ernestine Rose from the past and today's Catherine Fahringer of San Antonio. Join AOFers for this free presentation at the Sierra 2 Community Center, 2791 24th Street, in our regular meeting room #10.

President's Message

by Hank Kocol

Since March is "Women's History Month, it is appropriate to consider at this time one of the strong controls which fundamentalism has on women. I refer, of course, to the control of women's reproductive rights in the areas of birth control and abortion. In either case, to paraphrase AOF member, Gene Sproul, religion has proven to be nothing but cruel to women.

In the area of birth control, fundamentalist religions deny a woman the basic right to control her own body in the most personal decision an individual can make. The basic premise of religion seems to be that women are only baby factories, having only one use for their existence (no, their use as sex objects is only secondary to this basic one).

In the most heinous of the teachings, any restriction to the travel of sperm toward the ovum is considered a moral degradation surpassed only by abortion. It is irrelevant to those teachings whether the woman is too young to bear a child, too poor to raise one, too ill to carry a fetus, or may pass on a deadly disease, such as AIDS, to the fetus. The stricture is total. Even a woman

being raped does not have the right to ask of her attacker to use a condom; such a request has been considered acquiescence to the sex act and, thus, mitigates the charge of rape.

I find it very interesting that the loss of the male sperm is not considered as vile a sin as the use of any form of birth control. A case could be made that god is the greatest birth controller since he has made it necessary for the male to eject millions of sperm when only one is necessary for conception. As a male, I might, if I took the whole idea seriously, object that one of my sperm is worth less than one-millionth of an ovum. Well, I guess controlling uppity women is more important anyway.

In the area of abortion, the fundamentalists are even more cruel. No matter the state of the pregnancy, early or late, no matter the age of the woman, no matter the diseases which the woman and/or fetus may carry, no matter the financial circumstances of the woman, she shall not abort. Forcing an eleven-year-old girl to carry a pregnancy to term is an unspeakable horror, a cruelty approaching that which any human-created deity can impose even upon non-believers.

In this area, also, we can consider the fundamentalists' implicit acceptance of clinic violence, including murder, in order to stop abortions. I know: any fundamentalist preacher will say that he/she does not condone violence. However, when church members have been brainwashed into believing nonsense about an afterlife, about sin, about fetal life, about abortion being murder, who can expect them to act otherwise than to try to stop that murder in any way possible?

In a very moral sense, the fundamentalist preachers who decry abortion as murder are guilty of the acts of violence at clinics, as guilty as if they had overtly urged such violence. As proof, I cite any reports of clinic violence; without an exception, I have seen no fundamentalist preacher quoted as condemning the violence which was a direct result of that insane teaching. The preachers are very satisfied to allow their congregations to perform their violent acts while washing their own hands of guilt in any complicity. That reminds me of a bible story I remember well....

January AOF Program

by Steve Knapp

AOF's January 11th program featured Mary Walton from the Committee To Reduce Violence. At the meeting, Ms. Walton conducted a panel on violence in the community. The panel included Carol Ching (Asian Resources Center), Sheila Bollenbach (WEAVE), Leslie Watts (Committee to Reduce Violence), Peggy Babazadeb (Committee to Reduce Violence), and Miriam Navarro-Thoms (La Familia). After a short preface, Ms. Walton asked each panelist to highlight the main aspects of their respective specific programs.

Sheila Bollenbach summarized the WEAVE services, including a 24 hour crisis line, counseling to all parties, a halfway/safe house for women, and legal, educational, and children's programs. Interestingly, Ms. Bollenbach mentioned that some crisis calls come from women who are being

battered by clergy (fundamental), who often pray about it! She made it clear that men comprise the vast majority of all batterers.

Carol Ching from the Asian Resources Center (ARC) outlined three categories of their work: language assistance, low income services, and violence relief. She emphasized the latter topic, and mentioned that the ARC shares many of the goals with the La Familia organization. Special problems include the conflicts between some Southeast Asian cultural values and those of the USA. She noted a link between the need for power (i.e., gangs of impoverished young people), and violence, and the need to facilitate mentoring with young people. Ms. Navarro-Thoms and Ms. Medina described peer groups and leadership with high school kids, and the hope of expanding to middle and elementary schools.

Leslie Watts described resources available at the Committee To Reduce Violence: a library with books and pamphlets, networking and supporting conferences on violence issues and gun control, public forums, and supplying information and resources for interested parties.

Nearly all panelists mentioned the need for, and political work toward, gun control. It was noted that guns are not of good use to the elderly. In 1996 a new local ordinance for firearms requires sellers and dealers must have licenses to sell or be in business. Since then, the number of new licenses has fallen to 30% of pre-ordinance figure. It was also noted that Sacramento is crank capitol of the nation, and there are three times as many shelters for animals than for people (i.e., for women).

A spirited question and answer period followed the panel presentation.

Atheist Programming For Your Viewing Pleasure

Sunday March 8th 9:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Channel 74

Wednesday March 11th 8:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Channel 74

Sunday March 15th 9:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Channel 74

Wednesday March 18th 8:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Channel 74

Sunday March 22nd 9:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Channel 74

Wednesday March 25th 8:00 pm, [Atheist Alliance](#) Presents (Minneapolis) -- Channel 74

Sunday March 29th 9:00 pm, Atheist Viewpoint (American Atheists) -- Channel 74

Darwin's Ship

by Kenneth E. Nahigian and Edward T. Babinski

In the Creationist world these days, the buzzword is Intelligent Design (ID), the notion that the universe was designed for life -- more specifically, life on earth. "ID-ers", unlike rank and file creationists, accept standard geology and an ancient earth; to many, this makes them just a smidge more intellectually respectable. And, giving credit where it's due, some aspects of the universe do seem pretty "fine tuned" for life-as-we-know-it.

But one wonders. The vast majority of light and heat energy in the cosmos, and most of the matter, and almost all that empty space, are obviously not essential for the earth or our life on it - indeed, are irrelevant to it, even hostile to it -- casting doubt on the notion that an "Intelligent Designer" has focused attention on us in quite the way these creationists believe.

It is not just a question of wastefulness. Assume if you will that the Designer had infinite energy and infinite raw materials to work with (keeping in mind this is just an assumption). It is a question of good vs. poor design, of what's implied by what we see.

As far as our welfare is concerned, what possible reason can there be for so much energy in the cosmos, lighting and heating those vast realms of mostly lifeless space? Think of all the stars exploding, galaxies colliding, quasars radiating, black holes swallowing, meteors pounding, asteroids grinding and crashing, as the clockwork universe designedly comes to blows within itself, actually imperiling any life that may exist inside it. Can anyone really think it's all there just for us? As well might a goldfish in a bowl think the galaxy was built for it, and no one else.

Even here on our island earth, diseases of astonishing complexity and intricate "design" have caused more agony and death than all murders and all wars put together. Never mind natural disasters! Only a remarkably shortsighted or hellish motive would design a world where children suffer more than adults from mortal diseases, where the poor suffer more than the rich from natural plagues, parasites and catastrophe, where dumb animals have suffered since life began from pain and sickness. If we cannot agree on that, what can we agree on? If the vast tapestry of extinction and disaster, of poison and venom and death built into nature from the tiniest parasite to the largest toothed carnivore, of pain as old as the heartbeat of time, stretching back thousands of millennia before man appeared to commit the first sin -- if that does not seem either "unmotivated" or "cruel" to the creationist, then we must ask him: what do you think of as cruel? What would you not dare to defend as evidence of "intelligent design", regardless of the pain and horror it inflicts in yourself and fellow creatures? Where are your values?

Don't look further than the human body to find hundreds of examples of appallingly bad design. Wisdom teeth, for example. Our jaws are too small for these late-erupting teeth, so most of us must have them removed, or face adulthoods of chronic pain. The human eye, human spine and most joints have serious design flaws. In the case of the eye, the nerves in front of the light receptors (rods and cones) block part of the incoming light, resulting in a fairly poor image (in comparison to the eye design of the octopus and squid, which have nerves behind the receptors). In the spine, the fibrous cushions (disks) are not as durable or as firmly attached as would be

required for good design of a flexible load-bearing column, so are easily dislocated, resulting in a "slipped disk", a crippling condition. As for the elbow, why would a good designer leave the delicate ulnar nerve exposed at the end of the humerus, so that even a mild impact causes the numbing pain called "striking the funny bone"? Don't even ask about the human knee!

In human males, the urethra passes right through the prostate gland. Great design. The gland is prone to infection and swelling, which blocks the urethra, a common and serious problem in males. Why route a collapsible tube through an organ that is likely to expand and block the flow? Because of this design flaw, one man in three will require prostate surgery. The surgery commonly involves the cystoscope, a urethral intrusive instrument with whirling razor blades. Male readers are now invited to cross their legs.

It is tempting to say we mere humans cannot guess the "inscrutable" and "divine" purpose behind such designs. But remember, ID starts with the claim that these very designs "shout clearly" of the loving motives of a divine hand. It seems a bit late to argue that those motives are hidden, part of the Designer's mysterious "way". Such wildcard reasoning simply yanks the rug from under its own feet.

To plead ignorance now, in the face of the suffering and inefficiency "built into" nature, is to stop thinking with our brains and stop feeling with our hearts, to retreat to the blind faith position of backwater fundamentalists, which the new breed of creationists claim to scorn.

For myself, I cannot stop thinking with my brain and feeling with my heart concerning such matters; nor can I stop thinking and feeling such a way in all cases of pain and cruelty, whether "designed" by a Designer or instigated by man.

I can still imagine a creator who does not "directly" design such hellish things, but uses death and pain in an evolutionary way, so that from the soil of eons of conflict, pain and suffering bloom new possibilities, new life forms most numerous and strange -- much like the general Christian message of life conquering death. For this to make sense, the creator would have to have limits, flaws. Such a creator is perhaps not all-knowing, and cannot fully perceive the outcomes of his creative efforts, where they will lead in every instance. Or maybe just not intelligent enough to come up with a truly perfect design, is learning as He goes. Or, perhaps He does not care deeply about us; perhaps we are merely a "side effect" of the universe's design, like that goldfish in the bowl. I'll grant any or all of those, and concede the possibility of a God at least, or something like a God.

But it is not the God of mainstream Christianity -- not the Grand Designer favored by ID believers.

Close on the coattails of Intelligent Design is the notion of theistic evolution. Here, a Master Hand starts the ball rolling, then comes down from time to time to nudge things along. He "tinkers" with reptiles in order to produce synapsids, mammal-like reptiles with double jaw joints; then "tinkers" with those mammal-like reptiles to produce mammals, etc. Unfortunately this theory suggests an imperfect tinkering Designer, a fallible God.

See, for example, the earliest feathered flying species, like Archaeopteryx and proto-aves and Archaeornis. You will find they all had features which were more reptilian than any other later bird species. Those features hindered their flying ability. They did not have a large keel bone to anchor larger flying muscles. They had teeth, and their bones were not light or hollowed out like modern day birds, adding additional weight, making it more difficult to fly. Their skulls were all triangular, like reptiles, instead of smooth and helmet-shaped like modern day bird species. Their long bony tails added drag, limited maneuverability. Also their wrist bones were not fused, which again meant less steady flight, less maneuverability. So, the Designer had to come down and tinker with these earliest feathered fliers every few million years, until He finally "designed" better feathered fliers. No evidence here that such a Designer was "perfect", or could "get it right" the first time.

Some ID creationists are good talkers. They are a pleasure to listen to. But for all their rhetoric, they gloss over some of the most obvious, compelling evidence for evolution and the common ancestry of species. Busy dissecting blades of grass, they seem blind to the landscape of the forest.

Biochemical evidence, for example. In most cases, exactly how each change occurred between species, exactly what path evolution took, will be impossible to retrace; but the fact that biochemical similarities between species march in near-perfect lockstep with their timing of appearances in the fossil record, that these in turn synch with morphological/anatomical relationships seen between the same groups, is enough to convince most biologists of the theory of common descent, as easily as you and I are convinced of the heliocentric theory. (No "Noachian Flood" could ever "sort" fossils in such perfect evolutionary order.)

You may know the DNA of man and the DNA of the great apes differ by only 2%. This 2%, say the ID advocates, represents an "impassible gulf". But changes of 2% occur naturally, almost routinely, among sibling species of fruit flies; so what is so supernatural about the ape-to-man transition? We've seen how very tiny biochemical changes can have a huge impact morphologically. A mutation that simply causes one embryonic feature to continue developing a bit longer, can transform a fin into a hand, or even a scale into a feather. Likewise, the young chimpanzee skull resembles the human skull far more than does the skull of the mature chimpanzee, and we've seen cases where some mutation has caused a biological group to "retain" childhood features of its ancestors.

Suppose a tiny mutation triggered one of our proto-simian forefathers to retain his young skeletal proportions and brain-to-body ratio through adulthood. Even a little brain improvement could then lead to unexpected novelties -- just as playing with three or four alphabet blocks can lead to many more word combinations when simply one other block is added. That's no miracle, it's a fact of nature. Too, it is interesting to see how human advancement is linked to social stimulation of the brain. Humans not raised by other humans from birth do not talk and think and act humanly, but behave rather like apes, using similar gestures and expressions; so it is evident that some pretty big difference arises not merely from the larger human brain, but from how humans have used that brain over eons of social evolution. Likewise, apes, like the celebrated Koko, who are taught sign language, can pass I.Q. tests and score in the range of a human child!

Now why exactly would the Designer directly design such a learning capacity, an unused capacity, in apes? My guess is, we humans are not as totally unique as we like to think, and our extinct primate ancestors, like Australopithecus, were intermediary in intelligence between Koko and human beings. After all, the cranial capacity of Australopithecines was larger than that of any present day ape. Again, why was the Designer "tinkering" around with such large brained primates and other "incomplete human beings" for those millions of years? Why not just design a human being and be done with it?

For such reasons, natural evolution makes more sense than any version of ID Theory.

But let's drive one final nail into the creationist coffin. We know we use only a small portion of our DNA. In fact, human DNA is only about 10% "message", and 90% "garbage". Interestingly, comparisons between species on specific strings of that unused genetic material, corroborate relationships seen from comparisons on the useful portions of their DNA. The same genetic "glitches", called pseudo genes, show up in both. And in the same places. Why? Obviously evolutionary descent with modification is a better explanation rather than "creation theory", even an old-earth "ID"-style creation theory. A sensible Designer would have no reason to insert the same mutational errors into the same portions of unused DNA between two species.

Pseudo genes provide lovely examples of shared DNA errors between related species (in this case between man and ape). Some of those pseudo genes, found in exactly the same place in both modern man and modern ape, are "retro viruses", fragments of viral DNA that a virus inserted into the chromosomes of some common ancestor. Such evidence is hard to brush away. Why design exactly the same telltale elaborate retro viral "glitch", then insert it into the same position of DNA of both man and ape (but not other mammals)? If a theistic evolutionist "tinkerer" was at work, why then didn't this divine Designer "clean up" each species' genome while he was inside tinkering, instead of leaving the garbage to accumulate?

¼ Unless He were trying to fool us.

All told, Intelligent Design has two premises, and makes two basic claims. The first is that the first self-reproducing things that appeared had to have been far more complex than any other (non-living) chemical units in the cosmos. And the second premise is that the changes that followed, over eons of time, were more complex than "mere" mutation and natural selection will allow. Therefore a Grand Designer, God, had a hand. But, the fossil record and the biochemical and morphological arguments above force us to conclude that this Designer was in fact "tinkering" for millions of years, using a trial-and-error method, before the first good feathered flyer was "designed" or the first truly intelligent ape-like creatures were "designed" that became man. Suddenly we find our IT ("Intelligent Tinkerer") is in no way superior to the process of natural selection. This simple conclusion steals most of the wind from the sails of Intelligent Design Theory.

The capper is the profusion of those horrifically painful and bad designs, the many extinctions that have occurred through time, and the overabundance of animals born only to suffer and die. That takes the rest of the wind out of the ID sails, and blows Darwin's ship full speed ahead!

Kenneth E. Nahigian, Edward T. Babinski