



Rational Inquiry

Dare
to
think

VOLUME 12, ISSUE 3 *The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry Newsletter* SUMMER, 2007

The San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry (SDARI) is dedicated to the encouragement of rational thought in all areas of human affairs. Composed of citizens from every walk of life, and with a variety of technical, scientific, legal, and humanistic backgrounds, the association strives to encourage rational discourse in the life of San Diego. For more information, see page seven.

Editor Needed!

We are looking for a person who is willing to become editor. The position is presently vacant. The newsletter has been published quarterly in the past, and we would like to maintain this schedule.



Does Rational Thought Exclude Faith?

By Keith Taylor

One seldom hears the words “rational thought” juxtaposed with “faith” – except by the religious. The problem is that religion dominates America today to the point that it is the only large institution held above criticism, too often even by skeptical groups. Oh sure we are “allowed” to criticize some of the results of taking things on faith, but must not mess with the source itself, not even if it prohibits rational thought.

The idea that religion can be synonymous with rational thought is impossible. Virtually every religion insists its adherents *must* take things on faith. And virtually all follow that with the admonition that they must not test the faith. Show me a religion that doesn’t require faith, not logic, I’ll show you a religion that I’ll stop railing against.

If rational thought prevailed in this country we surely would not have twice elected a president who insists that his primary source of inspiration is a book that is indistinguishable from any other collection of myths. Perhaps we wouldn’t have because the opposing candidates, every single one of them, made similar claims, and not a one was challenged outside the secular community—and damned seldom at that.

Even Al Gore, the guy now touted as the most scientifically literate politician of our day, proudly told folks he wore a bracelet inscribed WWJD, for “What Would Jesus Do?” Nobody questioned it. Questioning a candidate’s

faith, or hypocritical claim of it, is considered unfair, even if faith is used as a reason to shape foreign policy or as an excuse to go to war.

I worry for my planet when our best hope for saving it might be an obvious hypocrite.

What would we SDARI members give to find a candidate who announced that he took his inspiration from *The Age of Reason*, or from *On the Origin of Species*?

But no. In the next year and half, about a dozen candidates will vie for the opportunity to replace the most obviously religious president in my long lifetime, and neither Paine nor Darwin will rate a mention. We can’t even begin to guess who the candidate or ultimate winner will be, but you can bet your last penny that that candidate will use every opportunity to assure the faithful that he or she reads the Bible faithfully and is duly inspired by it.

Religion is the only dominant force in the country which is never held accountable. Even the worst sort of sexual child abuse was ignored for decades until one dogged Boston lawyer and one dogged *Boston Globe* reporter persisted where others danced around the complaints that emerged from the mouths of children.

And it continues. Recently a group of Democratic presidential aspirants met at South Carolina State University. All were anxious and happy to show the world that he or she would rely on help from the unseen almighty.

One of my very good friends,

and a political expert of many years lauded the moderator who asked tough questions. I agreed she was tougher than most but she missed the one question which should have been asked of every candidate who claims a bit of validity because of his religion. “Mr. Candidate, you cite your faith as a reason we should vote for you, but the person standing next you does the same thing and has quite different religion. Shouldn’t we expect one of you – indeed all of you – to provide proof your religion is based on fact? After all, Ms. Candidate, we’ve been hearing about the power of God for 2000 years, yet not a single prayer has been answered that wouldn’t have been expected through the law of averages.”

Don’t expect such a question to be asked soon. Not even in many skeptical groups. Religion is almost certain to remain completely off-limits for criticism.

One who broaches the subject will be lambasted from here to kingdom come, metaphorically speaking of course. And that’s a shame, nothing should be held up to the light of honest questions more than a claim that one can mumble words to an unseen being and thereby solve problems.

As a freelance writer and a grouchy old man I tried belly-aching about it time and again, but few editors would go against the ingrained idea that believing in God is good. Now help is on the way and it is coming from the proper place for things of this sort, science.

At least five major scientists have written books that do not pussyfoot, but take on religion

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Rational Thought

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directly.

One is by SDARI's speaker in April of 2002, Victor Stenger. We got a preview of his book *God the Failed Hypothesis* with his talk "Has Science Found God?" Stenger and our own Mark Perakh use science to make the existence of god, as we are told to understand him, virtually impossible. Perakh, in *Unintelligent Design*, demolishes the pseudoscientific idea of a universe created by design. But don't expect the idea to go away. God, or the idea of him, does move in mysterious

ways.

Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) and Sam Harris (*The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*) did what I was worried would never happen. They aimed at the heart of religion and took it on directly, I challenge anybody to read either without wondering why we shouldn't consider the story of the great flood, indeed most of the Bible, a series of myths.

But Christopher Hitchens applied the coup de grace. He agitated the "tut tutters" across the world by claiming religion is not just wrong, it is evil. The subti-

tle of his latest book *God is not Great* sums it up with *How Religion poisons everything*.

Rational thought demands that we stand up and accept nothing on faith. Much more importantly rational thinkers must join those who stick their necks out for us and ask the questions nobody else will ask.

All we have at stake is the future of the world.

Keith Taylor is one of the early members and currently Secretary and Program Chair of SDARI.

Upcoming SDARI Public Lectures

Our Fall program offers intriguing subjects

For a while we seem to be on top of the speaker program. We have booked speakers for August 26, September 23, and October 28.

"Our laboratory is examining a broad range of evolutionary questions, including the evolution of sex and recombination. . ." So writes our August speaker, UCSD Biology Professor Christopher Wills.

Where will evolution lead mankind? What will we look like or act like a few millennia from now, in case we find a way to live that long? Likely few of us will survive that long, but Dr. Wills, if anybody, can make a prognostication. The future looks interesting and the method of trying to determine what it is fascinating. Even the rate of HIV proliferation seems to offer clues. I'm interested in learning what lies ahead for mankind whether I'll be there to witness it or not.

Dr. Wills has written numerous scientific papers and several books for a general audience on various aspects of evolution. In March, 1997, he talked to SDARI about his book *Yellow Fever, Black Goddess: The Coevolution of People and Plagues*.

In September, we will have another scientist, this one from San Diego State University. Professor Annalisa Berta will give us more ammunition in our continuing effort to support evolution and dispute the creationists' arguments

that there is no "missing link." She will cite *Archaic Whales: evidence for the evolutionary transition from legs to flippers and teeth to baleen*.

In October we will welcome back Dr. Ray Ashley, history professor at University of San Diego and the Executive Director of the San Diego Maritime Museum. The museum is also one of our city's great historical treasures. Dr. Ashley will give us a bit of the local history of science combined with the romance of exploration. The museum is building a full scale replica of the *San Salvador*. That's the ship Juan Cabrillo himself sailed into our harbor at the very start of what is considered the scientific revolution.

Dr. Ashley was our speaker January 27, 2002. He and your program chair are also interested in a possible program where junior and high school kids confront the many ghosts reputed to be residing in and haunting the ancient Star of India. Seems like a good project for some of our science fair winners. It ought to be great publicity if we can pull it off. Dr. Ashley says he can arrange an overnight stay on the ship.

Keith Taylor, Program Chair



Read any books this Summer?

A much talked about book ended up in my lap last month: *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*, by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh, and Henry Lincoln. (Dell Publishing, 489 p.p.). I read it.

The book purportedly is non-fiction. The authors claim that Jesus married Mary Magdalena, had children, and that these children or their descendant moved to the area of southern France. Here they intermarried and eventually became part of a secret society named Priory of Sion.

Real historical facts to support these claims are few, and mostly deal with events in the Middle Ages. Pseudo-history and fictional events are interwoven with historical facts to give the book an aura of legitimate research. The large body of serious research that questions the existence of Jesus, at least in so far as descriptions in the New Testament is concerned, totally is ignored.

The book has rich descriptions of the secret operations and conspiracies of the Knight Templars and the Freemasons, and intrigues, conspiracies and cover-ups by the Catholic Church, the Crusaders and nobilities. The conspiracism aficionados of today will feel right at home.

If you like fiction with historic flavor, this may be the book for you.

EAH

Rational Musings by the President

In this column I shall muse on whether all facts in science are provisional, on why there is something rather than nothing, and why people believe stupid things.

In the front pages of *Skeptical Magazine*, under the title “What is a Skeptic?”, is the statement: “A claim becomes factual when it is confirmed to such an extent it would be reasonable to offer temporary agreement. But all facts in science are provisional and subject to challenge, and therefore skepticism is a method leading to provisional conclusions.” This puzzles me, since there are plenty of facts that seem to be, well, factual, and not at all provisional. Richard Dawkins says that “evolution is as much a fact as the heat of the sun”—is the heat of the sun provisional? No, and neither is the fact of evolution, or the fact that the planets orbit the sun. I was thinking about falsification recently, and it occurred to me that no article that I have ever read has ever suggested that falsification is provisional—quite the opposite in fact. When a claim is falsified it means that it cannot be true, it becomes a fact that the claim is false, and this fact is not provisional. If falsification was provisional, it would be useless. It seems to me that falsification contradicts (falsifies?) the claim that all facts in science are provisional. If someone out there disagrees, I encourage you to write an article for the next newsletter explaining why you think I’m wrong.

In an article in the June 2006 issue of *Skeptical Briefs* and in his latest book, “*God: The Failed Hypothesis*”, physicist Victor J. Stenger discusses the ancient question, “why is there something rather than nothing?” The answer, according to Nobel Laureate physicist Frank Wilczek, is that “nothing” is unstable. I don’t completely understand all of the science, but I will try to explain what I think I do understand using Stenger’s example—water. In most of the universe, where stellar heat is not present, water vapor readily crystallizes into complex structures. These complex structures are more stable than the simpler structures of water vapor or liquid water, which require energy to be formed and maintained.

Many simple systems are unstable, and will transition into more complex structures of lower energy. “Nothing”, while simpler than “something”, is thought to be unstable, and without the actions of some outside agent to maintain it, “nothing” will naturally transition into “something”. According to one calculation, claims Stenger, “something” is more than twice as likely to exist than “nothing”. What an interesting claim!

As a skeptic, it’s frustrating trying to understand why people continue to believe in things that are not true. I hear ads for the healing powers of honey, for example, and while I’m skeptical, I can understand how a reasonable person might believe that honey could be useful in treating burns or other skin conditions. Then I hear the ads for magnets that you stick to your ears to help you quit smoking, and this seems highly unlikely, but I can understand how someone desperate to quit smoking might be willing to try anything. Then there are things like “The Secret”, which are just stupid. If we want people to start being more skeptical, we need to understand why people are so willing to believe exaggerated claims, false promises, and outright lies. I’ve read several articles and a few books on the subject, and while some of their speculations are interesting, I think the answer is much simpler and more basic.

Life is uncertain. Thousands of years ago (and for some people still today), people’s daily lives were dominated by life-or-death uncertainty. Will I eat today? Find water to drink? Be attacked by a predator? If I become sick or injured, will I die of thirst or hunger before I regain the ability to feed myself? Clearly, reducing the amount of uncertainty in our lives is not only desirable, but a matter of survival. The obvious way to do this is to form groups, and agree, as in the classic example, that if one of us falls into quicksand, the others will save him. Thus, the uncertainty of surviving a fall into quicksand is replaced with the certainty of rescue.

So the rational solution to reducing uncertainty in our lives is to form groups, and laws, and governments to serve and protect us. We pool our knowledge, experience, and resources to create a fair and effective safety net, and create a reasonable level of certainty. So no one starves, and no one worries about becoming sick

or injured. (I realize that to many people, “government” is a dirty word, but if our government isn’t serving and protecting us as we want it to, that is the fault of the people, and the people have the power to change it. Our apathetic management of our government doesn’t change the fact that government is the best solution to reducing uncertainty.)

Then there’s the irrational solution to reducing uncertainty, which is best illustrated by alternative medicine. There are diseases that were once fatal, but are now so rare that most of us have never even heard of them. But despite the great progress we have made, there are still fatal diseases, and although the odds have increased in our favor, modern medicine cannot give a 100% guarantee of survival. Alternative medicine, on the other hand, knows exactly what’s wrong with you, and will happily guarantee (but not in writing) a 100% cure with absolute certainty. The reason people believe unlikely, or weird, or stupid things, is because the people selling these beliefs guarantee absolute certainty—you will be cured, you will find true love, you will lose weight, you will become rich—and people want to believe in absolute certainty. It’s that simple.

“I know that it is difficult to teach people but that it is easy to deceive them. They learn with difficulty, and even when they do learn something from the few that know what they are talking about, they are deceived even more quickly by those who do not know what they are talking about. And they are deceived not only by others but even by themselves. For the truth is bitter and unpleasant to people who do not think, while things that are not true are sweet and attractive.”—Dio Chrysostom (A.D. 40-A.D. 112)

How do we convince people that absolute certainty is a lie? How do we convince people raised in a culture that sees belief in fairy tales as a virtue, that they need to grow up and stop believing in fairy tales? We need to keep repeating the message: Grow Up and Stop Believing in Fairy Tales. Life is uncertain, deal with it! And we need to continue to make the people who refuse to grow up feel silly and ashamed. I think we are—very, very slowly—winning.

Paul Wenger

From the Editor's Desk

Dangerous medications. We have on several occasions spoken up about the general uselessness of "alternative" medicine and the danger of many herbal "medications". Yet, their uses are flourishing. The problem basically is that our Government allows services to be performed and products to be sold without any scientific controls. One of our members sent the following communication to *Rational Inquiry*.

The Food and Drug Administration recently put out a warning to consumers and the medical community to avoid using Red Yeast Rice and Red Yeast Rice/Policosonal Complex, sold by Swanson Healthcare Products, Inc. and manufactured by Nature's Value Inc. and Kabco Inc., respectively; and Cholestrix, sold by Sunburst Biorganics. These products, promoted and sold over the internet as treatments for high cholesterol, may contain an unauthorized drug

that could be harmful to the consumer's health. This drug is lovastatin, the active pharmaceutical ingredient in Mevacor, a prescription drug approved for the treatment of high cholesterol. Lovastatin can cause severe muscle problems leading to kidney impairment. There are also numerous other drugs that can intensify the muscular problems. Typically liver function tests are periodically performed during lovastatin treatment. Obviously, none of this occurs when the Red Yeast rice is taken. The link to the FDA News Release is: <http://www.fda.gov/medwatch/safety/2007/safety07.htm#redyeast>. As of August 16, the internet companies seem to have stopped selling this stuff.

A female friend recently complained to her physician about menopausal symptoms. He responded with the suggestion that she try an over-the-counter supplement called Black Cohosh. Taken aback she responded, how will I know if the bottle contains Black Cohosh in the strength claimed. Good point, he said, and the subject was dropped. But what

were his motives? To save the HMO the cost of an approved safe drug? Carelessness in assessing the literature regarding this alternative medicine? An attitude of let the patient do what she wishes? The web site Natural Standards, the Authority on Alternative Medicine <http://www.naturalstandard.com> gives Black Cohosh a B grade (good scientific evidence) despite its admission "that most studies are not well designed and results not conclusive". The Safety Disclaimer on the site reads "The U.S. Food and Drug Administration does not strictly regulate herbs and supplements. There is no guarantee of strength, purity or safety of products, and effects may vary. You should always read product labels. If you have a medical condition, or are taking other drugs, herbs, or supplements, you should speak with a qualified healthcare provider before starting a new therapy. Consult a healthcare provider immediately if you experience side effects." So, why would anyone take these supplements?

Video Presentation: *Luck, ESP, and Magic: How Science Tests the Unusual.*

A Lecture by Richard Wiseman

Over the years, SDARI has hosted many fine speakers: our own Dr. Elie Shneour, Dr. Eugenie Scott, Dr. Bruce Flamme, *Skeptical Inquirer* columnist Robert Sheaffer, Linda Pratt from the Environmental Services Department, Judge James Gray, former police chief Norm Stamper, and many others. We have always preferred live speakers to video tapes or DVDs, but, of course, there are some desired speakers who are currently beyond our reach, and are only available to us on DVD.

In June we decided to try an experiment. SDARI presented a Skeptics Society Distinguished Lecture Series DVD featuring Dr. Richard Wiseman speaking on "Luck, ESP, and Magic: How Science Tests the Unusual". Dr. Wiseman heads the psychology lab at the University of Hertfordshire, but started his working life as a professional magician. He

clearly has a talent for performing and entertaining. His presentation was peppered with humor and he enjoyed every minute of it. And so did we!

Dr. Wiseman began by discussing the psychology of illusion, magic, and deception. He demonstrated how our perception of reality is less accurate than we think, how we can be fooled by our own assumptions, and how people respond to suggestion. He did this using optical illusions, magic tricks, and scientific studies. The tricks and illusions he used must be seen to be believed, and I won't be a spoiler and describe them here. You must check out this DVD from the SDARI Library and see them for yourselves!

Dr. Wiseman concluded by discussing his research on the psychology of luck, and the resulting book, "The Luck Factor". His group studied the lives of lucky and unlucky people, and found, for example, that lucky people spotted opportunities that unlucky people missed. He illustrated this with some very funny slides and film clips. He concluded "that luck, to a very large extent, was a matter of how you thought, and how you be-

haved." Luck can be learned!

One of the highlights for me was the film clip from "Tomorrow's World", a BBC television program in which Dr. Wiseman conducted an examination of firewalking. As I hope you all know, firewalking is simple physics, and anyone can walk a 15 foot bed of coals without harm. (Don't try this without proper supervision.) Professional firewalkers, however, claim that they "reach a state of personal empowerment, a kind of energetic change in the structure of the body" that protects them from the heat. So Dr. Wiseman suggested to the show's producers that they build a bed of coals 50 feet long. He said that, "the BBC loved it, not because it was about the paranormal, but because you saw people get burned on live television."

As I mentioned earlier, this DVD has been added to the SDARI Library and is available to our members. It is informative, very funny, and I highly recommend it.

Paul Wenger

Membership Application

I would like to join the San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry. Enclosed is my annual membership fee of \$20 (\$12 for students, seniors, and disabled people, \$6 if younger than 18). Name: Address: City: State: Zip+4: Special interests: Expertise: Mail to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry P. O. Box 623 La Jolla, CA 92038-0623 Phone: Email: For information contact contact Keith Taylor at 619-421-5844, or see our Website at sdari.org

We need your support! Please renew your membership. It costs to print and mail this newsletter and promotional fliers, award Science Fair prizes, and occasionally, to defray a small expense for the speaker. The membership gives the moral support for our cause. SDARI has been granted federal tax exempt status. Donations are deductible under section 170 of the Internal Revenue Code.

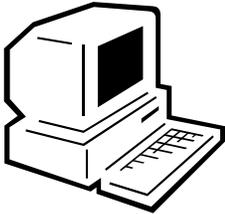
Lecture Schedule and Meeting Location

Public lectures are held at 7 p.m. on the fourth Sunday of the month (except December). The location of all meetings is the Joyce Beers Community Center, Vermont Street, 2 blocks north of University Ave., in the Hillcrest area. (The Center is near Ralphs and Trader Joe's markets in Uptown District Shopping Center. The parking is free, but please park underground).

The lectures are free, but a donation of \$5 is suggested.

Submission of Manuscripts Articles, essays book reviews and other written material may be submitted to Rational Inquiry. Pertinent announcements and clippings are welcome also. The submissions are subject to editing and abridgement. The approval of the author(s) will be sought for changes that materially affect the content. The Editorial Board, as appropriate, may evaluate each submitted work before publication for its suitability. Published material becomes the property of SDARI unless copyrighted by the author. Submitted articles that contain copyright material must have the permission from the copyright owners before publication. Such permission must be submitted to the editor in writing. Anonymous material will not be considered. Please send the material for publication (preferably on a medium compatible with Microsoft Windows) to: San Diego Association for Rational Inquiry P. O. Box 623 La Jolla, CA 92038-0623

Visit the webpage of SDARI to get the latest information on lectures and other events sponsored by the Association. You also will find other interesting facts and links to other organizations with goals similar to, or related, to ours. The Webmaster is Harry Sutton. We are at sdari.org



**The San Diego Association
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We are on the Web!
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Up-coming events

in the **Joyce Beers Community Center** (See page 5 for directions):

Sunday August 26, 2007.

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour.

7 p.m. Lecture: Dr. Christopher Wills. A lot is known about the paths of evolution in the past, but less so about those in the future. What is the future for mankind? Professor Wills at UCSD will discuss what lies ahead for the evolution of humans.

Sunday September 23, 2007.

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour.

7 p.m. Lecture: Dr. Annalisa Berta. Many of evolution's "missing" links are not really missing. Professor Berta at SDSU will present some examples of gradual transitions among species.

Sunday October 28, 2007.

6 p.m. Pre-meeting social hour.

7 p.m. Lecture: Dr. Ray Ashley. Professor Ashley at USD will tell us how Cabrillo and other explorers influenced the scientific revolution.

