

OK! ATHÉE OKIE

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THE LOVE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME WON'T SHUT UP!

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God must be rolling in his grave, because yet another state is on the cusp of legalizing, at least in form, gay-marriage, same-sex civil unions, or whatever you want to call the result of a non-hetero official life-partnership. In a 4-3 decision on *Goodridge, et al. vs. Department of Public Health* the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court ruled that their state constitution prohibits Massachusetts from banning this type of so-called "unnatural" union.

In the decision the majority wrote, "Recognizing the right of an individual to marry a person of the same sex will not diminish the validity or dignity of opposite-sex marriage, any more than recognizing the right of an individual to marry a person of a different race devalues the marriage of a person who marries someone of her own race. If anything, extending civil marriage to same-sex couples reinforces the importance of marriage to individuals and communities. That same-sex couples are willing to embrace marriage's solemn obligations of exclusivity, mutual support, and commitment to one another is a testament to the enduring place of marriage in our laws and in the human spirit."

This all comes just a few months after the U.S. Supreme Court's decision overturning Texas' anti-sodomy laws, the Episcopal Church's appointment of an openly gay man to serve as a bishop, and the television broadcast of and public obsession with *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*. You kind of have to feel sorry for the homophobic religious-right doomsayers yelling about the sky turning pink and falling. I suppose Earth-bound meteors playing out the *Armageddon* scenario will have a more choices than Orlando in Pat Robertson's future doomsaying.

In the classic American style, gay-marriage will become a new litmus test for determining if you are with us, or against us! And sadly, in a country known worldwide for plentiful variety in everything from groceries to pharmaceuticals to power tools, on issues of politics and religion Americans tend to see in black-and-white. Unsettling ideas must be compartmentalized, stereotyped, and repackaged so the public can swallow them.

On that note, the most curious reaction to these events is that many citizens are OK with the idea of a civil-union that affords a couple the same rights as a married couple but without the same nomenclature as a civil-marriage. Perhaps I am just ignorant but, what the hell is the difference? How does that make it more palatable? This is what Vermont has done under presidential candidate Gov. Howard Dean's watch. The reaction in several other states, including Hawaii and Alaska, to similar judicial decisions was to formulate a state constitution amendment defining marriage as one man and one woman. In fact, thirty-seven states have such laws now and Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney has already promised to lead a drive to amend the Massachusetts Constitution. At the national level the U.S. Congress passed the *Defense of Marriage Act*, freeing states from recognizing gay-marriages from other states, and conservatives are currently pushing the Marriage Protection Act to limit "judicial activism" in related cases.

I just don't get what the clamor and fear is all about. Do people really think that gay unions will spell the end of procreation and society? Why, for Christ's sake, would any heterosexual marriage be threatened by a union of any other people anywhere, in any way, for any reason? Why would anyone feel threatened by the private sexual acts of consenting adults? How can any rational, freedom-loving American possibly believe that regulating our most intimate of relationships is not an atrocious and un-American assault upon our privacy and liberty?

Neo-creationism as wedge

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In *Defeating Darwinism by Opening Minds* (1997), Phillip E. Johnson writes,

If we understand our own times, we will know that we should affirm the reality of God by challenging the domination of materialism and naturalism in the world of the mind. With the assistance of many friends I have developed a strategy for doing this, and a major purpose of this book is to interest young people, and persons with influence over young people, in preparing themselves to take part in the great adventure we have begun.

Johnson calls his strategy “the wedge.” He hopes to “redefine what is at issue in the creation-evolution controversy” and to unite theists around “the most fundamental issue—the reality of God as our true Creator” under the banner of *theistic realism*; united, these forces can combat the secular trend in society, a trend Johnson believe owes its existence to regnant philosophical materialism and the ongoing efforts by scientists and philosophers to disallow “materialism to be questioned” and to “suppress the facts.”

Johnson is spearheading a reprise of creationism bankrolled by the Discovery Institute of Seattle, Washington, a conservative Christian think tank, under the oxymoron “intelligent design” (ID). The intelligent designer is the Judeo-Christian skygod, or, as conservative Christians put in on creationist Web sites, “the politically correct term for God.” In November, the Texas State Board of Education approved by an 11–4 vote biology textbooks that present the origin of life in evolutionary terms, just as science textbooks have in Texas since 1911. In the belief that attacking high-school textbooks serves as a proxy for undermining the theory of evolution, the Discovery Institute campaigned in Texas to require that textbooks include descriptions of so-called weaknesses in the theory of evolution. The Discovery Institute is now targeting Minnesota. Writing in the Nov. 30 issue of the *Minneapolis-St. Paul Star Tribune*, Seth L. Cooper, a lawyer with the Discovery Institute, claims Minnesota’s Department of Education is ignoring the public’s desire that the theory of evolution be downplayed in textbook standards. ID’ists mistake public opinion for scientific proof. Johnson touts recent polls showing half of Americans favor creationism over the theory of evolution, conveniently ignoring that only a third of respondents claim they understand the theory of evolution, rendering the results meaningless. Half also believe dinosaurs coexisted with humans. (With numbers like these, what are ID’ists so worried about?) Cooper, who like Johnson portrays himself as a hard-nosed and chivalrous defender of scientific objectivity, flatly denies accusations that the standards controversy is about ID, but he blows his cover by plugging ID “theory” with this bold-faced lie:

It is true that some scientists who are critical of Darwin's theory favor an emerging scientific theory known as intelligent design. This new theory is based upon scientific evidence, not religious doctrine.

In addition to scientific illiterates who respond to opinion polls, who are the other arbiters of the state of scientific knowledge? Why, elected officials of course:

If the committee fails to discharge its duty to seriously consider public and professional input, then the governor and the Legislature will have an obligation to ensure that this input is incorporated before the standards are finally approved next February.

ID is a retread of a fallacious idea dating back to at least Plato (who himself loathed materialism), namely, that our inevitable incapacity to grasp some of the complexities in nature is not an invitation to overcome that ignorance through impartial inquiry but proof that nature is the design of a divine superintelligence. The unexplained is unexplainable. David Hume famously anatomized the theological argument from design by, among other things, arguing that *any* observable universe would perforce appear to us designed. William Paley, in 1802, posited that just as the intricacies of watch machinery proved the existence of a watchmaker, the intricacies of nature prove the existence of a divine creator. What about divine edict being responsible for, say, extinction, diseases, and disasters? Proof that providence acts in mysterious ways.

In the minds of ID'ers, doctrinaire scientific materialists work feverishly behind the scenes to conceal from the public that the theory of evolution is a false dogma. It is too late, Johnson informs us, to save academia and the media from the corrosive influence of the evil scientific materialists: so vast is their reach that their tentacles have even clutched "Christian college and seminary professors." The fate of Western Civilization rests on the ability of Johnson and his cohorts to open the minds of youth.

What are the merits of ID? Plumbing the depths of the self-congratulatory nonsense written by ID'ers reveals ID to be merit-free, failing to meet even the laxest standards of evidence. Its proponents, who don't even define ID, clearly don't grasp the theory of evolution, making mistake after mistake when trying to disprove its predictive value. They speak of ID as being so self-evident that once they (ineluctably) remove the ideological blinders of scientific materialism from our culture, we will instantaneously grasp the wisdom of ID. ID'ists like to portray themselves as more sophisticated than creationists: scientific materialists have only had to defend evolution against hog wallow-dwelling rubes; they cannot withstand the challenge posed by sophisticated ID'ists. Yet the chief difference between ID'ists and creationists who swear by the two Genesis creation myths is that many of the former don't believe the earth is a few thousand years old—a feature making them no more sophisticated than anyone who doesn't believe the earth is flat. ID'ists are almost apologetic for being so right. The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) invited William Dembski and Paul Nelson, two prominent ID'er, to present a defense of ID to the Fourth World Skeptics Conference in June 2002. Writing in *Skeptical Inquirer* (Volume 26, No. 6), Mark Perakh notes,

In his presentation, Dembski condescendingly suggested a program of action for skeptics if they wish to defend their position against ID. In his uncompromising self-confidence Dembski seems not to realize that if he suggests a new, allegedly revolutionary theory, the burden of proof is on him and his colleagues in the ID camp. It is ID-ists who need to provide evidence, any evidence, in support of their position. It is precisely the absence of evidence for the ID theory that makes skeptics (read: mainstream scientists) reject ID.

Dembski complained "about skeptics suppressing his views while speaking to the same skeptics who provided him the forum."

We will continue to hear about ID and other variants of creationism. Because to teach creationism is to teach religion, equal-time-for-creation-science laws, once the creationists means of undermining science education, were struck down in 1987 by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Edwards v. Aguillard*. Religion being their only reason for opposing the theory of evolution, anti-evolutionists use Trojan horses, calling for creationism in the guise not only of intelligent design but also "abrupt appearance theory" and "evidence against evolution." If ID goes the way of the dinosaur, anti-evolutionists will recast creationism once again under yet another high-minded euphemism.

The Love that Dare Not Speak It's Name Won't Shut Up! (continued)

Recall that the whole Texas sodomy issue was raised when two consenting adults experienced sudden and involuntary *coitus interruptus* as jack-booted thugs kicked down their door (under false pretenses) and dragged them off downtown, to be tried and convicted for daring to act as they please in the privacy of their own home!

George Dubya had a few juicy comments on the subject. After the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on sodomy in Texas the ruler of the free world said, "I will work with congressional leaders and others to do what is legally necessary to defend the sanctity of marriage." The Texas intellectual added this in response to the Massachusetts decision, "Marriage is a sacred institution between a man and a woman." He said the ruling by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court "violates this important principle." Well, I'm glad he cleared that up, because I kind of figured that personal lifelong commitments should be, well, personal.

In the florilegium of related stories and editorials posted on the internet a variety of common objections come up. The sinful nature of homosexuality is the primary objection, followed by the nebulous "sanctity of marriage" arguments which appear to refer to both the religious and cultural building block that marriage is. The others seem to concentrate on pure ignorance, such as "it will debauch children", "it will spread STDs", and "The homosexual agenda is forcing us to accept their evil ways!" It's amazing how much they all mirror former southern slave owners' arguments to support the status quo ante bellum.

What all of these issues boil down to, as is so often the case, is the desire to impose the religious precepts of the majority onto the minority. This is just another battle in the ongoing war between religious traditions and the principles of liberty. A poll, released by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that those with a high level of religious commitment oppose gay marriage by 80 percent to 12 percent. Rep. Walter Jones, R-N.C., called the Massachusetts decision "just one more assault on the Judeo-Christian values of our nation." Damn, I keep forgetting we are a Christian nation!

The question at hand is not, "What do ancient religious traditions teach us about the institution of marriage?" but rather "Should marriage be open to all consenting adults in a free and pluralistic society?" Many people seem to have a difficult time when judging between civil liberties and personal ethics, but our society should always show deference to the former. "Live and let live" should be our guiding precept, or, put another way "And It Harm None, Do As Thou Wilt."

Nearly about every hot button issue is also divided between those that advocate civil liberties for all and those that desire to enforce their own religious ethic upon the public at large: abortion on demand, creationism in public schools, Ten Commandments in the public square, drug prohibition, polygamy bans, and various other marital and sexual regulations. It is shocking how quickly people will replace fundamental liberties with authoritarianism whenever religious ethics become involved.

A final note from Pew Research Poll: people in their twenties and thirties overwhelming support civil-unions between members of the same sex. It would appear that the restriction of marital privileges to heterosexuals is inevitably doomed. One of the positive outcomes of all that pop-culture we generation 'X'ers got from television was a respect for diverse lifestyles and a general sense of the golden rule. Now if we can just keep out the corruption of traditional family values and archaic religious thinking we might be able to make this place a decent place to live.

December 2003 Freethought Calendar

Dec 11th – Church/state meetup – 8:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at
<http://churchandstate.meetup.com/>

Dec 16th – Atheists meetup – 7:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at
<http://atheists.meetup.com>

Dec 20th – Agnostics meetup – 1:00 pm

Please vote for your favorite location at
<http://agnostic.meetup.com>

Dec 26th – Galileo's Café – 7:06 pm

Food, fellowship, fun!