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The mission of the Red River Freethinkers is to advocate for a skeptical view of the role of religion in society and to promote critical examination of religious authority and dogma.

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RED RIVER FREETHINKERS

# THE RED RIVER RATIONALIST

ISSUE 132 MARCH 2010

## REVELATION ON THE ROAD TO GARRISON

For the last several years, I have been participating in a bicycle tour event called "Candisc" that starts and ends in Garrison, ND. Candisc is a bicycle tour that takes a different route through the North Dakota



countryside each year. The ride is sponsored by the North Dakota State Parks and originates out of the Fort Stevenson St. Park. The ride

last year was going great until the last night in Turtle Lake. The dinner offered that night was to be "family style", turkey and other things. Well, this apparently entailed being seated in the order that you came in so you got to sit with people you may not have actually liked much. But then the topper was a minister getting on the P.A. system and "offering grace". This wasn't the usual generic, "our heavenly father" thing it was a "our lord and savior Jesus Christ" kind of deal. Now to be honest, I would have objected to the whole thing no matter what they put in it, But I kept my peace until dinner was over and went up to the minister and pointedly, and I believe, courteously, told him that his offering was inappropriate, out of line and not appreciated by me. I also told the ride director, a State Parks employee, that the saying of grace was not called for in a secular state function. Not to mention that this took place in the public school gymnasium. The ride director told me that she thought every one else really enjoyed the prayer and that I ought to accept it. I said that maybe this will be my last Candisc and she said that was okay by her.

The next morning, as I was getting my baggage to the truck, I was passing by the ride director some distance off and mused aloud to myself, "I wonder what next years Candisc theme will be, "Candisc for Christ" or "Muhammad on a roll". The ride director shouted over to me that if I didn't stop right now she would prohibit me from finishing the rest of the ride into Garrison. I didn't really have anything left in my sarcasm file so I kept my mouth shut. I finished the ride and went back home.

Back in October I received a letter from the "Candisc committee" saying that "due to your behavior this past year, your registration will no longer be accepted". The letter had other things in it about how everyone is entitled to their own beliefs and feelings, and that they allow the host community to do what ever they want in exchange for allowing Candisc into their towns. They said my "behavior was very disturbing", but I can't quite see how I could have really bothered anyone outside of my right to freedom of speech. Like I said, I spoke pointedly, yet politely to the parties involved with the possible exception of the passing sarcasm. I've been told by some others that North Dakota is the bible belt of the northern plains and that I shouldn't be too surprised that they would take umbrage at a nonbeliever asserting that there ought to be a separation of church in state parks. What do you think? Friends, who are not lawyers, say that I should sue. I'd really like to just get to ride Candisc again. The people of North Dakota generally are the nicest and most kind folks I have come across in a long time. ■

**Morgan Christian**  
St. Paul, MN

### POINTS OF INTEREST

- The March RRF meeting will be a potluck in the large conference room at the Fargo Public Library in downtown Fargo on Sunday March 21 from 1:15 to 3pm. Everyone is welcome!
- Every Saturday morning from 11-12pm on KNDS 96.3 FM, catch Kent and Brian on "The Amplified Atheist".
- FirstLink is calling for volunteers to assist with potential flood fight and response efforts and with filling 1 million sand-bags. More information here: <http://www.myfirstlink.org>

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## THE BURDEN OF PROOF (PART 2 OF 2)

In part 1 of *The Burden of Proof* (RRR, Feb. 2010) we established that theism had 'opted out' on understanding the world with an *a priori* assumption of a god, that the logic tools within rhetoric could be corrupted by others tools of rhetoric, that language needs a logical correspondence with reality in order to adequately describe it, yet logic itself can fail in discussing reality. As such, we were left with no way to evaluate evidence and no way to progress beyond the 'I'm right and you're wrong' stage of argumentation (without resort to weaponry). A fitting way to start this essay is to quote a recent post on *Scienceblogs*. A creationist argued against the existence of transitional fossils as follows:

"If there were unicorns, then we would find them in the fossil record. We do not find unicorns in the fossil record. Therefore there were no unicorns."



This was part of a larger argument that went something like: 'we know unicorns did not exist because we do not find them as fossils and similarly we know that transitional forms also do not exist because we do not find them as fossils' (See RRR Nov. '09 for my comments on the transitional fossil 'question'). I could descend into blog-speak and say, "not even wrong," "epic fail" or simply "LoL." The educational approach is to note that these statements constitute: 1) a logic flaw, the false cause fallacy: *pro causa, non causa*, 2)

profound ignorance and (or) 3) deliberate dishonesty. But, how do we know? Here is where we leave the realm of rhetoric behind and begin looking at evidence. The methods for evaluating evidence and the way to progress beyond the 'I'm right and you're wrong impasse' is (you guessed it) **SCIENCE**.

Let's examine the unicorn proposition. The scientific approach here is: 1) establish what, if anything, is a unicorn, 2) examine what the fossil record preserves (or fails to preserve) and why, and 3) look for a connecting link between unicorns and the fossil record. What follows below is a much abbreviated 'results' presented as popular science from the primary research of others.

Unicorn legends based upon actual creatures can be traced to four geographical regions: India and the Orient, eastern Europe- Caucasus, the Scandinavian countries, and the Middle-east plus Asia Minor. From the first region we get accounts of animals with a single horn on their heads and elephantine legs. Carl von Linné in *Systema Naturae*, 1758, 'named' this unicorn: *Rhinoceros unicornis*. Today we commonly call this beast the Indian rhinoceros. It is an endangered species due to folklore concerning its horn.

The second source of unicorn stories are legends of the Evenk people inhabiting the Russian Caucasus that tell of a large black bull with a horn on its head. The beast was found in mountain valleys where it browsed on low foliage (much like the African black rhino, *Diceros bicornis*, does today). Nearly 50 years ago, the science writer Willy

Ley proposed that these 'unicorns' were the extinct rhino, *Elasmotherium*, part of the ice age megafauna that died out at the close of the Wisconsinan glaciations. Ley contended that *Elasmotherium* could have survived in the Caucasus late enough to survive into recorded history. However, youngest fossils are dated to 128,000 y.b.p. (years before present). By way of contrast, Woolly mammoths survived in New Brunswick as late as 7,000 y.b.p., but do not survive in Native American legend. The fossil record does not favor Ley's hypothesis. A much better candidate for Evenk legends exists- we'll get there, but for now, remember that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. The third region of unicorn legend, Scandinavian countries comes with objective 'proof': spiral twisted ivory horns of up to two meters long. When examined, each and every ivory horn turns out to be the projecting tusk of a male Narwal, *Monodon monoceros*- a small 1 ton arctic whale also described by Linne' in 1758. How did the whale become unicorn? Vikings 'traded' with Persia somewhat after 860 c.e. with a last recorded raid (Ingvar the far traveled) in 1042 c.e. This is a possible connection. The story of the Middle-east unicorn is more convoluted. Again, we'll get there.

Our last paragraph contained both fact and some speculation. Speculation is 'okay' even in science, but what is important is that the evidence is there for all to see. Purported unicorn horns (evidence claims), when compared to Narwal tusks, turn out to be Narwal tusks as well. No belief is required, this is objective evidence. If there is dried tissue at the base of a 'unicorn horn', with present day technology DNA sequencing could be done- confirming the morphological conclusion of Narwal. Does all this require special knowledge, yes. But is special *external* knowledge available to all and not requiring a conversation with a deity- it is not the internal or revealed knowledge (*a priori knowledge sans evidence*) of a religion.

Let's look at fossils. Donald Rumsfeld once said: "There are known knowns, known unknowns, unknown knowns and unknown unknowns. . ." A living rhino is a known known, an undescribed living rhino might be an unknown known, a fossil rhino would be a known unknown, but a fossil unicorn would be an unknown unknown. The fossil record contains animals like and others absolutely unlike those now living. There are fossil extinct Narwals (known unknowns), 30 genera of fossil rhinos (known unknowns), but also 6 winged insects (unknown unknowns), and *T. rex* (unknown unknown). In birds, 3/5 of the 8,700 living species are perching birds, yet 9/10 of the 900 known fossil species are non-perching birds. The lesson is clear: present diversity is not a guideline for past preservation. Living species could be thought of as leaves on the evolutionary 'tree of life.' We may

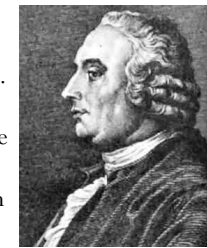


trace their twigs and branches to the root yet remain forever ignorant of nearby side branches not preserved. If present day birds did not exist, we would look at the 900 fossil bird species and wonder just what exactly was a feather? If fossil remains of 6 winged insects and *T. rex* had not been discovered, we would be ignorant of these creatures. We would assert they did not exist because there would be no evidence- but not because we failed to find them in the fossil record- hence *pro causa non causa*.

Science really is a method- the scientific method which consists of observation, hypothesis formulation, hypothesis testing, (i.e. experimentation or critical observation and research) and lastly, theory proposal which is an explanation that accounts for the observations and makes predictions concerning future observations. Science is more than making and recording observations. Science seeks to explain *why*, and furthermore, predict *how* something *will* appear or behave under novel (or ideal) conditions. **What** might be observed when we change conditions or look in a new place.

A foundational component of scientific work is that at every point a scientist honestly asks, 'How can I be wrong?' S/He then systematically explores each possibility. In this very special way science differs from forms of rhetoric. A scientist works hard to disprove that which they suspect (or even hope) might be true rather than presenting a (biased) argument for a favored proposition- which is a hallmark of rhetoric. Science is 'self-propelled.' New observations are always being made and every theory is constantly tested. Science is also 'self-correcting.' Critical observation and/or experimentation allow us to choose between explanations (hypotheses) and **discard** inoperable ones. Above, we discounted Ley's hypothesis based upon some albeit weak contradictory evidence and we rejected the assertion of preserved unicorn horns based on solid objective evidence. Logic can fail, rhetoric mislead, and religion deceive; yet, although individual scientists are subject to all the foibles of human nature and can also fail, mislead or deceive, the scientific community acts in a self-correcting manner. Why, because human nature also contains such properties as a desire to understand, to be right, to help others, and even to be famous. Bad explanations (or dishonest scientists) are winnowed out over time.

However, deep at the heart of the scientific method there lurks a small 'problem.' Philosopher David Hume pointed it out in 1739. Some things must be assumed (taken 'on faith'). In the use of the scientific method we make four assumptions: 1) There is a reality, 2) That reality can be understood, 3) We can make meaningful observations concerning reality, and 4) Those observations will enable us to understand reality. These four assumptions are undermined by an *a priori* assumption of anything (a god for example). You either live in reality or, to quote *Morpheus* (Laurence Fishburne) from *The Matrix* "It is the world being pulled over your eyes." How do you know the four assumptions and the scientific method are valid? The essay you are now reading was composed on a lap-top computer, possible only because of the application of scientific theories of matter and energy. Now, back to unicorns.



In 250 B.C.E., Ptolemy ordered some seventy scribes to translate the Torah into Greek. The resultant work, the Septuagint, had the Hebrew word Re'em rendered as 'monokeros' or one-horn. The Ptolemys commonly had rhinos on display and the Torah passages denote a powerful animal. Greek historian Ctesias, in the fifth century, upon seeing Persian palace 'copies' of Assyrian bas-relief profile images of the Wild ox or Aurochs wrote of a one horned animal and connected it with eastern European folklore (Viking 'traders' may also have seen such profile images). Ctesias' account is in the one surviving volume of his 23 books about Persia that found its way to Western Europe. Monokeros merged with the writings of Ctesias to give us the mythological unicorn. In the Geneva (1560) and King James (1611) Bibles there are eight unicorn entries in five different 'books.' A typical one is Numbers 23, verse 22-



"God brought them out of Egypt; he hath as it were the strength of an unicorn." By at least 1899 Johan Ulrich Duerst made the

connection between the Hebrew Re'em, the Assyrian Rimu and the ancient Akkadian Rumu as referring to the extinct Wild ox or Aurochs, *Bos primigenius*. This large black species of cattle was known for its ferocity (which was transferred to the mythological unicorn). The fighting bulls of Spain (and domestic cattle) all *Bos taurus*, are the insipid descendants by artificial selection of Aurochsen ancestors. As late as 1951, the Church of England Authorized Readers Bible still contained the unicorn reference as quoted above, even though Carl von Linné settled the identities of 'biological unicorns' in 1758 and 'linguistic unicorns' were laid to rest by 1899. The last home of the Aurochs was the Caucasus Mts. of Poland where it finally became extinct in 1627- 16 years after the first printing of the King James Bible.

Some still argue that Re'em might refer to various species of antelope (Arabic Rem= antelope), the Oryx- *Oryx beisa*, is the most popular candidate species. Creationist websites such as *Answers in Genesis* still hold out for either the mythical horned horse (so as to not limit a deities potential creativity), but also advocate *Tricerotops!* The mythological unicorn was portrayed in tapestry with the Virgin Mary. It was said to be fierce but could be captured by the innocence of a virgin maiden- and the horn had 'magical' = aphrodisiac properties (doctrine of signatures). Now we know why all five living rhino species are endangered (Save the rhino? Buy Viagra). Outside of science, there is no way to discard errors.



The burden of proof rests on the claimant, there is no other way to coherently interpret reality and this is the only way around the "I'm right and you're wrong" impasse. To alleviate that burden use the scientific method. We're still waiting and wondering whether theists when asserting the existence of a god, will ever produce even a unicorns' worth of evidence (or a tea kettles' worth of reason). ■

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