

The REALL News

The official newsletter of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land

"It's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense." — James Randi

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Africa's Curse: Magical Beliefs

by Richard Petraitis

In March 1996, a West African news journal reported that mass hysteria had broken out across the Ivory Coast. According to the report, fourteen suspected sorcerers were murdered by mobs, two were killed in Abidjan, and twelve victims met their brutal end in Ghana. Young African men had gone on a rampage because they believed their penises had vanished (or shrunken) when strangers used a "sorcerer's handshake" to greet them! During the ensuing mob violence, Ghana's government responded with armed force to end the lynchings. The hysteria was based on the local belief that sorcerers steal genitalia for nefarious, magical purposes.¹ (Across West Africa, there is a secret trade in body parts for use in Ju Ju, a form of sympathetic magic. The physical procurement of human body parts by Ju Ju practitioners, may have fed the fear of West Africans that they could even be magically separated from parts of their anatomy. Earlier, in October 1988, ten of Ghana's citizens were sentenced to death for their involvement in the occult trade of human organs.²)

However, neither the hangman's noose nor the firing squad have stopped centuries-old magical thinking on the African continent. The last hundred years of Africa's millennium began with the tragic Maji-Maji rebellion of 1904-5. It demonstrated the dire consequences of magical thinking. Over 120,000 believers were killed in the Maji-Maji revolt because a few spirit mediums promised to make all who used a special war medicine (water mixed with castor oil and millet seeds) immune to German rifles.³ Despite one of history's harshest rebuttals to claims of magic powers by mere mortals, magic-based belief systems continued to thrive on the great African land mass. Desperate people, seeking to free themselves from European colonizers, continued to believe in paranormal powers as a pathway to freedom.

In March 1947, the island of Madagascar was torn by a bloody, native revolt against the French colonials. Village sorcerers promised the oppressed Malagasies an easy victory against France's soldiers. The sorcerers told rebels their magic spells would have the French rifles firing only water! Initially, some whites were killed, but nearly 11,000 rebels would die.

When magical protection proved a sham, the sorcerers kept the rebellion alive using prophecy. These magic men told the Malagasies (armed only with spears and machetes) that America would assist their rebel army. Any dreams that U.S. forces would soon storm the island disappeared, and the Revolt of The Spears was crushed by December of 1948.⁴

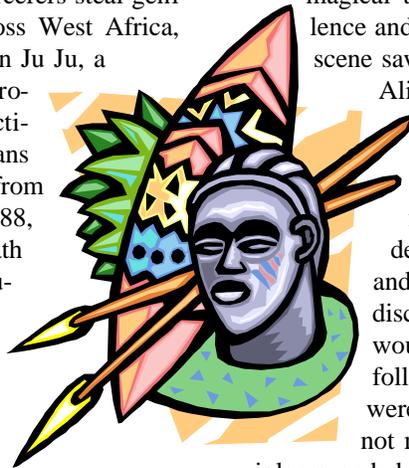
Colonial governments never had any large success in eradicating African beliefs in magic, sorcery, and witchcraft. Magical thinking remained deeply rooted as cultural belief. In the wake of the European exodus from the African continent, magical thinking stoked the fires of revolutionary violence and unrest. In 1962, Northern Rhodesia's political scene saw the ascendancy of a Voudon priestess named Alice Lenshina. She preached to the masses that she had been raised from the dead by God!

This charismatic priestess soon gained sixty thousand disciples and launched a brutal hunt for witches. The Rhodesian government condemned Lenshina's witch eradication program, and intervened with the army. Lenshina told her disciples not to fear soldiers' bullets because she would turn them to water with her magic. Clashes followed, and seven hundred of Alice's followers were dispatched – proving that magic spells will not make your body immune to rifle fire. The mob violence ended when the priestess was captured by authorities.⁵

As far as I know, Alice Lenshina never volunteered to personally demonstrate her own ability to turn bullets into H₂O.

Magical belief was a suitable mate for African politics; strongmen seized power in several new African nations by using local beliefs in magic to their advantage. One such strongman was Francisco Nguema. During the 1970s, Nguema had most of Equatorial Guinea convinced that he was a great sorcerer. This ruthless dictator believed he drew occult powers from a collection of skulls held in his home! Unfortunately,

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Purpose

The Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land is a non-profit, tax-exempt 501(c)(3) educational and scientific organization. It is dedicated to the development of rational thinking and the application of the scientific method toward claims of the paranormal and fringe-science phenomena.

REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL does not reject paranormal claims on *a priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

The REALL News is its official newsletter.

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Predictions

- More Weird Web Sites
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From the Chairman

David Bloomberg

This month's meeting, on Tuesday, April 4, will feature Professor Malcolm Levin presenting "**Teaching the Differences Between Science and Religion: Creationism and Evolutionary Theory.**"

Professor Levin will examine the nature of scientific theories and religious ideas with the goal of understanding the similarities and differences in theory formation and development at an elementary level. He will approach the problem of scientific theories by asking the question: Were Darwin's methods and processes of developing an evolutionary theory consistent with the "way of science"? Stated another way: Are Darwin's evolutionary theories (there are actually five theories) good science? To answer this question, he will use a composite set of qualitative descriptors to define good theories. In compiling these concepts, he will bring together the ideas of Langdon Gilky, a theologian, Phillip Kitcher, a physicist and philosopher of science, and Howard Van Till, Davis Young and Clarence Menninga, physical scientists. He will also examine modern evolutionary theory and creationism in the same context – do these theories meet the tests of good science?

Professor Levin earned his B.A. in biology at University of Virginia, his M.S. in Entomology and Applied Ecology at University of Delaware, and his Ph.D. in Genetics (specializing in ecological genetics and evolution) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. He is a professor of Biology and Environmental Studies and Chair of the Department of Environmental Studies at the University of Illinois, Springfield, where he has taught for 27 years. He teaches Concepts of Ecology, Evolution, Biology, and Public Policy, the Environmental Social Sciences and Humanities, and other courses. Most relevant to this presentation, he has taught a course on *Evolution and Creationism: Understanding the Controversy* for more than 15 years.

As you may guess, Malcom knows his stuff! He spoke to us once before, back in 1994, and we had a packed house. We usually have trouble with our schedules because he tends to teach on Tuesday nights, but we worked it out this time. So bring a friend. Have your friend bring a friend. Don't miss this meeting!

Media Review Committee

As I mentioned in my "REALLity Checklist" column in February, we are putting together a committee to review media performance on issues of interest to us, so the next "Checklist" can be more of a full-group endeavor, and we can send out "awards" to the winners (and losers). I just wanted to remind folks that we are encouraging you to submit nominations to us. You can e-mail them to me, phone and leave a message on the REALL hotline, or use regular mail to our P.O. Box. It's best if you can include a copy of the article if you're nominating written material (not really possible on the answering machine, obviously), or at least a topic, date, location, and enough information so we can dig it up.

If you see something, let us know!

Whoops! Forgot Something

Last issue, I mentioned David Hunter, a father who'd lost his daughter to recovered memory therapy and is now a member of Illinois Marriage and Family Therapy Licensing and Disciplinary Board and also has his own group, Parents Against Cruel Therapy (PACT). What I neglected to do was mention how to contact him, if anybody is interested. So here is that information:

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From the Editor

Wally Hartshorn

April is upon us! Did you fall prey to any April Fools jokes this year? Or inflict any upon others? Well, here at *The REALL News*, we have no time for such fooling around. Nope, we're all serious, all the time. Yep.

Well, okay not that serious. But we're pretty serious. However, in the spirit of things, there is one item in this issue which is stated as fact, yet isn't true. Test out your baloney detector and see if you can locate it.

This issue features a new article from Richard Petraitis about superstition in Africa. Previous articles of his that we

have published include "The Shamans of Suburbia" (May '97), "Bullets into Water: The Sorcerers of Africa" (August '98), and "The Shaman Question: Revisited" (November '99). His articles are always interesting reading, and we're glad to have another one to present to you.

In addition, David has written another of his popular "REALLity Check" columns. And as usual, there was more in the news than could fit in this issue, so he already has some items with which to start next month's column!

So enjoy the springtime weather while you search for the untrue statement in this month's issue of *The REALL News*. ☎

REALLity Check

by David Bloomberg

Another fairly busy month for us. Plus still catching up a bit from before that. Wouldn't it be nice to have a month where nothing related to REALL was messed up by the media? Ah well, I don't think that's going to happen any time soon. Call it job security.

A Shot in the Dark

Scientific American reported on over 2,300 cases of measles in Holland in the past year (March, 2000). Now you may be thinking, "But doesn't everybody get a measles shot?" Well, most people do, but there is a growing number of people fighting against vaccinations. Perhaps the three dead and 53 hospitalized children from Holland's measles outbreak will have some impact on these folks, but I wouldn't count on it.

The article notes that sometimes religious views are the reason for the anti-vaccination stance, but others oppose vaccinations because of overblown or completely groundless fears. Some believe the shot will cause the disease, while others believe shots may cause cancer, autism, arthritis – you name it. And, like any other crackpot belief, they have their own groups like the National Vaccine Information Center, which, contrary to what one might think in reading the name, actually *opposes* vaccination.

So are there risks? Sure. A child may get a sore arm or a low-grade fever from a shot. On "extremely rare occasions" a child may have an allergic reaction. Certainly such occurrences are tragic, but would it be better to risk such an infinitesimal chance against the much worse effects of the disease? As the article notes, "the overall risks from immunizations are far less than those associated with contracting one of the vaccine-preventable diseases such as measles or polio."

Some vaccine opponents go even further. They claim the government uses vaccination records to spy on us. They use accounts of children who got shots and then showed symptoms of a disease to supposedly prove the connection. The problem, as noted in the article, is that "with so many children being immunized so frequently, there are bound to be instances in which a condition like arthritis becomes apparent within a week or a month of that child's receiving a vaccine." In other words, the whole thing is similar to the brouhaha over silicone breast implants. Women got implants; later, a few of those women got various diseases; thus, they concluded the implants caused the diseases, even though the same percentage of women without implants also got the diseases. Once again, I feel compelled to repeat: Correlation does not equal causation.

This article didn't mention it, but some alternative medicine practitioners, such as some homeopaths, contribute to the problem by opposing vaccination. When a recent column of *The Straight Dope* by Cecil Adams tackled homeopathy, a proponent of the method posted to the message board about how horrible vaccination was. Somebody's world is turned com-

pletely upside-down.

Not So Healthy, Part 2

Last month, I discussed a few findings that "dietary supplements" (herbs and the like) were interfering with medical treatments. Since then, several new problems have hit the news.

Discover magazine discussed **Adriane Fugh-Berman**, a doctor at George Washington University School of Medicine who has been looking at such interactions. She has noted that St. John's wort can cause confusion, nausea, and diarrhea when taken with Prozac or other antidepressants. Ginkgo biloba can cause bleeding when taken with warfarin, an anti-clotting drug. Yohimbine can cause high blood pressure when used with some antidepressants. In addition, she found that some Asian herbals were contaminated with lead or arsenic or cut with steroids.

An AP article (3/3) discussed a conference on the safety and effectiveness of herbs, at which speakers noted how people will take herbs because medicine hasn't been able to cure their problems, so they act on their own. One herb specifically mentioned in the article was comfrey, which is supposedly anti-inflammatory and antibacterial. It is widely available here in the U.S., but restricted in Germany and Canada. One doctor noted that not only are the claims made for it unproven, but there **is** evidence that it can "destroy small veins in the liver and can result in abdominal pain, liver enlargement and liver failure."

CNN reported (3/6) that anesthesiologists are concerned about patients' use of herbs. While there has not been a scientifically-proven link for all of these, some anesthesiologists have noted problems with blood pressure, poor clotting, and excessive bleeding in patients who have taken ginseng, ginkgo biloba, ginger, ephedra, and other herbs. Furthermore, St. John's wort, kava kava, and valerian may affect the way people wake up out of anesthesia.

Business Wire went a step further (3/14) in noting a study put out by the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists. That study showed that patients using alternative medicine like herbs, supplements, etc., may experience adverse side effects that would otherwise not have arisen. As noted above, the study found that they could cause increased bleeding, poor clotting, and blood pressure problems.

And our old friend vitamin C was back in the news as well. In the past, whenever discussing mega-doses of vitamin C, it has generally been said that "it can't hurt" even if it does no good. Well, it turns out that might not be true. The AP had an article (3/2) discussing research that indicates megadoses of vitamin C may speed up clogging of the arteries. Clogged arteries, of course, can lead to heart attacks and strokes. Ironically, some have promoted vitamin C megadoses as a way to protect against problems with the circulatory system.

My question is this: How many more of these reports need to come out before somebody realizes it's time to do something about it?

When Phone Psychics Just Aren't Enough

NewAgeCities.com announced that it would be launching a "See & Hear Psychic Service" where victims, er, customers could "receive an interactive live psychic reading on the Internet utilizing streaming audio and video" (Business Wire, 3/6). Yes, that's right, a new way to charge money for bogus claims.

The company noted that their "market research indicates a strong demand for this new product." That in itself is bad enough, but they also say they anticipate over \$3 million in revenue just for the rest of this year! Indeed, they say that Americans spend over \$500 million annually on psychic services! \$500 million! Imagine if that money were actually put to a rational use...

Silicone Safety

In the "This is not a surprise" category, Reuters reported on a *New England Journal of Medicine* analysis noting that silicone breast implants are safe (3/15). Researchers analyzed 20 previous studies and found that, as we've reported previously, the illnesses attributed to silicone breast implants show no greater frequency in those women who have the implants than in those who do not.

Indeed, the article even notes: "The silicone breast implant controversy has now become a symbol of 'junk science,' where scary claims based on individual anecdotes turn out to be unfounded when systematic studies are done.

In addition to that study, the three doctors who had been independent experts for a judge who heard the federal suits against implant manufacturers wrote a separate article in the same issue of the *Journal*, arguing that such impartial, scientific panels should be used more frequently to help sort out the conflicts between "expert witnesses." I agree wholeheartedly. It's too late now for the implant manufacturers, who have had to declare bankruptcy and undergo massive financial losses due to untrue claims, but perhaps such panels can help in future cases of junk science that may be brought to court.

Local Alternative Medicine

State Journal-Register health writer **Tony Cappasso** has had several articles related to alternative medicine in the past month. One, "The World of Alternative Medicine" (2/28), was a general overview discussing how alternative medicine is described, where it can be used, etc. It mostly discusses how some doctors are finding common ground with some alternative practitioners, though much of the discussion is not about things I would necessarily call "alternative." For example, he discusses how doctors are trying to take emotional state into consideration in heart patients. I don't call that "alternative," just plain smart!

Some of the other portions of the discussion talk about chi-

ropractic, acupuncture, etc. Even the doctor who works frequently with a chiropractor notes he does not support acupuncture and calls homeopathy "nonsense." He also points out that "they can claim anything" with herbals. All in all, nothing to jump for joy about here, but nothing to really get upset about either.

A sidebar to that article, also written by Cappasso, talks more in detail about chiropractic. It discusses the "split" in chiropractic, between those who still believe aligning the spine can cure just about everything and those who simply use chiropractic to treat back and neck problems.

As Cappasso notes of the first group: "This belief has led many to claim that they can treat a wide spectrum of illness from asthma to hot flashes, from immune problems to cancer." He further notes that some of these "True believer chiropractors" even tell parents not to immunize their children. While Cappasso's article featured discussion with a chiropractor who only works on necks and backs, I've seen enough ads to know there are plenty of the "true believer" types here in town.

A few days later, Cappasso hit another alternative medicine subject with an article about a local doctor's views on the "HeartBar" (3/6). HeartBar is a "neutraceutical," a food that supposedly also has medicinal properties because of its vitamin content. This particular one has large amounts of L-arginine, an amino acid that can supposedly be broken down into nitric oxide and helps blood vessels relax.

Cappasso quotes Dr. James Dove, president of the Illinois Chapter of the American College of Cardiology, as being quite skeptical of the HeartBar and its claims. He notes that the doctor who did the tests that supposedly show how great it is also serves as a senior executive at the company making the bar! Furthermore, while that same doctor got his results published in the medical journal, *Vascular Medicine*, it turns out that he is on the editorial board of that journal! Dove further comments that while nitric oxide is indeed good for relaxing artery walls, we don't know that L-arginine is the driver.

The last sentence of the article, quoted from Dr. Dove, does a good job of summing up: "When physicians start to promote things that make them a lot of money, I get skeptical."

"NewsChannel"?

WICS, "NewsChannel 20" in Springfield, had a several-part series on Feng Shui. While I didn't catch it personally, discussions with several REALL members who did lead me to wonder where the news was.

Feng Shui is kind of like acupuncture taken to the level of buildings. You have Qi flow, have to avoid blockages, free up energy, and other nonsensical claims. (See "REALLity Check," April 1997 and March/April 1996 for previous discussions of Feng Shui.) So you're supposed to move things around, put in mirrors, add in specific colors, even move your bathroom so your money energy doesn't go down the toilet (no, I'm not kidding).

Alas, the "NewsChannel" didn't bother to address any of the numerous problems with Feng Shui (like the fact that there

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*[Africa's Curse]**(Continued from page 1)*

most of Guinea's citizens believed him. Nguema used that nation's many sorcerers to spread propaganda about his powers to all citizens. The dictator was noted for his conversations with the dead – especially with those he had ordered killed! Nguema created stories of escapes from assassins to enhance his supernatural reputation. During a ten year reign, Nguema executed an estimated fifty thousand people.⁶ When the dictator was overthrown, volunteers couldn't be found to execute the old sorcerer. Citizens of Equatorial Guinea believed that Nguema was a shapeshifter who could return from the dead as a tiger to seek vengeance. A firing squad even had to be imported from Muslim Morocco to carry out the death sentence given to this strange man. In 1979, Nguema was executed.⁷ As far as we know, no tigers have been reported lurking near the cities, or villages, of central Africa. Maybe Morocco was the scene of the vengeful Nguema's rematerialization in tiger form? Belief in sympathetic magic, sorcerers, and witches, continued to wreak havoc in Europe's old colonies.

Portugal was one of the last European nations to exit Africa. The Portuguese government abandoned the colony of Mozambique while "sorcerer" Nguema was at the height of his career. The Marxist government of Frelimo (Front of the Liberation of Mozambique) seized power and was challenged by an insurgent army, named "Renamo," sponsored by Rhodesia. In 1975, a bloody conflict began dragging into the 1990s and costing nearly one million African lives! Both Renamo and Frelimo military units had many adherents of magic within their ranks. Renamo fighters used healers to prepare their bodies with herbs before battles. These herbs were meant to act as a type of magical bulletproof vest for soldiers. When the magic failed, Renamo fighters dragged away the bodies of their fallen comrades to secretly bury them. It was in this manner that their reputation for magic would be saved in order to intimidate Frelimo soldiers.⁸ At times, Renamo fighters were led into the fray by a healer waving a goat's tail to turn bullets into water!⁹ That isn't as incredible as the belief of anti-government insurgents that certain magic rites made them invisible to the enemy. One Renamo general, according to captured papers, even employed an aide to record "battlefield miracles." This military man believed helpful spirits tricked enemy soldiers into shooting one another.¹⁰ If only battlefield miracles had been the order of the day, maybe Mozambique's civilians wouldn't have died in such great numbers.

And what of magic and the Frelimo soldiers during this Third World civil war? Evidently, the Frelimo fighters weren't rationalists either; they believed in the existence of witches! In March 1988, Frelimo had two old women sentenced to death for casting spells.¹¹ The socialist leadership of Mozambique was so frustrated by magic; they resorted to re-education camps for hundreds of local sorcerers, diviners, and healers.¹² The Frelimo government failed in its mission to counter magical belief, and no great dents were made in the paranormal beliefs of Mozambique's local population. Nevertheless, Mozambique wasn't the only country vexed by beliefs in magic. Nearby Uganda soon became the battleground for "voodoo warriors."

In 1987, Uganda was in turmoil from the power vacuum left by the flight of its dictator, Idi Amin Dada. Dada had been a believer in magic; he set policy according to the advice of fortunetellers. He interpreted his dreams and claimed divine guidance, using local diviners to spread word of his powers.¹³ Is it any wonder that Uganda was ripe ground for the reincarnation of Rhodesia's Alice Lenshina in the guise of a new voodoo priestess who called herself - Alice Lakwena? 1987 would be a sad year for Uganda. Alice Lakwena soon gathered a large group of Ugandans to aid her in a revolt. She dabbed her followers with a nut oil to give them immunity from gunfire and then she added spells of protection for her unarmed, Holy Spirit warriors. Her oil-daubed troops then sought battle with Ugandan soldiers. Lakwena armed her warriors with voodoo fetishes which were nothing more than wooden and wire toy weapons.¹⁴ She told her troops not to seek cover from bullets in battle. And what if ammunition was needed? Luckily, the priestess instructed her warriors on how to change bees into bullets. She also told her army that rocks thrown at the enemy would explode.¹⁵ A large portion of Lakwena's troops died in suicide attacks believing in her power! Over one thousand of Alice's Holy Spirit warriors were killed in a year's time; one estimate numbered the dead at several thousand. Fortunately, Alice Lakwena was seized by Kenyan authorities, bringing the revolt to an end.¹⁶ If only Alice's voodoo revolt were the closing chapter in Africa's tragic dance with magic. However, magical belief systems die hard. The century's end brought witch purges to the continent!

From 1984 to 1994, South Africa was seized with a provincial witch hysteria that rivaled that of the Inquisition. Over four hundred people were killed by locals after "smelling out" ceremonies by witch doctors, and due to the paranoia of their own neighbors.¹⁷ Burning, sometimes after trials by ordeal, was the preferred method of vigilante justice. Between 1990 and 1996, Kenya and the Congo became the killing ground for three hundred and sixty alleged witches, lynched by the superstitious.¹⁸ The problem of African witch murders has become so acute that camps have been set up to protect those accused of witchcraft—particularly in South Africa and Ghana.¹⁹ If Kenya had followed this example, perhaps ten innocent people wouldn't have been burned to death, within her borders, by a rural mob in September 1998.²⁰ So what should these beleaguered nation states of the Cradle of Civilization do to break the hold of unreason on their people? Will their citizenry remain in bondage forever to beliefs in simplistic causality? Tragedy befalls societies that hold onto a worldview better left in Man's past. John F. Kennedy was right to state that paranoia associated with magical belief could make life in certain societies horrendous.²¹ Let us hope that science and rationality will help to erode the Old Age beliefs that plague Africa in a dawn of a new millennium. However, the millennium's last decade saw a population of 200,000 healers practicing witchcraft in South Africa alone!²² The killings didn't subside with the new democratic government of South Africa – the burnings have continued unabated! Since the late 1980s, the South African "witch" lynching death toll is probably somewhere between 1,000 and 2,000 dead. In January 1999, four children

and one adult were burned alive for witchcraft at Balasi, South Africa.²³ So I remain pessimistic about Africa's future in the Twenty-First Century. Irrationality exacts a heavy toll in human life.

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[Richard Petraitis has written several articles for REALL about witchcraft and shamanic practices.] ♡

[REALLity Check]

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is no scientific evidence for it, that it is based on unknown, unproven "energies," etc.), but instead acted more like the "PromotionalChannel" and just talked about how great it was.

Can't say I'm sad that I missed it, but I am rather dismayed (though not exactly surprised) that they even aired it.

It's a very dangerous thing...

I'm often asked why I think it's a very dangerous thing to believe in nonsense. A short article in *Nature* answers this question (3/16).

As most of you know, there is a small group of scientists who continue to insist, against all evidence, that AIDS is not caused by HIV. The most well-known of these is **Peter Duesberg**, but the group includes a few others as well.

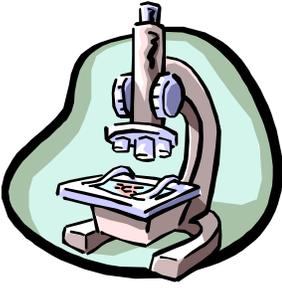
One member of this group, **David Rasnick**, has been asked by the president of South Africa, **Thabo Mbeki**, to give

his scientific opinion on questions related to AIDS and HIV. In addition, the South African health minister, **Manto Tshabalala-Msimang**, refuses to state categorically whether or not she accepts that HIV is the cause of AIDS.

AIDS is much worse in Africa than in the U.S. South Africa is one of the largest "hot spots" for AIDS in the entire world. And here they are reaching out to those promoting nonsense.

Believing those who claim HIV doesn't cause AIDS will not help those who are HIV-positive or who already have the disease. Indeed, it can only hurt by clouding the issue of how to prevent infection. Furthermore, Tshabalala-Msimang stated that she didn't want to "plunge into" the use of antiretroviral drugs because she doesn't understand them.

As an HIV-positive Constitutional Court judge in the country said, they are causing "considerable grief and confusion" by ignoring the mass of scientific evidence. He furthermore questioned Tshabalala-Msimang's competence; I have to wonder as well. ♡



Our Next Meeting

Teaching the Differences
Between Science and Religion:
Creationism and Evolutionary Theory
By Professor Malcolm Levin

Were Darwin's methods and processes of developing an evolutionary theory consistent with the "way of science"? Stated another way: Are Darwin's evolutionary theories good science? Professor Levin will examine modern evolutionary theory and creationism in the same context – do these theories meet the tests of good science?



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