**12/28/08 THESKEPTICARENA.COM**

**THE "CARLOS" HOAX**

**"We like to be deceived." - Blaise Pascal**

**"Carlos" was the name of a 2,000-year-old spirit allegedly channeled by José Alvarez when he toured Australia in 1988. Channeling was all the rage in Australia and an Australian television program contacted James Randi about finding someone who might show Australians that channeling was something doubtful. Randi approached Alvarez, a performance artist and friend who had long toyed with the idea of creating such a character. The rest, as they say, is history. Alvarez looked at videotapes of other people speaking in strange voices, pretending to be in touch with other worlds, and he picked it up right away. Eventually he went to Australia, took the performance into the Sydney Opera House before a rapt audience there, all handling crystals and beads and whatnot, and with charmed looks on their faces, attracted and enthralled by this man onstage, José Alvarez, doing the Spirit of Carlos that was claimed to be 2,000 years old. His performance was very convincing, and actually better than the "real" chanellers!**

**However, all of the material that he produced was spurious. In the press releases he invented magazines and newspapers, he invented towns and cities and radio stations and TV channels and whatnot, that didn't even exist. He prepared videos of radio interviews and theater appearances that never happened. And just one phone call by the media back to the United States would have revealed the whole thing as a hoax. Even after it was all revealed on the Australian Sixty Minutes TV show, a week after the Opera House appearance, many continued to believe in "Carlos" and his uninspired messages. (Randi, personal correspondence.)**

**For Alvarez, the creation of the character "Carlos" was a performance/experiment to see how far he could take his creation, but his purpose was not to make people look foolish. He hoped to liberate them from a false belief. However, the result of the performance seemed to demonstrate how easy it is to create a cult from scratch and how, even when the truth is revealed to them, some still refuse to accept it. The "Carlos" hoax also demonstrated how gullible and uncritical the mass media are when covering paranormal or supernatural topics. Rather than having an interest in exposing the truth, the members of the media were obsessed with "Carlos" the phenomenon and transformed his character from a hoax to a myth. The character Alvarez had so arduously created was transmogrified by the press. The media didn't even need to do any research to have determined that "Carlos" was not genuine. The biggest clue was handed to them on a silver platter: "Carlos" performed for free. He offered crystals from Atlantis for sale, but took orders rather than cash. Every journalist should know that the first sign of an authentic fake guru is greed.**

**José Alvarez had hoaxed an entire continent with his art. But he had created something that the media and his audiences would take from him and recreate to suit their own needs. One lesson here has to be the magician's refrain: deception requires cooperation. Another lesson might be that the need to believe in something like a "Carlos" is so great in some people that we must despair of them ever being liberated.**

**Alvarez continues to travel the world performing "Carlos" in a malleable manifestation of his initial "incarnation." He appears on global network TV, and performs before large live audiences, engaging them in discussions regarding gurus and the dangers of passive acceptance of unquestioned belief. His goal? To bring people real enlightenment.**

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**THE SCIENCE SEGMENT**

**WATER BEARS IN SPACE**

**Eight-Legged Space Survivor Gives 'Panspermia' New Life**

**By Robert Roy Britt**

**Senior Science Writer**

**posted: 16 September 2008**

**The revelation last week that tiny eight-legged animals survived exposure to the harsh environment of space on an Earth-orbiting mission is further support for the idea that simple life forms could travel between planets.**

**This idea, called panspermia, is not new. It holds that the seeds of life are everywhere, and that microbial life on Earth could have traveled here from Mars or even from another star system, and then evolved into the plethora of species seen today. In essence, we may all be Martians.**

**In various forms, the panspermia concept was discussed among scientists in the 1700s, again in the 1800s, and then notably when Sir Fed Hoyle and Chandra Wickramasinghe popularized it about 30 years ago. Mainstream scientists often dismissed the hypothesis, however, even into the 1990s.**

**But new life has been breathed into the idea in the past decade.**

**One big question that dogged panspermia for decades has been settled, most scientists agree: Could life endure a trip from one world to another?**

**One key breakthrough was a 2000 study that concluded a rock from Mars, found on Earth, remained cool enough during its violent ejection from the red planet and its fiery trip through our atmosphere 16 million years later to sustain life were there any aboard.**

**And the incredible survival tale of the tiny tardigrades, also called water bears, is a dramatic reminder that life can survive space travel. The dot-sized invertebrate creatures endured 10 days of exposure, and upon return to Earth, scientists found that even some of those exposed to solar radiation had made it through. Though it had already been shown that single-celled organisms could survive space, tardigrades are eight-legged animals on a different branch of the tree of life than microbes.**

**"It is an exciting result that seems to support the idea that life forms could be exchanged between planets such as Earth and Mars," said David Morrison, an astrobiologist at NASA's Ames Research Center.**

**"Now we know that species from three very different organism groups bacteria, lichens and invertebrate animals are able to survive at least short periods under space vacuum and also under some restricted conditions of solar radiation," said K. Ingemar Jonsson, who led the tardigrade study out of Kristianstad University in Sweden. "And if protected from sunlight, all these groups could probably survive for several months, perhaps years, in space."**

**So to travel through space, it looks like a bug or small animal needs a rock for protection. Equally important, the creature needs a hospitable environment upon arrival.**

**Mars to Earth**

**Some scientists think life might have originated on Mars and then been transported to Earth in a meteorite kicked up by an asteroid impact.**

**"Mars had a stable crust 4.5 billion years ago, at a time when Earth was still in the throes of recovery from the moon-forming impact," said Jay Melosh of the Lunar and Planetary Lab at the University of Arizona. "So conditions on Mars were conducive to the origin of life long before those on Earth."**

**Melosh explains what might have happened next: "Once life began on Mars, the Late Heavy Bombardment [lots of big rocks crashed into Earth and Mars about 4 billion years ago] would have provided abundant means of transport for the Mars-Earth diaspora. Given Mars' current very hostile surface environment, I would not be surprised if it petered out later (maybe some life still persists in the subsurface, living off the chemical and energetic gleanings from Mars' still-active volcanism).**

**Melosh calls the scenario "an excellent bet."**

**But could the reverse be true? Might life have originated on Earth and been transported to Mars?**

**"Mars today is so hostile and lacking in food or liquid water on its surface that it is very unlikely that any such naturally transported living organisms could survive," Melosh said.**

**Researchers figure we've sent plenty of microbes to the moon and Mars, on spacecraft. But most don't think they stand much chance of surviving. Only below the surface of Mars, where an Earth organism would find protection from radiation and where there might be liquid water, is colonization a potentially serious risk, they say.**

**"As long as we operate on the surface of Mars, there is very little risk, since surface conditions there are so harsh," Morrison said. "Remember the issue is not simply survival, but ability to grow and reproduce."**

**Microbes that manage to stick to a spacecraft throughout a six-month voyage to Mars are very unlikely to get off the spacecraft once there, according to research done by Andrew Schuerger of the University of Florida. And if they do jump to the ground, Schuerger said, there are 13 different "biocidal factors" that spell almost certain death to the invading species. From DNA damage to sterilization, any surviving microbes would be unlikely to successfully reproduce.**

**Schuerger has tried multiple experiments to breed life among hardy creatures under Mars-like conditions. One major difference between Earth and Mars is the red planet's extremely thin atmosphere, about 1 percent as thick as ours.**

**"I have not been able to get any microorganisms to grow under the conditions of Mars' surface pressure," he said in a telephone interview. "I am skeptical that a microorganism can be displaced from a spacecraft, get into the surface of Mars, and grow."**

**Star-to-star?**

**Interstellar panspermia remains a highly unlikely proposition in the minds of most scientists.**

**Multiple studies have shown that the raw material of life are common around other stars, and in fact the very seeds of life known as amino acids could also be everywhere. Life, therefore, might be common around other stars, scientists say. But getting from one star to another is another matter altogether. It would take four years just to get from our solar system to the next nearest star ... and that's if a rock was (impossibly) traveling at the speed of light.**

**"Star-to-star hops are so unlikely and take so long to complete that I very much doubt that panspermia has occurred by this mechanism, at least by natural agencies," Melosh said.**

**Even the "we're all Martians" idea remains a stretch for many researchers, who invoke Occam's razor (the simplest solution is often the best one).**

**"It's plausible that our early progenitors were transported here," Schuerger said, "but I think that's a complicated method. I think it's a lot easier to say life started on Earth and evolved on Earth."**

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**THE ARENA GOES ABROAD**

**11/26/8**

**Mbeki AIDS Denial Killed 365K in South Africa**

**South Africa's failure to provide antiretroviral drugs to AIDS patients has cost 365,000 lives, a new Harvard study finds. The report places the blame for the deaths with ousted president Thabo Mbeki, whose denial of AIDS' viral cause led Africa's richest country to ignore its sick citizens while other southern African nations provided medicine, the New York Times reports.**

**On his first day in office, new South African president Kgalema Motlanthe fired the government's health minister, who notoriously advised garlic, lemon juice, and beetroot as treatment for AIDS. Her replacement, who is trying to accelerate the expansion of antiretroviral treatments to the nation's 5.7 million HIV-positive citizens, said she felt "ashamed" by the Harvard report, but added, "The era of denialism is over completely in South Africa."**

**THE TSUNAMI IN 12/04 ONLY KILLED 250,000!**

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**SPECIAL BONUS SEGMENT: RELIGION**

**Kentucky law puts God in charge of security? Atheists appalled**

**December 4, 2008**

**As an atheist and a Kentuckian, Edwin Hensley was rather put off to learn that the God he has spent decades not believing had been put in charge of keeping the Bluegrass State safe from terrorism.**

**Turns out a stealthy legislative move by a Baptist preacher-turned-politician led to the passage of a 2006 bill requiring the state's Office of Homeland Security to acknowledge formally that safety and security in the state "cannot be achieved apart from reliance upon almighty God." The language in the bill only recently came to the public's attention, leading Hensley and some like-minded Kentuckians to file a lawsuit against the state.**

**"It's absurd to me," said Hensley, a proudly godless Louisville resident. "It's as absurd to me as it would be to a fundamental Christian if you told them the security of Kentucky is in the hands of almighty Zeus."**

**So riled up are the atheists over this apparent squeezing together of church and state that the lawsuit resorts to name calling, claiming the plaintiffs fear "their very safety as residents of Kentucky may be in the hands of fanatics, traitors or fools."**

**"No Christian minds being called a fanatic in the service of God," said Floyd, who disagrees with the notion that the U.S. Constitution requires a "wall of separation" between church and state. "But the term 'traitor or fool'? Well, this lawsuit is either constitutional or it's personal. It would seem by the phrasing of the lawsuit that it's personal."**

**And indeed, it is.**

**"We're not trying to be nice," said David Silverman, national spokesman for American Atheists, a national advocacy group that filed the suit on behalf of Hensley and nine other Kentuckians. "These people are breaking the law. They're breaking the law knowingly. They are trying to get sued."**

**The law in question also required the state's homeland security office feature a plaque that reads, among other things, "Except the Lord keep the city, the watchman waketh in vain."**

**Rep. Tom Riner, architect of this kerfuffle, is a Baptist preacher of enviable persistence. For more than three decades he and his wife, once a Kentucky legislator herself, have pushed to keep God in school, in the courthouse and in all the places Constitutionalists think the Almighty shouldn't be.**

**"If we don't affirm the right to recognize divine providence, then that puts that right in jeopardy," said Riner, a Democrat. "It's part of our history. Whether we believe it personally or not, it's what America is. And in the struggle to sanitize our classrooms, courtrooms and public buildings of all references to God, we are in many cases suppressing the ability of our young people and others to know our history."**

**As Andrew Koppelman, a Northwestern University law professor, points out, one man's "suppression of history" is another's "abiding by the First Amendment."**

**"It is so flagrantly unconstitutional that it's hard to imagine how a responsible executive could comply with it," Koppelman said of the Kentucky law. "If there is anything that this law accomplishes it's that it lets the state officially stick it to the atheists. But the First Amendment means that the state is not allowed to stick it to the atheists."**

**Clearly, however, the presence of that pesky amendment doesn't stop people like Riner from trying, over and over and over again.**

**When his wife, Claudia Riner, was a state representative, she sponsored a 1978 bill requiring classrooms across Kentucky display a copy of the Ten Commandments. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled the bill unconstitutional in 1980, but the Riners have never relented in their quest to keep God in the public arena.**

**In recent years, states across the country have faced church-state dust-ups over everything from the Ten Commandments to nativity scenes on the courthouse square. Illinois has wrangled with the constitutionality of a morning moment of silence in schools, and local atheist Rob Sherman is suing to block the state from giving a $1 million grant to help rebuild a South Side Baptist church.**

**All the activity leads people like Sherman to believe they are fighting a non-holy war against a movement to make America a monotheistic nation.**

**"It's part of a pattern of Christians trying to use government as a weapon for imposing their religious beliefs on everybody," Sherman said. "Guys like me are working on eliminating these laws. And Christians are working on enacting them."**

**For Rep. Kathy Stein, who says she's the lone Jew in the Kentucky House of Representatives, the law itself, and the lawsuit she knew would follow, is a silly waste of time.**

**"It's a waste of taxpayer dollars, and we're in a significant budget crunch here," Stein said. "I believe the man" - and by that she means Jesus - "would rather us spend the money we used for a plaque in the homeland security office on insurance for an un-insured child."**

**While she may disagree with his intentions, Stein does admit that after more than a decade of serving with Riner, she admires his moxie.**

**"He has a tremendous faith, and that's good," she said. "I think he's kind of crazy, but he certainly has faith."**

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**FAMOUS QUOTES**

**GENE RODDENBERRY (1921-1991) 70 years**

**He was an American screenwriter and producer. He became best known as the creator of what would become the science fiction universe of Star Trek.**

**He was a recipient of the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions in the U.S. Army Air Corps in the Pacific Theatre of World War II.**

**Roddenberry was sometimes referred to as the "Great Bird of the Galaxy" in reference to his role in Star Trek. He was one of the first people to be "buried" in space.**

**"We must question the story logic of having an all-knowing all-powerful God,**

**who creates faulty Humans, and then blames them for his own mistakes."**