

# WASHline

Newsletter of the Washington Area Secular Humanists

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## What is Your Opinion?

What are we, exactly? That question probably will never be answered, exactly. But theories abound. The March issue of *WASHline* contained an article, "On Evolution" by Dennis Joseph Cowles, which has brought a forceful response starting below from WASH member Gregory S. Paul, an evolutionary biologist.

What's your opinion?

If evolution isn't your cup o' tea, what do you think about the opinion that secular humanism is unworkable offered by a man who almost made it to a seat on the United States Supreme Court?

Robert H. Bork's recent book, *Slouching Toward Gomorrah: Modern Liberalism and American Decline* is reviewed on page 6. Read it. What is your opinion? Write it for *WASHline*.

## On Apes, Evolution and Theory

by Gregory S. Paul

As an evolutionary biologist I am often amazed, but never surprised, how little anti-evolutionists know about science. More disturbing is the low knowledge level sometimes expressed on the secular side. An example is the essay "On Evolution" by Dr. D.J. Cowles in the March *WASHline*.

Anti-evolutionists rhetorically malign evolutionary theory by scoffing at the notion that we noble humans descended from monkeys and apes. Attempting to evade this smear some scientists, Cowles among them, assert that humans evolved not

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## JOHNS HOPKINS SPRING FAIR

Baltimore Secular Humanists will be participating in the Johns Hopkins University Spring Fair of Friday, Saturday and Sunday, April 11, 12 & 13. This will be our sixth year at the fair which has provided us an opportunity to establish a presence in the community. We will have a table in the non-profit area to distribute literature and answer questions about humanism and WASH.

We need YOUR help at the table. It's fun, the food stalls are great, you'll enjoy it! Please call Casey Washburn at (410) 363-4851 and volunteer two hours of your time.

## NOMINATIONS MEETING

WASH holds an annual election to fill positions of board members whose terms have expired or who have resigned. We have a twelve member board of directors. Members are elected to a two-year term, but they can serve multiple terms. Terms are staggered so that six terms expire on June 30 of each year. The board will present a slate of candidates, and accept additional nominations from the membership, at the nominations meeting on May 3 in Chevy Chase. (See the MDC Chapter report for details).

## U.M. Students, WASH Sponsor Talk by Ex-Moslem Feminist

by Simin Royanian

Taslina Nasrin, poet, writer, feminist and secular humanist, was the speaker at a public meeting on February 18 at the University of Maryland in College Park, organized by WASH and the Atheist Students Association of the University of Maryland.

Taslina Nasrin was born in Bangladesh in 1962. She was trained as a physician and practiced medicine among the poor and rural women of Bangladesh most of whom were illiterate. She had been writing poetry and stories since the age of 18 and her experience among these women further fuelled her writings in defence of women's rights.

Nasrin's poetry, novels, and newspaper and magazine columns challenge the traditional Islamic gender roles and call for separation of religion and state. Her criticism of religion in general and Islam in particular, brought her into direct conflict with Islamic fundamentalists, who demanded her execution. She was forced to go into hiding and in 1994 escape her country. The blasphemy case brought against her by the Bangladesh government is still pending.

Nasrin has continued her relentless struggle against

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## Apes, from page 1

from apes and monkeys, but from primates. Apes, or Hominoidea, evolved from Old-World monkeys about thirty million years ago. The lesser apes became diverse and numerous, the fossil history of great apes is poorly known. The Hominidae evolved from great apes as recently as six million years ago in the form of *Australopithecus*, early species of which were very chimpanzee-like except that they were more bipedal. In fact, humans and chimps are significantly genetically closer to each other than either is to any other apes! That many do not like this fact has no bearing on its reality.

That we did not descend from any modern ape excludes us from the clan no more than your parents being dead excludes you and your siblings being from the same family. This brings us to the tricky issue of family trees. Cowles believes those common human evolution charts showing a series of primates from hunched over ape to striding are "completely wrong". It is true that organisms evolve via intricate branching patterns similar to family trees, and that evolution is not a progressive system that worked step-by-step up a single ladder to produce people. However, it IS possible to trace back the particular lineage of increasingly erect bodied ancestors that happened to evolve into us, just as you can sort out your genealogical lineage from the branching mess that is your family tree. Ergo, those old charts are incomplete, but not wrong.

Cowles also sinks into the surprising terminological sloppiness that afflicts science. Like some others he defines a scientific "theory" as a "proposition that has been proven TRUE through repeated testing". A more correct alternative view is "theory" as a testable set of related hypotheses. For example, the light speed barrier is a hypothesis that forms the Theory of Relativity, and natural selection is one hypothesis within the Theory of Evolution. Nor does it matter whether a theory has been confirmed or falsified - if Einstein's Relativity or Darwin's Evolution are ever refuted, they will still be theories.

Another source of terminological confusion swirls around scientific law versus theory. Many think the former is irrefutable, hence the LAW of Thermodynamics supposedly disproves that mere THEORY of Evolution. But in science many issues are never provable beyond all doubt, and the Theory of Relativity, the Law of Thermodynamics, and the Theory of Evolution are equally subject to falsification. Science is in the embarrassing position of not having a term that unambiguously characterizes a law or theory as being accepted as fact until proven otherwise by the great majority of the scientific community. Perhaps someone should think one up.

## Nasrin, from page 1

fundamentalism. She has published 17 books including her novel *Shame* which has been translated into 22 languages.

In her talk, while stating that she is an atheist, Nasrin said: "... though I have been away from my country and my people for more than two years, I remain true to my ideals. I still believe in humanism and not in any religion ... and I can assure you that my ideological fight against religious fundamentalism will continue."

Nasrin explained that though she was raised in a Moslem family, her training in science made it impossible to accept any faith which required unquestioning acceptance. Her reading of the Koran showed her that "women in the Koran were treated as slaves ... so, one day I had to take up my pen and start writing against the various misdeeds by religion, against all the injustice, unreason, and prejudice sanctioned and promoted by religious institutions. I began to try and expose the crimes of religion, particularly the injustice and oppression against women."

Nasrin noted that the conflict today is not between Islam and Christianity, but between fundamentalism and secularism. "The reasons behind the rise of religious fundamentalism are the failure of secular democracy on the one hand, and communism on the other, to solve the problems of underdevelopment and inequity ..." She pointed out that the powerful Western states which claim to be secular and democratic, patronize fundamentalism within and without their borders and tolerate military dictatorships.

Furthermore, Nasrin noted how some writers and intellectuals in the West are supporting the fundamentalists by arguing that not all the traditions in the third world are harmful for women: "... they think that even harems are not necessarily bad for woman, because they provide a degree of autonomy and independence ..." In this, she argued against the position taken by the supporters of "cultural relativism" which applies different standards of rights for the countries in the Western World and the rest of the world. In fact, Nasrin stated: "The fight is more urgent there because most the women have neither any education nor any economic independence. If modern secular education is good for Western women, why should the Eastern women be deprived of it?"

At the end, Nasrin read several of her poems expressing her views on religion, god, and the plight of women. She finished with a poem portraying the stoning to death of a village girl accused of adultery.

During the question and answer period, several members of the audience took issue with her radicalism. One Bangladeshi woman stated that she, herself, was both a feminist and a practicing Moslem. Nasrin pointed out that a practicing Moslem woman must wear the veil, which was not true of her questioner, and that just because of that one



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