



Humanists Hawaii

NEWSLETTER

March 2007

March meeting at Krauss Hall

At this meeting we discuss

The God Delusion

and also Richard Dawkins' recent lectures

and any other relevancies that might appear

March 25, 2007

10:30 a.m.

Krauss Hall 112

University of Hawaii

Humanists made a great turnout at the two lectures given by Richard Dawkins last month. Many of us, who hadn't previously read his recent book, [The God Delusion](#), resolved to do so. Since his Distinguished Lecture was part of his cross-country book tour, the lectures made considerable reference to *The God Delusion*. The first public lecture, "Queerer Than We Can Suppose? The Strangeness of Science," presented science as an awe-inspiring activity far surpassing the meager imaginations of the fantasy-believers. In the same vein as parts of the first and last chapters of his book.

The second lecture, called a seminar paper, considered the question "Is Evolution Predictable?" Answering "sort of," Dawkins explored ways that this might be the case. Although he focused on evolution, both in the lecture and in the following question period, he touched strongly on the god delusion among many who insist on denying facts and pursuing unverifiable fantasies.

At our March meeting, we'll discuss reactions to Dawkins' books and lectures – and perhaps his Free Inquiry columns – and extend what we've learned from them into our own other areas of interest.

Court Needs Stronger Dose of Humanity

American Humanist Association

Humanists were alarmed to learn March 14, of the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruling against a California woman's access to life-saving medicine. Executive director Roy Speckhardt, of the American Humanist Association responded, "In light of this inhumane decision, we call on Congress to introduce legislation that will respect California's right to self-determination in legalizing medicinal marijuana."

[Angel Raich](#), who lost a 9th Circuit Court appeal is suffering from scoliosis, a brain tumor, and other ailments. Her doctors have stated that if she is unable to use medicinal marijuana she may very well lose her life. No other drugs will alleviate her pain and nausea enough so she is able to eat. The court ruled that Raich, despite the fact that her home state of California has legalized medicinal marijuana, could still be subjected to federal prosecution for illegal drug use.

"Where is Congress in this life and death matter?" asked Speckhardt. "It was only two years ago that the US Congress, in the name of the 'sanctity of life,' took

the drastic action of intervening in the court case of [Terri Schiavo](#), who was declared brain dead by doctors. Congress seems to have no difficulty setting aside their busy agenda to violate family wishes for a death with dignity, but they can't pass legislation that would save the life of not only this woman but alleviate the suffering of others afflicted with similar ailments. Their misplaced priorities are endangering lives."

[Marijuana has proven itself](#) a powerful medicine, providing relief for numerous ailments and a range of symptoms. In recognition of these facts, medicinal marijuana has been legalized by several states, including California, Nevada and Oregon. Yet the federal government maintains the drug's illegality and denies its medical benefits. The only action taken to date has been that sponsored by Dana Rohrabacher, R-CA, and Maurice Hinchey, D-NY, which would have blocked the Justice Department from prosecuting medical marijuana users in states where it is legal. The House rejected this legislation by a vote of 264-161.

Humanists Praise Pete Stark for “Coming Out” as a Nontheist

American Humanist Association

March 12, 2007 – The American Humanist Association (AHA) applauded [Representative Pete Stark](#) (D-CA) for his historic decision to come out as the first openly nontheistic member of Congress.

"Pete Stark joins the company of millions of other nontheistic Americans, including humanists, many of whom have long kept their views secret for fear of discrimination in their communities," said Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the AHA. "With Stark's courageous public announcement of his nontheism, it is our hope that he will become an inspiration for others who have hidden their conclusions for far too long."

Stark affirmed his nontheism in a response to an inquiry from the [Secular Coalition for America](#), of which the AHA is a member organization. The inquiry was part of a unique and original campaign by the Secular Coalition for America to locate politicians who were open about their nontheism. In response, the AHA has launched an advertising campaign congratulating Stark. The [first of the ads](#) appeared March 13 in the *Washington Post*.

"Nontheistic Americans, including humanists, are the group most likely to be discriminated against for their convictions," said Fred Edwards, AHA director of communications. "Recent polls show that fewer than 50% of Americans would vote for an atheist presidential candidate, even if that candidate is well qualified. The fact that Pete Stark's public avowal of nontheism is controversial reinforces this point. Americans still feel it's acceptable to discriminate against atheists in ways considered beyond the pale

for other groups."

"By contrast, such an announcement by a politician wouldn't be news in Europe, where the public has embraced secularism to a degree not seen in the United States," Edwards continued. "Clearly, when it comes to American religious prejudice, we still have a lot to overcome."

Few politicians have openly acknowledged holding nontheistic worldviews, and no president or member of Congress has been among them. This is because the public isn't bound by Article VI, section 3, of the US Constitution, which states, "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Unfortunately, when voting, the people often have exercised this prejudice that is not granted to public office holders.

"A candidate's theological viewpoint should have no bearing on her or his perceived fitness for public office," said Speckhardt. "There's no necessary connection between nontheism and politics, any more than there is between theism and politics. Disagreement exists within both groups on the best way to run the country."

Pete Stark has represented the 13th district of California since 1973. He is a senior member of the House Ways and Means Committee and chair of the Health Subcommittee. He is outspoken on issues of healthcare, the economy, and the environment, and was one of the most vocal opponents of the war in Iraq. He is also a member of the Congressional Progressive Caucus. Most humanists will now regard him as one of their own.

A bit about atheists in public life

Striking facts from the AHA

A February 9 thru 11, 2007, [USA Today/Gallup Poll](#) revealed that only 45% of Americans would be willing to vote for "a generally well-qualified" atheist candidate for president from their own party. Moreover, fewer people would be willing to vote for an atheist than for a person having any of the other characteristics evaluated: Catholic, black, Jewish, a woman, Hispanic, Mormon, married for the third time, 72 years of age, homosexual-in the order of most favorable to least favorable.

A [survey by the Minnesota Daily](#) found as many as 54% of Americans say that atheists don't share their vision of American society. This figure represents the highest percentage of rejection for any religious category.

Yet nonreligious people often rate high in "traditional values" important to many Americans. For example, compared to Jews, born-again Christians, and other Christians, atheists and agnostics have the

lowest divorce rates. (From the US Census Bureau and the National Center for Health.)

Discrimination against nontheists in government appointments is illegal. Article VI, section 3, of the US Constitution states that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Yet this nondiscriminatory spirit in the highest law of the land isn't shared by a majority of the voting public.

Given these facts, it is less surprising that there have been no openly nontheistic presidents or members of Congress in history (until now).

But how many Americans are nontheistic or at least nonreligious? According to a study by the [Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life](#), approximately 13% of the population identify themselves as nonreligious/secular. This figure has grown over 100% since 1990 and represents approximately 30 million people.

Letters from Humanists

The Honolulu Advertiser, March 7, 2007, A13

Withdrawal from Iraq is support for troops

The hypocritical Bush administration has used the cry "support the troops" as a weapon against anyone who questions its operations in Iraq.

"Support" for the troops from this administration includes: cutting combat pay just before the invasion of Iraq; slashing support for the families of troops in the war zones; cutting veterans' benefits; lack of necessary protective armor for the troops; "stop-loss" policies that send troops repeatedly to war zones after they have already served multiple tours of duty there; and mismanagement of this war since the beginning.

As a (hopefully) final insult, we now learn, without surprise, that the medical care of the wounded veterans of this war has been inferior to that which most people give their pets.

When will the American public learn that the only way to support our troops is to bring them home now, away from this misguided, misled and mismanaged war? How many more troops must be abused and insulted before we stop?

Hank Kocol

The Honolulu Advertiser, February 25, 2007, B2

Removal of bus stops should be reexamined

Thank you for your excellent article about our growing fatalities at crosswalks.

I suggest the removal of bus stops be reexamined.

The bus stop at Kapi'olani and Pensacola has been discontinued, producing a safety hazard to walkers going diamondhead on the makai side of Kapi'olani.

Cars speed around that right turn, not even seeing pedestrians. A bus pausing there used to slow them down a bit – not anymore.

Juel Gustafson

At our February meeting, a guest locked the rest room key in the room. This is what Becky said about it:

Thanks for letting me know. In between yesterday's HH meeting and this morning someone evidently picked up the key, but has not returned it to us or turned it in to the custodial staff. One of the OLLI volunteers has our only spare men's room key and unfortunately he's out sick today. Until we can locate our missing key, we're diverting "traffic" to restrooms in adjacent buildings and hoping the person who picked up our key will return it soon. (One time a missing restroom key was returned a year after it was taken!)

If no one turns in our key by the end of the day, I'll submit a request for a replacement and hope that the stray eventually finds its way back here.

Oh well, these things happen. No harm done.

Best regards,
Becky
Osher Institute

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See scheduled events, pictures of officers and current and archived newsletters at our website:

<http://hawaii.humanists.net/>

HH's Meeting Place Room 112 Krauss Hall

HH meets the last (not the fourth) Sunday of each month at 10:30 am. Here's how to get there.

Driving on Dole Street past the University, turn mauka on East West Road then ewa on Correa Road. Drive to the end and turn makai toward the circle with the big tree. There's free parking on part of the circle, on the other side of Krauss Hall and various lots around campus. The entrance to Krauss Hall 112 is at the Diamondhead end of the lily pond.

We'll put up a sign by the door.



If you need transportation to the meeting, call another Humanists Hawaii member or Andi or Dave at the numbers listed above.

The July 2006 issue of *Humanists Hawaii Newsletter*, contained Roy Speckhardt's reply to a request to demonstrate support of the Falun Gong:

An Open Letter to Falun Gong

July 12, 2006

Dear Dr. Lily L. Zhang:

Thank you for your invitation to speak out against human rights violations perpetrated by the Chinese Communist Party against the Falun Gong. The American Humanist Association strongly opposes government sponsored human rights abuses inflicted on any people, including Falun Gong practitioners . . .

We are aware of how Chinese government persecution against religious and political groups is widely documented. Falun Gong practitioners, Tibetan Buddhists, Uyghurs, and other Chinese citizens are denied the basic freedoms. Freedom of speech, assembly, and religion are not respected. Citizens may be imprisoned without trial, and courts don't have the power of judicial review. None of these conditions should be condoned.

We regret, however, that we must decline to accept your invitation. As we've participated in a past event, this open letter is being sent to explain our position.

Given our strong human rights position, we cannot share the Falun Gong platform without concern that it will be viewed as an endorsement of the intolerant positions held by this religion. Though the Falun Gong in the United States claim "tolerance" as a primary principle, the Chinese word for this principle (*Ren*) is more appropriately translated as "forbearance;" in this case, forbearance as a form of resignation, a survival skill for getting through suffering. Falun Gong founder Li Hongzhi has explicitly condemned interracial relationships and homosexuality, and has even said, as reported by the *San Jose Mercury News*, that gay people would be "eliminated" by "the gods." These intolerant views are confirmed on reading a translated version of the second volume of the Falun Gong's primary religious text, *Zhuan Falun*.

Beyond the issue of tolerance, we Humanists don't support several irrational and unfounded Falun Gong claims – such as Li's belief that aliens are attempting to overtake human souls, or that Falun Gong unleashes supernatural powers that reverse the effects of aging. While Humanists often work closely with groups and individuals of differing views, any tacit support of these ideas would be incompatible with our dedication to reason and science.

We continue to hope that the Chinese government will one day embrace democracy and compassion, and allow the freedom of religion and from religion for all groups, including the Falun Gong.

Sincerely,
Roy Speckhardt
Executive Director, American Humanist Association

Jason Pomerleau, a practitioner of Falun Gong saw our newsletter on the net and replied to Speckhardt's letter:

An Open Letter to Humanists Hawaii

March 14, 2007

Dear Humanists Hawaii:

When searching on the Internet for information about Falun Gong in Hawaii, I came across a letter to Dr. Lily L. Zhang, dated July 12, 2006 ("An Open Letter to Falun Gong," *HH Newsletter* July 2006). I wish to respond to Mr. Speckhardt's comments in the interest of reason and science and to further mutual understanding between people.

First, let me say that your open condemnation of the persecution of Falun Gong by the People's Republic of China is commendable. The crimes perpetrated against millions of innocent Falun Gong practitioners by the communist regime have already been classified in courts of law around the world as genocide and crimes against humanity. Also, as a former teacher at China University of Geosciences in Beijing, I can attest first-hand to the inhumanity of the communist regime's relentless campaign of hatred and violence against Falun Gong.

I do not claim to represent Falun Gong, but as a student of the practice for nine years, I am well-acquainted with its texts and teachings and have developed a personal understanding of the principles, *Zhen-Shan-Ren*, (Truth, Compassion, Forbearance), as taught by Falun Gong. I am also a student of science, having completed bachelor's degrees in both Biology and Environmental Science from Tufts University, and having worked in diabetes and metabolism research at Joslin Diabetes Center, Boston MA, and currently working in regenerative medicine at LifeCell Corporation, Branchburg NJ.

It is simply not true that Li Hongzhi, the founder of Falun Gong, has condemned interracial relationships. In fact, when addressing how interracial marriage could historically create problems for people, he specifically said that today this is not a problem for people who practice Falun Gong. I know numerous interracial couples who practice Falun Gong. I am Caucasian; my girlfriend is Chinese. Someone has been spreading false rumors about Falun Gong.

On the issue of homosexual behavior, I speak as a man who grew up in a family with an openly gay older relative and who has had many gay friends and acquaintances since attending college in Boston, and especially as a Falun Gong practitioner, I can assure you that Falun Gong teaches nothing but compassion and tolerance towards people of all sexual orientations. In fact, Falun Gong teaches that practitioners should not sow discord or say anything detrimental to the unity of society. It is stated clearly in the texts of Falun Gong that anyone can come to learn and practice regardless of their sexual orientation, religious background, political affiliation, etc.

We practice self-refinement, not refinement of

others. Unlike the precepts in some schools of Buddhism or the Ten Commandments of Christianity, there are no set rules in Falun Gong, nor are there people taken as role models or heroes to emulate. However, like other orthodox faiths such as Taoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, etc., Falun Gong, which has its roots in ancient Chinese culture and moral philosophy, teaches that homosexual behavior, sex out of wed-lock, adultery, etc. are karma-creating acts strictly prohibited by Gods for the sake of peoples' own well-being. This is nothing more than an orthodox belief held by many of the world's traditional religions. However, Falun Gong teaches that practitioners should not judge others or impose their personal beliefs or understandings on others. Isn't that a true form of tolerance (*Ren*)? Don't people have a saying, "live and let live"? I do not believe that tolerance dictates that we all must share the same beliefs. In fact, that sounds like intolerance to me.

On the issue of Falun Gong's anti-aging effects: The quest for longevity (even immortality) is something that science has pursued for centuries, and also something that ancient Chinese science was particularly advanced in, as evidenced by early Chinese records of births and deaths. There have even been studies conducted demonstrating Falun Gong's anti-aging effects.

We are not talking mysticism here. It is common knowledge in the medical community that meditation and qigong* can reduce stress, boost the immune system and have numerous other beneficial health effects; and when a person's mental health and outlook on life improve, that person can literally look and feel younger and add years to their lives. Falun Gong teaches simply and elegantly that mind and matter are one thing and, as a qigong practice, it is exceptional in that it stresses cultivating ones virtue above practicing its physical exercises.

Finally, regarding aliens being mentioned in Falun Gong's teachings: As I understand it, there is very little said about aliens in Falun Gong, but it is explained that aliens have been aware of humans and Earth for a very long time; and, despite their great advances in technology, they are quite in awe of the human body.

Regardless of whether one believes in the existence of extra-terrestrials or not, their existence is something that mankind has pondered for generations and that today, governments and scientists around the world continue to put millions of dollars into researching. It seems neither radical nor irrational for a person to consider these things with an open mind. If the existence of aliens was truly so improbable, then what is [SETI](#) looking for?

Sincerely,
Jason M. Pomerleau
Somerville, NJ

* *Qigong: an ancient Chinese system of postures, exercises, breathing techniques, and meditations to improve one's chi/qi (energy field).*

Michael Mueller responded to Jason:

Aloha Jason,

Thank you for your letter. The clarification of your interpretation of your beliefs was very inspiring. Like in many belief systems the variety of interpretation is quite wide. For that reason I respect each flavor of religion, because at their most liberal and enlightened interpretation, they all seem to converge and improve humanity.

However, on the other side, they are harmful to humanity and a hindrance towards advancement. As Humanists we have moved on beyond authorities leading us "uneducated" mortals to a better state of mind (and body). Our activities are less focused on our own evolvment towards something other than being the best human being we can be, but rather to work with what we have already achieved to make the world a more humane place for all. How far backwards a religion has remained or how much forward a religious belief system has evolved in its current flavor or interpretation is less of a Humanist's concern.

I hope that whatever your needs might be, they will be met by your belief system. The less your beliefs conflict with reason and science, the better for mankind.

We appreciate the time you took to reply to the newsletter and wish you good luck for your personal development.

Aloha from Hawaii,
Michael

and a final word from Jason:

Aloha Michael,

Thanks for sharing with me what it means to be a Humanist. I didn't know that.

Considering what you said, I think you might be interested to know that Falun Gong actually is not a religion, although it is protected as one in the United States. Unlike Asia, which has a broad array of practices that do not take the form of religion, when we Westerners hear the word "belief", we immediately think of religion. In fact, like Tai Chi or Yoga, Falun Gong is a system/school of cultivation, a slow-motion, tranquil morning exercise practice. Even today, the better schools of martial arts also lay emphasis on virtues like respect, tolerance and self-restraint. . . .

I probably would never have come to learn Falun Gong if it were a religion. I learned the practice at a martial arts studio in Cambridge MA and practice mostly in the park or at home. Growing up, my parents exposed me to religion (Catholic), but probably like you there were things that I could not agree with . . . Later, through self-study and study of philosophy, I realized that great teachers like Jesus, Lao Zi, and Shakyamuni did not start religions, but that is was their followers that did years later.

Best wishes,
Jason

Egypt: Blogger convicted for insulting Islam

Rationalist International Bulletin # 165

Abdel Karim Suleiman, a 23-year-old former law student, has been sentenced to 4 years imprisonment by a court in Alexandria for insulting both Islam and the Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak in articles that he published in his Internet blog. The trial took merely five minutes. The judge sentenced him to three years for insulting Islam and to one year for insulting the president, whom he called a dictator. Suleiman is the first person in Egypt, who has been convicted for nothing else but peacefully expressing his opinion in the Internet. His lawyers announced that he would appeal against the judgment.

Suleiman was a law student of Al-Azhar University in Cairo, Sunni Islam's highest institute of learning [see also the next article]. When he criticized the university in his Internet blog for suppressing free thought and promoting extreme ideas, calling it a "university of terrorism", they expelled him and pressed prosecutors to put him on trial. He was arrested in November 2006 and kept in solitary confinement since then.

Among the articles branded as insult against Islam is a report with the title "The Naked Truth of Islam as I Saw it", describing savage Muslim attacks on Christians, who watched a video clip of an allegedly anti-Islamic theater play in their church in Alexandria in 2005. After publishing this report, Suleiman had been arrested for the first time, but was released after 12 days.

Though many oppositional bloggers were temporarily arrested during the last year – some in connection with the circulation of a video clip showing police brutalities – the Internet remained the major forum of political criticism in the country. After introduction of a harsh new press law in 2006, the press is kept at a tight leash, and there have been repeated violations of press freedom. Suleiman's trial and conviction has sent out shock waves in the blogger scene, as they could set a dangerous precedent.

The Paris-based press freedom organization Reporters Without Borders has listed Egypt among 13 "enemy-of-Internet-freedom" countries and demands that the United Nations respond to Suleiman's conviction by disqualifying Egypt from hosting an Internet Governance Forum in 2009.

Germany: "We have renounced!"

"Central Council of Ex-Muslims" founded
Rationalist International Bulletin # 165

Mina Ahadi, Iranian-born Human Rights campaigner in Germany, has founded the "Central Council of Ex-Muslims," headquartered in Cologne. Together with 29 other apostates from Muslim countries, many of them women, she wants to give a hand to those who wish to come out of Islam. The name was chosen as a play on the Central Council of Muslims, which, with about 800,000 members, is the largest Islamic group in Germany.

There are currently more than three million people in Germany who were born in Islamic communities. Many of them are secular-minded, says Mina Ahadi, but they have no voice in the country. Muslim organizations claim to speak in the name of all immigrants from Muslim countries and want to exert power on immigrants' personal lives even if they are not members. And the German authorities accept them. Ahadi wants to give Ex-Muslims a voice and to form a counterweight to the Muslim organizations.

In February, the Ex-Muslims launched a courageous campaign with the motto "We have renounced!" publishing photos and personal statements of their members. More than a hundred membership applications arrived within a few days. Meantime, Mina Ahadi, who had received death threats, had to be put under police protection. Renouncing Islam still carries the death penalty in countries like Saudi-Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Sudan. And even in Europe, there are fundamentalists who will carry out the sentence. But death threats don't spoil Ahadi's optimism. "We want to create a new movement in other European countries too," she says. "We hope that soon there will be 10,000 of us representing many more people."

Mina Ahadi is also the founder of the International Committee against Stoning and the International Committee against Execution. She fled to Europe after her husband, a political activist, was executed in Iran on their marriage anniversary.

Vice-president of the council is the Turkey-born Arzu Toker, writer and former member of the West-German Radio Council. The Central Council of Ex-Muslims is supported by the atheist [Giordano Bruno-Foundation](#) in Germany

Observation on Happiness . . .

"Happiness is not at all common in modern American society, and it's even scarcer than it was in earlier, less affluent times."

– Dan Baker and Cameron Stauth, *What Happy People Know*

The Bush Administration is attacking science by denying scientific truths such as evolution, disrupting scientific investigations into wide-ranging issues such as health and the environment, undermining science education, and calling into question the process of scientific thinking. Opposing these attacks is crucial not only for scientists, but for humanity everywhere and for future generations.

Defend Science Forum

Friday, March 30, 7 pm

UH-Manoa Art Auditorium

with

Steve Palumbi

Professor of Biological Sciences, Stanford University

*Author of **The Evolution Explosion: How humans cause rapid evolutionary change**, Professor Palumbi is a much-sought after speaker. He's spoken at numerous Darwin day events and is able to communicate to a broad audience. He spoke at a Defend Science program at UC-Berkeley and the audience response was great. He focused on how viruses evolve, and why it would be impossible to treat many diseases without applying the latest understanding of evolution.*

"Why Evolution Matters"

and

Frederic Mercier

Researcher, John A. Burns School of Medicine

Expert on neuronal stem cells

"Controversies and Promises of Stem Cell Research"

Moderated by

Michael G. Hadfield

Professor of Zoology, University of Hawai'i

*Defend Science Advisory Board**

The Defend Science Initiative includes scientists in various fields and from a diversity of perspectives, who are extremely concerned about the current attack on science, including on its very foundation in scientific method and thinking. Its goal is to mobilize scientists, issue a broad public call to Defend Science, and to bring community-wide attention to the real issues and the real stakes. Read or sign the Call and find out how to support this initiative at www.defendscience.org

*No admission * Open to Everyone (no science background needed)*

*Event Sponsored by World Can't Wait-UH * For more info: 534-2255*

Or e-mail worldcantwaithawaii@yahoo.com

Do you think that humans should search relentlessly for truth, that they feel compassion for all humankind and determine and promote what is right?

Do you think people can live meaningful, responsible and ethical lives without the need for believing in supernatural beings or places?

Would you like to join a group that shares your thoughts? Humanists – generally – believe these things.

If you'd like to join Humanists Hawaii, please complete and mail this form to: Marcia Lambeth at 825 Coolidge St. #310 Honolulu HI 96826. During 2007 we aren't collecting annual dues, but donations are gratefully accepted.

Dr/Mr/Ms _____

Address: _____

City, State, Zip: _____

Phones: Home: _____ Work: _____ email: _____

The Evolution Explosion: How Humans Cause Rapid Evolutionary Change by Stephen R. Palumbi. 288 pages. W.W. Norton & Company; Reprint edition, August 15, 2002, paperback, \$15.95. review by Gregory McNamee for Amazon.com

The first thing that Harvard University biology professor Stephen Palumbi wants you to know is that evolution is a fact, not a theory. The second is this: evolution does not require eons and eons to make its effects manifest. By tinkering with genes and rewriting the laws of natural selection, we humans have lately been "accelerating the evolutionary game, especially among the species that live with us most intimately"—not our pets, but the food we eat, the pests that share that food, and the diseases that visit us.

Almost all of this accelerated evolution – which, as in the pointed case of the human immunodeficiency virus, occurs faster than we can track it – is an unintended, accidental consequence of some well-intentioned effort to improve human life by sidestepping nature. One such consequence is the growing incidence of drug-resistant bacteria and viruses, which have mutated to survive antibiotic treatments to the point that postoperative infections from methicillin-resistant *Staphylococcus aureus* now pose a major threat to hospitals. Another is the arrival of pests that have evolved to survive pesticides of many kinds, pests that threaten crops around the world in a time of ever-increasing scarcity.

New bioengineered plants try to poison insects with

genetic alterations. Unless farmers keep low-yield refuges, this will simply create poison-resistant insects and pests. The potential danger to our food supply is enormous. Overkill with poisons is not a good solution for a variety of obvious reasons. A lot of biotechnology is not considering the evolution that these innovations will create. That gap needs to be filled

Professor Palumbi looks at the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria. These strains arise in 1 to 36 years after a new antibiotic is released. Historically, it seems that bacteria tried to kill other bacteria in similar ways, so there are genetic variation escape hatches. Palumbi points out that using multiple antibiotics can be an effective strategy for avoiding this problem. On the other hand, many diseases once thought to be under control (like tuberculosis) are on the rise again.

All this, Palumbi writes, is "evolution with teeth," and such responses to our hapless prompting make humans the most potent evolutionary form the planet has ever known. Whether we can survive our own power to reshape the earth remains a question. But, Palumbi concludes, ideas evolve, too, so that we can hope to think our way back to more or less normal cycles of evolutionary change. Well-written and provocative, his book makes for a useful start.



Humanists Hawaii

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The American Humanist Association (www.americanhumanist.org) is dedicated to ensuring a voice for those with a positive outlook, based on reason and experience, which embraces all of humanity.