



The Secular Circular

Newsletter of the Humanist Society of Santa Barbara

www.SBHumanists.org

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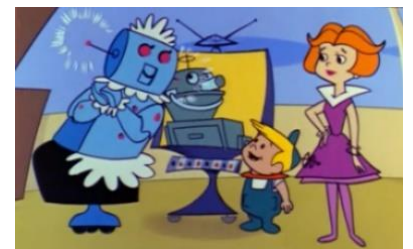
The Coming Population Collapse – What it Is, Why It's Happening, and Options to Address It

Our Program: Recently, there have been a remarkable number of stories in legitimate media outlets about projections of human population collapse. They highlight that after many decades of rapid growth, population trends are reversing worldwide—in both wealthy and poor countries. Demographers predict a transition from exponential population growth to a rapid decline. In our current world of effective birth control and changing roles for women, people now have the choice whether or not to have more children. They are deciding not to. This creates a whole new set of problems and challenges.

We will examine demographic data revealing significant drops in global fertility rates. The average number of births per female is currently below the replacement level of 2.1 in most countries. Low fertility rates are impacting economies now.

Recent generations were taught that the earth is running out of resources and cannot support the continued growth of humanity, so human reproduction came to be thought of as bad for the planet. Others cite climate change or the cost of raising children or the expanded opportunities for women as reasons not to reproduce.

Measures to reverse the declining birth rate (e.g. financial incentives, subsidized childcare, etc.) have had little effect. While the birth rates of religious people are higher than the non-religious, even evangelicals and Mormons have declining birth rates. Population collapse has become a major issue in the Presidential campaign on the Republican side. It hasn't broken through on the Democratic side yet, but perhaps it should.



Gary Noreen, HSSB
Board Member

How should humanists address this issue? Is cultural change necessary to convince people to reproduce? Would robotic nannies help?

Our Speaker: Gary Noreen is a retired JPL Systems Architect and a member of the HSSB Board. He is a futurist and a technology optimist. Gary follows breakthroughs in biotech, advanced energy, AI, autonomous and electric vehicles, and nanotechnology. Gary lives in Oxnard Shores with his wife Xina Kingshill. They are frequent world travelers.

When: Saturday September 21, 3:00 – 4:30 pm PST.

On Zoom: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>

Seth Andrews, Intelligent Designer 8-17-24

By Robert Bernstein

We often think it is pointless to engage religious fundamentalists. Well, Seth Andrews was a fundamentalist Christian talk show host. After hearing a talk by Christopher Hitchens, Andrews saw the light and started his path toward atheism.

We were honored and delighted by his amusing and informative talk *Seth Andrews vs God: Who is the Better Intelligent Designer?*

Andrews started off quoting Isaiah 64:8 “We are the clay, and thou our potter; and we all are the work of thy hand.” He showed the famous *Creation of Adam* painting by Michelangelo on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Full disclosure: It is forbidden to take photos of the Sistine Chapel, so I only took one (back when it involved film and a big noisy camera). People don’t realize this famous scene is just a tiny piece of the ceiling fresco. Here is my photo:



In any case, Andrews focused on the testicles. Why did they have to go there? They are very vulnerable and subject to painful attacks. We know that better designs are possible. Frog testes are safely inside their bodies. For mammals, the testes would get too hot inside

the body and the sperm would die. But rats, mice, and hares can retract their testicles most of the time, letting them out just when needed. Yet Intelligent Design (ID) claims humans are the product of an Intelligent Designer who made us according to a perfect design.

The so-called ‘Discovery Institute’ (DI) promotes ID. The name is interesting, since they do no discovery there, not unlike the mis-named Liberty University and the mis-named Family Research Council, he noted. In reality, DI is named after the Royal Navy ship HMS Discovery in which George Vancouver explored Puget Sound in 1792.

The Discovery Institute is a right wing think tank, founded in 1991, based in Seattle. Michael Behe is a biochemist and senior fellow at DI. Despite God’s ‘perfect design work’, Andrews noted that Behe wears corrective eyeglasses.

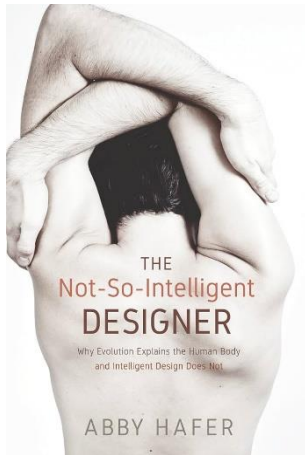
Behe claims that the human eye is “irreducibly complex”, like a car engine...meaning that all parts must work perfectly, or else it won’t work at all (which is actually not true about the eye).

Stephen C. Meyer is another irreducible complexity proponent at the DI. He wrote a book *Signature in the Cell*, that claims that the existence of DNA proves ID.

William Albert Dembski is an American mathematician, philosopher, and theologian who is also a DI fellow. He also wears eyeglasses.

From Wikipedia: Kenneth Alfred Ham is an Australian Christian fundamentalist, young Earth creationist, apologist and former science teacher, living in the United States. He is the founder, CEO, and former president of Answers in Genesis, a Christian apologetics organization that operates the Creation Museum and the Ark Encounter.

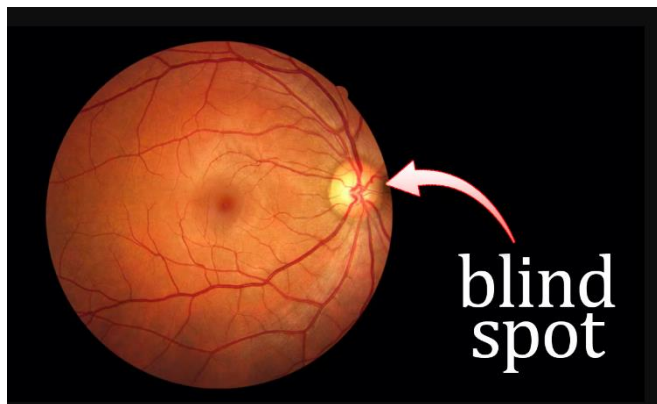
He also wears eyeglasses. Andrews has toured both of his exhibits. Ham dislikes DI because it is not specific enough. He believes that we were designed by Yahweh, the god of the Bible. Not just any old 'designer'.



Abby Hafer wrote *The Not So Intelligent Designer* book. Andrews narrated it as an audio book for her. Her book shows that evolution explains the bad designs of the human body in a way that ID does not. He gave her credit for using much of her material in his talk.

He starts with the human eye. Like a camera, there is a lens and a photo sensitive imaging layer, the retina. But all of the blood vessels and nerve wiring for the retina are in front of the retina, which blocks some of the light and lowers the sharpness of what we see.

Where these nerves bundle together and exit the retina, there is a blind spot.



Is a better design possible? Yes! The nerves and blood vessels of an octopus eye are located behind its retina; a far superior design. Octopi see better than humans in dim light. Geckos have 350 times better color vision at night than

we do. Then there is the eagle, which can see two miles away and into the ultraviolet.

An intelligent designer could do even better, in principle.

Why not macro and/or zoom lenses? And what's with all of the allergies that make a mess of our eyes? Maybe eyes on the backs of our heads would be a distraction most of the time. But maybe on demand it would be handy?

We have defects like glaucoma and cataracts. Why not make the eyeball modular, with the modules replaceable when they fail? That would be REAL Intelligent Design!

Brian Stanley is an engineer and machinist who lost an eye to cancer. He made the best of it by making a set of implant eyes with a variety of functions. Including a flashlight. And holiday versions!

85% of Americans need to have their wisdom teeth removed. We get one set of adult teeth that serve us for life. Again, another species got a much better deal than humans: sharks have multiple rows of teeth that cycle through every 2-3 weeks. Not long enough to build up plaque.

And sharks can breathe underwater. Why can't we? African lungfish can breathe above and below water. Consider that 230,000 people drown every year.

And what is with putting our breathing tube and our eating tube in the same place? There are 5,000 choking deaths a year just in the U.S.

And why do humans have hair that is of little value? Either fill it in or get rid of it! We have two to five million follicles; about the same number as other apes, but ours is not functionally useful. Lack of hair leaves us open to skin cancer: 700,000 new skin cancer cases a year in the U.S. If no hair, why not natural sunblock?

Humans are subject to many genetic defects. Hemophilia and Huntington's to name a couple.

There are 790,000 knee replacements each year in the U.S. We are bipeds that evolved from quadrupeds. We were not intelligently designed bipeds. One quarter of adults have arthritis.

Then there is our appendix. It may have some value to support the immune system, but it is not a great design. It can get blocked and cause a painful death without speedy surgery.

Speaking of pain, yes, it is an important signal. But after we get the signal, why can't we turn it down or off? Instead, we take morphine or other powerful narcotics, which have their own problems.

For some cases of pain relief, an epidural is used, notably for childbirth. It's not an optimal solution, but it's better than how we were designed.

Speaking of childbirth, what kind of crazy design makes a bony pelvic circle for the birth canal that is smaller than the baby's head? 287,000 women die each year worldwide during childbirth.

For those who don't die, some develop a fistula that leads to urine constantly leaking for the rest of the mother's life.

Some have argued that the human design is the best compromise possible between the survival of mother and infant. Not so. Again, we know that a better design is possible, because some other animals have such a better design.

Kangaroos and other marsupials give birth to a tiny embryo, which is then reared in a pouch. There is even a handy nipple inside the pouch. For six months, the baby kangaroo can leave and return at will. No maternal pain, tearing, injury or death required [plus having a built-in

pouch would be useful place to carry a cellphone -ed.].



40-60% of human embryos may be lost between fertilization and birth: an important point for the anti-choice crowd. The Intelligent Designer is by far the most prolific abortionist in history!

And what Intelligent Designer would place the sewer line next to the entertainment line in our uro-genital area?

Why 300 million sperm if just one is predestined to win?

And what is with the foreskin? The Bible calls for it to be cut off? Why doesn't it come that way already?

In the modern world, overweight and obesity is a bigger problem than lack of food. Why were we not designed to shed excess calories?

Some people are ambidextrous, able to use both hands equally. Why not everybody?

I forget what came next, but he also talked about how flawed our memory system is. We know it is possible to make a better memory system that is more accurate and more accessible. Our computer files are one example. Some people are also better at this. As we get older, our most valuable contribution to others is sharing our wisdom. Why is it, then, in old

age, when we most need memory, we start to lose it?

We should be able to regenerate limbs as certain other species can do, including some salamanders, which share most of our body's architecture and DNA. It **is** possible.

Regenerating the spine would also be very useful!

Most of Earth is covered in sea water that we cannot drink and there are sea creatures like whales that can drown. There are winged animals that cannot fly, and animals with eyes that cannot see. These are not the best designs.

And why do animals have to eat each other? Usually, alive. Why not protein-fortified fruits or vegetables instead? Andrews imagined picking a rack of lamb from the garden.

He quickly ran through some ghoulish examples of living things causing huge amounts of suffering for their survival, such as the loa loa nematode (worm) that lives in human eyeballs. Related nematodes cause river blindness. Was that design really necessary?

There are zombie mushrooms that grow out of the brains of ants and a parasite that infects snails and causes them to grow protuberances that resemble caterpillars on their heads, which cause them to be eaten by birds. Why is all this needless animal suffering part of the 'design'?

Some designs make no sense if created by ID. The recurrent laryngeal nerve in the giraffe makes an absurdly long route and then a U-turn. Fifteen feet instead of a few inches from beginning to end. Why design it that way?

Then there are all the mass extinctions. While some ID people believe the Earth is just a few thousand years old, others believe it is much

older. 99.9% of all species that ever lived are now extinct. Why all that waste?

ID apologists try to justify some of the bad designs due to Adam and Eve defying God and eating the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden.

Remember, this is a God who is supposed to be all knowing... kind of like giving a hand grenade to a nursery school class and getting angry at the children for pulling the pin.

One angle is the Mother Teresa angle: Suffering brings us closer to God. None of this explains the suffering of so many other species, nor does it explain why the suffering of humans has to go on forever.

Humans use their design ingenuity to get around the bad designs in nature. We build strong buildings to resist tornadoes and hurricanes. We develop meteorology to predict these storms. We make artificial limbs.

Religious people prayed for god to restore Seth Andrews' father's hearing. Prayer produced zero benefit; however, a human-designed cochlear implant did restore his hearing.

Occasionally a person with a disease or defect is prayed for and they recover. Hallelujah. But God clearly hates amputees. The web site [Why Won't God Heal Amputees](http://WhyWon'tGodHealAmputees.com) (previously called GodHatesAmputees.com) has a clear message: No amputee has ever had their prayers answered.

We are able to fly and communicate over long distances due to our ingenuity, not due to our inherent design. Some religious figures say we should not develop or use these things that God did not give us.

As absurd as human and animal designs are, they make perfect sense as a result of our understanding of evolution by random mutation and natural selection. Be sure to visit [Seth Andrews' web site](#) here!

HSSB Member Tour of UCSB MesoAmerican Research Center

Photos by Robert Bernstein

On August 8, Dr. Anabel Ford treated a group of HSSB members to a tour of her lab at UCSB. After the lab tour, we had lunch at the Dining Room at the Club and Guest House at UCSB. [Dr. Ford spoke to HSSB in January 2021](#) about her archeological work at El Pilar in Belize. HSSB also hosted a reception for a delegation from Belize when Narciso Torres, an expert in Maya forest gardening methods, received the Chancellor's Medal from UCSB Chancellor, Henry Yang, in January 2023. Thank you, Dr. Ford, for a behind-the-scenes look at your lab.



Upcoming Events of Interest to Humanists

Submitted by Diane Krohn & Melanie Jacobsen

- September 1, 10am. Rev. Jonathan Young: *Resilience in Climate Activism*. Sometimes a crisis is an invitation to rise-up. We will reflect on the film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* to ponder our place as loving caretakers of a fragile planet. Discussion to follow. Live Oak UU Congregation. Goleta.
- September 7, 4:30-6pm. V.R. Venkataraman: *The Classical Music of India: The Mathematics Behind the Sound*. Institute of World Culture, Concord Hall, 1407 Chapala St. Santa Barbara. Venkataraman was a professor of music at SDSU, a professor of Applied Mathematics, and is currently an Executive Chef at Appu's Tumeric Café in Long Beach. Free and open to the public.
- September 14-15: 83rd Annual American Humanist Association Virtual Conference. *The Future is Humanist: Shaping Tomorrow Together*. [83rd AHA Conference](#)
- September 15, 10am: Rev. Nica Eaton-Guinn: *AI & Being Human*. How can we help shape the evolution of AI into something life affirming and positive? Live Oak UU Congregation, Goleta.
- September 22: Dr. Brian Sharpless: *The Real Psychological Disorders Behind Horror Movies*. Center for Inquiry West, Los Angeles. [Psychological Disorders In Horror Movies](#)
- September 26-29: *Freedom From Religion Foundation National Convention*, Denver, CO. Speakers include Katherine Stewart, Ron Reagan, Michelle Goldberg, Bradley Onishi, and many others. [FFRF Convention 2024](#)
- September 29, 10am. Rev. Jonathan Young: *The Good News about Getting Older*. We will explore sage stories to reflect on how to harvest generatively and enjoy the unique pleasures of our later years, focusing on the Dowager Countess Crawley in *Downton Abbey*. A discussion will follow. Live Oak UU Congregation, Goleta.

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To Join or Donate to HSSB: Annual Membership dues are \$36 for an individual, \$60 for a couple, \$100 for a Society Supporter, and \$300 (or more) for a Society Patron. Dues payments and other donations can be made via PayPal (Paypal.me/SBHumanists), check or credit card. Include your name and contact information when submitting payments. Make checks out to *Humanist Society of Santa Barbara* and mail to Mary Wilk, P.O. Box 30232, Santa Barbara, CA 93130. mwilk722@gmail.com. Dues, donations, and payments can also be remitted via this PayPal QR code. At the PayPal site, select 'Send' then log into your PayPal account to complete the transaction. Watch our speaker videos on [YouTube](#). Subscribe to our [Meetup](#) page to be notified of upcoming events.



- October 5: Salman Khan: *Brave New World: How AI Will Revolutionize Education (and Why That's a Good Thing)*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Salman Khan](#)
- October 22: Dr. Jennifer Doudna: *CRISPR Gene Editing and the Future of Human Health*. UCSB Arts & Lectures event. [Dr. Jennifer Doudna](#)
- October 24-27: *CSICon 2024*, Las Vegas, NV. Speakers include Brian Cox, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Banachek, and Michael Mann. [CSICon 2024](#)



Humanist Society of Santa Barbara
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Santa Barbara, CA 93130

HSSB Calendar

Tuesday September 17. 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

Saturday September 21. 3:00 pm. Gary Noreen. *The Coming Population Collapse – What It Is, Why It's Happening, and Options to Address It*. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

Tuesday October 15. 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>. Members always welcome to attend.

Saturday October 19. 3:00 pm. Speaker TBD. Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/88193881833>.

Tuesday November 19. 5:00 pm. HSSB Board Meeting. Members always welcome to attend.

Zoom link: <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/83592300667>.

Saturday November 23. 9am – 5pm. *From Prisons to Partnerships*. On Zoom Co-sponsored by HSSB, SCSC, Another Way to Go, and others.