

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet
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IS ASTROLOGY RATIONAL?

by David Widdowson

[This article first appeared in "The Skeptic", newsletter of the Australian Skeptics.]

Given what we now know about the universe, it is of course unreasonable to believe that the positions of the heavenly bodies can affect the behavior and personality of people on Earth; that is, to believe in astrology. But has such a belief always been unreasonable? After all, there were the observed effects of the sun on the weather and the moon on the tides, and other supposed correlations such as between the lunar month and the menstrual cycle. Did such effects make a belief in astrology rational? To examine this question, it is necessary to look at the historical basis of astrology. One of the central features of astrology is the system of "star signs" and the characteristics that are associated with each sign. For instance,

"most of the constellations aren't named after their patterns, but rather from other aspects such as the seasons, myths and legends."

People born with the sun in Leo are thought to be strong, proud, forceful and natural leaders. Why is this the case? Was it because ancient people observed Leonians to be like that? This turns out not to be so; rather, it was that these were characteristics of LIONS, therefore they came to be associated with people of this sign. This type of connection can be seen in many of the signs; for example, people born under:

- Aries -- like a ram, are quick tempered and impulsive.
- Taurus -- are stubborn, persistent and determined, like a bull.
- Cancer -- as a crab, are outwardly hard but inwardly soft (emotional).
- Libra -- the scales, have a balanced personality, harmonious.
- Capricorn -- are tough and tenacious, like a goat . . . and so on.

This type of magical correlation between the names given to the signs and the characteristics they produce in people has a certain crude logic to it, but you could hardly say it was a rational system. Just because a constellation looks like a bull [and what it "looks" like is certainly cultural . . .], it doesn't follow

that a person born when the sun is in that sign will have a bullish character; such a belief is magical rather than rational.

In any event, most of the constellations aren't named after their patterns, but rather from other aspects such as the seasons, myths and legends. Characteristics of the signs also derive in part from the planets that were thought to rule them. The properties of the planets were in turn based on simple symbolic correlations; for instance, the sun was strong and dominated the Earth, hence it gave strength, and leadership. The moon was more subtle in its effects, so it was associated with emotions. Mercury, the fastest planet, was quick, shrewd, clever, "mercurial." Venus, bright and beautiful, represented love, beauty and goodness. Mars, red, meant war, hatred, cruelty and evil. Jupiter, bright, white, "majestic," was happy, optimistic, and "jovial." Saturn, dull yellow and slow, was gloomy, "saturnine."

When it came to assigning rulerships by the planets over the signs, one would expect there to be an attempted match between the properties ascribed to each. But the ascription of planetary rulerships (by Ptolemy around 150 AD) was arbitrarily based on the supposed order of planets from the Earth.

As can be seen, Mars is given the rulership of the first sign, Aries, then the rulerships move in the Earth and then out again; the only exception is Leo which "naturally" rules the sun. (Even this may not be the case if the sun was thought to be closer than Mercury and Venus, although this is unlikely.) So, apart from Aries and Leo, the ascription is purely arbitrary and not based on any reasonable belief. The arbitrariness leads to some incongruous associations; for instance, surely Virgo is more suited to Venus than Taurus is.

By the way, the discovery of three new planets caused quite a problem for the system of planetary rulerships (as it did for astrology in general) because there were no signs for the new planets to rule. One solution was to have two planets rule some signs, but, to use the astrologers' crude symbolism, it may be possible for a king to rule two kingdoms, but surely two kings can't rule the same kingdom. A further arbitrary element in the characteristics of the signs comes from their classification (also by Ptolemy) according to the four elements and the three qualities. The elements and their properties were: FIRE -- volatile; EARTH - - practical; AIR -- lively; and WATER -- emotional. The three qualities were CARDINAL (active), FIXED (stable) and MUTABLE (altered by external features).

There are twelve combinations of element and quality (e.g., cardinal fire, fixed earth, etc.) and each sign in order was given one combination. It can be seen that every fourth sign is ruled by a particular element and every third by a certain quality. The only aspect of this that is not arbitrary is the order of the elements, which contrasts with the order in Aristotle's system -- fire, air, earth, and water. This was probably done to give Capricorn and

Taurus to earth, and Cancer and Pisces to water. There are still some incongruities; perhaps Aquarius should be water, Scorpio fire, Leo cardinal, etc.

To summarize, this study shows that the basis of astrology is neither reason nor experience, but rather:

1. A magical belief in the correspondence between the properties of a star sign or planet and human characteristics; and
2. The generally arbitrary ascription of planetary rulerships and the classifications of the signs.

Both aspects are completely foreign to science and other rational fields of thought. To illustrate this, imagine physicists using the "astrological method" to explore the subatomic world. Their reasoning might run like this: How many subatomic particles are there? Let's ascribe each a letter of the alphabet. OK, so there are 26 of them. What are they like? Well, "A" is the first letter, so the "A" particle is the first and most basic. The "B" particle? Well, that swarms around like a bee. The "X" particle is difficult to know, etc. Of course, this is absurd, but no more absurd than astrology is.

Astrology's irrational basis explains to an extent how it survived the scientific revolution and why it flourishes today in spite of all the rational arguments used against it. It also seems that it will go on flourishing where irrationality continues to thrive.

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION

In a world in which hunger is a major problem, the average health-food faddist will spend about \$50,000 on mostly useless food supplements during his or her lifetime. This is according to information in a trade publication as reported in the NCAHF newsletter.

What a sorry state of affairs to contemplate when the problems are so great in other, pressing areas of human need. What a commentary on our modern, "enlightened" society.

EX-FIREWALKER PROMOTING NEW AGE COURSE by Eugenie C. Scott, Ph.D.

Tony Robbins. The name rang a bell. I looked back in some files, and sure enough, there he was: in 1984, one of the most financially successful operators of a "firewalking" scam. In those days he was touring with "Fear Into Power -- the Firewalk Experience," which was his potentially dangerous and certainly unethical means of promoting his "Neurolinguistic Programing-based power of positive

thinking" routine.

Robbins was the most successful commercial purveyor of the nonsense that through your own will you could "overcome the laws of nature" and "actually walk on fire!!" The cells of your body would somehow become reorganized to protect you from the thousand-degree fire, all because you willed it. If you can walk on fire, you can overcome any obstacle in your life. Robbins, in a newspaper article written by a devotee, allegedly told seminar participants that they would get through the walk through a series of "imbedded commands -- an unconscious program developed through hypnotic techniques to get yourself in tune on an unconscious as well as a conscious level."

This is horse manure, of course. First, the marks (paying up to \$500 or more per "seminar") walked on glowing wood chips, not "fire." Wood chip embers don't have a high enough heat capacity to burn one unless one stands on them for rather longer than it takes to walk across them. No one claimed you could walk on hot pennies, which really WOULD be impressive! The fad started to fizzle when Bernard Leikind, a physicist from Cal Tech, walked on fire on the Johnny Carson show, using just the laws of physics instead of New Age mumbo-jumbo. Skeptics groups around the country started going to Robbins' sessions and exposing him. The fires, literally, started dying down. I for one haven't seen an advertisement for firewalking in over two years.

Why am I reminded about this? In the September newsletter of the Humanist Community of San Jose, is an advertisement for "PERSONAL POWER!," a course to help you attain "dynamic, exciting, effective personal power." This course consists of 24 half-hour tapes, purchasable for \$150 (about the price of the old firewalking seminar, but described as "significantly below" the national supplier's price), produced by none other than our old guru, Anthony Robbins.

The tape titles suggest the old "power of positive thinking" routine, with the infusion of appropriate New Age linguistics (key words like "focus," "programing," "power," "energy"), plus some unrecognizable ones ("holophonic subliminal," "neuro-associative conditioning.") Results "beyond your wildest dreams" are promised.

Maybe Robbins has gone "straight" human potential, giving up gimmicks like firewalking. Potential course-takers should consider his history, however. Is this someone from whom you want to take advice for how to run your life? Or anything else?

A WONDER IN OUR MIDST: THE CALIFORNIA ACADEMY OF SCIENCES
by Yves Barbero

We can't just give a child present knowledge . . . the rate of technical insight grows geometrically. Expect a different world in

ten years!" Roy Eisenhardt, Director of the California Academy of Sciences, declared.

"The emphasis is on youth," he pointed out. "It is important that children be taught how to learn." Concerned with public policy decisions made about science, the director recognized that these kids, whether or not they enter the sciences as a profession, will be the decision makers of the future. A thorough grounding in science is not an option which can be lightly ignored. He sees the Academy as an important tool in that process.

The Academy, located in Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, is the West's oldest science institution. Founded in 1853, it boasts, aside from the well-known Steinhart Aquarium and Morrison Planetarium, a research division which manages almost 15 million specimens in its collection. It is staffed by dozens of naturalists. Despite the 1906 Earthquake which destroyed the first building, (and the recent 1989 event which caused only minor structural damage), it has managed to grow into the immense institution it is today.

Not often in the limelight, the research division has been doing serious work in anthropology, botany, ecology, geology, and zoology and has thousands of scientific papers to its credit, hundreds of which have been published by the Academy itself. It has one of the best research libraries in the area and it is accessible to the public. The research division is often called upon by government, the media and even the police (investigating crimes) for assistance.

As with any museum, it has exhibits designed to delight the heart and educate the mind. Eisenhardt said that since the public is not of one mind, the Academy tries to make a little something for everyone. The ambition is to inform us about the natural world; but each of us has to approach the museum in his or her own way. He gave an example of what he likes to do at the Academy: sit in front of a diorama (a sort of 3-D snapshot using painted backgrounds and preserved specimens) in the African Hall and study it in detail. "Just walking through is not enough," he said.

Among the lesser known but important exhibits at the museum are the Wattis Hall of Human Cultures and the Gem and Mineral Hall. Their impact on an individual may not be as immediate as that of the Aquarium or Planetarium in our non-stop age, but they offer insights into our natural and social history not easily available elsewhere.

For adults, there are a number of lectures, field trips and classes which help make the transition from the ranks of the merely curious to that of well-informed citizen (after all, adults are making the policy decisions now). For the first time in history, man is making a serious impact on the natural world. It is better to be informed than to listen to shrill voices from some extreme.

Susan Douglas is the educational chairperson for the Academy, and she agrees with the director that educating children is of primary importance. "Youngsters take classes at the Junior Academy. They work with real materials. It is an after-school science school." There is a minimal fee, she said, but scholarships are available for those unable to pay.

Douglas, an eleven-year veteran of the Academy, smiled as she said, "Most people approach it as educational but enjoyable. They drag their children here with that in mind."

She is particularly proud of the Biological Forum held annually for high school science teachers. In its fifth year, she feels that it has helped keep teachers current in an ever changing area of study. The Academy has close ties to the Science Unit of the State Department of Education, and on most school days, long lines of school buses are parked in the back of the Academy. It is the science teachers who determine what their classes get from the field trips to the Academy. The staff and docents assist with their specialized knowledge. (Docent volunteers are so well trained they earn four units of college level biology).

A major new permanent exhibit hall is now under construction which will display the evidence of evolution, "Life Through Time." It will open in early 1990. "When the Rainbow Touches Down," an exhibit of Native-American Art is now on display (until January 14th). "Wild California" and Gary Larson's outrageous "The Far Side" original cartoons exhibits are well worth the time.

The Academy is open every day of the year from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. There is an admission charge of \$4 for adults, \$2 for 12-17 and seniors and \$1 for 6-11. Kids 5 or less are free. Call (415) 750-7145. Membership, which includes a subscription to "Pacific Discovery", admissions and a variety of programs, is a bargain at \$40 a year. Call (415) 750-7111.

"BASIS" would like to run a series of articles about museums and other institutions dedicated to the promotion and public understanding of science. After all, the underlying purpose of Bay Area Skeptics is to promote scientific understanding and the critical thinking skills that go along with it. If you've special information, please submit representative articles and offer your suggestions. For more information, call Yves Barbero at (415) 285-4358 (evenings).

TASS GOES RAG

With "glasnost" comes more revelations of Soviet silliness. "BASIS" has reported some of the feats of funny psychics in what is becoming a phenomenon. The formerly austere Tass news agency now reports "National Enquirer" stuff in a matter-of-fact way. (Someone speculated that Rupert Murdoch has persuaded the Ministry of

Information to accept his bid for a capitalistic venture in rag journals.)

This reportage has filtered out to America, and now there have been evening-news pieces on the tube about UFO-nauts putting down right there on soviet soil. (The stories went from the national to the local network affiliates, and, on channel 5 news in the Bay Area, board member Andy Fraknoi and former BAS chair Robert Sheaffer were asked to express -- in a few seconds -- the skeptical side.)

The aliens who grace this side of the Atlantic are little and green, with large heads -- presumably to house the enormous brains they need to hold all that high-tech stuff. The Russian issue is from some other part of the galaxy, because they are tall and have tiny heads. Look at how our micro-chip technology has shrunk things, so maybe head size is not related to smarts.

The "Oakland Tribune" told of another poor devil, one E. Frenkel, a member of the growing cadre of soviet psychic healers and mentalists. Mr. Frenkel found that he could stop bicycles with his psychic powers when he stepped in front of them. He went to automobiles and lo, they couldn't run over him either -- they stopped, he believed, because of his powers. Ever the brave entrepreneur, streetcars were then tested with the same success. Confident that he really had mastered the Power, he finally stepped in front of a freight train.

In a properly laconic comment, the "Trib" wrote, "It didn't work." At least the late Frenkel "was on the right track," they remarked.

EDITOR'S CORNER

The issue of falsifiability is central to the scientific method. If a proposition is non-falsifiable, at least in theory, it is a proposition that has little scientific value. The focus here is SCIENTIFIC value, which is not, of course, to say that the proposition has no value in any context. Scientific creationism, for example, is not falsifiable because there is no evidence, even in theory, which could show it to be false. Whatever difficulty, real or imagined, may be swept away with an appropriate miracle, however clumsily.

Therefore the very term "scientific creationism" is oxymoronic. Bob Steiner's recent book, "Don't Get Taken!", includes an example of what he says is a non-falsifiable statement. The chapter with that example was published in the September "BASIS". Dr. Terence Hines challenged the example, and we printed Terry's letter and Bob's response in the November issue. I spoke with Bob about Terry's critique in early October and we agreed that one of the more wonderful things about science and the scientific method is that criticism is the lifeblood of intellectual honesty and advancement. Criticism is the essence of skeptical inquiry -- the stuff of

keeping our minds open and continually learning.

My own development before aligning myself more on the skeptical side was a very narrow mindset. Where I came from, criticism of the party line was unthinkable. The exhilaration of being able to openly consider criticism is wonderful. In the case of dogma, which cannot be wrong (non-falsifiable), choking stultification is the usual product. Like most things in life, there is a trade off when one renounces dogma: security for freedom.

Dogma produces security. There is no need to search for understanding because the truth is on a platter, conveniently in front of us, from which we must take our daily nutriment. The regimen may be only thinly nourishing, but, like manna, it is always there; dependable if austere, inexhaustible if bland. With skepticism comes that freedom which says one may roam into any area of human thought and pick ones way through, but the process is not without its poisonous hazards. Picking through the smorgasbord of ideas requires some method if one has any hope of doing it with the fewest errors. A system of formal reasoning is necessary to sort the wheat from the chaff.

A FORMAL SYSTEM

In any system of formal reasoning, a scheme must be established whereby we may evaluate the relative strength of propositions. Such a system must include, in reverse order of primacy, theorems, axioms, and definitions. Since mathematics is the system of logic most are familiar with, I will use geometry for examples.

Where do we begin when we devise a system? Above a certain level, we must be able to clearly and unambiguously define everything we will encounter in the system. We loathe circularity of definition as much circularity of reason, and since we cannot any more easily tolerate infinite regress in our definitions, we are forced to accept some primitive definitions as themselves undefined. In geometry, "point" is such an undefined entity. (No less a notable than Euclid thought he could build a perfect system, so he defined a point as "that which has no part.") Most people revolt at the notion of undefined entities, so an instructor prostitutes him/herself by making a little dot on the blackboard when the student would ultimately be better taught to understand the folly of trying to define everything.*

Next comes a set of assumptions. If we are to avoid tautology ("a" implies "a"), circular reasoning ("a" implies "b" implies "a"), and infinite regress ("a sub n" is derivable from "a sub n-1", . . .), we must cut the circle and truncate the reasoning extending back to infinity and say "this is the bottom." Such primitive statements are "axioms"; they are unprovable. Euclid called them "self-evident truths" in his continued attempt at a perfect system. The combination of these axioms and definitions in a logical system is so airtight that whenever we are able to apply its principles to some other system we may be assured that the latter, too, is

airtight. This is why mathematics is such a powerful analytical tool.

What does all this have to do with falsifiability? Remember that we stipulated that all our definitions must necessarily be unambiguous and flow linearly from the primitives. Many arguments should never get off the starting blocks: they are really over before ever having begun because there was no clear definition or there was no common agreement on the definition. Without clear definitions, all the logical prowess and agility one may possess are for naught.

"Skepticism is the chastity of the intellect, and it is shameful to surrender it too soon or to the first comer."
-- Santayana

I carried on for a year in a running debate with a creationist before realizing that his definition of science was "knowing." That is indeed one of the accepted definitions of science. He had selected that particular definition not because it is germane, but because it defined his position into existence. All the effort I had expended on R-S-T was wasted because we had not agreed upon A-B-C first. His definition allows voodooism and cow-chip tossing as valid scientific areas of study. There are many informal definitions of science, so if one is to have a meaningful discussion about science qua science, there must first be strict agreement on a formal definition. Any subject one may wish to discuss has multiple definitions.

BIG MAFIOSO

All of this now applies to Steiner's statement. Is there a specific definition that we could all agree upon, at least in theory, as regards what is a "big Mafioso"? We MUST agree or there is no point in even discussing the matter, and the matter is not as intractable as it can be made to appear.

The easiest way out is to allow only the most formal definition for the purpose of discussion. It is not theoretically difficult to arrive at, in a formal sense, what is meant by "big" in this case, and it is even easier to define, in a formal sense, what is meant by "Mafioso." Then and only then are we prepared to address the question of falsifiability.

The limits of scientific falsifiability should not have to hinge upon a definition, or we are in a pack of trouble. We wouldn't be able to falsify ourselves out of a wet paper bag. We must be able to determined falsifiability at the INFERENCE level of the logico-rational system, not be stymied at the definition level.

I contend therefore, that whether or not one is a "big Mafioso" or not is falsifiable.

* Try a little exercise in circular definitions. Take a word in the

dictionary and look up one of its definitions or synonyms. In usually at most six iterations of this process you will be back to the original word. Miss Rotman, my English literature teacher, marked our papers whenever we used the word we were to define in the definition, but this problem is ultimately unavoidable in language.

CSER REPORTS ON SATANISM

by Shawn Carlson, Ph.D.

For the last three years, I and several colleagues investigated monstrous allegations of Satanic crime. What we found are pillars of nonsense built on sand. Murderous cults of Devil worshipers are modern folk legends and a few opportunists, bereaved parents and religious fanatics have preyed on the public's imagination to create a lucrative cottage industry of fear. What follows is a press release describing our research. Copies of the 200-page report are available for \$10 plus \$1.50 P&H from me at Box 466, El Cerrito, CA, 94530.

Those who worry about a rising tide of Satanic crime in America are giving the Devil much more than his due according to a report issued today by the Committee for Scientific Examination of Religion (CSER), a group of scientists and scholars dedicated to the critical evaluation of religious claims.

"SATANISM IN AMERICA", compiled after three years of investigation, finds some evidence of Satanic or "occult- related" criminal activity in the United States, but cautions that its prevalence has been grossly exaggerated by self-styled experts who have wasted millions of tax dollars and countless thousands of police hours in search of a conspiracy that isn't there.

In fact, according to CSER's study, a phalanx of Christian fundamentalists, political extremists, bereaved parents, opportunists, and several mentally unstable persons have combined to form a lucrative "information industry" on occult-related crime. The report asserts that public monies have been used to fund police and law enforcement training seminars (often costing hundreds, and sometimes thousands, of dollars), and the publication of dozens of books and manuals, offering little more than "evangelism posing as criminology." And all of this has happened despite the fact that a person is more likely to be struck by lightning than to be the victim of a Satanic crime.

THE DEVIL WITH GERALDO

CSER decided to begin its investigation in 1986, shortly after its widely publicized expose of fraudulent TV faith healers. Alarmed by the nationwide Satanism scare, which had been fueled by outrageous claims and sensational media coverage, the Committee later focused much of its attention on an analysis of Geraldo

Rivera's special television presentation, "Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground," aired on the night of Oct. 25, 1988.

The report is sharply critical of the Rivera special, charging that it was:

- poorly researched.
- sensational.
- highly irresponsible.

"SATANISM IN AMERICA" tells that "The Rivera report was misleading, much of the information presented was inaccurate, and key facts were omitted." And these facts, CSER contends, would have left the viewing audience considerably less alarmed about the "threat" of Satanism.

Says Dr. Shawn Carlson, the report's principal author, "Had Rivera been a bit more even-handed in his treatment of the subject matter, perhaps some of the hysteria could have been averted or avoided altogether."

Carlson, a physicist and software engineer, points out that there was at least one confirmed case of homicide associated with the program. "Timothy Hughes of Altus, Oklahoma murdered his wife immediately after watching Rivera's special," Carlson says, "because he believed her to be part of the conspiracy."

"20/20" IN THE ACT

Carlson contends that since the airing of a special report on Devil-worship on ABC's newsmagazine "20/20" in 1985, and the continuing fascination of TV talk-shows and the press with allegations of a Satanic conspiracy, numerous acts of violence have been committed by vigilantes and arsonists across the country against those suspected of Devil-worship. "A number of small churches, including several Black churches, have been vandalized and burned because of rumor-panics," says Carlson. "After the Matamoros incident -- which had nothing to do with Satanism -- people in Pharr, Texas began to hear rumors that blond-haired, blue-eyed children were to be ritually murdered in a little church called the Church of Fire.

The church was destroyed in a mysterious blaze, and several of the members were threatened with similar fates.

The same thing happened to a Black church in Illinois last winter." Carlson points to a similar incident involving the producer of the "20/20" segment on Devil-worship, Kenneth Wooden. "Wooden addressed an audience of 200 people in Olean, New York last April on the topic of Satanic crime, and told them that 25% of all unsolved homicides were ritualistic in nature. That's one in four -- an unbelievable number! There had been a rumor about Satanism spreading in Jamestown, a nearby town. Asked about it, Wooden said, 'It doesn't surprise me . . . it can happen here.'"

"Two weeks later, the police had to stop a mob armed with knives and clubs in Jamestown from converging on a wooded area. And a local warehouse, used for punk rock concerts, sustained \$4000 worth of damage because several townspeople believed that a ritual sacrifice was to occur there.

"Wooden's report for `20/20', as well as his comments in that public meeting, were simply irresponsible," according to Carlson.

MORE EXAGGERATION

The report claims that many of those making public allegations about Satanic crime have exaggerated the extent of the problem beyond reason. According to Carlson, "These people claim to know who the cultist are, where they meet, and how they dispose of the bodies of their victims. But unlike undercover police officers and informants on organized crime, they are unable -- or unwilling -- to provide names, dates, places, or any other tangible evidence."

Carlson's charges are supported by many law enforcement officers and criminologists, among them Kenneth Lanning of the FBI's Behavioral Research Unit in Quantico, Virginia. Lanning, a specialist on crimes involving children, has recently published an article critical of the current Satanism scare in the October issue of "Police Chief" magazine, and reprinted as an appendix in CSER's report.

"SATANISM IN AMERICA" addresses the entire spectrum of claims surrounding Satanism and occult crime -- child-abductions, ritual abuse, human and animal sacrifices, women who purportedly offered their own infants up for sacrifice, animal mutilations, the link between Devil-worship and Heavy Metal music, and the phenomenon of "backward masking." It concludes that most of the allegations made over the last several years are baseless.

The report states that in the few instances where crimes with undeniable Satanic overtones have occurred, "there is no evidence to show that Satanism, per se, was responsible for the act. Nearly every Satanic criminal had a history of anti-social behavior long before he/she took up the trappings of Satanism. Satanism, in these cases, appears as an expression of one's mental illness, and not as the sole motivation for anti-social behavior. Satanism is a symptom, not the cause."

According to Carlson, "Some of the people who are most public about this issue make the silliest claims -- insisting that between 50,000 and two million children are ritually murdered each year by Satanists. We know that this just isn't true. The FBI states that they have fewer than 80 open files on children abducted by strangers in any given year. And there were a total of 23,000 homicides in the U.S. last year, making the lowest sacrifice number often offered by the conspiracy theorists TWICE the national murder average for children and adults combined. The numbers offered by

the so-called experts simply don't add up."

"Far more children drown in our backyard pools than are killed by cultists," Carlson argues. "In fact, last year 2,100 children were murdered in the U.S. by their own parents! This means that children are far more likely to be killed by their own father than by a Devil-worshiper. If we want to help children, we should cover our swimming pools and do something about child abuse, not waste limited resources chasing after non-existent Devil-worshipping conspiracies." According to the report, there have been over a million violent crimes committed in the U.S. in the past five years, fewer than one hundred of them involving Satanism or the occult.

CHILD ABUSE

"I'm proud of the work we've done, especially in the area of child abuse," says Gerald Larue, Emeritus professor of Religion at the University of Southern California and co-author of "SATANISM IN AMERICA". "The hysteria-mongers would have us exhaust our resources going after a non-existent, nation-wide cult of Satanic child-abusers. We must concentrate our efforts on finding the real abusers and taking them off the streets, as well as providing help for abused kids. We owe it to our children not to indulge ourselves in hysteria in their names."

"Our investigation has shown that, in child-abuse cases, allegations of Devil-worshipping conspiracies are phantoms of the prosecutors' imagination and that juries tend not to convict when such allegations are raised. I can't help but think that real child-abusers may have been released from jails because some prosecutors failed to concentrate on the abuse by getting carried away with meager evidence of Satanic murders allegedly committed during black masses and the like," adds Larue. "This panic is hurting kids a lot more than its helping them."

NEW FACES

Permanence in an all-volunteer organization is like finding Nessie in Lake Tahoe. Fresh ideas usually come with fresh names, so newcomers are always welcome. Things have been moving apace lately to the extent that the "BASIS" staff has barely had time to catch its breath enough to salute our latest "acquisitions." Kate Talbot has accepted the responsibility of distributing "BASIS", for which Yves Barbero is mightily grateful. Helping to get the newsletter out on time is a somewhat thankless but vitally important task, so we want Kate to feel our appreciation.

BAS extends a hearty "WELCOME!" to Eugenie Scott, Ph.D., who has agreed to serve on our board. Genie, a long-time advisor to BAS, is an anthropologist, properly degreed and papered in physical anthropology by the University of Missouri. After a post-graduate

stint she did some teaching rounds at U. of Kentucky and U. of Colorado, and several schools in California. She is now serving as Executive Director of the National Center for Science Education. Her impressive credentials and specialty in the creation/evolution controversy have led to her nomination as a CSICOP Fellow.

Still parceling out more of herself and her time, Genie is an elected member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Anthropologists, something that tells us what her peers think of her. In her spare time she debates -- very effectively -- various principals from the Institute for Creation Research. If one is somewhat daunted by this list of accomplishments, Genie's disarming, down-to-earth personality will just charm your socks off. No hoity-toity here.

MORE FOLLY

"Degrees of Folly" will probably conclude in January when the DOE makes its decision. If you question the value of the "BASIS" series on the ICR case, here is part of a letter from Stuart Hurlbert to Joseph Barankin, both principals in the story:

"Clearly [Bennetta's] a prickly burr under the saddle. . . . But . . . his articles [in "BASIS"] are the ONLY accurate account available to the public of this past year's events. He has done more this past year to protect the integrity of science degrees in California . . . than the entire DOE/PPED staff."

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THE GANG OF THREE "SKEPTICISM IN THE 1990'S"

Two past chairs of BAS, a current director, three authors of note, a magician, a political theoretician, a scholar and an advisor to senior citizens seems like a battalion but all these traits are embodied in three men who have stood the Bay Area on its ears.

Bob Steiner, Robert Sheaffer and Larry Jerome will predict, analyze and sort out skepticism for the coming decade. Will the Age of Aquarius melt and be overshadowed by End-of-the-Millennium Prophets of Doom? Is Creationism finally dead? What odd notions will join the short-lived anorexic Breatherians in the future?

Robert Sheaffer, past chair of BAS, is author of "The UFO Verdict". His most recent book is the political "Resentment Against Achievement". Lawrence Jerome teaches at the University of San Francisco and the Electronic University. Among his literary achievements are "Astrology Disproved" and "Crystal Power: The Ultimate Placebo Effect". Bob Steiner, past president of the Society of American Magicians, can often be heard on talk radio attacking the irrational notions of our age of reason. The title of his most recent book, "Don't Get Taken!" says it all.

Bring your questions.

Opinions expressed in "BASIS" are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of BAS, its board or its advisors.

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