

Bay Area Skeptics Information Sheet
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"I predicted last year before New Years on KGO radio and TV [San Francisco] and KCBS that there would be a 5.2 earthquake this year with some aftershocks, but that I didn't see a major 7-pointer destroying the Bay Area." -- Terri Brill, Psychic Astrologer, "San Francisco Chronicle", October 14, 1989 [three days before the earthquake].)

COSMIC CATASTROPHES

by Rick Moen

[This article is our November meeting review of astronomer David Morrison's talk. Dr. Morrison, a CSICOP Fellow, is a planetary scientist and head of the Space Science Division at NASA's Ames Research Center.]

Dr. Morrison spoke on "catastrophism", the school of thought that has revolutionized astronomy in the past few years and stirred debate among biologists as well. In the course of his talk, he also expounded on the "quack catastrophisms" of Immanuel Velikovsky and the creationists, by way of contrast. Within mainstream planetary science, there are two basic approaches to explain the geological and biological record: Uniformitarians hold that the land and lifeforms of Earth were produced by continuous activity over very long time spans, producing gradual, cumulative changes. This was the traditional view, which prevailed over the past 150 years, until recently.

The dissenting "catastrophists" have suggested that periodic intense bursts of geological activity have produced the bulk of this change, through such means as meteor strikes, or cataclysmic floods and volcanic explosions. Recent developments in astronomy and geology have lent their position powerful support.

Morrison felt that the influence of catastrophism may have been somewhat delayed because of the affair of Immanuel Velikovsky, whose theories bear at least a surface resemblance, and was at some pains to point out the difference. Velikovsky published in 1950 a work called "Worlds in Collision", describing his ideas about a kind of planetary ping-pong that supposedly brought our solar system to its current configuration: Venus sprang out of Jupiter during an encounter of that planet with Saturn, and swung by Earth circa 1500 B.C., causing such events as the parting of the Red Sea,

the sun standing still for Joshua's benefit, the collapse of the walls of Jericho, and the plagues in Egypt.

Venus then knocked Mercury off course, into several near-collisions with Earth, in the seventh and eighth centuries B.C., causing further upheavals. For good measure, Velikovsky had Saturn showering the Earth with water, thus accounting for the Deluge, and the moon being captured by Earth, all also within human history.

If this were not amazing enough, Velikovsky adduced as his primary evidence various "myths" from different cultures, employing his own idiosyncratic form of extreme literalism. Everywhere gods were mentioned, they were IN FACT planets: Zeus and Ares having a tete-a-tete actually meant a near-collision of Jupiter and Mars. He was thus able to tie various peoples' written records and mythologies to his hypothetical planetary ballet and its terrestrial side-effects (e.g., volcanoes and meteorites), making adjustments as needed (such as eliminating 4 Egyptian dynasties to synchronize events).

Velikovsky's work met with a harsh and perhaps disproportionate blast of criticism from the scientific establishment, mostly because it was published by Macmillan & Company's textbook division. He and his followers thus were able to follow the well-worn path of the self-described martyr, gaining from it considerable publicity and sympathy from the unwary, as have cranks in all ages.

Like the creationists, Velikovsky insisted on fitting everything into the human record, and so came up with an anthropocentric view of the universe, with an implausibly young solar system. He used a very narrow conception of history, postulated physical forces that are no longer at work today (and thus are not testable), distorted the human record to make the various myths world-wide and simultaneous, and ignored conflicting evidence from astronomy, physics, geology, and archeology.

All his major predictions turned out to be false (e.g. Venus giving off heat, because of its supposed recent formation), in spite of numerous attempts at rationalizing, as was pointed out by Velikovsky's many scientific critics (not least of whom was David Morrison himself). Yet some of his followers have persisted to this day, keeping the faith alive even after his death in 1979.

Creationism, the other major variety of "quack catastrophism," has itself undergone a type of radical change. As early as the 18th century, many writers attempting to reconcile biblical cosmology with scientific findings had concluded that the Deluge (however inaccurately recorded) must have been the most recent of a SERIES of catastrophes. Biblical literalism had been set aside or relaxed by most.

Around the turn of the present century, a "new U.S. creationism" began to be popular. It involved strict biblical literalism, the

occurrence of only ONE flood caused by the collapse of an overhead vapour canopy, and worldwide volcanic eruptions. These events produced all the Earth's continents and other landforms, geologic strata and fossil deposits, over the course of a SINGLE year, and all of cosmic history was required to fit within a timescale of less than 10,000 years (instead of billions of years). As with Velikovsky's theories, no physical evidence for this Deluge catastrophism exists: It contradicts the fundamentals of geology and astronomy, and is unrelated to (and fails to explain) the observed patterns of mass extinctions, evolution, and other elements of biological history.

In contrast to these variants, Morrison described the "new catastrophism" emerging from astronomy. For a long time scientists entertained the idea that infrequent, catastrophic events made the dominant effects in geology and biology. In the same way that sudden floods produced most of the erosion that formed the Grand Canyon, one could conceive of astronomical events that cause worldwide upheaval and consequent rapid change. The Cretaceous-Tertiary and Permian extinctions were cited as possible examples of these effects. Only recently, however, have plausible mechanisms and other supporting evidence for such rapid and dramatic change come to light.

Studies of the comets and asteroids, as well as of impact craters on the Earth and other bodies, have made apparent that collisions with the Earth have occurred quite frequently (on the cosmic timescale). The comets pass Earth orbit both inbound and outbound, and perturbations in asteroid orbits occasionally eject some of them into the inner solar system. The several largest of the roughly 30,000 asteroids are not too far short of planetary scale, and dwarf the remainder added together. One of these could be expected to strike Earth on the order of every 5 to 100 million years.

Astronomers now think that, in the most dramatic such episode, around 4.5 billion years ago, a body the size of Mars struck the earth, nearly splitting apart the Earth, and creating the moon. Some scientists thus speculate that life may have formed several times on Earth, with the Earth being "sanitized" by massive impacts each time.

Another clear collision on a lesser scale occurred at the time of the Cretaceous extinction (when the dinosaurs died out): The late BAS Advisor Luis Alvarez pointed out that the high concentration of iridium from that geological layer is best explained by a collision with some sizable iridium-bearing body (as some comets are thought to be).

Stephen Jay Gould and others have suggested that at ordinary times, species can in general adapt to the small, gradual changes in their environment, but have no such survival mechanism equal to the challenge of such catastrophic events. It is on such occasions that ordinarily-unimportant quirks, like living mostly underground (as

the ancestors of mammals did at the time of the dinosaurs' demise) suddenly become important survival traits, and enormous biological changes become possible as the environment changes drastically.

Although the craters resulting from some past impacts can be found in places around the Earth, constant erosion makes the record a relatively brief one: Better information can be found by examining the Moon. Part of the surface there, the "old highlands," consists of heavily cratered terrain -- craters on top of craters, of great age. The lunar "maria", by contrast, are volcanic flow plains formed about 3.5 billion years ago, and so were a "clean slate" at that time, and are thus useful for studying the more "recent" period since then. Only 5 craters of 50 km or more appear on the "maria".

Extrapolating to the 80-times-greater area of the Earth (and ignoring the stronger gravitational field), one would expect 400 such impacts in 3.5 billion years, or about one every 10 million years. (Note that the Cretaceous extinction, 65 million years ago, fits this model.) These would be massive impacts, utterly dwarfing the effects of even the most massive volcanic explosions, or any other known geologic processes. Each such meteor (of, say, 10 km diameter) would release kinetic energy of about 10 million megatons of TNT, excavating 10 to the 15th power tons of material, sufficient to blot out all sunlight for months and leave a layer several feet deep around the earth.

Evidence from the time of the Cretaceous extinction suggests that just such global effects occurred at that time. Alternatives to this impact scenario have been offered and considered. The only plausible event of enough severity is explosive volcanic eruption. Such cataclysms as the explosions of Thera (Santorini), Krakatoa, and Mt. St. Helens have seemed devastating to human onlookers, but have never been shown to reach more than one-millionth the power of the (inevitable) impacts already mentioned.

Krakatoa made possible the stunning beauty of Turner's painted sunsets, but was certainly not catastrophic on a global scale. So, unless one accepts the ad hoc hypothesis of million-times-magnified volcanoes, it seems more reasonable to expect impact events to have dominant effects.

What does all this mean for us? For an individual, the chance of having one's day ruined by a meteor is minuscule: For a once-per-million-year event (a several-km-wide meteor causing a several hundred thousand megaton impact), one chance in 20,000. However, for CIVILISATION, the risk of such an impact is significant, since the loss of sunlight would cause crop failure and starvation of most of humankind, much like the hypothetical "nuclear winter." The risk to individuals can be put into perspective compared to more familiar death risks:

Botulism: 1 chance in 2,000,000

Fireworks: 1 chance in 500,000

Tornadoes: 1 chance in 50,000
Air Crashes: 1 chance in 20,000
Meteor Impact: 1 chance in 20,000
Firearms: 1 chance in 200
Car Crash: 1 chance in 100

Or, to put this another way, Morrison listed the expected average deaths per year in the U.S. from each cause:

Botulism : kills a few
Fireworks: kills a dozen
Tornadoes: kill a hundred
Air Crashes: kill several hundred
Firearms: kill 20,000
Car Crash: kill 50,000

Averaging over a long period of time, impacts could, like air crashes, be expected to kill several hundred per year, or wipe out the U.S. population once per million years. What should be done about this? Well, considering the amount spent on such preventative measures as tornado watches, aircraft safety (a comparable hazard, not counting the civilisation threat), and food inspections, it seems reasonable to expect some proportionate societal effort. Several hundred people lost (on average) per year equates to roughly a loss of some hundred million dollars or so in lost earnings power, as another point of comparison. Such comparisons based on the number of lives at risk would suggest spending several hundred million dollars per year on research and protection.

Morrison urges intensified telescope searches, missions to examine comets and asteroids, and continued research on impacts, nuclear winter scenarios, orbital chaos theory, etc. He envisions, in the next decade or so, effective defenses from such disasters, using explosive devices to deflect incoming meteors when they are still far enough to nudge off course, a REAL space defense for everyone.

Dr. Morrison has gone into this matter in greater (and more eloquent) detail in his book "Cosmic Catastrophes" -- just out -- and many of those in attendance were able to buy copies at the lecture site (the Academy of Science). Keep your eye out for this well-written and interesting work.

A near catastrophe of much lesser proportions grazed Morrison not too long ago: He was a co-defendant, with CSICOP and several other local skeptics, in the recent Hawaii lawsuit filed by self-described psychic Gareth Pendragon. The skeptics prevailed, but we hope to give Dr. Morrison a safer environment here in the Bay Area, earthquakes notwithstanding, and extend to him a warm welcome -- and a thank you for a wonderful talk.

THANKS!

A note of gratitude to Daniel Sabsay for a keen eye and some great recommendations to improve the appearance of "BASIS". Look around and see if you can see the changes. We are always pleased to receive the comments and suggestions of you, the talented people out there. Pull out your rulers, graphic-art minds and send your ideas to make things better. The improvements to our newsletter have almost all come from very caring people, some of them professionals. Thanks to you all.

UN SOUND ADVICE

by Robert Pease

[Robert Pease is an electronics engineer who saw some gibberish in the "San Francisco Chronicle" Home Entertainment section alleging that splicing speaker wire is to be avoided because it degrades the sound quality. He wrote to the "Chronicle", challenging the claims of their article. What follows is background and part of the rebuttal to the newspaper. -- Ed.]

In the olden days, the soothsayer would require you to cross her palm with silver before she would assure you that you could win the hand of your true love, etc. These days, there are other areas where you have to have faith in the unexplainable to win the prize. For example, you have to trust and spend \$\$\$ according to the advice of the Hi-Fi Expert. You have to take his word for it that an expensive amplifier made with vacuum tubes sounds better than any amplifier made with the best transistors. You have to take his word for it that \$200 speaker cables "sound better" than \$5, \$50, or \$100 speaker cables.

This whole thing is lifted to new levels of absurdity when a man named Somerfield comes along and says, if you have a perfectly adequate set of speaker wires, and you need them 5 feet longer, well, throw them away and buy new ones at the new length so you can avoid splices in the wires. After all, you wouldn't want to add splices which would "hamper the sound quality," would you? I have done some measurements and can say that this is hogwash.

I took some 12-gauge stranded wire and spliced it simply by twisting the strands together. Unspliced wire has a resistance of about 150 micro ohms per inch. With the twisted splice, about 900 ohms -- the equivalent of an unspliced wire six inches longer -- was added. When the splice was soldered, making the splice more solid, the increased resistance was only about 40 ohms, or less than .3 inches of wire! I have also checked other effects of splicing, such as impedance, with the same negligible effects.

I have proposed a test and challenged Mr. Somerfield to tell me which wires, spliced or unspliced, "sound better." I asked him to pick out an unspliced wire from a group of wires with up to 10 splices in each wire. Obviously, even HE knows he has no chance to do that. He'd have to be clairvoyant to guess which wire has a

splice, because at microwave frequencies, (200 - 800 MHz), one might be able to notice a tiny difference. At the highest end of human hearing (20 kHz), no way.

Many of these "Golden Ear" fellows really do have good ears, but too often they claim to be able to hear things that are just not there. Some of these people claim things that border on the paranormal, and they cry out to be rebutted to help prevent even a duped yuppie from getting ripped off.

The notion that a properly spliced speaker wire is sufficiently inferior as to "hamper the sound" is so absurd that next they'll be telling us that a speaker wire in a knot will cause the sound to be "constricted" or "strangled." Often, when a "Golden Ear" claims that amplifier A has "less distortion when overdriven" than amplifier B, or that speaker system C has "smoother phase" than system D, we laymen are not in a position to argue, because the experts' opinions are subjective and because it would cost thousands and thousands of dollars for us to duplicate the experiment. Here, we are talking about a few dollar's worth of wire and some very basic comparisons: either a wire with one or two splices is noticeably different from unspliced wire or it is not.

Self-proclaimed experts must beware of making pompous pronouncements which cannot be supported when challenged.

(Note: As of press time, Mr. Somerfield has not responded)

SATANIST SURVIVORS

by Rex Springston

[The following is a June 1988 excerpted article from the Richmond, Virginia "News Leader".)

Cassandra Hoyer said she was being thrown to the ground by 30 Satanists when a woman drove by and stopped her car to help. "They dragged her into the woods, hung her on a cross and sacrificed her by fire," Ms. Hoyer alleged. Another time, Ms. Hoyer and a teenager were harassed and dipped into vats of blood, she said. She claimed that both rituals occurred in the summer of 1987 in a rural part of Goochland County, Virginia, she said.

At the time, investigating Police found nothing -- no car, no missing person report, not even a drop of blood from the vats, said chief deputy Leslie Parrish. Does he believe the stories? "I'm a little iffy on it," he said. Sue Bane says she has witnessed 50 to 70 human sacrifices by Satanists in the Richmond area. The most recent occurred about six months ago in Henrico County when a baby was sacrificed on an altar, then cut up into pieces, she said. The police have found nothing.

Hoyer, 42, and Bane, 28, call themselves survivors of Satanic

cults. They are representative of hundreds of such "survivors" across the country. Both have had intensive psychotherapy, and both suffer from multiple-personality disorders, their psychiatrists say. Neither has physical evidence to support her contentions. "Survivors" across the country have told extremely similar stories of torture and sacrifice without corroboration by physical evidence, experts say. The stories -- given great play on talk shows and in the mainstream press -- help feed the notion that Satanic cults are conducting sacrifices with regularity across the country. Many experts say that notion is a myth.

Two outspoken local advocates of the Satanic-conspiracy theory, Richmond police Lt. Lawrence Haake and Hanover County private investigator Patricia Pulling, say "survivors" are key sources of their information. "People are saying the same thing all over the country, and those people are totally unrelated to one another, but what they say is consistent -- to me that is a degree of credibility," said Haake.

Some mental health professionals say the survivor accounts are simply delusions suffered by mentally disturbed people and passed to the public as fact by unskeptical therapists, police officers and news reporters. The delusions may be reactions to genuine, but non-Satanic, abuse they received as children, experts say. "The true cult is the people who believe in this," said Dr. Park Dietz, a Newport Beach, CA forensic psychiatrist.

Ms. Hoyer, a toy-store cashier who was brought up in New England and has lived in Richmond since 1980, has spoken in public meetings and in news stories of being chased by a Satanic cult, being repeatedly raped and being forced to witness two local sacrifices. Her story was the basis for a January 1988 feature article in "Style Weekly", a weekend newspaper insert. Mrs. Bane has spoken about Satanism to Richmond police training groups, according to her and Parrish. She is writing a book, "Freedom from Satan's Horror".

She revealed she had 17 personalities, and some of them wanted to be in the cult. She said therapy and faith in God fused her 17 personalities into one. "I prayed, and through a miracle, I was completely integrated," she said. Her husband, Nathan, a 35-year-old plumber, said the whole thing had been a "nightmare." He said he never saw the rituals; his wife would slip out at night to go to them. Ms. Hoyer and Mrs. Bane said they began to realize they were Satanic cult victims while undergoing psychotherapy in recent years.

Adults are not the only ones to describe Satanic rituals. According to officials, a dozen or more children in the Richmond area have described them, as logged by various Virginia state and local departments. The children reported -- or indicated through play and passing comments -- seeing sacrifices, dismemberment and other bloody rituals.

"They are not saying they witnessed it. They are talking about it

as if they know about it, and that's what makes us suspicious," said Bettie Kienast, a Social Service director. She said her department had dealt with four such children in about four years.

The stories are consistent with unconfirmed reports from children across the country. Many experts say the children may have picked up the stories from adults or other children or even from movies and other popular culture. The stories also may be fantasies or false reports induced by leading questions, experts say. In some cases, the children may have been victims of real but non-Satanic abuse, or of abuse by pedophiles who use the trappings of Satanism as a means of control, some experts say.

Kenneth Lanning, the FBI's chief expert on sex crimes against children, has been consulted in more than 299 case involving Satanic themes. He would not discuss specific cases but he said he was aware of claims of sacrifice in the Richmond area. He said he knows of no bona fide Satanic cult sacrifice -- not only in Central Virginia, but nationwide. Regarding Mrs. Bane's story, Lanning said, "It's unlikely that a group of individuals could come together, commit 50 to 70 human sacrifices, and no one ever finds any evidence, no mother of a (sacrificed) child ever has second thought . . . nobody ever makes a mistake."

[Note the great similarity in reports of Satanic ritual and UFO abduction reports.]

UFO TREKKIES

They recently reuned in Foster City, CA to discuss the growing problem of alien abductions. J.R. Wheeler sent us the story from the 8-7-89 "Peninsula Time Tribune" detailing the conference. More than anything, it appears that it was an occasion for the faithful to swap stories: "You know what happens when you leak any of the UFO information? You get snuffed out," said a society member who preferred to stay anonymous as he leaked UFO information.

The general topic of discussion was the vast government cover-up, about which everyone on the planet knows. One of the reasons given for the success of the plot is that we are getting great technological secrets from the aliens in exchange for silence guaranteeing that nobody knows they are here. We must be very careful to see that people don't write books or have meetings about them.

DEGREES OF FOLLY: PART IX

by William Bennetta

Parts I through VIII of this article ran in earlier issues of "BASIS", starting in February 1989. Here is a summary: By law, no

unaccredited school in California can issue degrees unless the school has been assessed and formally approved by the superintendent of public instruction -- the chief of the State Department of Education.

In August 1988, the Department's Private Postsecondary Education Division (PPED) staged an assessment of the ICR Graduate School (ICRGS). The ICRGS is an arm of the Institute for Creation Research, a fundamentalist ministry that promotes the pseudoscience called "creation-science." The founder and president of the ICR is Henry Morris, a preacher and former engineer who poses as an expert in geology, biology, paleontology and various other fields in which he has no detectable credentials.

The Department's assessment of Morris's school was made by a five-man committee that had been chosen by, and was managed, by a PPED officer named Roy W. Steeves. The committee included two ringers who had been linked closely to the ICR or to Morris, and the committee's report was bogus: It hid the real nature of the ICR, promoted the ICR's scientific pretensions, and said that the superintendent of public instruction, Bill Honig, should approve the ICR as a source of masters' degrees in science and in science education.

Two of the committee's legitimate members then sent separate reports to Honig, telling the truth about the ICR. But Roy Steeves, in memoranda to the PPED's director, Joseph P. Barankin, endorsed the ICR and urged that it should be approved. Honig, in statements that he gave to the press in December 1988, refused the approval; but in January 1989 the Department drew back from that decision and began to negotiate with the ICR.

On 3 March 1989, Joseph Barankin and the ICR reached an agreement. The ICR would revise its curriculum, purging "ICRGS's interpretations" from courses that would count toward degrees. To learn whether the ICR had made the revisions, the Department would send a new examining committee; one member would be selected by the ICR. Despite the agreement, the ICR continued to advertise the ICRGS as a "Graduate School of Creationist Science," devoted to "scientific and Biblical creationism."

The new committee visited the ICR in August 1989. Four of the committee's five members are scientists from campuses of the University of California or the California State University. The fifth, evidently selected by the ICR, is from a Bible college in Ohio. The committee is being managed not by Roy Steeves but by Jeanne Bird. Bird joined the PPED in the spring of 1989, as a staff consultant, and became one of the PPED's assistant directors a few months later.

Henry Morris and the other ICR men, according to their own statements, expect that the committee will declare the ICRGS unworthy of approval, and that Honig will follow the committee's judgment. On 31 August, in an effort to win sympathy from the press

and the public, the ICR men held a "news conference" to denounce Honig and to distribute a fiercely misleading account of their transactions with his Department.

They achieved only modest success, however: Most news organizations apparently recognized that the ICR men's only "news" was their own desperation. The committee has not yet given its report to Honig. I recently asked the Department about the status of the committee's work, and I shall tell here what I learned. -- W.B., 14 December 1989

NEW ARRANGEMENTS

On 20 November 1989, Jeanne Bird replaced Joseph Barankin as director of the PPED. Bird's title is "acting director"; she presumably will manage the PPED through the end of this year, when it will go out of business. (See sidebar.) According to the Department's public-relations officer, Susie Lange, Barankin now has a special assignment and works for Bill Honig's deputy superintendent for specialized programs, Shirley Thornton.

As a part of that assignment, Lange says, Barankin is still handling the ICR case. Responsibility for the case, however, remains with Jeanne Bird in the PPED, even if Barankin no longer works there.

WHAT'S TAKING SO LONG?

Early on 4 December I telephoned Jeanne Bird to learn how the case was developing. She said that she had to go to a meeting and would return my call in the afternoon. The person who called me in the afternoon, however, was Gregory Roussere, the Department's lawyer who has overseen the ICR case and who accompanied the members of the new committee during their visit to the ICR.

According to Roussere, each member of the committee had submitted, in August or in early September, an account of what he had observed during the visit. Jeanne Bird then had directed the synthesis of those accounts into a draft of the committee's report; and copies of the draft had been sent to all the members, in mid-November, so that they could offer comments and corrections that would be reflected in a new draft.

Further drafts will be generated until all the members reach a consensus and sign a report that can be delivered to Honig. "We'd like to finish it as soon as we can," Roussere commented, "but as a reality, we probably won't have a final report until the first of the year."

Why, I asked, has the writing of the report proceeded so slowly? The chief reason, Roussere said, is that the PPED has been preoccupied with preparations for implementing some new legislation that will take effect on 1 January 1990. That legislation governs the assessment and approval of vocational schools.

TOPICAL STUFF

The ICR men, meanwhile, have just distributed another batch of religious pamphlets, including the December issues of "Impact" and "Acts & Facts". "Impact" offers an end-of-the-world piece -- "Earthquakes in These Last Days" -- by Steven A. Austin, of the ICR's Geology Department. (For a note about one of Austin's earlier ventures in pseudoscience, see "A Truth Patrolman Tracks Prof. John," in "BASIS" for October.)

Austin mentions the California earthquake of 17 October 1989, links some biblical passages to earthquakes, and then tells how recent earthquakes should be interpreted:

Jesus Christ spoke of them as "signs" of His coming again to earth. He said, "There will be earthquakes in divers places" (Matthew 24:7; Mark 13: 8), a fact now verified by the global distribution of earthquakes recorded on seismographs. Furthermore, He said this sign is the "beginning of sorrows" (Matthew 24:8; Mark 13:8). The word translated [as] "sorrows" in many English Bibles is the Greek [word] for "birth pangs." Just as we know that a woman is going to give birth to a child because of birth pangs, Jesus says we know that the intolerable anguish of God's judgment and the return of His Son is [sic] at hand.

Austin concludes that "our basis for understanding earthquakes" should be this: They are divine devices for judgment, deliverance and communication. An unsigned article in the December "Acts & Facts" says that the California Republican Assembly (CRA) last October adopted a resolution supporting the ICR's attempt to get approval from Bill Honig.

According to the article, the resolution accused Honig of intending to deny the ICR men's academic and religious freedom; it also called for investigations of Honig's actions by the federal Civil Rights Commission and by the attorney general, among others. I have not yet been able to get the CRA's comment about the "Acts & Facts" piece.

SIDEBAR: SB190 IS NOW LAW

SB190 -- State Senator Becky Morgan's bill for reforming the regulation of unaccredited schools that operate in California -- was signed into law by Governor George Deukmejian on 1 October. The bill had been approved in the Senate (by a vote of 31 to 1) on 19 June. It then had been amended by the Assembly, which passed the amended version (by a vote of 70 to 5) on 13 September. Two days later, the Senate accepted the amended text (by a vote of 23 to 4); and on 20 September the bill went to the governor.

Since 1977 the responsibility for regulating vocational schools and unaccredited, degree-granting organizations has resided, by statute, with the superintendent of public instruction -- the chief of the State Department of Education. Morgan's law will transfer that responsibility to the California Council for Private Postsecondary and Vocational Education, a new agency that will come into existence on 1 January 1991 and will be devoted entirely to overseeing postsecondary schools.

Concomitantly, the new law will abolish the Department of Education's Private Postsecondary Education Division (PPED) and the Council for Private Postsecondary Educational Institutions, an agency that was established in 1977 to advise the superintendent of public instruction. It will not, however, affect the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC), an advisory body that serves the governor and the legislature. A committee convened by CPEC will prepare, by 1 October 1990, a forecast of the new council's operating budget, including an estimate of any subsidy that the council may need, from the state's general fund, to supplement the fees that will be paid by regulated schools.

The council will have authority to establish "minimum criteria" governing the operation of unaccredited, degree-granting schools and to grant or deny approval to such schools. No unaccredited school will be able to grant degrees, legally, unless it has won approval. The council will begin practical operation on 1 July 1991 and will have 15 members: the superintendent of public instruction, the secretary of state, a representative of the California Student Aid Commission, six representatives of schools that fall under the council's jurisdiction, and six people from the general public.

(The text of the law adds: "It is the intent of the Legislature that the members of the general public . . . have a strong interest in developing private postsecondary and vocational education, and include representation from businesses that employ persons in positions requiring academic, vocational, or technical education.")

Any civil-service employee who may be working for the PPED on 31 December 1990 will become an employee of the new council; and any school that may be holding an approval under current law will have its approval extended "for a period not to exceed four years from the date of the institutions's last approval review."

The new law offers a new opportunity and mechanism for policing unaccredited schools and for driving bogus outfits from the state, but it is not as potent a law as it might have been. One glaring weakness lies in the composition of the council: Two-fifths of the council's members will come from unaccredited schools -- that is, two-fifths of the regulators will be regulatees -- but none of its members need come from ACCREDITED ones.

Hence there is no clear, mandated link between the council and the

mainstream academic community, nor any clear, mandated safeguard against the council's turning into a mutual-certification club. The law's actual effect will depend on the integrity of the council's members and technical staff, their diligence in resisting attempts by diploma mills to vitiate the law, and the willingness of the legislature and the governor to support the council with money. If the council must depend entirely on license fees for its funds, and must see its own budget shrink when it refuses to approve or reapprove a school, then both the intent and the letter of the new law may be compromised. -- W.B.

SAI BABA BABBLING

The sleight-of-hand cum-psychic, Sai Baba, is so confident of his unswerving support that he feels he can be as reckless and carefree as he pleases. B. Premanand, head of India's CSICOP-like organization, has exposed the Indian guru many times, but his followers remain stalwart. (Premanand visited the Bay Area and told about the god-men of India, of which Sai Baba is the most notorious.

In July of 1989, another rationalist, Abraham Kovoov, uncovered an utterly shameless attempt by Sai Baba to claim he had materialized a unique Seiko watch "from thin air" for the head of the Japanese watchmaker company when he was on a visit to the god-men in India. Sai Baba claimed that the watch in question was locked in a vault in the corporate headquarters in Japan, yet he was able to materialize the timepiece and hand it to the dignitary during the Indian visit.

Kovoov did some painstaking investigations and found that the truth was quite different. He wrote repeatedly to Sai Baba's office for details of the miracle, but his letters went unanswered. He then wrote to the Seiko company who told him that no Seiko company official had visited India near the time in question, let alone to Sai Baba. Therefore no watch had been produced. Most significant is the simple fact that no such unique watch exists in the first place.

The entire episode from start to finish was a fiction. This incident should remind us that when miraculous claims are spouted, the FIRST explanation we should consider is that it is simply a fabrication.

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THE NEW SCIENCE FRAMEWORK: WHY SCIENCE WON BIG.

Dr. Kevin Padian, a professor of evolutionary biology in the department of Integrative Biology at U.C. Berkeley, an advisor to BAS and a member of the board of the National Council for Science Education said that he learned a lot about the political tactics used by creationists in the fight over California's science curriculum. The public need to know more about the threat to science education. As a member of the "Science Framework Committee" drafting the new guidelines for science education, he discovered that it wasn't all rational science or obvious public policy. The stakes are high, and the creationists have an agenda.

The editor of "The Origin of Birds and the Evolution of Flight" (1986) he had to come down to earth and confront these very real opponents of sound scientific education. But "science won big," he insisted. Find out why, despite last minute compromises and wording changes, your children's future as science students took a leap forward. Come and hear Dr. Padian's step-by-step analysis of what really happened in Sacramento.

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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