

The Association For Rational Thought News

The Voice Of Cincinnati's Skeptics

Volume 3, No. 3

February, 1994

The Association for Rational Thought is a new organization committed to encouraging rational, well-informed evaluation of fringe-science, pseudoscience, and paranormal claims. A.R.T. encourages the investigation of paranormal and pseudoscientific claims from a responsible, scientific viewpoint and the distribution of the results of such investigations to the public. You are cordially invited to become a member of A.R.T.

Come to the February Meeting!

The meeting will be held on Saturday, Feb. 12, 10:00 A.M., at the Bethesda Blue Ash Medical Building (directions on the back page of the newsletter). Lunch and lively conversation at the James Tavern across the street from the Medical Building after the meeting. The public is invited.

Skeptical Blurbs Begin Media Assault

In January, Media Resources Coordinator Lance Moody launched Skeptical Blurbs, a project aimed at providing the news media with accurate, timely information on paranormal claims.

The first use of Skeptical Blurbs occurred on January 8, when the news teams at WXIX and WKRC Television received information from the system concerning visions of the Virgin Mary.

The one page "blurb" contained a concise history of Mary sightings, a survey of the typical scenario, and the conclusion that no evidence existed to support the claim that Mary is actually speaking to her followers. Sources were included in the fax transmission.

A.R.T. members are urged to keep a close eye on local TV, radio and newspapers. When you find a story that makes paranormal claims, note the time, date, media source, and name of the reporter, and call Lance Moody.

Lance will search the Skeptical Blurb data base for a statement of scientific perspectives on the paranormal claim and forward the statement immediately by fax to the reporter or media source.

The blurb he sends includes a description of A.R.T. and phone numbers to call for more information, in addition to information on the paranormal claim. At present we have blurbs for: visions of Mary, Creationism, satanic ritual abuse, near death experiences, unidentified flying objects, mind reading (mentalism) repressed memories, and astrology.

Skeptical Blurbs can grow into a powerful tool for countering paranormal claims in the news media, but only with the strong support of individual members.

Skeptical Blurbs needs your help in writing the statements that will be sent to the media. These topics are now in search of an author:

Psychic Detectives -- Faith Healers -- Bigfoot -- Loch Ness Monster -- Hypnotherapy -- Graphology -- Biorhythms -- The Bermuda Triangle -- Alien Abductions -- Facilitated Communication -- Any Other Paranormal or Pseudoscientific Claim.

Leaf through your old Skeptical Inquirers, pick a topic, read an article or two, and write a brief summary of the skeptical position on the issue. Brief means two or three very short paragraphs, no more than one-half to three-quarters of a page single-spaced. Add two or three references from the Skeptical Inquirer for further reading.

Send your blurb in today. --Lance Moody, Media Resources Coordinator.

Understanding "Mary Sightings"

Members of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Center, 5300 Montgomery Road, Cincinnati, expect a series of visions of Mary to occur near Falmouth, Kentucky, on the eighth of each month January through June of this year. Further information is included below in January Membership Meeting.

A good source for information about this phenomenon is Sandra Zimdars-Swartz's book *Encountering Mary: Visions of Mary from La Salette to Medjugorje* (1991). The author offers a thorough, sympathetic, and nonapologetic investigation of contemporary sources describing modern visions of Mary in Europe. This is a summary of her views:

Mary is held by Christians to be the mother of Jesus. She is especially revered by Roman Catholics. Alleged visions of Mary occur wherever Roman Catholicism is widespread. No evidence other than the visionaries' reports has ever been found to support the claim that Mary appeared and spoke to her followers. There are no photographs, no audio or videotapes. The Roman Catholic church has actively and consistently refused to recognize the authenticity of most visions of Mary. It has recognized a small number of healings as "miraculous," and rejected the vast majority of claims as unfounded. The church has also rejected claims of rosaries turning to gold and other similar claims.

Official rejection of visions of Mary has done little to quell the phenomenon, which appears to be a Roman Catholic folk custom built on the notion that Mary is a sympathetic and powerful figure, responsive to human suffering and able to influence God. The need of devout Roman Catholic lay people for a strong and sympathetic source of help in time of trouble appears to drive the custom.

These events typically share the following common elements:

- The visionaries are women or young girls, rarely a young boy.
- The event occurs at an outdoor site, often marked by a tree, cave, or other natural landmark.
- The event occurs in rural areas in times of economic and social distress.
- The person who claims to have seen Mary does not just return from a walk one day and say that she has seen Mary. Careful evaluation of contemporary sources suggest that the visionary reports only having seen "a figure" or "a lady." The idea that the object seen is Mary is an interpretation added to the story by friends and relatives.
- The visionary comes to believe that Mary will appear to her at the site of the original vision and will have "messages" for her.
- The visionary, accompanied by friends, relatives and other members of the Roman Catholic community in which the vision occurs, visits the site and reports the "messages" to those around her. Only the visionary sees Mary or hears her messages.
- The messages typically urge the hearers to pray more because there is much evil in the world. Often commands specify what prayers are to be said.
- In a few cases the site becomes a permanent shrine, e. g. Lourdes, where devout Roman Catholics come to pray for release from sickness. Often claims are made that sickness has been healed at these sites.
- The supporters of the visionary often appeal to local Roman Catholic clergy to recognize the legitimacy of the visions and messages. Roman Catholic clergy are generally reluctant to do so because such recognition undermines the authority of the church. On the other hand, they are reluctant to disparage the obvious devotion of the faithful. Thus visions create difficult problems for the Roman Catholic hierarchy.
- In addition, recent visions in the United States have typically been accompanied by an assortment of claims of miracles other than healing, for example, silver rosaries which miraculously change to gold, and Polaroid pictures of the sun, which are claimed to show "the doorway to Heaven."

Many books and articles have been written about visions of Mary, but the vast majority of this literature is apologetic and devotional. Finding scholarly, nonapologetic material is difficult.

Here are three good sources:

1. Sandra Zimdars-Swartz. *Encountering Mary: Visions of Mary from La Salette to Medjugorje*. New York: Avon, 1991. A scholarly, nonapologetic, highly readable attempt to understand modern European visions of Mary through examination of contemporary sources.

2. Marina Warner. *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and Cult of the Virgin Mary*. New York: Knopf, 1976. A nonapologetic, thorough introduction to the worship, doctrine and imagery of Mary.
3. Ann Taves. *The Household of Faith: Roman Catholic Devotions in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986. A scholarly description of the cultural and religious context in which visions of Mary occur.

--Virginia Jergens.

Cincinnati Skeptics and Religion

The relationship between skepticism and religion may be troublesome to skeptics' groups, especially in the absence of an established policy. In this article, submitted to the newsletter by Lance Moody, Mark Hodes proposes a policy on religion for the Bay Area (San Francisco) Skeptics.

What do you think of this policy? Do you think A.R.T. would benefit from such a policy? What do you think A.R.T.'s policy toward religion should be? Send your ideas to A.R.T. Newsletter, by February 19 for inclusion in the next newsletter.

Bay Area Skeptics and Religion Bay Area Skeptics is a diverse organization. Our Board of Directors, consultants, and subscribers include men and women of differing religious and non-religious persuasions, persons affiliated with religious institutions and persons not so affiliated. The position of Bay Area Skeptics on religion is, simply, that we have no position. The claims and attitudes of religious organizations and individuals, with few exceptions, are neither offered nor taken to lie in the domains in which scientific inquiry is effective or applicable. Therefore such claims generally do not engage our attention.

Exceptions, however, do occur, and they fall into two overlapping categories:

- I. Religious claims whose proponents assert scientific justification for their truth.
- II. Religious claims that, if unchallenged, exact grievous societal costs.

This is a touchy subject involving, at the least, highly subjective judgment, if not downright prejudice. Allow me to illustrate these categories with three specific examples:

1. The Shroud of Turin is a paradigm for Category I. The Shroud is a linen wrap that surfaced in France in the 1350s, and carries an image supposed to have been scorched into the fabric by radiative emission from the crucified body of Jesus. In 1978 a team of dozens of American and European scientists subjected the Shroud to an impressive battery of sophisticated tests, and were widely reported to have proclaimed the Shroud authentic!

Once the question of the Shroud's authenticity had entered the scientific literature, that question and earlier work on it became fair game for the critical evaluation that attends all surprising and significant results in science. The more surprising the outcome, the more meticulous and compulsive the scrutiny it receives. This is the conservative side of science, but note that this same scrutiny leads sometimes to the astonishingly rapid acceptance of those rare revolutionary ideas that stand up to it. As the purpose of this essay is not to review the Shroud literature, I refer you to the notes for further information.

2. A topic that spans categories I and II is Creationism, so-called Creation Science. Creationists offer what they profess to regard as empirical justification for their beliefs. This places them in Category I. However, they misrepresent the nature of their beliefs, seek to promulgate their dogma in public school classes, and pursue political means to effect this goal. The costs to society of weakening the science curriculum are manifold and manifest.

In a broader context, the Constitutionally mandated separation of church and state is as crucial a safeguard as freedom of speech, and is a foundation of academic freedom. The case against Creationism has been made elsewhere, and so I refer you again to the notes.

3. The sensitive subject of faith healers falls squarely in Category II. Faith healers' numbers are legion, and their annual "take" is exceeded only by the extravagance of their claims. Peter Popoff, the subject of other articles in this issue [of the Bay Area Skeptics publication] is not exceptional either in his apparently cynical exploitation of those who place their faith in him, nor in his apparent lack of regard for the unnecessary health risks to which his followers may be exposed. Here the connection with religion is wholly incidental. The substance of our criticism is not against anyone's religious beliefs, but what may be the use of stage magic of the mentalist genre, clothed as a religious service, to perpetrate possible medical fraud. Again, religion PER SE is not the issue.

Certainly situations will arise in which our intuitions will differ as to whether to become involved. Ambiguity is among the usual costs of dealing with complex issues. My point is that Bay Area Skeptics is neither antagonistic toward nor supportive of religion in general, or the religious beliefs of individuals in general. We do take interest in controversial subjects that enter the scientific literature, and in areas where the penalties for uncritically holding beliefs are unconscionably severe. --Mark Hodes, Bay Area Skeptics.

Notes:

1. A good place to start reading about the Shroud of Turin is *The Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. VI, #3, Spring, 1982. This issue contains carefully researched articles by Maavin M. Mueller and Steven D. Schafersman, each including a large bibliography.
2. For the case against Creationism I suggest Godfrey, Laurie R. (ed.), *Scientists Confront Creationism*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York, 1983. This volume, introduced by Richard C. Lewontin, contains essays by 15 distinguished scientists, including Stephen Jay Gould. The essays carry individual bibliographies, and the collection includes a detailed cumulative index.

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

According to the masthead on the newsletter, A.R.T. "encourages the investigation of paranormal and pseudoscientific claims."

It's fun to review how N-rays were "discovered" and debunked. Astrology and flying saucers are safe targets. Religion can be picked on without risk.

There's a whole field of quack science that is more dangerous to life and liberty. Environmentalism contains lots of good science; unfortunately it also contains lots of quackery.

Roy Auerbach described several laws of quack science. Do we dare check some environmental fads using Roy's laws? What if we discover that many "politically correct" ideas are quackery?

For example: Asbestos comes in three basic kinds; the most common is "white" asbestos. It has not been found to create any lung problems, anywhere. A very good book, *The Asbestos Racket*, by Michael J. Bennett, tells a lot of horror stories about the damage caused by outlawing asbestos.

Our forests are increasing faster than logging can possibly strip them. Who is telling this to the school kids?

Global warming is not happening. The ozone is safe.

The problem with these issues is that they touch politics. Government is supporting quack science. I think A.R.T. should be aware of this field of quackery, not necessarily to do anything about it, just to know what's going on. --Everett DeJager, A.R.T. Member.

To the Editor:

I find much in Everett DeJager's letter that I agree and empathize with. I would restate his last paragraph to say that issues of engineering and science which enter the political arena attract emotional overtones, political agendas, and greed. These very human forces often drown out any reasoned discourse or attempts to deal with a problem rationally. As an example, decisions about issues such as the production of power in this country through the use of nuclear reactors are not arrived at logically.

The great frustration here is that such issues, unlike the vast majority of political issues, could possibly be analyzed to determine the best course of action. Everett DeJager presents a diverse list of issues as examples of environmental quackery. Of these, I can speak with some knowledge about the issues of climate and I do not think we see eye to eye on these.

There is currently a mini-trend in global warming. No one can say for sure if this trend is influenced by man-made changes to the atmosphere. Climatic modeling of the earth is by no means a precise science today. What is irrefutable is that we are significantly affecting the earth's atmosphere and are increasing trace gases such as carbon dioxide. I agree that there has been too much alarmism about the climate, but I think there is cause for genuine concern.

There is pretty solid evidence supporting ozone depletion in the atmosphere and that this is a man-made effect. Yes, there are a few contrary voices, but these voices are speaking with other agendas. The facts appear fairly convincing. Remember, certainty is not something easily come by in science, but everything points to this effect being real and man-made.

What is less certain is the consequences of the ozone hole. The only clear cut effect of the increase in ultraviolet will be an increase in skin cancer. No doubt, plant and animal life will be affected but how and to what degree no one knows.--Roy Auerbach, A.R.T. Membership Secretary.

The A.R.T. News welcomes letters from readers. Send your letter to: Letters to the Editor, A.R.T. News. Limit your letters to 250 words or less and include your name, complete address and phone number. Typed letters are preferred. Those selected for publication may be shortened for space reasons.

December Membership Meeting

Fourteen members met December 11 at the Blue Ash Medical Building. President Keith Brabender asked members to submit ideas for meeting topics. Kathy Russell, Brad Bonham, Peggy Borger, Dick McGrath and Ruth Ann West volunteered to help Newsletter editor Virginia Jergens assemble and sort the February newsletter. Dick Shepherd and Virginia Jergens invited A.R.T. members to a Dec. 17 meeting at their house focused on the possibility of forming an American Humanist Association chapter in Cincinnati. Lance Moody summed up recent changes in the public's view of repressed memories, memories of long past events which are discovered in the course of psychotherapy. He reported that the concept of a false memory syndrome, in which a person develops, often with the inadvertent assistance of a psychotherapist, memories of events which did not in fact occur, is gaining ground. More people are willing to believe that recovered memories may be either true or fabricated.

Mary Sighting Predicted

Peggy Borger summarized a Channel 12 broadcast that reported that visions of Mary were expected on January 8 in Falmouth, Kentucky, and once a month on the eighth of the month for six months thereafter. Members who are interested in observing the event may call her at 351-0921 for more information. Such events offer excellent opportunities for observing first hand some of the paranormal claims made in connection with religious beliefs, for example, rosaries said to have turned from base metal to gold. As often happens with visions of Mary, portentous messages from Mary have been predicted, including the end of the world. The event may also provide opportunities for skeptics to test the reliability of such predictions.

Trial Run for Questionnaire

Lance Moody provided members with copies of a questionnaire he wrote to study beliefs in paranormal or pseudoscientific phenomena.

Results of the survey show a fairly wide range of belief among the A.R.T. members present, most of whom would probably claim to have a skeptical view of the world. The questions, with the number of persons choosing each response, follow. Thirteen members and one guest participated.

Statement	Agree	Somewhat agree	Not sure	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
There is compelling evidence that deceased persons can communicate with the world of the living.	0	0	0	0	14
The position of the stars and planets at the time of one's birth might have an effect on one's personality.	0	0	3	0	11
It seems plausible that lights and other objects seen in the sky are visitors from other worlds.	0	1	2	3	8
The evidence suggests that the human mind may be capable of amazing feats like telepathy.	0	1	3	1	9
The scientific method contains checks and balances that usually ensure accuracy.	9	4	0	1	0
When operated by an expert, the modern lie detector can accurately detect falsehoods.	0	0	1	3	10
Psychic power has sometimes proven to be useful in the solution of crimes.	0	0	0	1	13
The forests of the United States may very well hide an undiscovered human-sized biped mammal.	0	1	1	1	11
Hypnotherapy is a valuable tool for recovering lost memories.	0	1	0	3	10
The U. S. Government is probably hiding several important scientific discoveries from its citizens.	4	3	0	4	3
When someone is terminally ill, there is no potential remedy that should be ruled out, no matter how unorthodox.	2	4	1	2	5
If the recipients of a remedial treatment report relief of symptoms, then the treatment must have some value.	3	3	1	2	5
A person's handwriting can reveal that person's propensity for criminal behavior.	0	1	1	0	12
There may be some truth to the theory of biorhythms: our emotional, physical and intellectual lives follow precise patterns.	0	0	4	1	9
Too many ships and planes have disappeared in the Bermuda Triangle for the incidences to be just coincidence.	0	0	1	0	13
Plants may respond emotionally to their caretakers.	0	1	1	1	11
Events that people near death have described (lights, voices, etc.) are evidence of an afterlife.	0	1	1	0	12

Statement	Agree	Somewhat agree	Not sure	Somewhat disagree	Disagree
The theory of evolution is the best explanation of the fossil record.	13	0	0	1	0
Ritual abuse by satanic cultists is widespread in the United States.	0	1	0	0	13
I have personally had a paranormal experience.	1	0	1	0	12

Members agreed that the questionnaire may be useful as an educational tool for local schools or community groups interested in discussing skeptical issues, but no plans were made for its immediate application.

January Membership Meeting

More on Mary Sightings

Two dozen A.R.T. members gathered at the Bethesda Blue Ash Medical Building on January 8. President Keith Brabender announced that visions of Mary were expected at a farm near Falmouth, Kentucky, the afternoon of the meeting. Treasurer Peggy Brabender provided information on the event. Her information is included here because the sightings are predicted to occur once a month on the eighth of the month January through June.

The handout about the event included a map with directions to the site and the following information:

"We welcome your interest in the Falmouth, Kentucky apparition site and are providing some general information to you in response to your map request. We are looking forward to greeting all who will be able to attend."

"The prayer service which is open to all faiths at the Falmouth, Kentucky farm will begin at 1:30 PM and conclude about 3:00 PM beginning in January on the 8th day of every month. The visionary expects an apparition during this prayer service."

"Please keep in mind that this is a new apparition site and therefore we have limited automobile parking. It is only a rustic, rural farm and in the winter has no water, no heated buildings and only Port-A-Lets for bathroom facilities. There will be parking at the farm near the grotto area for the handicapped and we will be happy to park your cars for you. We will have additional auto parking at Kincaid Lake State Park which is about 3 miles from the farm. We will have shuttle buses running from Kincaid Lake State Park to the farm every 15 minutes starting at 11:00 AM with the last bus leaving the farm at 4:30 PM. RV's must park at the Kincaid Lake State Park and ride the shuttle. Tour buses may drop off people at the farm and park at Kincaid Lake State Park."

"Nothing will be sold at the farm. There will be no material or literature distributed on the property except a prayer sheet which will be distributed by volunteers (identified by a yellow name badge) from Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Center in Norwood, Ohio. There will be not food or drink available at the farm, therefore, we suggest that you bring what you need for the day (food, hot drinks, chair, blankets etc.). Dress warmly and make sure you have hats, gloves, boots etc."

"We are not responsible for anything but we hope your experience here will lead you to a closer relationship with God."

The handout also includes a map and directions to three places:

"Apparition Site Near Falmouth, Ky. (Directions From St. Joseph Ch[urch] Cold Spring) Go South on #27 (Alexandria Pk) 17.8 miles. Left on #177 for 3.9 miles. Right on #159, 5 Mi[les] to OKincaid LkO Parking. Backtrack 2.5 Mi. on #159 to Site."

" 'Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Center' (Directions From Downtown Cincinnati) Go North on I-71 for 6.7 Miles. Exit Norwood #7, 1.5 Mi. to Mont[gomery Road]. Right on Montgomery Road, .6 Miles to 5300 (Just past Sts. Peter and Paul Church.)"

"Saint Joseph's Church' Cold Spring (Directions from Downtown Cincinnati) Go South on #471 5.7 Miles. Exit 'Alexandria,' Turn right on #27 So. Proceed 1.2 Miles to St. Joseph Church, To 4011 'Alexandria Pike' (#27)."

Outside Speakers

Keith reported difficulty in obtaining outside speakers for meetings because of the reluctance of experts to tackle potentially troublesome subjects. He was unable to find knowledgeable speakers on Creationism, facilitated communication, false memory syndrome or cryptozoology. He suggested that members may be the most knowledgeable local experts in many areas and that we may need to depend more on our own ability to research and present such topics. Consumers Reports was mentioned as a good source for information on topics like acupuncture, homeopathy, and chiropractic. Members who know of possible speakers are encouraged to call Keith at 351-0921.

Annual Elections In April

Keith also announced that annual elections will be held in April. Members are encouraged to volunteer to run for any office presently filled plus Meeting Organizer and Recording Secretary. Please call Keith at 352-0921 to tell him which job you interests you.

Skeptic: A Good Read

Joe Gastright brought a copy of Skeptic, a magazine for skeptics published by Skeptics Society, 2761 N. Marengo Ave., Altadena, California 91001, Phone/Fax 818-794-3119. Membership in the society includes a subscription to Skeptic. The cost for one year is \$35.00 for an individual, \$25.00 for students or seniors, and \$50.00, foreign.

The Skeptics Society aims to promote critical thinking skills and good science. Part of their effort is the handsome 8 1/2 by 11inch Skeptic, according to Stephen Jay Gould, Harvard University, "the best journal in the field."

The Vol. 2, No. 2 issue included "Phony Archaeology Revisited: Sun Pictures Responds to Ark Hoax" and "Holocaust Revisionism and Pseudo-History: Should Skeptics Investigate?" It also included a special section on cults, including articles like "Waco, Jonestown and All That Madness," by Cynthia Kisser, "Millennium Watch: Cults Brainwashing and Society" by Ted Daniels, and "The Jesus Cult" by Steve Allen.

After the business meeting members watched a Skeptics Society videotape of a lecture by Michael Shermer, "Altered States and the Quest for Transcendence."

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