

ELECTRONIC NEWSLETTER OF THE GEORGIA SKEPTICS

VOLUME 5, NUMBER 4  
JULY/AUGUST 1992

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by Anson Kennedy

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Georgia Skeptics is a non-profit local group which shares a common philosophy with the national organization CSICOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal), and seeks to promote critical thinking and scientific inquiry as the most reliable means to gather knowledge of the world and universe. Like CSICOP, Georgia Skeptics encourages the investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view, and helps disseminate the results of such inquiries.

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Joining the Georgia Skeptics organization is encouraged because membership dues help us to disseminate the results of skeptical inquiries to the public and to hold educational events. Yearly dues are \$17.50 for individual memberships, \$21.00 for families, and \$12.50 for full time students.

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MAGIC FOR SKEPTICS  
An Initiate's Report

[In which a not-so-serious account of a recent Institute for Inquiry seminar is related.]

by Anson Kennedy

[Photo Caption: Joe Nickell demonstrates his telekinetic powers by levitating a small metal object. Photo by Stephen Peterson.]

The Amazing Randi and other prominent skeptics have been accused of actually having psychic abilities and using those abilities in their efforts at debunking. Other skeptics have discounted these accusations as mere wishful thinking (at best) on the part of paranormal advocates. This reporter, along with two other members of the Georgia Skeptics, attended an Institute for Inquiry seminar, "Magic for Skeptics: Trickery and the Paranormal," last April in which we learned the truth behind those stories. Revealed here for the first time is what we learned.

About sixty skeptics from around the nation converged on Lexington, Kentucky, for a series of sessions on magic. The Institute for Inquiry seminar was hosted by CSICOP Fellows Joe Nickell and Dr. Robert Baker; the weekend's venue covered a range of topics, from a brief history of magic to the demonstration of and instruction in various standard magician's tricks.

At least, that's what the brochure advertised.

What really went on was the instruction in various arcane arts to be used in the exposure of false psychics. Yes, it's true. And we now have the evidence to prove it!

Dr. Baker's intensive history of magic was both entertaining and informative. In fact, his descriptions of some of the famous magicians of the past, such as Harry Houdini and the Great Houdin, lead one to wonder if he has knowledge of them obtained from other than conventional sources. His presentation seemed one of a person who had personally witnessed many of the events he related. And since we know that Dr. Baker was not born until after many of the people he described had died, we can only conclude that he has, through techniques akin to past life regression, actually traveled back in time to participate. Either that, or he is in actuality the Count St. Germain, the infamous alchemist of the eighteenth century who claimed to have found the secret to eternal youth.

Joe Nickell's instruction in magic tricks was also most revealing. As shown in the accompanying picture, he demonstrated his psychic ability to levitate small objects (rumor has it that he can in fact levitate elephants, but since none were handy at the seminar this reporter is not prepared to pass on that rumor). He also demonstrated his keen telepathic sense by reading the minds of some of the attendees (if he read this reporter's mind, he did not let on).

These techniques are all obviously applicable to the art of debunking. Evidence of chicanery can be levitated into incriminating locations of psychics and reading their minds can help ferret out other information.

All in all, the weekend was well worth the time and effort.

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Board Meeting

SECRETARY'S MINUTES

A meeting of the members of the board of the Georgia Skeptics was held at Becky Long's home on Sunday May 10, 1992. In addition to the board members, 20 regular members of the Georgia skeptics attended.

After each person introduced him- or herself, the first item of business was brought up for discussion. Ideas for attracting new members was considered a major issue for the group. Among the methods suggested were the distribution of complementary issues of the newsletter to local libraries and the offering of a special gift subscription rate for the newsletter. It was decided that

Ed Oram would contact the Cobb County library, Larry Johnson would contact Fulton County, Georgia State, and DeKalb County libraries, Anson Kennedy would contact Gwinnett County libraries and Bill Evans would contact the Georgia Tech library about carrying the Georgia Skeptic. A gift subscription rate of \$12.00 was agreed to.

The second item of business was public access television. It was decided that two members would take the qualification class offered by Georgia Cable Television for groups or individuals wishing to produce their own programs. The format of a locally-produced skeptic's program was not decided at this meeting.

The third item of business was tax exempt status. While the group's income is low enough that we do not need formal tax exempt status to be considered tax exempt [see associated article in this issue, Editor], formal tax exempt status is required in order to receive grants. Larry Johnson volunteered to check on the exact requirements and procedures.

The fourth item of business was the formation of a bylaws committee, chaired by Anson Kennedy. It was decided to write to other skeptics groups to get samples of their bylaws as examples.

The fifth item of business was the planning of the first annual picnic at Dale Heatherington's house in September.

The sixth item of business was press releases. It was decided that we should issue press releases in response to paranormal or fringe-science events such as the apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Conyers on the thirteenth of every month.

The seventh item of business was getting local newspapers to print disclaimers with their astrology columns ("For entertainment only"). Hugh Trotti agreed to contact the local papers.

The final piece of business was the formation of a committee to help plan for our major guest speaker for the year. It was decided to try to get the Amazing Randi to speak sometime this fall.

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## BOOK REVIEW:

### UNEARTHING ATLANTIS: AN ARCHEOLOGICAL ODYSSEY

by Charles Pellegrino

York, Random House, 1991, 325 pp. with Bibliography and Index, \$23.00

Reviewed by Hugh Trotti

Pellegrino is a scientist who has a talent for writing and the presentation of controversial subjects in a straightforward and interesting way. His story of the archeological excavations at the Greek island of Thera is worthwhile whether or not one wishes to connect the site with Plato's ancient tales or not. "Atlantis" is brought down to earth in this well-written book, and is described as simply another tale of an ancient lost civilization: Minoan Crete and its outlying settled islands. Pellegrino is not the first to come to such a conclusion. The Greek archeologist Marinatos, the initial excavator of the island of Thera (also called Santorini), proclaimed such a view. Credit for being first to connect ancient Crete with the Atlantis story is given by Pellegrino to a certain K. T. Frost (pp. 39-40, 298), who published his view linking Crete with Plato's Atlantis in 1909 in a scholarly journal; and the island of Crete has been identified as part of Cretan "Minoan" culture. And any person who has read Plato's dialogues about Atlantis[1], with his mention of bulls running loose in palaces, and has also seen the impressive Minoan Cretan fresco of a bull and bull-acrobats found on Crete by Sir Arthur Evans, must have wondered at the "coincidence of the bull."

Very briefly put, Plato's story of Atlantis comes from Egypt (or Plato's own mind, many scholars think), and describes an idyllic yet tragic culture. An early people, descended from a god, with high moral principles and living on a beautiful island, eventually declined morally and were punished by the gods. They came from outside the Straits of Gibraltar, and were in process of invading and conquering the entire Mediterranean lands when they were opposed by the ancient Athenians, a noble people much admired by the Egyptians. The attempt to gain an empire over the Mediterranean coastal lands suddenly ended in failure when the home island of Atlantis suddenly sank beneath the waves, and an Athenian army was swallowed by the earth at roughly the same time. This intriguing story has caused endless speculation through the years.

Excavations at Thera have unearthed beautiful frescoes from the ancient town that was buried like Pompeii and Herculaneum by volcanic ash and so preserved over the ages for our discovery. The island itself was largely destroyed by the volcanic blast that scholars had put about 1450 B.C., but which now appears to date from the Autumn of 1628 B.C. (as Pellegrino shows convincingly, presenting data from various sciences outside archeology).[2]

The author describes in an interesting way the exploration slowly going forward at the ancient town site, and has chilling tales of the nature of volcanic upheavals from more recent times of which we have knowledge. But it does seem, from what is known so far, that most of the inhabitants left the place before the terrible blast that blew out the center of the island. Pellegrino has it (p. 288), that the blast would have been "the oldest sound ever heard by human ears," and a crater at least a mile deep would have

resulted, with the sea rushing into it as a gigantic and awesome waterfall. Future excavations should show us more, and perhaps even reveal more buried settlements on the island, with or without evidence of the victims caught in the cataclysm. Pellegrino states that the Greek word "Thera" means "fear" (p. 282).

Plato wrote that the tale of Atlantis was true.[3] Modern scholars have almost uniformly said that it was not true,, but that Plato simply wished to illustrate some of his ideas in an entertaining way. Pellegrino thinks Plato described real things that were preserved through the ages in a somewhat jumbled legend. We realize the obvious dangers of picking out the part of a description that we wish to use, and ignoring the rest, but he may be on to something. Many of the classical Greeks believed that there was a Minoan "empire of the sea" prior to their era.[4] We can forgive such minor lapses by Pellegrino as having Egyptian Alexandria extant before 2000 B.C. (p. 111), when we know that city was founded by Alexander the Great in the 4th century B.C., for his work is generally well worthwhile.

The author is rightly impressed by the advanced plumbing of the Minoan architecture. It would have been interesting to see him link such plumbing with ancient trade routes - for advanced plumbing existed at such distant places as Mesopotamian Mari and the Indus site Mohenjo-Daro, as well as at Crete and Thera. It is a most puzzling and interesting thing that very advanced plumbing was found all the way from India/Pakistan's Indus valley through Mesopotamia, to Crete and Thera in the Mediterranean.

But there is another fact that may support the author's view that the Minoans were the Atlanteans. In the course of writing his monumental work *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Gibbon paused to remind his readers that when the Greek and Roman writers wrote "Asia" they meant "Turkey,"[5] (and not our concept of the continental land-mass which continues from Europe to the shores of the Pacific Ocean). The "Asia" so indicated in the ancient sources is therefore very much smaller than the Asia of our times. It may have been even smaller: Michael Grant, the noted historian, states that it might be applied to only a small part of eastern Turkey, the part which once was the kingdom of Lydia.[6] Plato stated that the island of Atlantis was larger than "Asia" plus Libya; but if this indicates a size "larger than a small part of Turkey plus Cyrenaica" (Libya west of Egypt), then the island of Crete might plausibly be meant by ancient peoples giving generalized descriptions, such as the Egyptian priests who are said to have passed the "Atlantis" story on to the Greek traveler Solon some generations before Plato's time. The southern coast of Crete that faces Egypt is a long one. This seems to dispense with the objection that there is no huge continent sunk in the Atlantic Ocean. But the placement of "Atlantis" past the Straits of Gibraltar (the "Pillars of Hercules"), remains a puzzle with no really satisfying answer.

The result of the change in the meaning of the word "Asia" is that we may speak of the "island of Atlantis," instead of the more traditional "continent of Atlantis." [7] This would support the author's views: both Thera and Crete are islands. Plato did write of a continent past "Atlantis" that could be reached from intervening islands - perhaps Europe, as the author and Greek archaeologist Marinatos believed; or perhaps Eurasia, as this reviewer once pointed out (see note 7).

One curiosity of that account was the story of an Athenian army opposed to the villainous forces of "Atlantis;" The Athenian soldiers were said to have been buried by earthquake after having heroically opposed the bad guys; presumably the same natural catastrophe that "sank" Atlantis caused that loss. (An odd fact is that Athens seems to be about the only site of the older Mycenaean culture that was not overthrown by unknown forces about 1200 B.C.)

We may not care to take the biblical Exodus stories to be indicative of a specific date for the story of Moses and the Israelites as does the author. While tales about thick darkness and various natural problems in Egypt may have resulted in stories handed down through centuries, it does not follow that they pinpoint Mose's time, whether they were produced by Thera's volcano or not. In fact, Plato's Atlantis tale may include a real invasion story of an ancient people striving to conquer lands around the Mediterranean. For such an event did occur in the attack of the so-called "Peoples of the Sea" upon Egypt's delta region, thought to have taken place about 1200 B.C. (See my contention in *Beasts and Battles* that the "Peoples of the Sea" form part of the legend of Atlantis - note 7). As these peoples did attack Egypt, it would not be surprising if their story was retained by the priests of that land (the pharaoh of the time carved in stone the story of his triumph over them). The story may have entered the earlier accounts about Atlantis and Thera - especially if the Cretan "Keftiu" peoples took part in the attack.

Plato's accounts of Atlantis, then, may include varying events from clearly different times of the past, perhaps mixed together in Egyptian recollection. The same "Peoples of the Sea" that attacked Egypt and were defeated by the pharaoh may be the peoples that overthrew the Mycenaean about 1200 B.C. (or could have been partly the displaced Mycenaean themselves conjoined with Cretans and others). The dating of events of early Greek history does seem to need more work.[2]

The author lets Arthur C. Clarke, who also wrote the Foreword, have the last thought on Cretan civilization (p. 295): the very geology that created those islands to inhabit, and so fostered competition and progress as well as sea protection, was also the geology that brought eventual ruin to the Minoans. Pelligrino's book remains a good popular exposition of the finds at Thera's Minoan site, and is recommended as instructive.

Despite my own beliefs, it is only fair to note the other side of the evidence concerning "Atlantis" and the island of Thera. Most scholars and scientists reject any concept of Atlantis as real. The negative view may be found in cogent form in William H. Stiebing Jr., *Ancient Astronauts, Cosmic Collisions and Other Popular Theories About Man's Past*, Buffalo, Prometheus Books, 1984 paperback, pp. 29-56. Specifically, he states that attempts to link the legend with the island of Thera should be abandoned (p. 51). His views do reflect the majority opinion.

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## NOTES

[1] Plato's two dialogues concerning Atlantis, the "Critias" and the "Timaeus," may be obtained in convenient form in one Penguin paperback edition: *Timaeus and Critias*, New York: Penguin paperback, 1983.

[2] While (as the author amusingly details), a date revision may cause distress to some, it is welcomed by this reviewer - for the early Greek dates seem to require changes. For those of us who view the "Trojan War" as a possible historical reality, its "traditional" date of 1190 or 1200 B.C. for that event seems contradicted by the known overthrow of the Mycenaean world about 1200 B.C.

[3] Plato, *Timaeus and Critias*, p. 39.

[4] The designation "Minoan" is from the purported name of the ancient Cretan king or line of kings: "Minos." Thucydides writes that "Minos" put down piracy and settled many islands in the sea with his people, thus securing trade revenue (*The Complete Writings of Thucydides*, New York: Random House Modern Library, 1951, pp. 5, 7).

[5] Gibbon, Edward, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. I, New York: Random House Modern Library, (no date), p. 22: "Asia" as the Roman Province of Asia west of the river Halys (western Turkey).

[6] Grant, Michael, *The Ancient Mediterranean*, New York: Meridian Books, 1988 paperback, p. 86.

[7] Pellegrino still thinks of Atlantis as a continent, being (as I believe) still misled by the view of "Asia" as a continent and not a part of Turkey, as it was in the ancient writings. In Plato's writings it is an island, and the continent is past Atlantis (from Egypt, the source of the story)). See my *Beasts and Battles: Fact in Legend and History?*, New York: Rivercross Publishing, 1989, pp. 143-146 of Chapter 13, and pp. 161-163 of Chapter 15. In the same place my contention about the "Peoples of the Sea" is stated. The earlier tale of Thera's explosion (probably from 1628 B.C.) may have been joined with a later tale of the attack of these foreigners upon Egypt, about 1200 B.C. these sea-peoples were defeated by the pharaoh of the time, however, and not by heroic Athenians - so far as we know. (Does the new dating of 1628 B.C. make such linkage more difficult? The earlier date of Thera's explosion about 1450 B.C. made the linkage more plausible.)

Some elements (various overbridged canals, for instance), may point to description of Mesopotamian cities and canals; it would not be surprising if the entire story of Atlantis contained elements from various times and places in or near the Mediterranean.

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Special Fiction Supplement

ME, GRANDFATHER, AND PROFESSOR FREE

[Editor's Note: The Georgia Skeptic does not often run fiction. However, we felt this contribution by one of our new members would be of interest to our readers.]

by Diane O'Rea

Professor Free, director of the Avalanche Mountain Parapsychological Foundation, spoke with me (an affected soul who is touched by the unknown).

His office was filled with metaphysical paraphernalia. I noticed a huge, winsome crystal sitting in the left corner, next to a large brass pyramid. The sound of a waterfall filled the atmosphere with an effluvium of something that relaxed my tense psyche. Professor Free was sitting in a huge desk-chair, and facing me. He asked me to sit, and I complied.

Prof. Free: Come in! Make your self comfortable. Now what can I do for you?

Me: Last week, my dead grandfather called me on the phone four times! The phone rings differently when he calls - kinda like tinkling bells.

Prof. Free: Yes. Yes.

I wriggled in my chair because I was beginning to pick up a weird resonance. I knew this was his way of encouraging me to tell him something. "Yes. Yes." was said with detached enthusiasm - which in psyche-talk, means he is listening, but he doesn't want me to know if he is interested or not. I slipped my hand into my coat pocket and grasped my mini-crystal for spiritual courage.

Me: I heard something strange in the background, while my grandfather was talking.

Prof. Free: Yes. Yes.

Me: It...it sounded like flapping wings. there must have been a million of 'em.

The professor, not wanting me to lean to religious fantasies - like thinking the flapping is angel wings - did a quick psyche-trick called suggestion

Prof. Free: Something like bird wings, maybe?

Me: No.

Prof. Free: Yes. Yes.

Me: It...well....it sounded almost like....locust wings. It was like the wings were trying to send me a message. I asked my grandfather to shut up, so I could hear the locust wings speak.

Prof. Free: Ah yes, locust wings. Very interesting. (He scribbles in his notebook.) Did you pick up any message? Do you think this could have been a sound your grandfather was making?

Me: No, grandfather kept asking to speak to grandmother. I kept telling him that she died last year - one week after he died. He never could hear very well. I asked him to look for her in the spirit world. He said the damn noise was driving him crazy. Grandmother isn't there, as far as he knows. But I did pick up bits, pieces of the locust language.

Prof. Free: Yes, go on PLEASE! (The professor is thinking, "If this woman doesn't give me something concrete to send to the A.M.P.F., my grant money could be cut off.")

Me: The locust wings said stuff like...fire and rocks...we get...Lazarus infiltrates C.I.A. ...we come in numbers..... Honest, professor, it was hard to concentrate with all that insane flapping. Do you think we're gonna have a war? MY GOD! THAT'S IT! IT'S A WARNING FROM THE SPIRIT WORLD! I GOTTA DO A WHITE WITCH REVERSAL SPELL TO COUNTERACT, SO I CAN SAVE THE WORLD!

Prof. Free: No, there is not going to be a war. It would not be economically feasible. And besides, the combined minds of people like you, gifted and chosen, will be power enough to stop a war. Not to worry. Go home and sit by your phone. Wait until your grandfather calls again. Sleep with it, if you have to. Above all, don't leave the phone until you get another call.

Me: But what if I need to take a bath or something. My phone is in the living room. (By this time, I had rubbed my hand raw on my mini-crystal.)

Prof. Free: You are a nice person. I like you a lot. This is for science, a very worthy cause. Have you got a long cord on your phone? I'll give you one that is as long as your house. Not to worry.

Accepting the phone cord, I thanked him and left. Once outside his office, I quickly dropped the cord, and whisked out my crystal. Everyone ought to clean foreign energy off stuff before taking it into their homes. Some people don't do this and end up with major astral problems. "CULPA NON EST TUA. CULPA NON EST TUA." One needs to apologize to the object being cleaned - so, as I continued to chant my favorite mantra, I moved the crystal in windmill fashion around the phone cord.

I went home and sat by the phone for four days. No call from grandfather. I wonder if, somehow, my grandfather knows and is playing some kind of sick joke on me and science. I wonder if spirits have a sense of humor. Maybe they get bored doing all that ghost stuff.

After four days of concentration, I was running low on colas. With the phone securely under my arm, I went to the kitchen to get a previously opened can. I went back to the couch in the living room, sat. Just as I put the can to my lips, I heard flapping. The noise was coming from the can! I peered into the hole in the top of the cola can. THE FLAPPING WAS COMING FROM INSIDE THE CAN! I put the can to my ear and screamed - "Are you in there, grandfather!"

A big bug, green with huge wings, crawled out of the hole and sat on top of the can. My breath was coming in short gasps, as I waited for the bug to speak. After a moment, my curiosity could stand it no longer...."Are you from the spirit world? Is there gonna be a war?"

The creature dropped off the can to the floor and crawled under the couch. I ran to the kitchen to get my super-kill bug spray. I decided to threaten it into talking.

I ran back to the couch and, on hands and knees, (people don't realize how

people like me suffer), stuck my face between the couch and the floor. "One more chance! SPEAK TO ME!"

I was slapped in the face with eerie silence. I creamed Mr. Bug with the spray. A fog began to rise from under the couch. Funny, the fog kinda shaped up and looked like grandfather. Professor Free is gonna love this.

Tearing through my house, I ran to get my camera. No film. The story of my life, all this and I don't have any proof. To ease my disappointment, I sat on the living room floor in the lotus position and began to chant, "Culpa non est mea. Culpa non est mea."

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## TAX DEDUCTIBLE CONTRIBUTIONS AND THE GEORGIA SKEPTICS

by Rip Strautman, Treasurer

There have been recent questions regarding the deduction of contributions to the Georgia Skeptics. The purpose of this article is answer some of these questions. As with most tax questions you should consult your accountant about your personal tax situation.

Q1: Are cash donations to Georgia Skeptics deductible as a charitable contribution on Schedule A of my federal tax return?

A1: Yes, cash donations are deductible.

Q2: Are the dues I pay deductible as charitable contribution on Schedule A of my federal tax return?

A2: Probably not because we receive something of value, the newsletter, for our dues.

Q3: Has Georgia Skeptics received a formal recognition for exemption from the IRS?

A3: No, it has not, because the organization has not sought formal recognition. IRS publication 557, Tax Exempt Status for Your Organization, states "Some organizations are not required to file Form 1023. These include: . . . Any organization (other than a private foundation) normally having annual gross receipts of not more than \$5,000 . . . These organizations are exempt automatically if they meet the requirements of section 501(c)(3)."

Following the adoption of a properly prepared constitution and bylaws the Georgia Skeptics will meet the requirements of section 501(c)(3). The organization's annual gross receipts do not exceed \$5,000.00 and therefore we are not required to file Form 1023.

Q4: Why doesn't the organization seek formal recognition from the IRS?

A4: The Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1990 requires payment of \$150.00 user fee for determination letters submitted to the Internal

Revenue Service. Since the organization is automatically exempt under purpose and revenue definitions no additional benefit would accrue to Georgia Skeptics. In addition to the expense involved, the recognition process can be complicated and time consuming.

Q5: Can I donate other items to Georgia Skeptics and deduct these as charitable contributions on Schedule A of my federal tax return?

A5: Yes, under the following circumstances:

1. The organization must be willing to accept the items. This determination will be made by the officers and directors.
2. The organization must retain control over the items and may dispose of the item as it sees fit. Quoting from IRS Publication 17 "You may deduct the value of a charitable contribution of . . . tangible personal property only after all rights to the actual possession or enjoyment of the property have . . . been turned over to someone other than yourself or related party or related organization."
3. The amount deductible on Schedule A must be based upon the fair market value of the item(s). Individuals who claim high non-cash contributions should be prepared to provide substantiation.

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## LAWSUIT AGAINST CSICOP DISMISSED

[The following is the text of a news release from The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal.]

A federal court in Washington, D.C has thrown out a lawsuit filed by self-proclaimed psychic Uri Geller against the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and has authorized the imposition of monetary sanctions against Geller for prosecuting the case.

In orders issued by Judge Stanley S. Harris, the United States District Court for the District of Columbia entered judgment on behalf of CSICOP and granted CSICOP's request that the Court impose sanctions on Geller for his prosecution of the lawsuit. Geller commenced the fifteen million dollar lawsuit in May of 1991 against CSICOP and James Randi, alleging that Geller was defamed by Randi in statements reported in The International Herald Tribune. In its motion to the Court seeking judgment on Geller's claims against it, CSICOP asserted that Geller had no legal or factual basis for his assertion that CSICOP should be held liable for Randi's alleged statements.

In a declaration filed with the Court in Geller's lawsuit, CSICOP Executive Director Barry Karr stated that "I believe that CSICOP was made a defendant in this lawsuit solely for the purpose of harassment and intimidation, and in the hope that the lawsuit would dissuade CSICOP from encouraging and providing a forum for... the critical discussion and analysis of paranormal claims, particularly those asserted by Geller."

CSICOP publishes on a quarterly basis the Skeptical Inquirer [see page 7 for a subscription form, Editor], a scholarly journal of articles and comment regarding claims of the paranormal and scientific controversies intended to inform interested scientists and scholars, the media and the general public on such matters and to publish skeptical and evaluative critiques of them based upon scientific principles and recognized concepts of creditable evidence. On numerous occasions, the Skeptical Inquirer has included articles that have examined and commented upon claims of paranormal powers asserted by Geller, many of which have called into question Geller's claims.

Judge Harris's authorization of sanctions against Geller was made pursuant to a federal court rule that mandates the imposition of sanctions if litigation is "interposed for any improper purpose such as to harass or cause unnecessary delay or needless increase in the cost of litigation," or if papers filed with the court are not "to the best of the signer's knowledge, information, and belief formed after reasonable inquiry...well grounded in fact...and warranted by existing law or a good faith argument for the extension, modification, or reversal of existing law."

Following notification of Judge Harris's orders, CSICOP Chairman Paul Kurtz commented, "This type of libel suit, even if ultimately unsuccessful, threatens to chill debate on scientific issues. If such obstacles as these are placed, unchecked, in the way of scientific research, and if one cannot question extraordinary claims, then a serious blow will be dealt to freedom of expression and of scientific inquiry." Kurtz continued, "We view this case as a serious challenge to our First Amendment rights, and we are thankful that Judge Harris chose to vindicate those rights." In addition, Kurtz observed, the judge's decision to impose sanctions against Geller "sends a stern warning to those who would utilize libel suits as a weapon to harass; such conduct can carry a heavy penalty."

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## VIEWS AND COMMENTARY

A New Way of Thinking, or Abandon All Reason, Ye Who Enter Here?

by Anson Kennedy

Creative Loafing, the free weekly newspaper, began a new feature a few weeks back called "Paradigms." It seems that the New Age movement has co-opted the word "paradigm" as a way of justifying the validity of their beliefs.

"Paradigm" in this sense means "model of thinking." Very often, skeptics are dismissed as operating with the now outmoded (to the New Age proponents) "scientific paradigm," meaning we still require evidence before accepting extreme claims. What the New Age proponents claim to represent is a "new paradigm," popularized by Shirley MacLaine and others, in which any idea no matter how wild is valid -- and evidence to the contrary is dismissed as being a different reality. Creative Loafing's new section seems designed to do just that as well.

Written by Cliff Bostock, the general format features one or two New Age practices each week. Mr. Bostock recounts his impressions of and experiences

with each one, following the column with information on how to contact the featured practitioners. In this sense, the pieces read more like testimonials than like a simple accounting of the who, what, when and where of regular reporting.

Mr. Bostock set the tone for the series with his introduction to the first column. Appealing to the inherent uncertainty of quantum physics (an appeal which shows his misunderstanding of this fundamental concept of modern physics), he justified the "new paradigm" this way: "Twentieth-century physics, particularly in its study of subatomic particles, has demonstrated that consciousness cannot really be separated from the object of its examination. The 'spin' of an electron can literally be programmed by the mind of the person measuring it." Mr. Bostock then uses this confused description to declare "science is not, after all, value-free." And once he has made that determination, he is now free to throw out any limits of science which conflict with his own values (after all, aren't his - or your - values just as valid as those of any scientist, who is using an outmoded paradigm anyway?).

This is the danger of New Age ideas, and it is exhibited time after time in subsequent installments of "Paradigms." The first column, subtitled "Breathing Old Life," details "holotropic breathwork therapies." These therapies were first promoted in the 1950s by Chekoslovakian psychoanalyst Stanislav Grof as a result of his experimentation with LSD. Now, he has abandoned the drug in favor of inducing altered states "by breathing deeply and rhythmically while loud, evocative music is played." The claimed effects are astounding (and equally non-verifiable): "spontaneous healing and resolution of emotional conflicts that remained unaffected by years of classic psychoanalysis;" meeting animal spirits and non-human entities; re-experiencing the birth process in detail. And, according to a certified Grof worker, it doesn't matter whether these encounters are real or hallucinated. "What is important is to use the material however [the individual might] want." And we are back to creating our own reality in spite of the world around us.

The column concludes with this warning: "Breathwork is contra-indicated in persons with cardiovascular problems, epilepsy, pregnancy and a history of mental illness." The warning's use of medical syntax and jargon seems designed to give the therapies discussed in the column a reassuring, scientific-sounding basis.

A later column, "Your Psychic Knows," asks the question "Can we escape our own truth?" It then launches into a distorted description of the life of Nietzsche and the circumstances of his death, attributing the latter to "the experience of feeling sadness and compassion" which was "so terrifying that he disintegrated rather than face discrediting his own defenses, his philosophy, by seeking the love and compassion he'd never received." And how might he have avoided this? Why, by consulting with a psychic, of course. According to Mr. Bostock, psychics can provide a great service through the "discovery and validation of personal truth." Again, we have the theme of "my reality is just as valid as your reality" which seems to be the guiding principle of the New Age movement.

And how does Mr. Bostock know that psychics are "real?" Because he had

similar mini-readings at a psychic fair here in Atlanta. When the consistency was pointed out, one of the psychics told him, "We've [meaning the two psychics] worked together a lot and we often find we pick up the same information." Conspicuously absent from the report was any mention of cold reading. Mentioned but not dwelled upon was that the readings at the psychic fair contradicted a reading he had from another psychic.

This other reading seemed most interesting. As Mr. Bostock detailed the initial portion of the reading, he seemed unimpressed because of its general nature. Then, he was surprised at the accuracy of more specific claims or predictions later in the reading. What was amazing in Mr. Bostock's account was that the most accurate predictions were the most general while the most specific ones were flat out wrong - yet he glossed over these problems. For example, the psychic "predicted a relationship which sounded very much like one I'd already ended." The psychic's explanation for "predicting" the past: "...we can get time frames mixed up every now and then." The psychic then predicted a major change which was, according to Mr. Bostock, corroborated by one of the psychics at the fair -- but a close reading of the article showed it didn't.

So what is the problem with Creative Loafing's new column? It serves to promote the self-centered New Age ideal of "each person's reality is as valid as another's." While a person's beliefs are his own business, by favorably presenting those beliefs which run counter to reasonable inquiry, "Paradigms" serves to further the "resentment against achievement" detailed in Robert Sheaffer's book of the same name. By couching the descriptions in the form and language of science, these fringe beliefs are given an unwarranted legitimacy. As William Evans pointed out when he spoke at a recent meeting of the Georgia Skeptics, this is a common practice of fringe practitioners. This gives the New Age something of a dual personality. While spurning the scientific paradigm as being "outmoded," the proponents simultaneously wrap themselves in the trappings of science in order to appear "reasonable."

The Georgia Skeptics will continue to monitor Creative Loafing's "Paradigms" column.

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THE END