



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

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Healthy Skepticism

By Tim Gorski, M.D.

Berry Interesting!

Bioenergy Nutrients, a company out of Boulder, Colorado, is conducting a mail-order promotion for a miraculous product which it claims can "improve and restore" the eyesight of users. The supplement consists of capsules of an herbal product called Bilberry (*Vaccinium myrtillus*), which the promoter says is the "European blueberry." Supposedly, this remedy "helps improve blurred vision, eyestrain and nearsightedness, helps to enlarge the range of vision and improves the sharpness of images, enhances the ability to focus, helps eyes more readily adapt to the dark, supports the bed of tiny blood vessels that deliver nutrients to the eyes, fights hyperpermeability of capillary walls, [and] helps combat cataract conditions." The promoters also claim that Bilberry can "strengthen your entire vascular system, inhibit the development of ulcers, neutralize the free radicals that damage cellular health, and much more."

As is typical for such products, it's claimed that scientific studies in other countries "prove" its efficacy. Numerous testimonials are also offered in the company's promotional mailing, including this one: "Bilberry is helping my myopia. Also, I know Bilberry really works because when I stopped taking it my indigestion flared up again." How's that for irrefutable logic!

The product is offered at around 20 cents a capsule. When reached by telephone, a company spokeswoman stated that the suggested dosage is 2-3 daily. And we're to believe that prescription medications proved safe and effective are expensive! Of course, there's a money back guarantee on the miraculous Bilberry.

The American Ophthalmological Association, when contacted by the Council Against Health Fraud, had no information on the product.

The \$375 Question Mark

An entity called HeartCheck America is engaged in nationwide promotion of ultrafast computed tomography as a form of screening for coronary artery disease. Computed tomography (CT or CAT-scanning) is an X-ray technique that produces two-dimensional cross-sectional views of portions of the body. In this case, the area of interest is the heart, and specifically the coronary arteries. Atherosclerosis ("hardening of the arteries") of these vessels commonly results in calcium deposits that can be detected by such X-ray testing.

Called "a medical breakthrough for early detection of heart disease," promotional literature describes this application of CT as "98% accurate for ruling out coronary artery disease." Testimonials portray the test as potentially lifesaving when positive and giving peace of mind when negative. The company offers the study at Saint John's Cardiovascular Center, the University of Illinois Hospital, and Children's Hospital of Buffalo for \$375.

But the American Heart Association (AHA) states that the test is still investigational. In an advisory issued this year, the AHA notes that "the prognostic significance of the presence or absence of calcification detected by ultrafast computed tomography is unknown," and concludes that clinical use of the test as a screening tool "is not justified at this time."

Intravenous H2O2 Promoters By Another Name

Last year, the Council Against Health Fraud reported on the International Bio-Oxidative Medicine Foundation's promotion of intravenous hydrogen peroxide as treatment for a wide variety of medical conditions. Among other things, the hydrogen peroxide was claimed to bubble up between healthy and diseased tissues in order to rid the body of its toxins, etc. How this simple molecule "knows" not to do its bubbling thing in the capillaries (tiniest blood vessels) of the brain or kidneys was never disclosed.

The same people making those ridiculous claims are now also operating as the International Credible Medicine Association (ICMA) out of the same D/FW Airport post office box. In response to an inquiry, the ICMA recently listed 13 Texas physicians as "knowledgeable in Oxidative Medicine" and states that it's "anticipating many more" in the near future. Of the three physicians listed for the area, one contacted by the Council said that he has never used the intravenous hydrogen peroxide therapy. An individual at the office of another said that the doctor "used to, but doesn't any more." And the third physician, an M.D., still defends the practice but hasn't said if he's still using it.

Swollen Claims For Medical Device

Farrall Instruments Company of Nebraska drew the attention of Texas law enforcement officials when it began advertising and promoting its penile and vaginal plethysmograph in the state. It seems that the device, which is supposed to detect sexual arousal by measuring the state of engorgement of erectile tissue such as is found in the penis, was apparently being sold to inappropriate individuals and on the strength of claims of its being a reliable tool for dealing with rapists, child molesters, and other criminals.

The Office of the Texas State Attorney General recently reached an agreement with the company concerning the advertising and sale of the product. The permanent injunction prohibits its distribution to nonpractitioners or without appropriate labeling. The company is required to state in its promotional materials that the product is intended solely for assessment purposes and is not effective in aversion therapy, as an aid in behavior modification, or, by itself, useful in determining whether sexual offenders ought to be imprisoned. The terms of the agreed order also prohibit explicit sexual materials from being used in advertising or distributed with the device.

This information is provided by the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud. For more information, or to report suspected health fraud, please contact the Council at Box 202577, Arlington, TX 76006, or call metro 817-792-2000.

Dr. Gorski is a practicing physician, chairman of the D/FW Council Against Health Fraud and an NTS Technical Advisor.

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Eco-Scam: The False Prophets of Ecological Collapse

By Ronald Bailey
St. Martin's Press, 1993

Reviewed by R. A. Dousette

Mankind faces catastrophes without end on the wane of this century. The world is overpopulated, and with this comes famine and the risk of a collapse of the food supply. Natural resources are limited and rapidly depleting, while biotechnology threatens to create mutant diseases and epidemics that threaten us all. Climatic change, ozone depletion, and nuclear winter each threaten to destroy our civilization. This, at least, is the view of things garnered from reading the literature of environmental popularizers over the past quarter century. Those who preach imminent ecological collapse have, in the 25 years since Paul Ehrlich authored *The Population Bomb*, established an extensive paper trail of failed predictions. In the current volume, Ronald Bailey has extensively researched this trail to produce a readable and entertaining history of failed prophesy.

Apocalyptic visions have been with us as throughout Western history. The widespread acceptance of these views is, in Bailey's view, a recent phenomenon. He discusses various religious and secular millenarians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and offers several reasons for their success. The destructive wars of this century combined with the cold war and the possibility of nuclear destruction are offered as one reason for the success of the doomsayers in propounding their views. Other reasons include political ambition and political ideologies that are hostile to Western culture and values. The ecology movement has discovered, as have televangelists, that promotion of fear can raise substantial sums of money. Mr. Bailey notes that, in 1990, leading environmental organizations collected \$400 million in contributions. This is about ten times as much as the Republican and Democratic parties combined raised in that year.

Separate chapters are devoted to different visions and their promoters. One chapter discusses the threat of overpopulation and famine as promoted by Paul Ehrlich and Lester Brown. The chapter is liberally salted with Mr. Ehrlich's propensity for failed prediction. In 1969, for example, Mr. Ehrlich had a spasm in a magazine article for *Ramparts Magazine* in which he predicted that "... the oceans died of DDT poisoning by 1979; crops failed due to air pollution blocking sunlight; the 'much ballyhooded' green revolution collapsed; 200,000 people died of 'smog disasters' in New York and Los Angeles in 1973; and U.S. life expectancy dropped to only forty-two years by 1980 as a result of deaths owing to epidemic cancer caused by pesticide use. The scenario ended with the beginning of World War III on October 13, 1979." Mr. Ehrlich continued to make predictions of imminent disaster throughout the decade of the 80s. In 1991 he predicted the death of billions, but this time in the early years of the next century. Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute has a track record as bad as Mr. Ehrlich's, although his predictions aren't as specific.

Other chapters address the failures of other ecology movements. The Club of Rome predicted in 1968, in *The Limits to Growth*, that natural resources would soon be exhausted and that civilization would collapse. Bailey details the failures of these predictions, as well as the defects in the computer models used to support them. Other chapters are devoted to predictions of global cooling, the hole in the ozone layer, and the greenhouse effect. Jeremy Rifkin's exploitation of fear of biotechnology has its own chapter, and CSICOP's own Carl Sagan has earned a chapter as a consequence of his association with the promotion of nuclear winter.

The book is extensively researched, footnoted, and filled with quotes. If Mr. Bailey had only documented a long list of failed predictions, this would be an amusing book. He has, fortunately, gone further and documented the wide range of debate on each of the topics. Authorities such as Harvard Population Center demographer Nick Eberstadt, American Enterprise Institute Fellow Ben Wattenberg, and University of Maryland economist Julian Simon have disagreed with Paul Ehrlich's theories, and have usually met with "... sharp ad hominem attacks." Critics of the alarmists are quoted and examples are given of the exploitation of regulation and the media in order to exaggerate risks.

The final chapter discusses the interaction of the media and the environmentalists in promoting an exaggerated atmosphere of fear. Ten tips are given to help the public identify "... a false prophet of doom." Perhaps the best advice is to avoid science handled by public relations firms.

Ronald Bailey is a journalist and the producer of the PBS-TV series "TechnoPolitics." He is at least as qualified as Vice President Al Gore to discuss environmental matters. His book is better-footnoted and more readable than Gore's *Earth in the Balance* and it offers a balanced view of environmental issues apparently beyond the grasp of the Vice President.

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Letters

To the Editor:

I appreciated Pat Reeder's review of the book *The Elvis Sightings* in the August issue of *The Skeptic*, if only because I've been having fun with the people certain that the King faked his death for years now. Problem is, the more outrageous one gets, the more people believe it.

To wit, I know that Elvis is still alive: he currently resides in the Roy Orbison Celebrity Rehab Clinic and Retreat in Sheepdip, Wyoming, where he rubs elbows with other famed and allegedly dead musicians who wanted to get away from the stresses of their tours while remaining in touch with their fan clubs.

On any given day, Elvis can be found taking potshots on the small-arms range with John Lennon, flying ultralights with Buddy Holly and Stevie Ray Vaughan (with Ritchie Valens and Ricky Nelson as flight crew and Randy Rhoads as the tower operator), preparing gourmet dinners with Karen Carpenter and Mama Cass, taping "just say no" commercials with Jim Morrison and Janis Joplin, coaching Dennis Love's swim team, playing a few riffs with Bill Haley and Jimi Hendrix, taking charm and poise lessons with Sid Vicious and G.G. Allin, and preparing for his comeback concert tour with Andy Gibb. Of course, Sundays are his day off, so he gets to relax ...

In the past five years since I first conceived the ROCRC&R, the response has been interesting: a letter to the editor on the subject to the [defunct] Dallas *Times Herald* snagged me four phone calls, three from people asking where Sheepdip was located. One woman regaled me with a tale of how she had spent hours calling up Wyoming directory assistance looking for the Retreat's phone number, and when I told her it was all a joke, she said, "They're keeping you from saying, aren't they?" What was sadder was that the fourth call came from a girl if it were true that Sid Vicious were still alive. Some people have no sense of the ridiculous.

With this in mind, I've postulated an even more vile hypothesis, which acts as the main plot thread in my upcoming book, a very dark comedy entitled *The Second Coming of Sid Vicious*: those Elvis stamps are part of Biblical prophecy, namely referring to Revelations 13:17-18 (John didn't know about mail order at the time). When included with the recent Elvis credit card, the famed decanters, the black velvet paintings, and the impersonator rallies, we have a massive conspiracy facing us in these latter days. Mojo Nixon's "Elvis is Everywhere" as a hymn for the Antichrist? You tell me: I just work here.

Anyway, thank you for a very informative and extremely entertaining newsletter, and I'll have to hand in my subscription the moment I'm able to beat the money out of my various editors.

Paul T. Riddell

Dallas

To the Editor:

As most of us have seen, skepticism is often bumping up against fantastic claims that are explicitly linked to some people's religious beliefs. Creationism, the Shroud of Turin, and Robert Tilton's faith healing claims are examples of these. [Oxford Professor] Richard Dawkins' comments last year at the CSICOP Convention, which included a critique of the Catholic Church's doctrine of transubstantiation, drew attention to this in an even more striking way. This wasn't much appreciated by [CSICOP Chariman] Paul Kurtz as I understand it. But Kurtz is himself a Humanist and an enthusiastic critic of theistic religious beliefs. Too, I notice that the organized skeptical community has stayed away from considering widespread beliefs that are "politically correct," like the threat of global warming, acid rain, and ozone destruction that have been claimed by some to rest on erroneous facts and reasoning.

What I am wondering is what, if any, linkage is seen between skepticism and the spectrum of religious (or political) belief by members of The North Texas Skeptics. I realize that this is a very touchy subject, and certainly one that most people stay away from in polite conversation. But I'm very interested in what others think. Why doesn't the NTS issue a challenge or request of some kind to its membership to comment on where, how, and why the line should be drawn between beliefs that are fair game for skeptical criticism and those that are properly left alone?

Deborah A. Boak

Arlington

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The third eye

By Pat Reeder

We are living in the last days, folks. And how do I know this? Because dead spirits are rising from the grave all over the place. I don't know why they're even bothering to bury Ferdinand Marcos, since he'll probably be popping back up again within the week. Want evidence? Submitted for your approval ...

The Associated Press reports that a ghost is roaming the halls of the Fiji Parliament, and has been recorded on a security video camera. The national TV station broadcast the tape, which shows a shadowy figure moving about in a meeting room. Now, you might be thinking that it is perhaps the shade of a dead bureaucrat who passed away in his sleep during an interminable meeting. But no, it has been identified by a local clairvoyant as a "kalou vu," or ancestral spirit. The spirit is said to be dressed in traditional Fijian garb, including a sash of beaten bark, and the clairvoyant says he's come back to urge Fijians to place more emphasis on traditional values. A shadowy, restless figure who hangs around politicians calling for traditional values? Could it be ... Pat Buchanan?

Closer to home, the Episcopal diocese headquarters of Dallas, on Ross Avenue near downtown, has undergone an exorcism. According to *The Dallas Morning News*, Bishop James M. Stanton and six other priests conducted the rite September 14th, after staff members and their families started coming down with all sorts of ailments, including bronchitis and blood clots in the lungs. All evil spirits were expelled, and the illnesses seem to be clearing up. Of course, they also called an air conditioning company, who found a problem in the ventilation system which had been preventing fresh air from coming in. It reportedly caused the entire building to smell like a basement all the time. Of course, that might have been a demon.

The paper reports that some people in the diocese were embarrassed about the exorcism, with a few complaining that it was "conduct unbecoming Episcopalians," which places it right up there with wearing white after Labor Day. But Bishop Stanton defended the exorcism as a recognized rite of the church, and said, "It is a sad commentary that anybody in the church would wonder about the use of prayer." Personally, I say we put it to an experiment: let's send the Episcopalians to New York and see if they can get rid of that asbestos in the schools. They couldn't do a worse job than David Dinkins has, and God knows, they'll be cheaper.

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At least you need not fear that Dallas has a monopoly on superstition. According to the Associated Press, paganism is making a big comeback in Russia. The old communist regime, fearing competition from other idiotic philosophies, suppressed mysticism and the paranormal for years, but now that society is free, the Russians are happily diving headfirst into a pool of New Age gobbledook. Like a starving man who gorges himself on ice cream, they just can't help swallowing all the junk they can get their hands on.

You name it, the Russians believe in it: faith healing, astrology, magical ointments, and so on. A popular Russian magazine on herbal remedies offered the following, strangely Clintonian, advice: "To heal rheumatism, summon the courage to lash yourself with nettles." No doubt the editor used to work for the KGB.

A 16-year old girl named Lena had her headaches treated by a faith healer, who yanked from Lena's stomach a rope of spirits that only the healer could see. She pointed with disgust to the floor, where the spirits purportedly lay coiled in a heap, and said, "Five meters I pulled out!" (That's five yards of spirits, not five parking meters ... demons come by the yard in Russia.) Seems that this would give you stomach aches, not headaches, although reading about it gave me both.

Old folk superstitions have also made a big comeback in Russia. Single women are not allowed to sit at the corners of tables, for fear that they won't get married. Flower vendors won't sell more than one flower at a time, unless they're for a funeral. Anyone who forgets something at home and has to go back for it must stop and look in the mirror for a moment to ward off bad luck.

It seems hard to believe, but the Russians have actually come up with a system that is more cumbersome, inconvenient and oppressive than the creaky, old Soviet bureaucracy!

Meet the New Age, same as the Old Age ...

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Last month, I told you about a group of fundamentalist Christian parents in North Carolina who wanted to remove "anti-Christian" places like Africa from school maps and globes. Well, an interest in cartography seems to be the latest trend among southern fundamentalists.

On September 5th, the *Birmingham News* kicked off a statewide uproar by publishing a private demographic survey commissioned by the Southern Baptist Convention, which estimates that exactly 46.1 percent of Alabama's population is going to Hell. Under the headline, "Baptists Count The Lost," the paper also printed a map showing a county-by-county breakdown of who's bound for Heaven and who isn't, unless they become born again Christians (or more precisely, perhaps, Southern Baptists).

The study took each county's population and subtracted from it membership of all churches. After that, Baptist researchers used a secret formula to estimate how many people from different denominations and faiths were probably going to Heaven. Estimates were based on how closely the church members' religious beliefs matched those of Southern Baptists. For example, a higher percentage of Methodists were considered saved from Hell than Roman Catholics. Jews, Hindus, Buddhists and other non-Christian religions were considered to be on the express train to Hades, along with virtually everyone who doesn't belong to a church at all.

In their defense, the Baptists claimed that they were not making judgements of other people ... They just wanted a map showing where the unsaved were, so they would know the best places to build new churches. I don't know if they've considered this, but if they really could get an accurate map of the locations of all the sinners in Alabama, they could pay for the study by selling the map to people who want to build new liquor stores.

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At this writing, a murder trial is going on in Philadelphia, but the defendant is nowhere to be found. The accused, Ira Einhorn, skipped bail and left the country 12 years ago after he was charged with killing his girlfriend, and has eluded authorities by living in England, Ireland, Spain and Sweden. Prosecutors say they decided to go ahead with a trial in absentia before all the witnesses die, or else they'll risk letting Einhorn get away with murder.

What makes this of interest to this column is the fact that Einhorn was a rather prominent New Age guru and lecturer. He first entered the public eye in 1967 with a march on the Pentagon, and by the late 1970s, was lecturing global conferences on environmental, ecological and spiritual concerns. In addition to these achievements, prosecutors claim that he also killed his girlfriend in 1977 when she considered leaving him, stuffed her body into a trunk, covered her with newspapers, and shoved the trunk into a closet. It was not discovered until two years later, when the smell of rotting flesh in neighboring apartments led

police to break in and search the place.

Einhorn's attorney tried unsuccessfully to get the charges dropped, saying that Einhorn has not been informed of the trial and, "For all we know, Einhorn cannot attend ... he could be in a hospital, too ill to attend, working on a tramp steamer, ... in prison, or indeed, dead." Considering that this guy spent years preaching about telepathy, communication with the dead, reincarnation, and astral projection, I don't see how being dead or away from a telephone would present any obstacle to communication at all. Still, if he is found guilty but cannot be brought back to be punished, prosecutors may have to take drastic measures. They may have to get the Southern Baptist Convention to send him to Hell.

...

A word about *The X Files*, Fox TV's new series about UFO abductions and other such occult tales being investigated by a wild-eyed FBI agent and his "skeptical" female sidekick (don't worry, she gets over that silly ol' skepticism soon enough!).

The premiere episode was, surprisingly, not bad. It was reasonably well-acted and suspenseful, with a similar theme to the old 1960s TV series, *The Invaders*, but with better special effects. They got the details of UFO abduction tales straight: unexplained marks on the body, missing time, etc. Somebody researched the cliches very well. As a work of science fiction, i.e., something which is not to be believed, it was not half bad, although it didn't contain anything original for folks like us who are familiar with these stories. And I appreciate the fact that the skeptical agent is such a babe. Of course, on the Fox Network, everyone is a babe. At Melrose Place, even the pool boy has a contract with the Elite Modeling Agency.

The problem is, Fox seemed to be suffering from schizophrenia when it tried to advertise this show. Before it premiered, it was repeatedly promoted with the phrase, "based on actual FBI files." But now, with the show finally airing, that phrase seems to have quietly disappeared from all of Fox's advertising. While I cannot say with certainty what became of it, I suspect it was mysteriously spirited away by the grim, grey little men in the Fox legal department.

Just as well. It was about as accurate as saying that *Married With Children* and *The Simpsons* are documentaries on American family life.

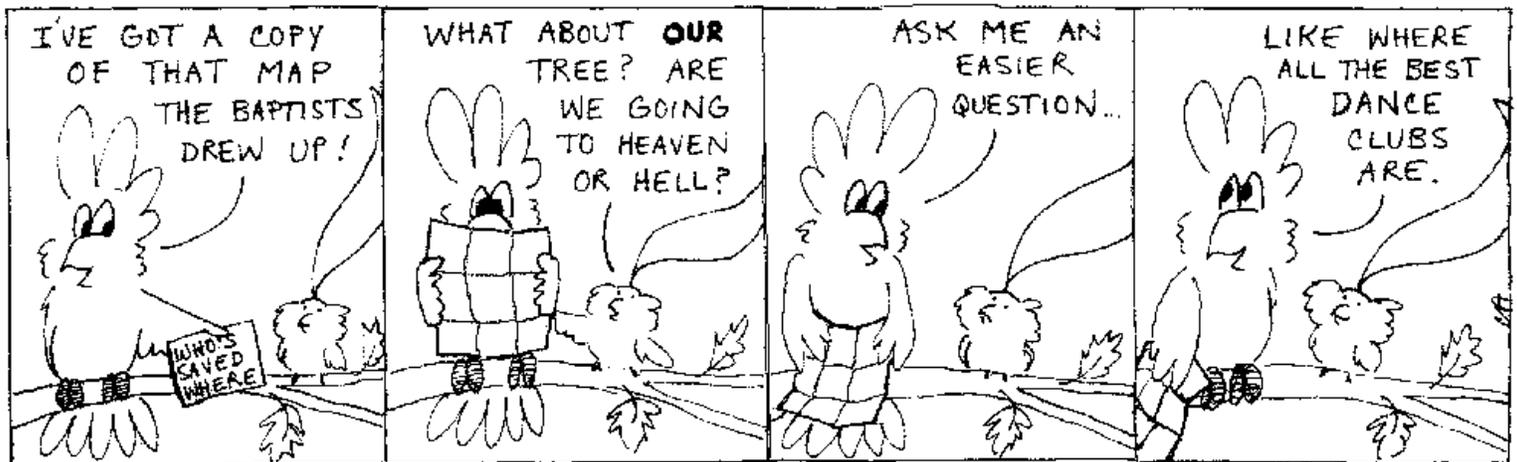
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Finally, this just in from Paul Harvey. People are lining up in Elsa, Texas, near the Mexican border, to see the face of the Virgin Mary in the hood of a 1981 Chevy Camaro. Since Elsa is so close to McAllen, we can now find out which is more effective at preventing car theft: the Virgin Mary or The Club.

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Up a tree

A skeptical cartoon by Laura Ainsworth



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