



The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics

Volume 14 Number 11

www.ntskeptics.org

November 2000

In this month's issue:

- [Perspective on demons](#)
- [New wave of exorcisms](#)
- [Face on Mars](#)
- [Top ten ways to tell if you're a skeptic](#)
- [Skeptical ink](#)

Perspective on demons

by John Blanton

[This editorial is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views of the NTS or Pope John Paul II.]

Exorcism (and deliverance) is getting to be the rage. Bob Larson seems to be riding the crest, and at least one old E&D movie is coming out of retirement. Even the NTS is getting into the act with lively presentations and reviews of E&D sessions.

When pressed on the issue at the October NTS meeting, even NTS VP Danny Barnett refused to rule out the possibility of demonic possession. To me it seems this joke has gone on long enough, and the time has come to get our heads back on straight. Maybe we need to take a hard look at this issue of demons.

To hear E&D supporters put it, there is a separate demon for every social ill. There's a demon for indolence and one for disobedience and one for anger and one for deceit. And so on. There appears not to be a demon for religious zealotry. Anyhow, while watching this list being laid out at the November meeting a thought occurred to me.

All these demons seem to be associated with *human* issues. You can't have people problems without the appropriate demon. Apparently forgetfulness and shyness are not problems that come and go of their own accord. There has to be a demon assigned to manage them.

So I got to thinking about all those demons, too. Like "Lust" and "Envy." They've got it cushy right now. But what about before? That is before there were any people to be lustfully envious?

It's not a pretty picture. Demons, bunches of them, specifically designed to torment people, just lounging around for billions of years with nothing to do. That would make anybody cranky. Without getting too ridiculous, let's just assume that demons didn't come around until there were actually people. Problem solved, right?

Well, not so fast. Back to Biology 101. When were there first people? Who was the first person? And you can forget about Adam. Remember we're talking about *real* people.

Assume, for the sake of argument, there was a first person. OK, call him Adam. Now, Adam's parents were not people. I know this is true because a creationist told me so. Because he was a real person, Adam got haunted by demons. Maybe the first demon was lust and the second had something to do with forbidden fruit. No, likely it was the other way around.

Adam's parents must have been perplexed. The kid came from a fine old australopithecine family that never had any trouble of this kind. Now he's got demons. Fleas, too maybe, but demons for sure. Where did they come from? The demons, not the fleas.

Two possible scenarios come to mind: a) The demons just popped into existence at the right time to infest the first person (Adam The Unfortunate). b) The demons must have evolved along with all the other life forms. Before there were people they spent their idle hours making other life forms miserable, starting with the microbes.

I want to nix option a) right out of the box. This violates all known rules of evolution. All life forms have ancestors going back to the primordial muck. Must have been that way with demons. That is, if they are real.

That leaves b). There are problems with b), as well. A logical conclusion is that other life forms have demons, as well. If our grandparents had demons then our cousins will have them, too. It's hard to imagine our australopithecine ancestors inherited the demons but the ancestors of chimps did not.

Of course human demons are different from those of the other life forms. For example, I am sure horses don't suffer the same demon of advanced calculus that afflicts some humans.

Since there is virtually a continuum from living things to non-living things, the obvious conclusion is that inanimate objects must have demons. When you get right down to it, the smallest electron must have its own demon of CT symmetry violation. That's a bunch of demons. I think this may be the solution to all of that missing mass in the universe.

About here this all gets a bit heavy. There ought to be a simpler answer. How about this: We made it all up. We invented demons. There weren't demons before, because we hadn't invented them. Horses don't have demons, because they weren't smart enough to invent them. Electrons don't have demons, either, for reasons I don't want to go into right now. Something else has to account for all that missing mass.

When you think about it this way things begin to get a lot simpler. I propose we take this approach. Sure we have demons, but they are only in our imaginations. We invented them, and we can dispense with them.

Yes, it's time to cast out these demons now and forever. Send them back to the world of grade B fiction whence they came. Relegate them forever to children's tales and anchovy pizza-induced dreams. Demons are an idea whose time has passed. Too long have they served to excuse obnoxious social behavior and middle-age hair loss. Their welcome has long expired while their stench lingers on. They shall not be missed.

The time is past, too, for polite accommodation. No more must we be expected to smile pleasantly and nod at these ridiculous tales of demonic possession.

Let's call this one as it is: People who believe in real demons are really just a tad stupid. People who make money off people who believe in real demons have a marvelous great scam going. They shall be called entrepreneurs, and we shall all respect them and strive to learn from them.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

New wave of exorcisms

Press release

Contact: Joel Schwarz
joels@u.washington.edu
206-543-2580
University of Washington

New wave of exorcisms seen; some people can be convinced they witnessed a demonic possession as a child.

Couple the re-release of "The Exorcist" and the up-coming Halloween broadcast of "Possessed," a TV documentary about a purported exorcism in a mental hospital, and you've got a prescription for a sudden jump in the number reported demonic possessions.

"Quite a number of people who watch these exorcism films will be affected and develop symptoms of hysteria. These films will be a full-employment bill for exorcists," said Elizabeth Loftus, a University of Washington psychologist and memory expert.

Loftus recently completed a demonic possession study that is to be published in The Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied. She conducted the study with Giuliana Mazzoni, a Seton Hall University psychology professor and a UW visiting scholar, and Irving Kirsch, a University of Connecticut psychology professor. The research demonstrated that nearly one-fifth of those who previously said that demonic possession was not very plausible and that as children they had not witnessed a possession later said possession was more plausible and they may have witnessed one. These changes in belief and memory were accomplished in several steps. Subjects read several short articles that described demonic possession and suggested it was more common than believed. Later they were asked to list their fears and then were told that witnessing a possession during childhood caused those fears.

"When you realize what we did with a few stories and a suggestion and then think of the very vivid depictions that are in these movies, I know these films are going to have a very powerful effect," Loftus said. The publication of the book "The Exorcist" in 1971 and the film's release at the end of 1973 generated reams of publicity and a mini-epidemic of people requesting exorcisms, she added. Loftus will talk about demonic possession and the results of the study in a campus seminar on Halloween. In the study, the researchers recruited nearly 200 college students in Italy, where the idea of demonic possession is considered somewhat more plausible than it is in the United States. All of the students initially rated possession as highly implausible. They also had strong beliefs that they had not witnessed one as a child.

The researchers conducted three experiments. In the first and key experiment, students filled out questionnaires that rated the plausibility of a number of events and asked about their life experiences. Students were divided into three groups, two of which were exposed to a plausibility manipulation a month later. The two groups were given a series of 12 short articles to read. Among the articles given to the first or

"possession" group were three that promoted the idea that demonic possession is quite common in Italy and that many children witnessed such events. They also described typical possession experiences. The second or "almost choked" group was given three similar articles to read about choking. The third or control group was not exposed to the manipulation.

A week later the first two groups filled out questionnaires about their fears, such as being afraid of spiders. Then the students were told that their individual "fear profiles" signaled that they probably had witnessed a possession or had almost choked in early childhood. After another week these students and the control group filled out the original two questionnaires. The researchers found that the manipulation not only increased feelings of reality about an already plausible event, "almost choked," but also of an initially implausible event "witnessed possession." More important, according to Loftus, 18 percent of the students now believed that the events had probably happened to them. There was no change in the control group.

The other two experiments tested variations of the manipulation.

Loftus said the three experiments tell a consistent story. When people are exposed to a series of articles describing a relatively implausible phenomenon, such as witnessing a possession, they believe the phenomenon is not only more plausible but also are less confident that they had not experienced it in childhood.

"We are looking at the first steps on the path down to creating a false memory," said Loftus. "There is controversy about whether you can plant memories about events that are unlikely to happen. As humans we are capable of developing memories of ideas that other people think occurred. Just being exposed to credible information can lead you down this path. This shows why people watching Oprah or those in group therapy believe these kinds of things happened to them. People borrow memories from others and adopt them as their own experiences. It is part of the normal process of memory." In addition, she said the study reinforces the idea that therapists need to be careful in using potentially suggestive procedures that could change a patient's perceived likelihood of unremembered events. These include UFO abductions, serious trauma suffered in a past life, or participating in or witnessing satanic rituals (common elements in abuse claims).

"This study can help us understand how you can take normal people and create this kind of effect - make demonic possession seem plausible," Loftus said. "It normalizes this process and shows it can happen to a lot of people, not only to those who are considered to be 'kooks.'"

From: <http://www.eurekalert.org/releases/uw-nwe101700.html>

[[Back to top](#)]

Face on Mars

Press release

CONTACT: Kevin Christopher
Ph: (716) 636-1425 ext. 224
Fx: (716) 636-1733
[E-mail: SIKevinC@aol.com](mailto:SIKevinC@aol.com)

Amherst, NY (October 17, 2000)

Gary Posner, a consultant for the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and executive director of Tampa Bay Skeptics, probes the credentials and claims of Richard C. Hoagland in the November/December issue of Skeptical Inquirer. Hoagland, a science writer, is the author of the 1987 book "The Monuments of Mars: A City on the Edge of Forever"-a book that lays out his vision of an ancient Martian metropolis, an idea based on images of supposed "ruins" shown in a 1976 NASA Viking mission photo.

The "Face on Mars" is an outcropping of rock in the Cydonia region of Mars. The Viking 1 Orbiter photographed an image of this geographic feature in 1976. Catalogued as Plate #035A72, it shows a formation with the vague appearance of a human face. When the photo was released to the public, there was a surge of speculation that the image revealed an artificial structure built by intelligent life. In 1998 NASA released a Mars Global Surveyor image of the same outcropping. With different lighting and much higher resolution, this image clearly shows that the "Face on Mars" is nothing more than a natural geographical feature. Nevertheless, the wild claims persist, along with accusations of a NASA cover-up.

Richard Hoagland has been a lightning rod in this charged atmosphere of anything-goes speculation and innuendo. But unlike many who see an ancient extraterrestrial culture and a cosmic message to humanity in the Cydonian rock, Hoagland is not easily dismissed. After all, he seems to have the ear of NASA and a list of accomplishments in the history of space exploration. He has given two talks to NASA employees following the space agency's own investigation of the "Face on Mars," he was the first to conceive of a possible ocean beneath the crust of the Jovian moon Europa, and he was responsible for the Pioneer 10 and 11 plaques-humanity's calling card to any intelligent beings who might stumble on these probes in interstellar space. All of this adds a lot to Hoagland's credibility-if you take the interpretation of the above-mentioned events at face value.

Gary Posner decided to investigate these accounts of Hoagland's contributions to astronomy and space exploration, looking to place Hoagland's own image into higher resolution.

As for his NASA appearances, a March 1990 appearance at the NASA's Lewis Research Center in Cleveland, OH, Posner found that Hoagland was asked to talk as part of an "employee perk" presentation series, not because NASA was seriously examining his ideas. Posner's questions to NASA also revealed that a later appearance in September also seemed to be more for novelty and entertainment than forging ahead in space science.

In July 1990 on the "For the People" radio program Hoagland proclaimed that "Carl [Sagan] for many years has been taking public credit for the Pioneer plaque which, of course Eric Burgess and I conceived." In November of that year he claimed that "Carl was involved with Eric Burgess and me in the design of [the] message." But according to Posner in 1990 correspondence between him and Carl Sagan, Sagan stated that "Eric Burgess and Richard Hoagland did no more than suggest to me that a message be put aboard Pioneer 10 and 11. Frank Drake and I did the design, and I was responsible for getting it through the White House and NASA approval process."

As for the hypothesis that there are oceans beneath the surface of Europa, none other than Arthur C. Clarke states in his 2010: Odyssey Two that the idea "was first proposed by Richard C. Hoagland in the magazine *Star & Sky* ("The Europa Enigma," January , 1980)." However, Clarke himself seems to have been mistaken. John S. Lewis first proposed the idea in 1971 and several other scientists published articles in agreement during the 1970s. Posner found that Ralph Greenberg, a professor of mathematics at the University of Washington in Seattle has been trying for years to convince Hoagland to set the record straight-without success.

Founded in 1976 by Dr. Paul Kurtz of the State University of New York at Buffalo, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) encourages the critical investigation of paranormal and fringe-science claims from a responsible, scientific point of view and disseminates factual information about the results of such inquiries to the scientific community and the public. It also promotes science and scientific inquiry, critical thinking, science education, and the use of reason in examining important issues.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Top ten ways to tell if you're a skeptic

by John Blanton

Number 10:
Dionne Warwick doesn't return your phone calls.

Number 9:
You think "energized water" is another name for vodka.

Number 8:
Your lucky rabbit's foot? The rabbit has it.

Number 7:
While everybody else is out partying you have to stay home and study evolution.

Number 6:
You can spell transcendental meditation, but you can't pronounce it.

Number 5:
You have to watch the Weather Channel to tell if it's going to rain.

Number 4:
You stick magnets on the *refrigerator*.

Number 3:
Reincarnation means left over hamburger.

Number 2:
The only aliens you know work at the 7-11.

And the number one way to tell if you're a skeptic:

There's a law suit from Uri Geller in your mailbox.

[\[Back to top\]](#)

Skeptical ink

By Prasad Golla and John Blanton

Copyright 2000

Free, non-commercial reuse permitted.

[\[Back to top\]](#)