



REPORT

VOLUME 5 NO. 3 WINTER 1992-93

The view from Miami

by Wesley Martin Johnson
Miami Oakland Park, FL

In the aftermath of hurricane Andrew the notion of surveying damage to secular and sectarian structures occurred to me. The question of whether there was a discernible difference in damage to the two different classes of structures seemed worthy of examination. Any difference might imply a non-random force and perhaps suggest the existence of a guiding intelligence, perhaps even God.

I was led to the question by the many statements of people who praised "God" that they were spared from some of the devastation. Almost everyone I met, and those with whom I shared personal hurricane stories, thanked "God" that it was not worse than it was for them or someone they knew. A sign in front of the Old Cutler Road Presbyterian Church galvanized me into studying the question. I noticed the sign on the first Sunday after the storm. The sign was hand-painted on a torn piece of roof sheathing and propped up against a tree that had no leaves. None of the trees had any leaves, for that matter. The new crude sign was necessary since the existing one, almost a marquee, was destroyed by the storm. The Church is very large and affluent, with facilities covering at least five or six acres. On most Sunday mornings it is a difficult task to count the number of BMWs, Mercedes, Volvos and well scrubbed children starched within an inch of their lives. It is still harder to drive on Old Cutler Road if you happen to pass by when church lets out.

The sign screamed out to me. Its message seemed so ludicrous, so laughable and out of touch. It read: "Come celebrate God's power." The sign flew in the face of reality; it struck me as somehow Lilliputian. The more I thought about it the more concerned I became. Do these people really thank their God and give that God praise and worship in the face of the utter devastation around them? How can that be? Are these people so wrapped up in themselves and their beliefs that they are mindless of the horror? The image of someone thanking a marauding band of barbarians after they sacked and destroyed their village came to mind. If indeed God created and actively steered the storm, is that something to be thankful for? Is such a power to be respected and celebrated? Upwards of a hundred people were killed and 150,000 left homeless (I am still not back in my home). It seemed to me bizarre and

frightening that anyone would celebrate such a destructive force. So I went looking for evidence.

Over the last two months I visited a score of sectarian structures in various locations within 10 miles of Andrew's eye — Christian churches, Jewish synagogues, and homes of believers. I also examined secular structures in the same area — businesses, public schools, and homes of known non-believers.

The evidence indicates that the storm's fury was not in any way selective. Secular and sectarian structures were equally destroyed in the same pattern as all other structures of similar construction. There was no indication of non-randomness. In Homestead, for example, the home of Mr. Sidney Jones, a God-fearing man and head of a lovely family, was destroyed to the same extent as was his agnostic neighbor's home two houses away. The Naranja Baptist Church was damaged to the same degree as the Homestead Municipal Building. The Cutler Ridge Methodist Church was affected to the same extent as the Old Cutler Oyster Bar across the street. Differences in damage were obvious only by virtue of the direction the structure faced. The wind came from the east on the "north wall" of the "eye." Buildings on the "north wall" were all equally damaged on their east-facing side. On the "south wall," where the wind came from the west, the west side naturally took the impact. Except for the direction a structure faced and the asymmetry produced thereby, there was no evidence of non-randomness.

The obvious conclusion: There appears to be no indication of intelligent control. I have been unable to find any evidence of a "smoking gun" with God's fingerprints on it.

One GIANT conundrum

As you all know by now, Tampa Bay's hopes for landing the San Francisco Giants have been thwarted by the baseball "powers that be." Tampa Bay Skeptics must now once again ask: Is *astrology* another "power that be"?

One strong argument against such is the failure of Tampa Bay's premier "astro-analyst," Janet Sciales, to accurately predict the Giants' fate. As reported in our last issue, Janet told the *St. Petersburg Times* in August that, yes, "It [relocation] will happen . . . San Francisco [has] Jupiter in their 12th house — that's the house of their own

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TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS
Statement of Purpose
and "\$1,000 Challenge"

Tampa Bay Skeptics, Inc. is a non-profit educational and scientific organization devoted to the critical examination of paranormal and fringe-science claims, and the dissemination of factual information about such claims to interested parties throughout the Tampa Bay area and environs. TBS does not reject claims on a *priori* grounds, but rather is committed to objective and critical inquiry. We share the philosophy of the international Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), though TBS is an autonomous local group and is not formally affiliated with CSICOP.

TBS's "\$1,000 Challenge" is open to anyone claiming verifiable scientific proof of the reality of ESP, UFOs, dowsing, astrology, or any paranormal phenomenon. Please contact us for complete details.

TBS Report is published quarterly. We welcome news clippings, and articles and letters for publication (subject to editing for length, clarity, and taste), including opposing points of view. As our budget is very limited, stamped, self-addressed return envelopes would be appreciated with all correspondence.

Views expressed in articles and letters are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the Tampa Bay Skeptics.

TAMPA BAY SKEPTICS
REPORT

Founded in 1988

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\$10/yr. (4 issues)

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CHAIRMAN'S

ORDER

Bring back "Effective Thinking"

by Terry A. Smiljanich

In our quest to educate the public, it sometimes seems that there are two groups of people whom we skeptics address: 1) the converted to our cause, who nod enthusiastically as we rail against ignorance and silliness; and 2) the believers who, after listening patiently to us, will rationalize any negative result and see only confirmation of their particular personal quirk, be it UFOs, psychic powers, etc. One needs no convincing, and the other will never be convinced.

Obviously, the real target of our efforts ought to be those who still retain some semblance of an open mind, people who — in spite of hit movies about ghosts, in spite of tabloid television about alien abductions, in spite of all the media hype — are not quite convinced. Perhaps a few of them are listening when our representatives talk on the radio or TV about skepticism. Maybe a few in the media see an opportunity to service the truth by giving balance to their stories.

But we will only ever reach a few people this way. It is up to our educational systems to teach young minds the efficacy of rational inquiry.

When I went to college back in the sixties, the university system had not yet succumbed to the cry for "relevance" in education; it had not yet restructured the curriculum to reflect the "needs" of the students. The university still required all students to study a foreign language, even though the student may have no "use" for a foreign language skill. The university still required comprehensive courses in general sciences, Western and non-Western humanities, and literature, even though the student might not "need" such courses for his/her major, be it business, agricultural mechanics, or pre-dentistry. The assumption was that all college graduates ought to have a common heritage of core knowledge.

Included in these general requirements at the University of Florida was a course called "Effective Thinking." The only way out of taking this course was to be a science major and take a course in logic and one in higher mathematics. Otherwise, you found yourself, along with every other freshman, studying inductive vs. deductive logic, logical fallacies, and skepticism.

I recently had a much younger sister-in-law attend the same university. Gone were these general requirements. Students now have a smorgasbord of "neat" courses to pick from to satisfy general requirements. Science? Sure, you can take "Weather" or "Modern Transportation." Social Studies? Sure, how about "Leisure in America" or "Capital Punishment"? Effective Thinking? What's that?

One can now get a four-year degree and: 1) not speak any foreign language; 2) not know the difference between inductive and deductive logic; 3) not know why it's hotter in the summer than in the winter; 4) not know which came first, the Civil War or the Spanish-American War; or 5) not know the name of a single book by William Faulkner.

The educational system has let us down. We now have more uneducated college graduates than ever before. Some of the brightest people around are self-educated, curious, open-minded high school graduates who scoff at sheepskin badges of knowledge.

Which brings me back to the Tampa Bay Skeptics. We are foremost an *educational* organization. That's why we should cultivate public appearances. Take my word for it, we could never convince a Janet Sciales that astrology is hogwash, or a Noreen Renier that psychic powers are exercises in self-delusion. They are not our audience. All those uneducated college graduates watching *Unsolved Mysteries* with an uncomfortable feeling of manipulation. All those honest working people who don't believe they "may already have won a million dollars — open the envelope and see!" They are our audience.

So the next time you are engaged in a debate with someone who truly believes that his Uncle Chester can predict the future in his dreams, remember that it is not *he* whom you should expect to be able to convince of the unlikelihood of such a phenomenon. It's the *other* people listening in.

Tampa Bay "Breast Hypnotist" no-shows for Illinois radio show

by David Bloomberg

One recent morning, I was getting ready for work here in Springfield, Illinois and, as usual, had the radio tuned to WYMG FM 100.5 with Don and Liz. They were discussing a man who claimed that he could hypnotize women and thus enlarge their breasts. I immediately realized that I had read about such a man very recently in two issues of the *Tampa Bay Skeptics Report* which I had downloaded only a few days earlier from the Electro-Skeptic Bulletin Board.

Speaking with Don (off the air) confirmed that Michael Stivers, the man discussed in both articles, was indeed the topic of conversation. Stivers was apparently on a cross-country trip to promote himself, which would take him to St. Louis one day and Chicago the next. His wife had called WYMG to ask if he could go on the air between these two appearances. Always willing to promote a good laugh, Don and Liz accepted. Stivers was to be in the studio the very next day.

Upon learning this, I informed Don about the articles and ran down some sketchy details with him, including that Stivers had been a professional wrestler under the name of "Pretty Boy Behning," which got a good laugh. They said they would call me when Stivers came to the studio the next day.

I was able to contact Gary Posner, who had written the previous *TBS Report* stories, and he gave me all the information I could possibly need about Mr. Stivers. I was ready for the next morning.

It seems, however, that Mr. Stivers was not ready. He failed to show up. His wife first claimed that it was the radio station's fault for not confirming, even though the date and time had been confirmed earlier. Then she changed her claim, and said that he had to be called back home, but would return at some later date.

Even without Mr. Stivers' appearance, Don and I discussed the content of the articles at two separate times on the air that morning. I read some of the more interesting quotes and information from the original *St. Petersburg Times* articles, such as that from Martin Orne, the University of Pennsylvania psychiatrist and author of the hypnosis section for the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, who said, "This is a modern type of con." Also, I quoted the original article, which said that Joe McCawley, who trained Stivers in hypnosis, "said he regrets that Stivers has been making public claims about breast enlargement and scar removal. They are unproven, unscientific, and inappropriate."

We were hoping that Stivers would, indeed, decide to come to Springfield so I could discuss these things, along with several contradictions I had found in some of his statements. For example, in the *Times* article from July 1991, he claimed that, "Out of probably 20 [clients], maybe four or five didn't respond well." The same article states, "Stivers says he received 299 phone calls from potential customers in response to [his appearing on a] local talk show." However, the *Times*' February 22 article states, "Stivers said that out of 30 clients who have undergone the breast treatments, only two have failed to show results." So, what we see is that, in seven months, after 299 phone calls, Stivers gained only ten clients. In addition, the number of failures miraculously dropped from four or five to two. Add this to his claim that he does hypnosis "every day for a living, six, sometimes seven days a week," and we are left wondering at the strange math involved.

However, it appears that Mr. Stivers won't be coming to Springfield any time soon after all. His wife called WYMG a few days after I was on the air, and was rather upset. Somebody called and told her what we had said about her husband. She claimed we were speaking ill of him and that we had made false statements (I made absolutely no false statements and stuck completely to the published reports). I think it unlikely that Mr. Stivers will try to obtain more free public exposure on WYMG any time in the foreseeable future.

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CONSULTANT'S COMMENTS

by The Rev. W. Thomas Leckrone

Casting out devils:

Re: Leslie Hale Ministry, Tarpon Springs (following his appearance on Ch. 13's *Eye on Tampa Bay*, Nov. 23). Any attempt to either prove or disprove that Leslie Hale can indeed cast out devils, as he claims, is pretty much an exercise in futility.

There is little doubt in my mind that Hale actually believes that he can. In this respect he is a cut above many of those in similar ministries. This does not, however, imply that he can, or that demons even exist.

Hale is personable, well-spoken, and has a good selective command of biblical passages. He is, therefore, believed by many people. But he also demonstrated that he is severely lacking in knowledge of the actual meaning of the scriptural passages, as well as of medicine and

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SNIPPETS

Great news! New Age Ministries International and its educational division (the Center for Metaphysical Studies) are headquartered right here in Clearwater! Metaphysical minister Dorcas Black can "read the runes" for you and put you in touch with your higher self.

(*St. Pete. Times' "Clearwater Times" section, Aug. 29*)

And Silver Springs, Florida, is home to the Center for Paranormal Studies and investigator Andy Nichols. His team recently photographed a ghost in the haunted home of the Manns, 1424 Lakeview Road, Lakeland. Want more proof?: "Three months ago — shortly after they were married, the family says, Linda was possessed by a ghost. The 105-pound Linda pinned her 260-pound husband to the bed and assaulted him with unnatural strength and energy, the family says." Need we say more?

(*Lakeland Ledger, Nov. 1*)

Wes Johnson may have been barking up the wrong tree in his search for "God's fingerprints" (see p. 1). According to the Oct. 13 *Weekly World News* headline, he should have been looking for "SATAN'S FACE IN HURRICANE ANDREW!" A photo allegedly taken by Thomas Frank provides "proof positive that the devil exists and that it is he who causes the world's disasters."

(*AP via St. Pete. Times, Oct. 4*)



Whoops! We should have known better than to cite the *Weekly World News* as an authoritative source (a story in the same issue, about a horse with a human face and the vocabulary of a 5-year-old child, should have been a dead giveaway). The *real* truth had already been announced by none other than the "First Lady of Shoes," in another screaming headline, this one from the *Examiner*: "Imelda: My dead hubby triggered Hurricane Andrew!" Yes, says Imelda, the spirit of Ferdinand Marcos "is restless and tormented . . . He's wreaking havoc until he's given a proper burial in the homeland he loves."

(*National Examiner, Sept. 22*)

No, Ross Perot does not claim to have caused Hurricane Andrew, nor has the Bush administration accused him of such. But an interesting quote about Perot, by White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater, did make

the news after Perot repeated his 20-year-old yarn about a hit team being chased off his estate by security guards and a dog: "[T]his crazy man's theories . . . It's so crazy that he seems to have latched on to this theory, much like other people latch on to UFO theories, and he seems to believe it."

(*AP via Tampa Tribune, Oct. 27*)

Talk about yarns! Consider the plight of the followers of Korea's huge Mission for the Coming Days church. Their problem stemmed from the church's teaching that there wouldn't be any more coming days after Oct. 28, when the Book of Revelation's "rapture" was to have taken place, culminating in the faithful's ascension to heaven and the end of the world. But "rapture" didn't commence on schedule for the "hundreds and possibly thousands of believers who sold property, left families, quit schools and jobs and deserted military posts . . . When the day passed uneventfully, some people attacked preachers but there were no reports of suicides or other extreme actions by followers." Thankfully, there was indeed *one* suicide — the church "apologized to the nation" and then disbanded.

(*AP via St. Pete. Times, Nov. 3*)

And while we are admitting our mistakes, hats off to the Vatican for officially acknowledging that the earth revolves around the sun. After thirteen years of deliberation, a Papal commission presented John Paul II with its "not guilty" finding for Galileo, who had been forced by the Roman Inquisition to repent and to spend the last eight years of his life under house arrest. But the commission did find that Galileo's clerical judges had acted in good faith, since the Bible does say that "God fixed the Earth upon its foundation, not to be moved forever." After all, according to the newspaper, "The judges feared that if Galileo's ideas were taught, they would undermine Catholic tradition at a time when it was under attack by Protestant reformers." For his part, the Pope says that no longer should one infer "an incompatibility between the spirit of science and its rules of research on the one hand, and the Christian faith on the other . . . one which has its source in Revelation and one which reason can discover by its own power." The Pope declared these two realms of knowledge distinct but compatible.

(*AP & L.A. Times via St. Pete. Times, Nov. 1*)

And even an "official psychic" can make a mistake. Barbara Norcross, Palm Beach's official resident psychic, had predicted in September that President Bush would be re-elected. No matter. The Palm Beach Town Council voted unanimously on Nov. 10 to issue her a license, the first ever approved for a "psychic" by the Council as far as town officials can remember.

(*St. Pete. Times, Nov. 12*)

[Snippets] are derived and rewritten from the referenced sources. Please send your clippings to the editor.]

“One GIANT conundrum” (continued from page 1)

undoing.”

But two of the eleven “seers” interviewed for the *Times* article (The Rev. Richard Fox and “Professor Mako”) did firmly predict that the Giants would stay put. And, interestingly, all four paranormal prognosticator panelists on the September 28 *Eye on Tampa Bay* show had agreed that Tampa Bay would once again be shut out.

TBS has attempted to follow-up with those panelists, without success. Council member Vince Parr, present in the *Eye* audience, reports that all four (when he spoke with them after the program) had expressed to him a willingness to have their powers officially and scientifically tested by TBS for our “\$1,000 Challenge.” Chairman Terry Smiljanich has spoken with two (Jane Warren Schiller and Jason Oliver) on the phone, and followed-up his conversations with letters (both unanswered). The other two (Ronald Cole and The Rev. Donna Jeanne) have not responded to Terry’s messages (two each) that he has left on their answering machines.

—Gary Posner

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“Consultant’s Comments” (continued from page 3)

psychology. Inasmuch as he is trampling on these other disciplines, he should be expected to demonstrate at least a nodding acquaintance with them.

Rites pertaining to exorcisms are to be found in the Roman Catholic and Episcopal churches as well as several others. They are permitted to be used only under the direction of a bishop, but have largely fallen into disuse over the centuries as we have learned more about the causes of those things once thought to be caused by demons.

This does not mean that a person cannot be “made well” by *believing* that he/she has been “made well.” Such depends upon the nature of the illness — mental vs. physical, real vs. imagined. Perhaps this does happen to some of Leslie Hale’s followers. But I fear that the lives of the people whose “devils” were allegedly exorcised by Hale may be worse off after the “exorcism” than before.

Life after death:

George Anderson recently appeared on a segment of NBC-TV’s *Unsolved Mysteries*. He had first come to my attention a year or so ago when one of my parishioners told me about him. She, as well as a couple of her relatives, had been to see him over the years, and had come away fascinated. She is what I would call a stable, rational person, not given to flights of fantasy or emotional or spiritual ecstasy. Consequently I was somewhat surprised at what I took to be her gullibility.

As for myself, I’ve had a rather varied background, as a Naval officer, professional pilot, business executive, and Episcopal priest. I’m a member of Mensa and TBS. I don’t believe in flying saucers, weeping icons, or that the Bucs will ever go to the Super Bowl.

In short, two rather normal people discussing a person

(Anderson) allegedly possessing a certainly *abnormal* ability.

My parishioner gave me a copy of a book about Anderson, *We Don’t Die* (by Joel Martin and Patricia Romanowski, Berkeley Books). I read it with considerable interest and made a mental note that if I was ever in the New York area I would attempt to see him. I hadn’t seen or heard of him again until his recent TV appearance.

Anderson appears to be a rather unassuming man who purports to receive messages from deceased persons whose relatives or friends are in his presence or speaking with him on the telephone. Anderson’s powers are purported to work even with skeptical, “objective” participants whom he has never met. When people call him for an appointment, I understand from my parishioner that they are asked only for their first names — nothing else. Once there, they are asked to answer only “yes” or “no” to questions — additional volunteered information is discouraged. And I am told that the information that he transmits is quite specific.

I am probably somewhat biased toward believing that such communication is possible. From the good research into near-death experiences, as well as my own religious studies, I have come to believe that each person has an indestructible soul. If such spirits exist, then I can see no particular reason why they could not communicate with us if the conditions were right.

The role of a skeptic should not be one of attempting to disprove something. Rather, it should be one of attempting to discern the truth. I believe that George Anderson can probably do what he claims to do. However, I will remain skeptical until he calls my grandfather by name. If and when that happens, you (and probably my cardiologist) will be among the first to know.

[Editor’s note: Given my own biases, and having seen Anderson demonstrate his technique on one of the national TV talk shows, I am quite a bit more skeptical of his alleged abilities than is Tom.]

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Randi / Geller Update: From: James Randi, 14 Dec 92

Hi folks! Things continue to improve. (1) Mr. G’s lawyer in Florida (in the case he has against Prometheus et al.) faxed in a message recently, just 24 hours before a scheduled deposition of his client, saying that the deposed would not be appearing. (2) Mr. G has just made overtures in that case in the UK, suggesting that he would settle for a much lower award, and (3) I have Mr. G scheduled for a deposition in NYC on Feb. 2/93. Very soon, interesting things will begin to happen. Meanwhile, I have just signed another book contract . . . and in 1993 I will be appearing on at least two major, major TV programs that will feature the Geller saga. Another major TV news/investigative show will examine the Geller matter as well. I’ll be doing a major lecture tour in Australia in ’93, too. So, great coverage is coming up and that can only end up going in the direction of unraveling this whole thing in our favor. I’m much encouraged. The ONLY down note is that The James Randi Fund is running low, and in need of a major transfusion. If anyone out there knows of an agency that might promote this cause, I’m ready to do some heavy listening. Thanks for the use of the hall! —J.R.

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Other skeptical sources on the paranormal:

• *The Skeptical Inquirer* •

Flagship journal of
CSICOP / Box 703 / Buffalo, NY 14226

• *Free Inquiry* •

An internat'l secular humanist magazine
Box 664 / Buffalo, NY 14226

• *Prometheus Books* •

50-page catalogue
700 E. Amherst St. / Buffalo, NY 14215

• *CompuServe Skeptics Teleconference* •

A monthly computer forum
3550 Watermelon Rd. #29-A
Northport, AL 35476

St. Pete. Times on "faith- healer" Ernest Angley

In her December 6 *St. Pete. Times* article, Jennifer Stevenson reported upon the Oct. 18 Tampa crusade appearance of TV "faith-healer" Ernest Angley, and the effects of his allegedly curative powers on three of Tampa Bay's most needy "true believers."

Ruby Vincent, 54-years-old and on continuous oxygen due to severe emphysema, watches Angley's TV show "seven days a week." At his Tampa crusade, he "gently laid hands on her and removed the breathing tubes." But within three hours Ruby had reached her limits of endurance, and her oxygen was restarted.

Archie Nichols is a 14-year-old, severely retarded, 38-pound cerebral palsy victim. At the crusade, Angley tells Archie's mother to "watch for changes." No significant changes seem evident, although mom now says, "I think he's smiling more."

Charlotte McClain, battling leukemia at age 13, was in a state of remission. Angley pronounced her "cured" at his Oct. 18 crusade. But taking no chances, Charlotte underwent a bone marrow transplant on Nov. 23. [Tragically, a severe post-op infection has since taken her life.]

Stevenson also quoted CSICOP chairman Paul Kurtz about the possible adverse emotional and physical effects of so-called "faith-healing." Angley and his staff "declined to be interviewed."

Nat'l UFO Conference draws 100 in Tallahassee

The 29th annual convention of the National UFO Conference, held Oct. 24-25 in Tallahassee, attracted "about 100 of the convinced and curious," according to the Oct. 26 A.P. story in the *St. Pete. Times*. Don Ware, Florida state director of the Mutual UFO Network (MUFON), told the press that after years of cover-up, the government and media are

now conspiring to finally let the truth about UFOs trickle out to the general public. Says Ware:

"I'm starting to suspect that the Fox network is somehow supporting the government's covert educational program. There is a lot of evidence that what we see on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is designed to help us understand the larger reality represented by UFOs."

Ware, in a letter to the editor of the Gulf Breeze *Sentinel* (published Nov. 14, 1991), had this to say about the Ed Walters Gulf Breeze photographs, widely acknowledged in UFO circles (except by MUFON) to be a hoax:

"I am convinced [Walters] and others were *allowed* such good photographic opportunities . . . because the occupants wanted people to see the pictures. . . . I know well 60 people who have been on board [the UFOs]. I know several credible people in our area who report frequent telepathic contact . . ."

TBS in the media

TBS founder Gary Posner was interviewed on Dec. 3 by Jackie Keenum for her WFLA Radio public affairs program *Tampa Bay Tomorrow* (the show aired Dec. 6). He and chairman Terry Smiljanich are scheduled to be the guests of Rob Lori on WMNF-FM at 10:00 A.M. on January 7.

Posner's 1989 Tarpon Springs "Weeping Icon" investigation, reported upon in these pages and in CSICOP's *Skeptical Inquirer*, was mentioned in the April 24-30 edition of *Washington (D.C.) City Paper*, in a story about "religious hoaxes."

TBS's \$10,000 challenge to "The Amazing" Kreskin, issued in January 1992 following Kreskin's appearance on *Eye on Tampa Bay*, was reprised in the spring issue of the southern California Skeptics Society's new glossy *Skeptic* magazine, which appears to be gaining a national readership.

LETTERS • READERS' FORUM

Editor: I have been active in many non-profit groups over the past 55 years, and have done quite a bit of organizational work. If I may, I would like to point out that too much of the burden of TBS rests upon only one person, (i.e. you). Although I am renewing my membership, I will no longer attend any meetings or be active in any way. I intend to spend my time in other groups which are perhaps organized a bit differently and in which I can be effective and of help.

Jacques Musy, Valrico

Page 8 of our Spring issue carried an impassioned plea for an infusion of "active blood" to invigorate the group. We received no response whatsoever. What we need, and urgently request, is more, not less, participation by you and the rest of our members. I would gladly relinquish some of my responsibilities to other eager and capable members, should they care to come forward and make their desires known. —G.P.

Editor: The question raised by Mr. Smiljanich in his Fall "Chairman's Corner" is not one of the battle between science and religion, though that battle wages ever strong. It is not about the existence or nonexistence of absolute truths, though that argument continues. It is not about evolution and creation. It is about being a skeptic.

The essential problem is one of a dichotomy or perhaps even a dilemma. That is, how can one person be both a skeptic and a theist. The notions seem to me mutually exclusive. A skeptic accepts only those things that are proven or for which actual facts clearly indicate a high probability of reality. Mr. Smiljanich, and others cited by him, seem able to hold their skepticism in abeyance when the subject comes to "Theos." They are able to compartmentalize their skepticism. He cites Steve Allen as stating, in relation to the existence or nonexistence of an ultimate being, that "I accept the probability that there is some kind of divine force, however, because that appears to me the least preposterous assumption of the two." The acceptance of such a "probability" is contrary to being a skeptic. Mr. Allen, by his own words, acknowledges that the existence of a

divine force is "preposterous." He clearly admits that the probability is extremely low. How then can he call himself a skeptic? Under the same standard (i.e. absurdly low probability), Mr. Allen would say he would not accept UFOs, psychics, and the paranormal in general. Yet, he and Mr. Smiljanich do exactly what they profess not to do: They accept something without proof.

Mr. Smiljanich cites some famous people who agree with his position. He appears to take some pride in the fact that he is in their company. The fact that others, no matter how famous, share his view in no way validates it. In fact, use of such reference is the logical fallacy known as the "appeal to authority," and damages his case. If the same level of skepticism were applied to his belief in an ultimate being, then Mr. Smiljanich would naturally be agnostic. However, his continued defense of his "Theism" exposes the dichotomy.

Mr. Smiljanich states that "Ultimate philosophical and metaphysical statements, however, are not subject to purely rational resolution." Why not? I wonder where Mr. Smiljanich obtained this bit of belief. I wonder just what "Ultimate" means. Is it not simply circular reasoning to posit the "Ultimate" and then conclude a "First Cause"? The word "Metaphysical," from *Webster's 9th Collegiate Dictionary*, has the meaning: "1. a: of or relating to the transcendent or to a reality beyond what is perceptible to the senses b: SUPERNATURAL." Mr. Smiljanich, it would seem from this definition, is saying that he is both a non-believer in the supernatural and a believer at the same time. It is this dichotomy that disturbed the listeners on the radio program and that disturbs me. I submit that a skeptic does not fall to circular reasoning and does not believe anything unless it has a high probability of being true.

Footnote: Mr. Smiljanich referred to Stephen Jay Gould as a "committed evolutionist." Such a reference implies that Dr. Gould is committed to a belief system. I dare say that Dr. Gould is an evolutionist, but within the same context as Mr. Smiljanich is an attorney. That is, Dr. Gould practices the art and science of evolution as Mr.

(continued on page 8)

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“Letters • Readers’ Forum” (continued from page 7)

Smiljanich practices law. Mr. Smiljanich may be a committed theist since he believes in some Absolute, and he may be a committed lawyer since much of his life is dedicated to its practice. However, the two are not the same. A committed theist is committed to a belief in something that cannot be proven, while a committed lawyer is committed to the practice of a profession. Evolution, like law (and it really is a natural law), is factual and a process. It is meaningless to use the words “committed evolutionist” together. An analogy would be to use the words “committed gravityist,” meaning one who is committed to the belief in gravity. Gravity and evolution are laws; no amount of belief or commitment will make them more or less so.

Wesley M. Johnson, Oakland Park

First, I confess to appealing to authority, but not to prove my point; rather it was to refer readers to other writers who do a much better job of expressing themselves on this issue. Second, the “law” of gravity governs calculations of celestial mechanics. The “theory” of gravity postulates a warp in space-time as an explanation. The “law” of evolution, as Mr. Johnson points out, describes the fact of evolving species. The “theory” of evolution postulates natural selection as the driving force. In that light, I think Mr. Johnson unnecessarily criticizes the use of



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the word “commitment.” Dr. Gould is “committed” to the theory, but remains open to contrary evidence, should any ever present itself. —T.A.S.

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