



Selected articles from
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Journalist Guillen gulled by Raelian cult's cloning claims

by Gary P. Posner, M.D.

On January 12, Fox News Channel's Gregg Jarrett showed parts of an interview he had recently conducted with Dr. Michael Guillen, former Emmy Award-winning ABC-TV News science editor and now an embattled freelance journalist. At the Raelians' December 27 press conference in Fort Lauderdale announcing the alleged birth of a human clone, Guillen, who holds a doctorate in theoretical physics, mathematics and astronomy from Cornell University and has taught physics at Harvard, had approached the podium to explain his involvement in coordinating the effort to verify the cult's claims.

As the days passed with no proof forthcoming, it was becoming apparent, even to those predisposed to accept such extraordinary claims at face value, that the Raelians might more aptly be described as Faekians. During his interview, Jarrett read quotes from two prominent detractors of Guillen -- physicist Robert Park (University of Maryland) and James Randi. Jarrett then asked Guillen if perhaps he had been a bit too "gullible" with regard to the Raelians' cloning claims, to which Guillen replied in the negative and then elaborated:

First of all, those two gentlemen that you've just quoted, and everybody seems to be quoting those two same gentlemen, belong to an extremist group called the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal [CSICOP] -- they're based in upstate New York -- and you have to consider the source of their criticism. And I have no trouble with criticism when it's voiced honestly and constructively. But in this case, this is a group, for example, who believes that all religions are a dangerous superstition, and that programs like *The X-Files* are a menace to society and should be pulled off the air. These are folks who don't necessarily defend the truth but a certain point of view. And, listen, they have a right to defend their point of view, but I don't really take that criticism very seriously.

But not all of the media were quoting just those two gentlemen. On the day of the Raelians' press conference, Tampa Bay Skeptics received media inquiries from the *Miami Herald*, Newhouse News Service, and Alan McBride of Florida's Radio Network. McBride and the *Herald* interviewed me, and though my actual phraseology had been more nuanced, Herald TV critic Glenn Garvin got the big picture correct when he had me saying, "For Guillen to call himself a scientist is really to besmirch the term. His approach to claims of the paranormal is extremely unscientific. He's willing to believe anything." [See the [Miami Herald article](#).]

Two of the three media contacts had called us not to discuss the cloning controversy per se, but Michael Guillen, whose role had become a story unto itself. Apparently they had found, on the Internet, [a brief item](#) I had written in the aftermath of my August 13, 2001, appearance on ABC-TV's *20/20 Downtown*. Guillen had been the correspondent for a sympathetic 20-minute story about the miraculous healing power of distant prayer, during which my interview was pared down to 20 seconds of token "balance." My piece appeared in the Winter 2001-02 *TBS Report* and as a "News & Comment" item in the Nov./Dec. 2001 *Skeptical Inquirer*.

Upon reading my complaints about that program, Guillen [responded to me](#) by e-mail on 10/25/01, saying in part that over the years he had done "thousands" of science stories, yet fewer than a dozen had dealt with the paranormal. He added that he "almost always" included a dissenting voice, often from CSICOP, yet all he has "gotten for [his] troubles" has been "belly-aching and sniping. Nothing is ever enough for CSICOP people."

Guillen went on to express the opinion that CSICOP is "not interested in promoting the truth, but merely its own peculiar philosophy." Further, he compared the contents of *Skeptical Inquirer* to "the fanatical rantings of the infamous Senator [Joseph] McCarthy; but instead of trying to root out Communism invoking circumstantial evidence, CSICOP is bent on rooting out what it perceives as wrong-headedness, invoking accusations such as 'it could be fraud' or 'it might be chance' or 'the experiment isn't perfect,' and on and on. Different cause; same narrow-minded and dangerous mentality in my book." He added that despite his "weariness" with CSICOP, he continues to be "as fair to everyone . . . as humanly possible."

In my reply to his astonishing allegations, I explained to Guillen that "CSICOP was chartered to poke holes in such unlikely claims -- unless they happen to be strong enough to withstand the assault intact. That's how scientific scrutiny is *supposed* to proceed -- the 'null' hypothesis is assumed true (i.e., the novel claim is assumed false) until the accumulation of non-hole-pokeable evidence compels otherwise. Science isn't about equal deference to all claims."

And in reply to his January 12 accusations on Fox News Channel, Randi and CSICOP promptly sent letters to FNC setting the record straight. (Coincidentally, I had managed to capture the Fox interview on tape and had made it immediately available to Randi and CSICOP.)

Excerpting from Randi, whose foundation had awarded Guillen its "flying pig" award in 1997 for what it termed (Guillen feels unfairly so) his "indiscriminate promotion of pseudoscience and quackery":

Neither I nor Dr. Bob Park are connected with, or members of, CSICOP. Dr. Park

represents the American Physical Society, and I represent the James Randi Educational Foundation. I have never stated, nor have I ever held the opinion, that "programs like *The X-Files* are a menace to society," or that such programs "should be pulled off the air."

The following is from CSICOP's response:

Our committee is not, as Michael Guillen claims, an "extremist group." It is a non-profit science organization which publishes the highly respected magazine *Skeptical Inquirer* and promotes the critical and scientific examination of paranormal and fringe-science claims. Its fellows include several internationally respected scientists and scholars, among them Neil deGrasse Tyson, director of the American Museum of Natural History's Hayden Planetarium, Nobel laureate physicist Steven Weinberg, and SETI Institute Director of Research Jill Tarter. The Committee finds it both ironic and laughable that Guillen, a freelance journalist who has spent months working with a fringe UFO cult . . . to promote their bizarre human cloning agenda, chooses to characterize our committee as "extremist." The Committee has never advocated media censorship, nor has it ever characterized "all religions" as "dangerous superstitions." . . . Neither James Randi nor Robert Park are fellows of the Committee. They make their public statements independent of our organization.

In addition, *Skeptical Inquirer* editor Ken Frazier, a longtime friend of Guillen's (though somewhat estranged through the years due to their disparate views), informs me that he wrote a personal letter to Guillen expressing his dismay at Guillen's characterization of *S.I.* and CSICOP. In that letter, in addition to reiterating what Randi and CSICOP had told Fox News, Frazier pointed out to Guillen that not only had CSICOP never advocated that *The X-Files* be taken off the air, but its creator had been a featured speaker at an annual CSICOP conference, with as many fans as critics in the audience.

Frazier further informs me that Guillen has responded very warmly to his letter, expressing a more conciliatory attitude and even a desire to initiate a working relationship with CSICOP. According to Frazier, Guillen ascribed his televised anti-CSICOP tirade to having felt deeply hurt by the recent criticisms from Randi and Dr. Park, both of whom Guillen thought were representing CSICOP. However, as Guillen's previously referenced e-mail to me attests, his extreme views toward CSICOP and *Skeptical Inquirer* predate the recent Raelian fiasco.

In his approach toward reporting upon paranormal claims, Michael Guillen has been the mirror image of John Stossel, another ABC-TV science journalist, but one whose skepticism parallels that of CSICOP and TBS. I predict that despite Guillen's self-professed change of heart, once the Raelian stench dissipates a bit more and his wounded reputation begins to heal, his disdain for CSICOP will return with a vengeance. For his old friend Ken's sake, if for no other reason, I certainly hope I am proven wrong.

Comments on the CFI–Florida Inaugural Conference

by **Miriam Blake Basart**

[Center for Inquiry – Florida](#) held its inaugural conference on February 7-9 at the Radisson Hotel on Roosevelt Blvd. in St. Petersburg. It was an epoch-making event, hosting speakers from near as well as such faraway places as Australia and New Zealand. Each provided a fresh and stimulating view of their chosen topic.

The weekend provided camaraderie and chances for new contacts with like-minded people. The speakers were first class in their knowledge and entertainment value. Many gave audio-visual presentations while others simply used a few notes.

Paul Kurtz, chairman of the parent CFI in Amhurst, New York, spoke of current world affairs. Later he led a fundraising drive and showed a short movie showcasing the work of himself and the staff of the CFI Centers in New York and Los Angeles.

Topics at the conference were as diverse as sex education and flying saucers. Deborah Roffman spoke about the need for proper sex education for children, so that their knowledge about this important subject does not come from the gutter. Our own Gary Posner gave a [PowerPoint presentation](#) about his [early belief in UFOs](#) and how even [the police can be beguiled](#) by the alleged "fact-finding powers" of a psychic.

Richard Lead, from Australia, added humor and sadness with his animated talk of how even the upscale scam artists, with a fancy office address, can separate gullible people from their money as easily as the stereotypical wide-shouldered, mustachioed con artists depicted in films.

There were about 15 or 16 speakers in total, including magician Bob Steiner, one of the founders of the (San Francisco) Bay Area Skeptics, who performed some amazing card illusions.

Throughout the meeting rooms, many works of *St. Petersburg Times* (and *TBS Report*) cartoonist Don Addis were displayed on easels. Don told me that he attends the *Times* newsroom meetings every morning in order to produce topical editorial cartoons.

The new CFI–Florida, which is chaired by [Jan Loeb Eisler](#) (who is also a member of the TBS Executive Council), intends to operate a community center for uniting people of varied economic, racial and cultural backgrounds through education, dialogue and cooperation. Unlike typical faith-based centers, CFI is rooted in scientific naturalism and secular humanism, an organized philosophical system that looks towards human beings rather than gods to solve human problems.

Families in Reason, a major CFI–Florida initiative, supports freethinking parents in the Tampa Bay area through discussion and activities designed to help nurture critical thinking and reasoning skills in their children. In a similar vein, Camp Inquiry, also sponsored by CFI–Florida, will provide additional human enrichment programs for children.

[Note: CFI – Florida has since been renamed Center For Inquiry Tampa Bay]

Tampa Bay's "Star Goddess" develops new web presence

Local astrologer Janet Sciales, the "Star Goddess" on FM 98.7's morning Freak Show, has [a new presence on the web](#) as of December. [We last reported on Sciales](#) in our Summer 2002 issue following a major *St. Petersburg Times* article about her.

Upon looking over her website, several issues came to mind, and Gary Posner sent Sciales the following letter, on TBS letterhead, to which we have received no reply:

January 30, 2003

Dear Janet:

It has been a long time. I hope you are well.

I see that you have a new website, which we will be mentioning in the next issue of our newsletter, and I have added a link to it from my own website. However, upon looking over your site, the following two questions arise to which I would appreciate replies for publication:

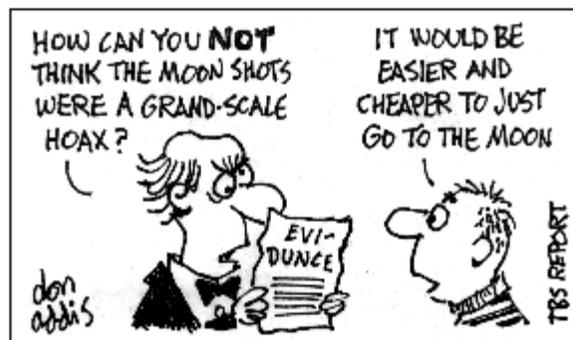
(1) Several sections of your site appear to be devoted to sun-sign astrology, which you characterized as "bogus" when you addressed our group back in 1988. I am tempted to ask what changed your mind, but if I'm not mistaken you were doing sun-sign astrology on *Murphy in the Morning* even back then. Please explain.

(2) When I first met you at your office (the day after your story was rerun on *60 Minutes*), you told me that you agreed with me that "psychic" power was not genuine, and you even joined TBS for a year! Yet I recall having since seen you described as a "psychic astrologer," and on your website you describe your sister as "the best psychic on the planet." Please explain.

Also, we remain desirous of testing either you or your sister, or both, under mutually agreeable conditions, for our ["\\$1,000 Challenge"](#) prize -- perhaps "live" on Kathy Fountain's TV show -- to see if you are able to demonstrate either genuine astrological or psychic abilities under proper observing conditions.

We hope to hear back from you soon.

Snippets



Rumors that the U.S. Apollo program was a hoax, and that no manned spacecraft ever landed on the moon, continue to flourish, especially via the Internet. Apollo 11 moonwalker Buzz Aldrin was even provoked to throw a punch last September at a provocateur (criminal charges were not filed). One such video, being marketed as a "documentary" at www.moonmovie.com, is entitled *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Moon*. NASA decided to commission a book exposing these myths for what they are, and offered the job, and \$15,000, to aerospace engineer and author [James Oberg](#). However, NASA shortly thereafter cancelled the project, apparently out of concern that such a NASA project would lend some degree of respectability to the charges. Oberg plans to secure other funding and write the book anyway.

(*St. Pete. Times*, Oct. 6 & Oct. 31)

Ten days after the Raelians' press conference and a few days before his controversial Fox News Channel interview was aired (see page 1 story), the light began to dawn upon science journalist Michael Guillen. On January 6, he issued a statement in which he acknowledged the possibility that "Clonaid's announcement [may have been] part of an elaborate hoax intended to bring publicity to the Raelian movement." Do you think? But as Natalie Dewitt, an editor with *Nature*, perhaps the world's premier science journal, explained, "We have been ignoring [the Clonaid/Raelian story] because we don't view it as a scientifically valid [claim]." Just the sort of attitude (i.e., scientific) that Guillen rails against.

(A.P. and *N.Y. Times* via *St. Pete. Times*, Jan. 7)

Last October, the "North of Tampa" section of the *St. Petersburg Times* carried [a major article](#) on "traditional Chinese medicine" by staff writer Jackie Ripley. The focus was Dr. Yali Fan, who worked at the Florida Institute of Traditional Medicine in St. Pete. before opening her own clinic in Town 'N Country. Though the author does note in passing that alternative medicine is "controversial in some circles," the typical reader would be led to conclude that such modalities as acupuncture, Tui Na massage and Qigong are effective in treating a wide variety of ailments including digestive, reproductive and respiratory disorders (including asthma).

(*St. Pete. Times*, Oct. 6)

Randi coming to town for freethinkers convention

James "The Amazing" Randi will be a featured speaker at the 2003 Atheist Alliance International educational and fellowship convention (April 18-20) in Tampa, hosted this year by Atheists of Florida. 300-400 people are expected to attend, representing many autonomous freethought (not merely atheist) groups from around the world. Randi has also been booked on Ch. 13's *Your Turn with Kathy Fountain* on Friday, April 18 (12:30 p.m.).

For more information, [see here](#) or contact Alex Giannakoulis [by e-mail](#) or at (727) 639-9333.

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