



Selected articles from  
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## **TBS merges with Center For Inquiry–*Florida***

By [Terry A. Smiljanich](#)

"Welcome!" So declared the e-mail received by TBS on January 12, 2004, from Barry Karr, Executive Director of both CSICOP and the Center For Inquiry–*International*. After months of discussions, Tampa Bay Skeptics and the Center For Inquiry–*Florida* (CFI–*FL*) have successfully completed negotiations for the merger of TBS and CFI–*FL*.

### **Center For Inquiry–*International***

The [Center For Inquiry–\*International\*](#) is a non-profit corporation comprised of two primary "wings." The "skeptical" wing is occupied by The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal ([CSICOP](#)), publisher of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine. Paul Kurtz, who founded CSICOP in 1976, later helped found the Council for Secular Humanism ([CSH](#)), which comprises CFI's "humanist" wing and publishes *Free Inquiry* magazine. Despite Kurtz's central role in both organizations, CSICOP and CSH had originally been entirely separate entities until 1995, when Kurtz created the Center For Inquiry model in order to address both scientific and ethical/religious skepticism under one roof -- literally -- the beautiful CFI–*International* headquarters in Amherst, New York.

### **Center For Inquiry–*Florida***

[CFI–\*Florida\*](#), which was established a little more than a year ago, is the local branch of CFI–*International*. As in other cities that will or now have a CFI branch (such as Los Angeles), CFI–*FL* will have more than one "wing," with TBS playing the CSICOP-type role.

TBS and CSICOP, the premier skeptical organization in the world, have always shared the same

interests in exposing pseudoscientific shenanigans and promoting rational inquiry about the natural world. In fact, it was with CSICOP's invaluable assistance that TBS was founded in the first place. But with this merger, TBS now becomes officially affiliated with CSICOP.

Moral/ethical/religious/humanist issues -- areas that are beyond the scope of TBS's charter -- will be addressed by other aspects of CFI-*FL*. TBS will continue to concentrate its efforts in the realm of scientific skepticism.

### **Tampa Bay Skeptics**

So have no fear -- TBS will not disappear. Quite the contrary. Although the bookkeeping and finances will be more centralized, Tampa Bay Skeptics remains a separately incorporated entity promoting rational inquiry and challenging purported psychics to put up or shut up. But rather than continuing to fly solo, TBS will function as a "Special Interest Group" of the Center for Inquiry-*Florida*.

Individuals can continue to pay for official TBS membership, or simply for a subscription to *TBS Report*, without having to also join CFI-*FL* proper (though the TBS fee is being raised from \$13 to \$15). TBS members are, of course, welcome -- even encouraged -- to become full members of CFI-*FL*, should they so desire, through payment of its standard \$45 dues.

TBS will continue to convene quarterly meetings. The website will remain intact, though it soon will be relocated to within the CFI site. The media will continue to receive *TBS Report* gratis and will know that they can still turn to us for the skeptical point of view in connection with news stories or events related to the paranormal. And TBS's "\$1,000 Challenge" remains a beacon to anyone claiming the ability to demonstrate the existence of any paranormal phenomenon.

### **CFI-*Florida* and Secular Humanism**

Though not a religion, secular humanism does deal with many religious subjects such as ethics and moral values, and CFI-*Florida* will play a major role in addressing these issues. Such topics are not, however, addressed by CSICOP, which examines paranormal claims from a scientific and skeptical perspective, nor have they been or will they be addressed by the TBS Special Interest Group of CFI-*FL*. TBS's "special interests" lie elsewhere.

So, in answer to the question, "Must TBS members be atheists or secular humanists?" the answer is an emphatic "Absolutely not!" If we did, I would have to quit TBS myself. Of course, if a proponent of religion claims that his healing powers can cure cancer or turn lead into gold, he's fair game for TBS.

### **Advantage: TBS**

CSICOP is the premier skeptical organization in the world and has included among its luminaries people such as Carl Sagan, Stephen Jay Gould, James Randi, Martin Gardner, Phillip Klass and Richard Dawkins. By merging with CFI-*Florida*, TBS is now officially affiliated with CSICOP and its long tradition. And by being a part of CFI's efforts, TBS will hopefully now be able to carve out a larger presence in the state.

By merging TBS under the umbrella of the Center For Inquiry-*Florida* rather than continuing to go it

alone, the skeptical message will not be diluted by the presence of two entirely separate organizations. In concert, TBS and its parent CFI will prove an even more formidable force for reason than either could without the other. Charlatans beware!

[2009 Note: Center For Inquiry–*Florida* has since been renamed Center For Inquiry Tampa Bay, Center For Inquiry–*International* has since been renamed Center For Inquiry–*Transnational*, and CSICOP has since been renamed CSI (Committee for Skeptical Inquiry).]

## So Just What Is a "Skeptic" Anyway?

By Valerie Grey

A skeptic is someone who thinks that if you're telling the truth about an extraordinary claim, you shouldn't object to proving it -- and isn't afraid to ask you to do so.

But first, just what is it that makes a claim "extraordinary"?

If you tell me you have goat in your backyard, and I know you have cows and pigs and chickens, there's nothing at all unreasonable about your claim to have a goat. If I know you to be an honest person from past interaction, I probably wouldn't question it. Sure, you could still be lying in this particular instance (say, as a practical joke), but your claim is hardly "extraordinary."

Now, if I know you live in the city, where there's a zoning ordinance against keeping farm animals in your backyard, then it's a little less likely, but it's certainly not impossible, and it's "extraordinary" only in the mildest sense. If you keep your goat quiet and out of sight, then, granted, it may be a violation of the "laws of man" -- but not the "laws of nature." To be sure, a Polaroid of little Billy munching on grass in front of your very distinctive back door would probably go a long way toward convincing me of your bona fides.

Now, if you swear with a completely straight face -- even if it's on a stack of Bibles -- that you have a real live *unicorn* in your backyard, a mere photograph ain't gonna cut it. This claim definitely qualifies as "extraordinary." So far as I know, there's nothing biologically impossible about a horse-like mammal having a single horn; after all, there are lots of hooved quadrupeds with horns. But the fact that there has never been a documented sighting of one before and that there's a certain minimal gene pool required for the perpetuation of a species make it seem a pretty unlikely possibility.

I'm going to figure it's much more likely that you're just trying to pull my leg -- for fun or profit (maybe I'm just a test case to see if you can get away with charging admission). This I'm definitely going to want to see for myself before I believe you. And not just from a distance, but up close, hands on. And even if it looks and feels real, I know from past experience that, unfortunately, like most people, I'm pretty easy to fool, especially when it comes to professional con jobs. I'll want to bring in a team of genuine, reputable experts, including biologists, veterinarians, magicians, and movie special-effects people, who'll want to perform tests such as comparing the DNA of the horn to the DNA of the "unicorn."

But chances are I'll never be allowed to get that far. I'm much more likely to hear (in a hurt and/or offended tone, of course -- very Academy of Dramatic Arts), "Do you doubt my word?! Are you calling me a liar?!" Every confidence man, swindler, snake-oil salesman, and Mercedes-Benz-driving television evangelist who preaches "family values" while he's cheating on his wife knows how to turn most people's reluctance to be "rude" and call you a liar to your face to their own financial advantage.

Or you might hear, "Sorry, but I can only allow you to see a photograph of my unicorn." And a fuzzy photograph taken at a considerable distance at that.

Or, "Oh, no, I can't allow you to get close to him. You have to view him from twenty feet away." In the dark, through a dirty window.

Or, "Touching him is out of the question. He's very sensitive, especially if you touch him anywhere near his horn." As in, it tends to fall off -- is that it?

Or, "I'm afraid I couldn't possibly allow you to bring any experts in. Corny is practically a member of the family. Your scientists and investigators would try to exploit our precious pet for professional gain and ruin our lives with unwanted publicity." God forbid they should be inconvenienced by a little favorable press for the sake of radically advancing our knowledge of the world. Wanting to avoid being exposed as frauds, on the other hand, is quite understandable.

Or, "The world isn't ready for something as radical as a real live unicorn. It would be like real aliens. It would create panic in the streets." Get real.

Or, "We don't want the media to get wind of this because we're not interested in the enormous financial revenues such an historic biological revelation would undoubtedly produce." Sure they're not. Just like most "psychics" say they don't use their ESP powers to win the lottery because they're not interested in the money, or their powers don't work when it's for personal financial gain. Apparently, it never occurs to them that they could give their jackpots to charity. It also apparently never occurs to them that when they set up shop and charge their marks -- I mean clients -- fees for reading their palms or auras or whatever, they're using their alleged powers for their own "personal financial gain."

Facts are facts. People tell falsehoods. Sometimes it's innocent, because they are honestly mistaken or because they have trusted what someone else has told them, who in turn may have trusted what someone else told them, ad infinitum -- until you finally get to someone who is either honestly mistaken or who doesn't know, for certain, it is actually true, or who is deliberately claiming something patently false -- a.k.a. lying.

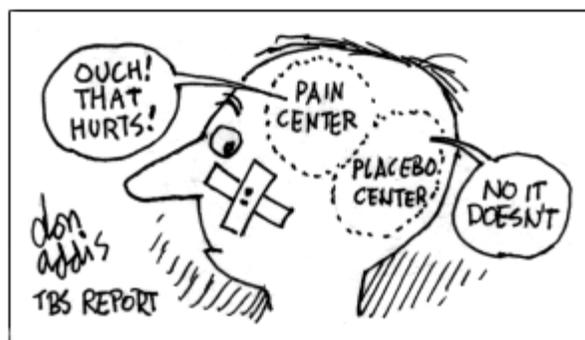
Yes. People lie. Frequently. Fluently. In fact, sometimes it seems that's what we do best. Think about it: We give fancy awards to actors for -- basically -- how expertly and convincingly they lie. We teach our children to lie and literally punish them for telling the truth -- all in the name of "good manners." ("Tell Aunt Martha how pretty you think her new dress is." Gag.) But usually the motive is not one of kindness, but is more self-serving: to defraud someone out of money, to shift blame and avoid punishment, to obtain undeserved respect or admiration or a better-paying job, to trick a child into a car for rape and murder, to get religious zealots to be suicide bombers for a nonreligious political agenda, with promises about an afterlife that, very conveniently, don't have to be kept.

People are gullible. Some more than others. Little children have to believe what their parents tell them or they won't survive. "Hope" in a better future, no matter how remote or unlikely, is what keeps us striving against all odds, against all the pain, grief and despair a hostile universe can serve up. But part of growing up is -- or at least should be -- learning to distinguish *wishful* thinking from *reality-based* thinking.

Wishful thinking is Anne Frank's famous words from her World War II diary, written while she and her family were in hiding from the Nazis: "I still believe that deep down human beings are good at heart." Reality-based thinking is Anne's stepsister Eva Schloss's words, written after her harrowing, fluke survival of the Birkenau concentration camp: "I cannot help remembering that Anne wrote this before she experienced Auschwitz and Belsen."

The skeptic says, "If you make an extraordinary claim and you refuse to demonstrate it under conditions that rule out deception or cheating, and you act offended if I question your veracity, then you appear to have dishonest intentions whether you admit it to yourself or not." The difference between the gullible believer and the skeptic is that the latter probably isn't going to give you the benefit of the doubt.

## Snippets



Three recent brain imaging studies conducted at the University of Michigan, UCLA and Princeton, and published in *Science* and *Neuroimaging*, suggest that people's faith in the effectiveness of a placebo can alter their neural circuits as would an analgesic agent, resulting in genuine diminution of pain. Two of the studies involved administering painful shocks to dozens of volunteers. When later given a placebo cream to apply and told that it was an analgesic, brain imaging revealed startling results. Said psychologist Tor Wagner from the Michigan group, "We actually see the physical changes in the brain that correspond closely to changes in symptoms that the patients report."

(*L.A. Times* via *St. Pete. Times*, Feb. 20)

Although Tampa Bay Skeptics has been around for 16 years, one Bay-area octogenarian has been debunking "psychic mediums" for more than three decades. Born and raised in London but now living in Bradenton, Ben Alexander travels the world expounding upon the folly of believing that "psychic mediums" such as [John Edward](#) (host of *Crossing Over*) actually speak to the dead. But before you decide to vote him onto the TBS Executive Council, you might want to know that he has seen ectoplasmic spirits materialize at séances and believes that those genuine "psychics" who truly *do* speak with the dead are actually speaking with Satan. He recounts that when using a Ouija board, "We felt an evil presence and we heard, 'All is dark.' . . . Over and over and over again. And the Bible would get raised and slammed against the wall." He is so knowledgeable about such matters that, as reported in this disheartening passage from [Leonora LaPeter's article](#), "[A handful of the Central Christian School students] who heard Alexander [speak] said they accepted his message without question. So did the principal of the 350-student religious school, Rhonna Bodin." At least [James Randi](#), also quoted in the article, remains skeptical of Alexander's claims.

(*St. Pete. Times*, Feb. 20)

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## A Warm Welcome From *CFI-International*

I am very pleased to be able to say to members of the Tampa Bay Skeptics, "Welcome to the Center for Inquiry!" For many years Tampa Bay Skeptics has provided a voice for rationality, scientific thought, and a large dose of common sense to the Tampa Bay community and, truth be told, the world community as well.

For over two decades, the programs of public education and advocacy headquartered at the [Center for Inquiry](#) in Amherst, New York, such as The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal ([CSICOP](#)), the Council for Secular Humanism ([CSH](#)), and the new [Commission for Scientific Medicine](#), have developed into leading resources for the inquiry community as well.

With the recent establishment of a branch of the Center in the Tampa Bay area, it seemed clear that a combination of resources, expertise, and organizational know-how between the Center and TBS would make a great deal of sense in the never-ending battle to oppose pseudoscience and superstition, while at the same time promote science, the scientific method and freedom of inquiry.

Centers for Inquiry create a shared community where secular humanists, skeptics, philosophical naturalists -- indeed everyone who is interested in the implications of the scientific outlook for society's most cherished beliefs -- can come together and advocate for the values that they share.

However, one does not need to embrace all the various aims of the Center for Inquiry to be an active and enthusiastic member of the Tampa Bay Skeptics. TBS will continue to operate as a Special Interest Group within the Center. You will continue to publish your excellent newsletter, you will continue to act as a resource for the media, conduct investigations, and maintain your very informative website. But now you will also share in the economies of scale that we can provide from

the Center, and you will grow as the Center grows.

This is an exciting time for all of us involved with CSICOP, CSH, CFI and the Tampa Bay Skeptics. Glad to have you with us!

--Barry Karr  
Executive Director  
Center for Inquiry--*International*

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## TBS/CFI in the Media

[Paul Kurtz](#) was a guest on Kathy Fountain's *Your Turn* show (Ch. 13) on Feb. 20. [Gary Posner](#) was interviewed by *The Record* (New Jersey) on Feb. 18 for an [article on medical prayer studies](#), to be published in March.

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## Letter to the Editor

Editor: Your websites -- both [your personal one](#) and that of TBS -- are excellent. They have been very useful in helping me assist police agencies that are intermittently plagued by psychics trying to inject themselves into homicide investigations.

One case involved a woman whose sister was likely abused, as a child, by a friend of the family. But she has now developed some false memories regarding the abuser, coupled with her "psychic gifts" regarding this man being responsible for a 30-year-old homicide and another that occurred three years ago.

By the way, I have been consulted by the Florida Department of Law Enforcement in the past, and have also been brought down to present to the Florida Sex Crimes Investigators Association on two occasions -- once in Tampa and once in Orlando.

--Peter Collins, M.C.A., M.D., F.R.C.P.(C)  
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