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UFO UpDates Mailing List

Re: Failure Of The 'Science' Of Obergian Debunking

From: **Jerome Clark** <jkclark@frontiernet.net>
Date: Tue, 20 Oct 98 05:29:02 PDT
Fwd Date: Wed, 21 Oct 1998 16:44:21 -0400
Subject: Re: Failure Of The 'Science' Of Obergian Debunking

>Date: Mon, 19 Oct 1998 04:18:55 -0700
>From: Ed Stewart <ufoindex@jps.net>
>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <updates@globalserve.net>
>Subject: Re: Failure Of The 'Science' Of Obergian Debunking

>>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <updates@globalserve.net>
>>From: Jerome Clark <jkclark@frontiernet.net>
>>Subject: Re: Failure Of The 'Science' Of Obergian Debunking
>>Date: Sat, 17 Oct 98 17:05:17 PDT

>>>Date: Mon, 12 Oct 1998 01:03:53 -0400
>>>From: Nancy White <njw@ix.netcom.com>
>>>To: UFO UpDates - Toronto <updates@globalserve.net>
>>>Subject: Re: Failure Of The 'Science' Of Obergian Debunking

>>Sagan, however, stacked the deck with skeptical
>>scientists, most of whom (e.g., Philip Morrison, whose own
>>knowledge, such as it was, was based, by his own admission, on
>>occasional casual reading of the UFO literature) had little or
>>no investigative experience and were largely unfamiliar with the
>>evidence.

>Typical Jerome Clark distortion we have come to experience on
>this mailing list. The title of Philip Morrison's presentation
>was 'The Nature of Scientific Evidence: A Summary'. Dr. Steven
>J. Dick, a reference recommended by Jerome Clark on a previous
>post for his observations on "Edward U. Condon, UFOs and the
>Various Cultures of Science" describes Morrison's contribution
>to the conference thusly in his book 'The Biological Universe',
>page 306 - from a chapter in the book which according to Steven
>J. Dick was directly based from his notes of his previously
>cited paper by Jerome Clark.

> "Philip Morrison, with his penchant for zeroing in on
>the significant issues, argued that the debate came down to the
>nature of scientific evidence. 'Reproducibility' was not enough,
>for one could not reproduce an aurora or eclipse, nor was 'hard
>evidence' enough (or Darwin would have been in trouble). The
>prime requirement for responsible evidence, he held, drawing a
>parallel with the nineteenth-century acceptance of meteorites as
>extraterrestrial, was 'independent and multiple chains of
>evidence, each capable of satisfying a link-by-link test of
>meaning.' Neither the extraterrestrial hypothesis nor any other
>explanation of UFOs had multiple chains of evidence or a
>link-by-link test."

The two scientists most qualified to discuss the UFO evidence at

the AAAS panel were Hynek and McDonald, who had an enormous amount of investigative experience and thorough familiarity with the data. Morrison, on the other hand, had -- by his own admission -- no more familiarity than casual reading of unspecified UFO literature (George Adamski? Frank Edwards? Brinsley le Poer Trench?). In no other field than UFO-bashing would this sort of ignorance qualify one as an expert. Hynek and McDonald rightly objected to Morrison's claim to expertise or insight, and I suspect most people would. Ignorance is not strength, even in UFO-debunking.

>>If this is tolerance, ignorance is strength, war is peace, and I am
>>emperor of the moon.

>>>Please, it is not necessary to demonize a respected man and a
>>>wonderful communicator ('Cosmos' probably brought many people
>>>into the mind frame necessary to think about UFOs etc) just
>>>because he disagrees with you and may actually have good arguing
>>>points, just as you most likely do to support your position.

I have become convinced that Ed Stewart, who is the most abusive polemicist I have seen in this field next to Bob Todd, honestly cannot tell the difference between criticism and demonization. It is his view, repeatedly betrayed in prose that can only be characterized as consistently mean-spirited, that one cannot disagree with him without being a bad human being. I have nowhere said or implied that Sagan and Morrison were bad human beings (I have neither opinion nor information on that subject -- nor, actually, interest); what I did say is that they did not advance UFO research or offer much elucidation about the nature of the UFO phenomenon. I am sure everybody on this list except Ed Stewart grasped my point.

>>Interesting that our correspondent here uses the verb
>>"demonize." Sagan, as his 'Demon-Haunted World' book makes
>>clear, charged, and may have even believed on some level, that
>>people who hold views about controversial anomalies different
>>from his are little better than superstition-crazed
>>demonologists. Sagan's role in ufology is not, to be fair, so
>>uniformly dismal as Donald Menzel's was,

>Just a minor point on Menzel. We have all been told how demon
>Menzel's debunking of UFOs was so devastating to ufology that to
>this date he still exerts an influence even though buried in his
>grave for a quarter century. Interesting that while alive he
>wasn't able to convince the Air Force of his debunking
>explanations. He must of been some kind of influence to
>accomplish from the grave what the Air Force refused to listen
>to while he was alive! On another note, it was Sagan's stacked
>deck of skeptical scientists, including Menzel, that lobbied the
>Air Force to preserve intact the Project Blue Book files for
>future generations to be able to study and research.

At least we agree on something: Menzel "still exerts an influence even though buried in his grave." His work was cited as definitive in an anti-UFO rant by Frederick Crews in the influential New York Review of Books a few weeks ago.

Beyond that:

"Must have," not "must of," Ed. For revealing perspectives on Menzel, I refer interested readers to James McDonald's documented examples of Menzel's free use of pseudoscience in the pursuit of UFO explanations, or to astronomer Ian Seymour's observation on Menzel's methodology and willingness to distort data, or to the private views of Ruppelt and other Air Force luminaries of Menzel (highly unfavorable). All of these are discussed in my UFO Encyclopedia, and I cite bibliographic references for those seeking more information. I also recommend, if you can find it, Brad Sparks's privately circulated monograph "Refuting the Skeptics: A Close Look at Donald H. Menzel" (1977).

>>but it was not among
>>his better or more admiral moments as a scientist, and it is
>>foolish - and blind to unhappy reality - to praise it.

>Jerome Clark also took issue with an obituary that Barry
>Greenwood wrote in JUST CAUSE praising Carl Sagan's
>contributions and wrote a typical Jerome Clark letter for which
>Barry Greenwood rebutted in the following issue, JUST CAUSE #50,

>03/97, pages 4-6. The rebuttal is too lengthy to re-type here in
>its entirety. Suffice to say that Jerry Clark's pettiness and
>obsession with a dead exobiologist did not go unanswered. The
>initial paragraph of Barry Greenwood's response should be enough
>to make its point:

"I am sorry that my memory of Carl Sagan's influence on
>not just my own interest in the search for extraterrestrial life
>but on science's as well has bothered you. It is however
>precisely what I had expected from a good chunk of the UFO
>community. Sagan was critical of the notion that aliens are
>visiting the earth. He did not deny that UFO reports should be
>investigated. In fact in his essay from 'UFOs: A Scientific
>Debate' (ed. Sagan and Page, 1972), Sagan argued for judgement to
>be withheld on UFOs, that "there isn't enough data...and that
>an open mind should be kept."

It's just too bad that Sagan didn't follow his own advice about
keeping an open mind. (And how do you know "there isn't [sic]
enough data" when you're not looking for such data?) For further
information, if you're interested, in my views of Sagan, I refer
readers to my essay "Carl Sagan's Demons," IUR, Summer 1996, pp.
3-5,32.

For reasons best known to himself, Ed Stewart thinks only
hagiographical commentary on Sagan is permissible; all else is
demonology -- a subject about which Ed, as a regular
practitioner, knows rather more than the rest of us.

To Sagan's critics, of whose existence (except mine) Stewart
seems oblivious, the man Ed reveres so much confused a religious
quest with scientific inquiry. In his 'The Extraterrestrial Life
Debate 1750-1900' (Cambridge University Press, 1986), historian
of science Michael J. Crowe has this to say:

"Persons skeptical of traditional Christian conceptions of
heaven or the afterlife have imagined planetary paradises
populated by angelic extraterrestrials.... Sagan, although
disparaging the messianic motives of some flying saucer
enthusiasts, has suggested that the mere detection of an
extraterrestrial radio signal would provide `an invaluable
piece of knowledge: that it is possible to avoid the dangers
of the period through which we are now passing....'
Furthermore, according to Sagan, `it is possible that among
the first contents of such a message may be detailed
prescriptions for the avoidance of technological disaster'
.... Such passages support the thesis, advanced by Karl S.
Guthke in his study of the extraterrestrial life debate, that
pluralism (belief in intelligent life on other worlds) ... has
become `the myth of modern times' and a `religion or
alternate religion'."

Jerry Clark

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