



The Arizona Skeptic

A Journal Promoting Critical Thinking

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Ethical Skepticism

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At the risk of providing the evidence necessary to oust me as the Executive Director of the Phoenix Skeptics, ethics in skeptical pursuits is a subject that has to be addressed. No, to answer the question this first sentence raises, I have done nothing unethical. Whether or not it was skeptical is another thing entirely, but I get a bit ahead of myself.

When looking at and actively investigating claims of the paranormal some of us end up slumming. We associate with people we'd normally give wide berth because they are practitioners of the arcane arts that bilk millions out of the unsuspecting. While fraud is not as nasty a crime as robbery or murder, it still does not fall into what I would class as suitable occupations for my friends. These people prey on the unsuspecting or willfully ignorant, and that makes them slimy in my book.

As the man said, "It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it."

So is investigating them.

Ron Harvey and I attended a prayer meeting hosted by Rev. Peter Popoff. Ron had received an invitation by mail and both of us met outside the hall Popoff had rented at a fashionable Scottsdale resort. Ron was feeling poorly, and ended up leaving the meeting, but not until Popoff had made his appearance and started the meeting. Ron and I had taken one of the tables furthest from the podium and hoped no one else would join us.

We were not fortunate enough to be left alone. A petite woman with mousey brown hair joined us at our table. She introduced herself as Frances. From her voice and name I could tell she was either from France or Quebec, though she spoke English perfectly. She asked us if we had been saved and Ron and I both replied in the affirmative. This pleased her greatly and she confided in her "Brothers in Christ" that she sometimes felt "my husband is from Satan."

I had a hard time meeting her eyes after that initial lie about being saved. It was not that I so much felt guilty about having lied, as much as I felt guilty about mocking her fervent belief. I reminded myself, not for the first time, that I had to see myself as an anthropologist witnessing the arcane religious rituals of some lost tribe in the Amazon. I had to give her belief the respect it was due no matter if the man she had come to hear was a fakir of the worst kind.

The lies came much more easily after that.

Ron left as Popoff began the sermon for that night. Popoff is not content with telling little lies, he goes for the whoppers right off the bat. His first tale told us of his boyhood experiences in war-torn Berlin at the end of World War II (1939-1945). His father gave the Popoffs' last crust of bread away to a refugee, leaving the family nothing to eat. As an alternative to starvation, the Popoffs prayed and the Holy Ghost lead them to a truck full of potatoes that had been buried by rubble. It yielded a harvest of food that lasted them and their entire congregation for the rest of the war.

Listening I marveled at how he wove this tale. It was obviously a parable that would set us up for the press for money later in the show. If we gave from what little we had, the moral of the story went, God would return our gift to us a hundredfold. Subtle and effective. The story caught everyone up in its miraculous nature, including Popoff himself.

Peter went on to expand on this success. He told of his mother duplicating the miracle of the loaves by slicing a single loaf of bread into thin slices, but always having more. That amazed the crowd. Popoff topped that by saying that his father's church and the houses of everyone in the congregation survived the bombing of Berlin. And then, better yet, he told of how his family was being shipped off to Siberia by the Russians but that Jesus, in the form of a Russian officer, singled his family out and drove them back to Berlin and dumped them in front of the American Headquarters.

Peter Popoff has quite a memory for detail for a boy who could have been no more than five years old (if Popoff's measurement of his having been hip high is accurate).

Frances was enthralled. She mumbled "Amen" and "Praise Jesus" at the right points as if that were a mantra. I asked her how old Popoff was — believing he looked too young to have been born in 1940 — and she shrugged. She suggested that he was well preserved in the Lord.

Popoff then turned to explain how we could help with his mission. As he went about distributing offering packets, Frances appeared both attracted and terrified by him. She dearly wanted to take a packet, but she dreaded the attention he paid to each person who chose to help him. It was only a matter of time before she bit, and she did.

At various points Popoff spoke in tongues and this thrilled Frances. "Do you speak in tongues?" she

asked me quietly.

I shook my head and lied as slickly as possible. "I've not been so blessed." I even looked her in the eyes as I told her that one.

She smiled and confided a secret to me. "I find myself speaking in tongues half the time. It's the only way I can stay sane..."

When Popoff had sown enough offering packets, he sought the first harvest. He asked people to take out the first of the seven envelopes in the packet. He asked them to make the first installment of their promised \$1000.00 offering that night. I would estimate he got 20 offerings averaging \$20 per on the spot. Once the collection had been taken up, we formed a prayer circle and, with hands clasped, we prayed and then Popoff traveled around the circle and laid his hands on all of us.

I recall he told me my minstry would be strong and that I would show others the truth. If he ever gives up being a religious vampire, he ought to shift to psychic flummery — he's better than most. He could not give Frances the full treatment because, by this point, she was crying and being comforted by another woman she had met at previous meetings.

Things broke up after that and I returned to my table where I had left my tape recorder. Frances smiled up at me. "I think we should pray for you so you get the gift of tongues."

Alarm bells exploded in my head. I tried to get out of it by offering an explanation that I was a writer and that in writing I was able to communicate with many people, hence I already had a form of that gift.

Frances would not be put off. "But that has nothing to do with the Holy Spirit." A friend of hers had gone over to Peter Popoff and brought him back to help me.

"Mike," Popoff began, "I just feel God is going to give you your prayer tonight."

As he spoke the others, about a half dozen, surrounded me and began to pray right along with Popoff. Again the image of an anthropologist deep in the Amazon jungles surfaced in my brain. Popoff pulled closer and I closed my eyes.

His hands pressed to my throat. "Heavenly Father, such as I have I GIVE unto our brother."

A short shake coincided with his shout of the word GIVE. As his voice built higher, then dropped to a soft whisper I could feel the anticipation building within the people surrounding me. Almost instantly I

saw how it would be impossible for someone who truly believed in this man and his gifts to avoid speaking in tongues.

Popoff's hands pressed my chest front and back. "And let him receive the gift of the Holy Ghost and let him receive the evidence. Let his tongue be LOOSED that this river of living water well up within him!"

Again more pressure accompanied the shouted word. His hands moved faster, cupping my chin, tipping my head up. Inside I knew, as things built toward a crescendo, that I would have to do something. Popoff would keep at it until I gave him what he wanted, which was speech in tongues. I started searching my brain for languages I knew and instantly rejected the only one that I could have pulled off — French — because I was not proficient enough to fool Frances.

Popoff's voice dropped to a sibilant whisper. "And let this prayer language come forth... even NOW!"

At the last he gave my forehead a gentle push and I started spouting gibberish. I was conscious of the fact that, like Popoff, I would repeat the same mouthings over and over again, so I kept my voice low. I tried to stop after five or ten seconds, letting my upthrust hands drop toward my sides, but I could not! From behind, Frances forced my arms back up and urged me to continue. I did so for perhaps another thirty seconds. Then, feigning exhaustion, I took my seat again and gratefully accepted a glass of water.

With clinical detachment I knew what had happened and why I had done what I had done. I started shaking because of the adrenaline coursing through my veins — finding yourself about to be exposed in enemy territory will do that to you. Moreover, though I knew I could have just walked out of there, denouncing Popoff and shocking all those who had been there. They would have thought me possessed or troubled and, damn them, they would have tried to help.

That's where the whole ethical question in this comes to bear. I spoke in tongues because to do otherwise would have hurt Frances and the others. She so obviously and desperately needed the help that her faith gave her, that I could not do anything to destroy her.

I had gone to Popoff's meeting as a lark. I expected a sideshow, but I had not expected to see the tortured soul of one of those I would have described as a "whackoid Christian fruitcake" days before. Seeing Frances and how her belief enabled her to cope with her life again made me proud that I was trying to do something about the frauds that bilk her kind, but it also made me question the methods some of our more vocal and virulent comrades employ.

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I learned after the meeting that Peter Popoff was born in Bulgaria on 2 July 1946, so his whole story was a lie. When he returns and I am bidden to display my gift of tongues, God will have a revelation for Brother Popoff. This information also made me happy that, in my prayer envelope, I enclosed David Alexander's business card with the inscription, "So nice to see you again, Peter," on it.

Still, after I left the room, Marie caught up with me. She hugged her "brother in Christ" and I wished her all the best. I meant it, every word. But, somehow, I couldn't look her in the eye when I said it.

I believe it is absolutely vital for us, as Skeptics, to clearly identify our targets. Instead of rejecting stories and phenomena out of hand as ridiculous, our lot is one that demands **proof positive** of what we use to debunk a claim. I knew, in my guts, that Popoff was lying through his teeth, but I couldn't denounce him because I didn't have the smoking gun that a copy of his birth certificate would have been. For me to speak out against him at that point would have made me no better than he was.

In identifying our targets we also have to be careful not to hurt or ridicule folks who believe in New Age phenomena. Our job is not to make these people feel horrible about being fooled. To do that just demeans us and what we're trying to do.

Our job is to make people think about things they believe. We want to encourage them to apply critical thinking techniques when they are presented with paranormal phenomena. We want little alarm bells to go off in their heads when they hear some psychic say, "Hundreds of studies at universities have proven..." We want them to demand a list of the studies so they can check them out on their own.

At the Popoff lecture I made my attempt at pointing out to Frances that Peter looked too young for a man who had lived through the end of World

Yes, I want to renew my membership to the Phoenix Skeptics. I have checked off my class of membership below, and I have enclosed a check made out to The Phoenix Skeptics for the appropriate amount. I realize that if I don't renew my membership by June 1 I will be dropped from the mailing lists and the Phoenix Skeptics will do nothing to help me if I get kidnapped by aliens.

☐

Single Membership: \$12.50 a year.

☐

Couple Membership: \$20.00 a year.

☐

Philanthropist Membership: \$100.00 a year. (Well, we can hope!)

War Two. That was my best shot because I had nothing else to work with. Maybe, if I was lucky, that thought popped up again in her head a month or two down the line when Popoff spun another tale about his youth in Bulgaria on his radio show.

I doubt it, but I can hope.

Editorial Blathering

You will note at the bottom of this page a renewal form for your membership in the Phoenix Skeptics. Dues are considered due on 1 May 1990, and delinquent on 1 June. What that means is that if you don't pay up you'll only be getting one more issue of this newsletter, but we'll probably just fill your mail box up with pitiful requests to renew after that. You have been warned!

Dues are now \$12.50 a year, with couples getting a break at \$20 a year. (Couples will get both names on the mailing label, but only one copy of the newsletter.) Your membership will get you a year's subscription to the Arizona Skeptic and notifications of our meetings. We do NOT sell our mailing list to anyone, so you need not worry about junk mail or solicitations unless someone decides to buy a page worth of advertising from us.

Your dues are used, in the main, to produce and mail this newsletter. With the little we have left over we buy dinner for our local speakers at our meetings and, occasionally, bring a speaker in from an exotic locale like Los Angeles. (The last time we did this was in December of 1988 when we brought David Alexander over to speak on faith healers.) We also use the money, as we will this coming month, to rent the auditorium of the Phoenix Public Library for presentations we hope will bring in lots of new folks.

Please clip the coupon on the bottom of this page and return it to us. You'll note that your address label is on the back of it, so we can track things more

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easily. You can send your renewal in to our Post Office Box, or bring it to the next meeting and give it to me or Ted Karren.

All checks should be made payable to The Phoenix Skeptics.

On the morning of 12 April I did the Barry Young radio show on KFYI 910 AM from 6-8 in the morning. The discussion concerned whether or not Creation Science should be taught in the schools in the Valley. Bill Parks, an employee of the Center for Scientific Creation, was my opposition. He had written an OpEd piece in the Arizona Republic stating that a majority of Americans advocated the teaching of Creation Science and KFYI jumped on that as an interesting and controversial subject.

When first called I suggested KFYI try Dr. Robert Dietz, but they already had and had discovered Dr. Dietz was taking off for a cruise, so he couldn't do the show. After determining I had no advanced degree — Parks didn't want to face off against someone with an advanced degree, I was told — I was deemed acceptable and I agreed to appear.

The show went very well for our side. The callers were overwhelmingly supportive of evolution and Park's refusal to compromise at all did not win him any points. When I pointed out that creationists believe evolution could NOT have happened, because if it did there was no fall from grace and, subsequently no need for Jesus to appear as Savior, Parks sidestepped that issue and tried to bring up "scientific" evidence for creation.

I was steadfastly able to maintain that Creationism was religion and, therefore, had no place being taught as science. Parks maintained Scientific Creation was divorced from religion, but his argument was less than convincing. I don't think either one of us changed any minds in the listening audience, but it was an interesting show none-the-less, and we do have it on tape.

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Oh, and lest anyone think I made up the bit about the Creationist view of evolution, allow me to quote from the very book Parks used to find facts during our debate (from the copy he gave me at the end of the debate, in fact). This is **In The Beginning** by Walter T. Brown, Jr. and is published by the Center for Scientific Creation, page 115:

If evolution happened, then death was widespread before man evolved. But if death preceded man and was not a result of Adam's sin, then sin is a fiction. If sin is a fiction, then we have no need for a Savior.

Would that all we have to fight was so easy!

Also in April we provided background information on a local UFO group to a talkshow host to use when that group was scheduled for an appearance. The data we supplied was not used to refute anything the speakers had to say, and I am not sure why. It is possible that despite having faxed and then later hand carrying material to the station, the material did not make it to the host to whom it was addressed. If that happened, I am sorry for the screw-up.

As it was, the El-Legions needed no refutation. They were silly and could not be taken seriously.

Meeting Announcement

Our May Meeting will be held on Saturday, May 5 at 12:30 in the afternoon at the Central Branch of the Phoenix Public Library on McDowell and Central. Our speaker will be Michael A. Stackpole, the Executive Director of the Phoenix Skeptics. He will be speaking on **Satanism: The True Menace in America**. Mr. Stackpole is a contributing author to the Committee for the Scientific Examination of Religion's **Satanism in America** Report. He is also an award winning game designer and a science fiction novelist who has studied Satanistic Phenomena in America for the past 5 years.



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