



Schism in the Church of the Left Brain

An evil force seems to have possessed those skeptical of the paranormal.

By Scott S. Smith

IN LOS ANGELES, center of the universe for the New Age, a counterrevolution is stumbling out of the gate trying to end superstition. Alarmed by Hollywood's preoccupation with the supernatural, the 23-year-old Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal recently launched a media committee headed by showbiz personality Steve Allen (who has written books on religion with a secular slant).

Allen is one of the few major personalities in the world of skeptics who is on good terms with both Amherst, New York-based CSICOP (which its critics love to point out is pronounced like "psy-cop") and the Skeptics Society, headquartered in Altadena, California, founded a few years ago by Michael Shermer, author of *Why People Believe Weird Things*.

According to Fritz Stevens of CSICOP's "Center for Inquiry West" in Los Angeles,

the rivalry started when a scandal involving its local chapter leader caused the group to collapse. Members were grateful when Shermer offered to put things back together and CSICOP gave him its mailing list to that end. The next thing they knew, he had turned what was a chapter publication, *Skeptic*, into a rival for subscribers and newsstand space to CSICOP's own *Skeptical Inquirer* (the former has 30,000 circulation, the latter 52,000).

CSICOP excommunicated Shermer for misuse of its list. Shermer began aggressively recruiting board members for his new national organization. His most high-profile supporter is James "The Amazing" Randi, also expelled from CSICOP under a cloud of controversy (skeptics seem to have as many of them as TV preachers).

Shermer, who teaches the history of science at Occidental College, told me that he believes both magazines are necessary be-

cause "we [*Skeptic*] run long, serious, original research and they [*Skeptical Inquirer*] take more of a pop media approach." Shermer likes to write about the errors of Holocaust Revisionism and Ayn Rand.

Both publications are militantly against a wide range of what they think is irrational, from acupuncture and astrology, to faith healing and near-death experiences. Shermer takes an even harder line on alternative medicine: his book attacks chiropractic *per se*, while *Skeptical Inquirer* ran a piece by a chiropractor pointing to scientific evidence for its most conservative claims.

Shermer is also more willing to talk about religion in his magazine. The skeptics know that the American public is highly religious, and that skeptics must be very careful or they'll be perceived as attacking religion and their efforts will be undermined. There is a small minority of skeptical activists who claim to be spiri-

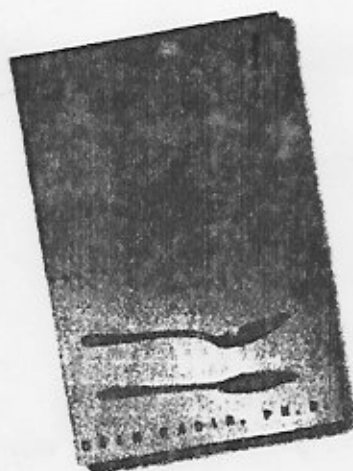
tual, but feel they have license to attack religious beliefs they think are simply superstitious. But one can't call belief in afterlife a delusion and pretend to be neutral. CSICOP's leader happens to head an atheist publishing house, and anyone who has had personal contact with card-carrying skeptics realizes their antireligious bias can scarcely be concealed.

While the skeptics pay lip service to the scientific method, they're as closed-minded as those they claim are gullible. As the late, tough-minded parapsychologist D. Scott Rogo pointed out (in *Psychic Breakthroughs Today*), no one who has had experience with, or done objective research in parapsychology would dismiss everything with the eagerness which marks the skeptics as simply debunkers with an agenda.

A example of this is the reception which Dr. Dean Radin's book *The Conscious Universe: The Scientific Truth of Psychic Phenomena* received when it was published in August 1997. Although praised by eminent scientists as providing revolutionary evidence for phenomena such as ESP and psychokinesis, it was ignored by *Skeptical Inquirer*. Shermer's magazine gave it a mention, brushing it off as providing "miniscule evidence." In a later issue, ex-parapsychologist Dr. Susan Blackmore conceded that Radin's experiments "look good," but said she had no intention of investigating them (which didn't surprise Radin, who points out that Blackmore's criticisms of her former profession don't hold much intellectual water).

More importantly, hardcore skeptics predominate among science editors. Their influence would explain why no major magazine reviewed such an acclaimed book: Skeptics did not want something this disturbing to be mentioned. The one exception to this rule was the scientific journal *Nature*, which did a hatchet job on the book. *Nature's* one piece of apparently solid criticism was based on an error which the editors refused to recognize by printing letters from readers in response. Finally, after eight months of pressure, and after the responsible editor had left, letters were printed pointing out the mistake.

Without review support, only 10,000



copies of *The Conscious Universe* were sold.

When I recently approached both skeptical magazines seeking a detailed critique of Radin's book for an article I was writing in a mainstream publication, each referred me to its parapsychology specialist. He was one and the same for each camp, out of necessity, as he is the only one with much knowledge of the subject: Ray Hyman, Professor of Psychology at the University of Oregon. Unfortunately for the skeptics, Radin has repeatedly pointed out the scientific mistakes in Hyman's arguments, so it was no surprise when Hyman did not respond to requests for a response.

Bestselling author Michael Crichton, in his nonfiction book *Travels*, relates a number of experiences which have transformed his outlook on the universe from a narrow-minded scientific view into one that accepts that reality seems to be stranger than fiction in some respects. In his last chapter, Crichton provides a speech he was invited to give to Shermer's group back when it was part of CSICOP. He explains why skeptics too often have an attitude about the world that is no more warranted than the certainties of nineteenth-century physicists.

Everyone will find this notion instructive and amusing—except professional skeptics.

Scott S. Smith is a frequent FATE contributor on various subjects and the author of The Soul of Your Pet: Evidence for the Survival of Animals in the Afterlife.

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This Old House

It appears that there is a point of contact with another dimension in my basement. Objects on the workbench and floor disappear without a trace. Missing, for example, are a soldering trimmer and a small pry bar. At first I suspected my cat Tracy, but they are too heavy for a cat to carry very far without losing interest.

My main concern is that she, or I, might fall through at this point. The house is 80 years old, and to my knowledge no one has died a violent death in it. I did run over our cat accidentally some 25 years ago [see *FATE*, January 1995, p. 57].

A recent article in *Sky and Telescope* (July 1999) indicates that there may be an infinite number of universes. I believe that there can be other universes. If you imagine God as a scientist working in a laboratory, He might have several experiments going at once. If He doesn't like the way one of them turns out, He destroys it with a BIG BANG.—*Ralph Condit, Dearborn, Mich.*

A Letter From Shermer

Please allow me to correct a number of factual errors in Scott Smith's otherwise well-written article on *Skeptic* and *Skeptical Inquirer* in your April, 2000 issue.

The circulation of *Skeptic* magazine is 40,000, not 30,000, and we are in every Barnes & Noble, Borders, and all chain bookstores in America and Canada, as well as hundreds of independent bookstores and newsstands.

Skeptic magazine was founded by myself, Pat Linse, and Kim Ziel Shermer, equal partners in the process. Because of my high media profile people naturally attribute it to me, but I want to set the record straight that Pat and Kim play an equal role in everything we do.

Before we founded the magazine, there



was never a "chapter publication" called *Skeptic*. There was a newsletter called *Lazer* published by a different group called the Southern California Skeptics. There is no connection whatsoever between that newsletter and our magazine.

Finally, I am especially grateful for the opportunity to clarify publicly a misnomer that the reason for the tension between our groups is because they gave us their mailing list and that we then "misused" it (as your source stated) to found a competing organization (sometimes the legend has it that we "stole" the mailing list). We have never commented on this old canard publicly because, up to now, it has been just a rumor without a source. But now that CSICOP's own Fritz Stevens has stated it publicly, it is appropriate for us to set the record straight.

We have never stolen, borrowed, rented, or purchased CSICOP's mailing list. We have never even seen CSICOP's mailing list. We once inquired if we might rent the list, but we were turned down.

What really happened: Sometime after the collapse of the Southern California Skeptics we decided to get another skeptics group going. In addition to numerous other mailing lists that I procured, including those of past students of mine and from some other organizations to which I belonged, we approached CSICOP, who did for us exactly what they did to help other groups form: they did a mailing to the Southern California portion of their

list with a request for those interested to fill out a form and return it to them. This they did, and we received 112 names, for which we were grateful. In our initial mailing to approximately 3,000 people, a grand total of 3.7 percent came from CSICOP. That's it. That's the truth behind the "stolen" or "misused" mailing list story.

The reality of the so-called "schism": While I can understand the temptation for *FATE* magazine to delight in an apparent rift between groups from the opposing camp on the believer-skeptics spectrum, there really is no great "cloud of controversy" here. In reality, I personally know most of the major players in the skeptical movement, including high ranking members of CSICOP's council, and we all get along just fine. But it only takes one or two people to spread false rumors to give outsiders the impression that doom is in the air and that, as the good book says, "he that troubleth his own house shall inherit the wind." No ill winds are blowing.

P.S. We all really enjoy your magazine and look forward to receiving it each month.—*Michael Shermer, Publisher, Skeptic Magazine, via email*

Dorothy's Progress

I enjoyed this article in April's issue. I also think *The Wizard of Oz* is a spiritual allegory. This article gave me more food for thought. I always thought it was based on a dream. Supposedly, dreams are in black and white (movie version) and we live in color. Thus, I thought it was Baum's interpretation or whomever made the movie version, to enlighten us that the dream world was the real world. Like new agers believe, life on earth is a stage, to find enlightenment through lessons. Our soul self is the real world or the real plane or dimension. I figured the rest of it was explained through dream interpretation. Regardless of what it really is, it has remained popular because each person can interpret it differently, to their own under-