SPECIAL REPORT

The State of Belief in the Paranormal Worldwide

At a banquet session of the CSICOP conference on "Science, Skepticism, and the Paranormal," October 28-29 in Buffalo, representatives from six countries gave appraisals of the status of belief in the paranormal in their areas of the world. We present here slightly condensed versions of those talks.—ED.

Mexico: Old Rural Ghosts and New Urban Irrationalities

Mario Mendez-Acosta

IN MEXICO, ancient customs, styles of life, and everyday activities coexist with totally modern habits and forms of existence. In every culture—modern and ancient—belief in some sorts of paranormal phenomena is an important ingredient of daily life. The old Indo-American peoples of Mexico are no exception. Their beliefs survive up to this time. Their most notorious ghosts are now the ghosts of the modern Mexico—for instance, *La Llorona,* the crying woman, a street ghost of old Mexico City. Their werewolves (werecoyotes or weretigers) are now Mexico's modern werebeasts and are nightly terrors in many rural areas. (This concept is known as the *nahual* and is associated mostly with the totem-related customs of each tribe and culture.) In many regions, the belief in influential and fearsome local gods still persists alongside magical convictions, from the picturesque to the hair-raising.

However, the rationalism brought about by education and occidental civilization did not have time to make all these old beliefs fade away before new irrationalities, imported mainly from the United States, made their appearance in the twentieth century, especially during the past two decades. The new urban irrationalities—religious sects, pseudoscience, and modern charlatanry—are now

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spreading all over the country.

The degree of penetration of these new doctrines is rather disturbing. They affect all sectors of Mexican society. The first wave arrived at the beginning of this century, led by the Theosophist movement and by the spiritism of Allen Kardek's school. With it arrived vegetarianism, naturism, and homeopathy. At this moment, there are two official schools of homeopathic medicine in Mexico (one of them within the otherwise prestigious National Polytechnical Institute). There is one homeopathic public hospital in Mexico City and thousands of homeopathic pharmacies all over the country.

In addition to what has been published by the Mexican section of CSICOP, so far as I know there has not been any other critical analysis of this situation. Not even in ordinary medical journals has there ever appeared a study about even the most preposterous claims made by homeopathic theory. (When ordinary physicians participate in panel discussions about homeopathy on TV and radio, they plainly show they don't really understand what it is all about; sometimes they misjudge it as some kind of herbal medicine, which may at least have some logical basis.)

Spiritism had its great moment in the first two decades of this century, but Mexico had its counterpart of Harry Houdini in the person of Carlos de Heredia, a Jesuit priest, author of a classic of debunking, *The Spiritist Frauds.* In it he describes in detail all the tricks then used by mediums to fleece the gullible. He visited the United States on several occasions and published, in English, *Spiritism and Common Sense.* He debated with Conan Doyle and contributed to the unmasking and final confession of Nino Peccaro, a noted psychic of that time. Father Heredia managed to duplicate some psychical phenomena and became an excellent stage magician. In order to pull Conan Doyle's leg, he wrote *The Spiritistic Adventures of Sherlock Holmes,* in which the great detective solves some cases involving spiritist frauds. (I am sure this book would delight Martin Gardner.)

It was not until the late fifties and sixties that the strongest wave of modern paranormal fads and doctrines hit Mexico and the rest of the world. Belief in UFOs and their extraterrestrial origin is exploited by several groups and individuals that publish three or four national magazines and include a semireligious group that is allegedly in continuous contact with extraterrestrials. These aliens supposedly furnish valuable information concerning advanced techniques in meditation, but unfortunately no technological information whatsoever.

The most important advocate of UFOmania in Mexico is Pedro Ferriz, a widely known TV commentator and anchor man who was named manager of Channel 13, the official TV network, and of the government's news agency, Notimex. Ferriz took advantage of the means and facilities of both organizations to indulge his particular beliefs. He presented a documentary film about the so-called UFO of the Pleiades, widely recognized as a fraud. In a public presentation in Mexico City, he treated the sightings as a proven fact. The Mexican CSICOP committee denounced all this through a radio program and gave the press a complete file on the Pleiades fraud.

Astrology is, beyond any doubt, the most extensive superstition in Mexico at the moment. It has gained access to almost all periodicals and newspapers in the country. Public cultural and educational TV channels have been broadcasting horoscopes regularly in recent years. However, actions taken by the committee,

mainly through newspapers and news magazines, have been very successful and astrology has ceased being promoted on public TV—for the moment, at least.

But not everything in broadcasting is good news. The private Mexican TV network (Televisa, a collection of the worst aspects of all American commercial networks put together) has opened a noncommercial "cultural" TV channel on which not only astrology but almost any kind of pseudoscience and the wildest superstitions can find warm refuge and ample and uncritical diffusion. Its specialty this season has been computerized horoscopes. Our group has already satirized this in radio and TV appearances. (The whole idea is so ridiculous that we have not found a more suitable measure.)

In radio, the situation is much worse. Station XEW, the most important AM station in the country, owned, as it might be expected, by Televisa, not only broadcasts horoscopes and other astrological pseudoinformation, but also all kinds of medical charlatanry, religious fanaticism, and current occult fads: conversing with plants, reincarnation and life after death, miraculous cures, and so forth. We are doubly embarrassed about this because XEW has a powerful shortwave signal, broadcasting to a wide audience all over the world.

There is also in Mexico a weird society that supports and teaches a kind of advanced astrology they call "cosmobiology." (They use black holes, pulsars, and quasars in their computations.) We have debated with their followers on television. A member of our section—Charles Calderón, a civil engineer and professional magician—took one of their courses and has not quite recovered from it yet!

Another important movement in Mexico, headed by a handful of swindlers, allegedly teaches children to read with the palms of their hands or the skin of their faces (depending on the seriousness of the established controls). They have set up several schools where they have so far trained around 3,000 children. We were lucky that James Randi, on a visit to Mexico, conducted several controlled tests of these claims at the School of Psychology of the University of Mexico. The result was appalling: their best subjects, several children and a "gifted" blind youth, failed dismally on all tests. The fraud was exposed, and we gave it all due publicity in the press and on radio.

In spite of all this, within the same school one investigator remains a true believer in "dermovision." His scientific explanation of this phenomenon is a quaint theory based on—you guessed it!—quantum mechanics. When these things were subjected to debate in the auditorium of the school, it became obvious that everything was a question of faith rather than of experimentation.

Creationism is not a great problem in Mexico, since the Catholic church accepted biological evolution in 1952. (This may be interesting to those who are intent on demonstrating that "creation science" is nothing more than badly disguised religious dogma.) However, fundamentalist Protestant missionaries, such as those of the so-called Linguistic Summer Institute, are now spreading creationist ideas among many Indian communities. I don't know what effect this may have, since the Indians already possess some really interesting and even exciting legends about the creation of the world. Except for our commentaries on the situation in the United States, nothing concerning this matter has appeared in the Mexican press.

Unfortunately, the attitude toward the paranormal of the more or less cultivated sectors of our society and of scientific circles can be described as one of

complete indifference. Few of them consider it worthwhile to work in countering the activities of these loons and swindlers. Only within the School of Psychology at the University of Mexico have we found high-level backing. Because of this we prefer to channel our activities through the press rather than through academic and scientific circles.

We have had some important successes and have achieved a reputation that allows us to be included in almost any discussion on the paranormal that takes place in the media. •

Netherlands: Psychic Surpluses and a Call for International Cooperation

Piet Hein Hoebens

THE STATE of belief in that part of Europe I consider to be my *fief* does not, I think, fundamentally differ from the state of belief in other parts of the developed world. There is a pattern of paranormal beliefs that is simply part of modern life. It is a universal phenomenon with basically insignificant local variations.

In the Netherlands people are no different from Americans, French, Italians, or Australians, in that they find it hard to resist the temptations of the unbelievable. However, they do not necessarily select the same phenomena as targets of their credulity. The supply of miracles also has characteristics particular to the area.

For example, Holland has a surplus of so-called psychic detectives, to the point that they have become something of an export item; but there is a definite shortage of poltergeist cases, and flying saucers are also sadly underrepresented.

Holland is probably unique in that back in the fifties the queen officially received George Adamski at the Royal Palace for an eyewitness report on current affairs on Venus; but no resident of the kingdom has ever been granted the privilege of a UFO-abduction, and, for some reason, those extraterrestrials given to the disconcerting habit of cattle mutilation will not touch our cattle.

Dutchmen think the British superstitious for believing in ghosts, and they think the Americans gullible for having swallowed Peter Hurkos. Ghosts and Peter Hurkos are nonsense, most Dutchmen think—unlike faith healing, Gerard

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Croiset, horoscopes, and the miraculous powers of copper bracelets. We may not have a chief of state who believes in astrology, but Leyde University supports a professor of Blavatskian metaphysics.

Instead of giving further examples of Dutch beliefs and unbeliefs, I wish to offer a few words about some problems—both philosophical and practical—facing those who are worried by the "occult explosion" and who feel the urge to actively promote the skeptical viewpoint.

Problem No. 1 is the danger of excessive polarization between skeptics and so-called believers. If you carefully look at the history of the paranormal controversy you will find that serious mistakes have been made on *both* sides. Some of the predecessors of CSICOP have fallen into the trap of skeptical dogmatism, and have thereby lost their effectiveness. The best way to avoid this trap, I would suggest, is to seek cooperation, whenever possible, with other groups—especially those that are the targets of our skeptical curiosity.

There are several reasons we should seek to be on speaking terms with those proponents of paranormal claims who have indicated that they are willing to play according to the rules of the scientific game.

The first reason is simply intellectual honesty. CSICOP-associated skeptics are committed to the point of view that claims of the paranormal may not be rejected on a priori grounds, antecedent to inquiry. This can only mean that we must seriously consider the possibility that the verdict of history will be that we were wrong and the proponents were right on a number of issues.

The second reason is a more practical one. If we want to debate the paranormalists fairly and effectively, we must take pains to ensure that we are criticizing what the other side is really claiming and not attacking straw men. The pro-paranormal literature is vast and complex, and few skeptics can afford to spare the time and the energy needed for keeping abreast of all developments in, say, parapsychology or astrology. It is very easy for a skeptic accidentally to overlook a possibly important piece of information that tends to support the nonskeptical hypothesis and thus expose himself to the charge of data selection or even misrepresentation. We can avoid such risks by keeping in touch with knowledgeable proponents and by consulting them before we attack certain claims in public.

The third reason is contained in a quotation from Ray Hyman: "The believer-skeptic dichotomy tends to overshadow the fact that there are important overlappings of common interests and goals that cut across this dichotomy." Several proponents of paranormal claims are nonskeptics only to the extent that they predict that the application of scientific research methods will result in the vindication of certain extraordinary claims. However, the proponents I am referring to here are very conservative in their methodology and in their philosophy of science and they will usually agree with the skeptics on such issues as what constitutes acceptable scientific evidence. So these people are really on our side, and we should be careful not to lump them together with the real crackpots.

The fourth reason is practical and perhaps even a little Machiavellian. Proponents of the paranormal are often extremely good sources of information for skeptics. The skeptic who restricts himself to critically reading the literature may get a somewhat unrealistic idea of what is really going on in the alternative sciences. For proper perspective, we cannot dispense with the backstage information, with the gossip that only the insiders will be able to give us. However, these

insiders will only part with this information if they know that they can trust us.

Problem No. 2 is far more practical than problem No. 1 and is basically about the accessiblity of relevant sources. Much valuable information is contained in books and journals that have become very rare and difficult to obtain. Often this literature will give us clues to the solution of paranormal problems that puzzle us today. Some proponents like to buttress their case by citing spectacular anecdotes of ancient miracles—and are not contradicted for the simple reason that few if any skeptics are aware of the published criticisms. A related problem concerns the skeptical literature that continues to be cited by enthusiastic unbelievers who are not aware of the published rejoinders.

The fact that a book or article concludes the nonexistence of a paranormal phenomenon does not guarantee that it is reliably documented or that it reaches its negative conclusions on the basis of adequate evidence. It is always risky to rely on secondary sources. To locate the primary sources, however, involves a lot of work. In practice, this can only be done if skeptics from all over the world pool their resources. What we need is a comprehensive and critical bibliography of the literature—and here I mean the literature pro *and* con.

A final problem I want to discuss briefly is the language barrier, which often complicates or even renders impossible skeptics' attempts to obtain reliable information on certain much-publicized claims. Many such claims are effectively protected from debunking assaults by the simple fact that the relevant documents are only available in a language with which the debunker is not familiar. Thus I have found that many prize cases involving the internationally renowned Dutch psychics Hurkos, Croiset, and Dijkshoorn continue to be cited as strong evidence for ESP in English-language publications, whereas in fact these claims are fantastic distortions of entirely nonspectacular incidents. The documents proving this, however, are in Dutch or in German and are not accessible to someone who does not read those languages.

There is a need for intensification of international skeptical cooperation, so that no questionable miracle is safe from skeptical investigations even if it takes refuge in a distant country. •

U.K.: Horoscope Breakfasts and ESP on the BBC

Michael Hutchinson

THERE ARE two ways of judging the level of belief in the paranormal. The first and best way is with a well-designed public opinion poll. The second is

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by looking at media coverage of the subject. What are the results of these methods in the UK?

The last poll that I know of was conducted by that cornerstone of rationality and truth the *London Times*. But what a disaster their poll was! For it was self-selecting. When looking for an accurate answer, a self-selecting poll leaves a lot to be desired. I don't think it can even be considered as indicative. But so far it's the best we have.

The result of the *Times* questionnaire was published on Saturday, December 20, 1980. Of the 1,314 people who responded, only 2 percent stated that they do not believe in psychic experiences. The remaining 98 percent were made up of those who thought that psychic experiences certainly exist (64%), probably exist (17%), and possibly exist (also 17%). Of the 98 percent, 83 percent believed in ESP and telepathy, while only 29 percent accepted reincarnation. Oddly enough a higher percentage believed in apparitions of the living (33%) than believed in reincarnation. Seventy percent accepted dowsing.

To give a further flavor of this questionnaire let me quote a series of questions:

> Have you had any contact with someone who has died? [This is followed by three multiple choice answers: once, more than once, and never.]
> If it happened, how did you experience it?
> Was anyone else with you and in a position to observe?
> Was a pet with you at the time?
> [If yes] did it show any sign of stress or unusual behavior?

It is possible that these questions are familiar to some of you because much of the *Times* questionnaire was devised by Dr. Karlis Osis and Dr. Erlunder Haraldsson with the intention of using it in countries all over the world.

One of the additional subjects included was dowsing—or water-witching, as it is known in the USA. As mentioned, 70 percent of the believers accepted dowsing. However, its inclusion riled the vice-president of the British Society of Dowsers, who claimed that dowsers were "appalled" at their inclusion. This was defended by the *Times* on the grounds that the question asked was about experiences that "do not always have a ready scientific or natural explanation at the present level of knowledge." *Present level of knowledge?* It is a shame that the *Times* didn't hire someone to write this piece who had some knowledge of science—or had read the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.

I understand that a properly conducted poll was in fact carried out last year on behalf of the Society for Psychical Research. The analysis of that poll is almost complete and should be reported by SPR in 1984.

The second method of judging the state of belief in the paranormal is to look at the way books, newspapers, magazines, radio, and television report the subject. I do not think it takes a psychologist to realize that people's beliefs are going to be influenced not only by what they read but also—and perhaps more so—by the regularity with which a subject is presented to them. Perhaps—just perhaps—even readers of the *National Enquirer* will be just a little skeptical the first time they read of some extraordinary psychic success. But when they see similar claims being made they begin to accept that there may be something to them.

The saddest thing to report is that even the BBC and the better quality newspapers have climbed on the psychic bandwagon. The BBC has more uncritical paranormal items than the independent television channels. Even the BBC's "Breakfast Time" show has its daily dose of horoscopes. Its astrologer has become quite a personality, appearing in other programs as a celebrity guest.

The producers of the breakfast program are not enthusiastic at the idea of devoting time to astrology, but they realistically acknowledge that the program's popularity relies on such nonsense. The program's editor defends the inclusion of an astrologer, claiming that it is only light-hearted and that no one believes that the astrologer is making statements of great wisdom.

The BBC jointly produces the NOVA/Horizon series with WGBH Boston. Some years after the excellent Bermuda Triangle and Ancient Astronauts programs, they put together a 90-minute program called "The Case of ESP." Besides being twice as long as a normal Horizon edition this program was also heavily promoted by the BBC. Its weekly magazine *Radio Times* devoted its full-color front page and several inside pages to it.

But what of the program itself? I found it to be very dishonest. Although skeptics Susan Blackmore, Ray Hyman, Mark Hansel, and David Marks were given time to state their cases, much of the program was devoted to unbalanced propaganda supporting psi.

For example, the commentary about the use of psychics in police work included only one or two sentences admitting that two controlled studies had produced negative results. But instead of giving details of these tests an assistant district attorney was interviewed because—it would appear—his testimony supported the use of psychics in police work.

Similarly, a disproportionate amount of time was given to a claim that Russell Targ's group, Delphi, had succeeded nine times out of nine in predicting the rise and fall of the silver market. This included shots of the siliver market and interviews with two stockbrokers. But only two sentences were used to tell us that earlier this year the system had failed. (NOVA presented a 60-minute version of "The Case of ESP" on the public television network on January 17, 1984. The SKEPTICAL INQUIRER will publish critiques of it in the next issue.)

There is much more that I could say about the promotion of the paranormal in the UK. There seems to have been a tremendous upsurge of interest by the press in the past ten years or so. But perhaps this is just my imagination. I decided to check a press guide to see whether there had been an increase in the number of publications devoted to the subject. Much to my surprise I discovered that, except for two small-circulation magazines, the majority of current publications have been in business for anything from twenty to more than a hundred years. One of the exceptions to this is a magazine that started in late 1980 and ended, as planned, just a couple of months ago after publishing over 120 issues.

I am pleased to report that even the BBC—for which I have little regard—can produce a balanced program if they try. The producer of the Horizon program on ESP was previously responsible for a rational look at metal-bending. This program was neither for nor against metal-bending. It left viewers to make up their own minds. Personally, that is all I ask and I feel sure that is all most of the Committee ask. It is shameful that we have to fight so hard in order to achieve it! •

Australia: Dowsers, Yowies, and the Tasmanian Triangle

Dick Smith

I AM NOT a scientist or an intellectual, but my business is in one of the most exciting areas of applied science—electronics. I have specialized in selling electronics to consumers and encouraged them to participate in the modern and fantastic developments in electronics.

In the course of running my business, I have become aware of the many strange beliefs held by Australians. My mail includes letters suggesting I cooperate in developing new ideas from perpetual motion machines to flying saucers. All had one thing in common—with the writer's ideas and my money we could both become rich and famous!

Instead I invested in a subscription to the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER and found that others shared my concern about the widespread belief in the paranormal. I found a letter in the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER from a fellow Australian, Mark Plummer, and wrote to him suggesting we get a CSICOP group going in Australia and that we invite Randi out for a visit.

Randi was unknown in Australia prior to his arrival. I was anxious for him to conduct some tests and decided on a test of water divining as Australia is a very dry continent with an abundance of water diviners and dowsers. There are more water dowsers in Australia than you could poke a stick at.

With the incentive of a prize of $50,000, many diviners came forward to be tested by Randi. None passed the test. The failed diviners made all manner of excuses and rationalizations as to why they failed. A major documentary was made and shown on national television. Randi's presence also caused a manifestation of the well-known "shyness effect." In Melbourne we have a Dr. Osborne, who claimed to have found and tested over forty psychic spoon-bending children. Randi appeared at the college at which Osborne lectures and repeated his offer to test the children, but Osborne said that he had contacted all of the parents and none was interested in the $50,000! Since Randi's visit Dr. Osborne has been strangely silent.

However, it was not the tests or the offer that gained the most publicity. It was Randi's appearance on a popular national TV program—"The Don Lane Show," an equivalent to the Johnny Carson show. Don Lane's show was a platform for many clairvoyants and psychics. But when Randi bent objects on his show, Don Lane lost his cool, said, on the air, "You can piss off," and then ran across the studio and off the screen.

The subsequent furor brought more phone calls from listeners than any other subject that year—and the viewers comments were 2 to 1 in favor of Randi. Randi became a media hero overnight, and at the end of his tour we were able to

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set up the local section of CSICOP—the Australian Skeptics. I am co-patron with Phillip Adams, a national columnist and filmmaker, and Mark Plummer is our national chairman. We have plenty in Australia to keep us busy.

Every morning I can listen to an astrologer on TV's "Good Morning Australia," read my stars for the day in my morning paper, or dial a number on the government-owned telephone system for my star-reading for the day.

I can go downtown in Sydney, our largest city, to the lobby of the tallest building in the Southern Hemisphere, the Sydney Tower, and pay $2 for my biorhythm reading, my palm reading, or my horoscope, or collect my lucky numbers for the lottery. I can then take the lift to the top and see "Earth's Largest UFO Exhibit." This is a collection of the best UFO photos and tape recordings of contactees and models of extraterrestrials. It will be occupying this high rental space for the next 18 months and will be seen by hundreds of thousands of Australians.

Australia has many reported sightings of UFOs and they get great media coverage. One UFOlogist even produced a book in which he claimed that a certain material came from a UFO. It may have, but since it turned out to be common fiberglass it probably had a more mundane origin.

In addition to UFO sightings Australia has the same paranormal beliefs that are found elsewhere in the world. The majority of beliefs have their origins outside Australia. Books on the paranormal written overseas fill large areas in our bookshops. Australian newspapers and magazines carry overseas stories about the paranormal. Our electronic media carry the very latest paranormal stories from abroad only hours after the story has broken in the country of origin. For example, in September 1983 we had film of the latest apparition of the Virgin Mary in Texas the same day it was on U.S. TV news. We are flooded with U.S. documentaries on subjects like the Bermuda Triangle and Bigfoot.

However, the media are not so quick when it comes to debunking stories. When our papers wrote a story on a psychic finding lost youths in the U.K., we sent the articles by airmail to Mike Hutchinson, CSICOP's man in the U.K. He sent back the correct version of the facts by airmail. But by the time we had the truth it was "stale news" and the papers were not interested in carrying a followup story. Australia's media problem is the same as that in the United States—a bias for sensational paranormal stories. Australia is also on the circuit for the international psychic jet set. Uri Geller and Doris Stokes have toured Australia, and most recently, Michael Manning, who was exposed by Randi six years ago. In addition to those that have been imported, local promoters have found variations of the worldwide paranormal beliefs in Australia. Thus a stretch of waterway between the mainland of Australia and the island of Tasmania—the Bass Strait—is our Bermuda Triangle, where planes are snatched by UFOs.

You have your Bigfoot, we have our Yowies. Our Aborigines were allegedly in touch with ancient astronauts, and their curses are still held responsible for deaths in strange circumstances.

We have our own ghosts (some appear in bikinis), our own water-powered cars, and our own pyramid glass houses for growing plants—one of which was paid for by the local authorities and stands proudly in the main gardens of our western city Perth.

Comparing the strength of paranormal beliefs held by Australians with that overseas, it would seem that some, such as water dowsing, are more widely

accepted in Australia. Others, such as creationism, are not so widely accepted here as overseas. This may be due to local factors. Australia is an arid country, and water therefore is much sought after. And since Australia is not so religious as the United States, creationism is not an issue.

We do have many Australians who claim to have psychic powers. We have our clairvoyants, exorcists, palmists, iridologists, card readers, levitators, astrologers, psychic surgeons, and faith healers. Some Australians claim to be in touch with other planets, and the Virgin Mary is supposed to visit an Australian farm almost every week.

Although we have a large number of Australians who claim to have psychic powers, very few have come forward to be tested. More than two years ago I offered a cash prize for any person who could prove they have psychic powers. Apart from water diviners less than 20 people have written to me asking the details of the tests!

The offer has had plenty of publicity, as has the Australian Skeptics. To date we have not produced a significant change in the strength of paranormal beliefs in Australia. However we have increased some people's doubts, asked some questions and burnt the fingers of some would-be psychics. We have contested previously unchallenged claims and will continue to do so. I'm happy to say that our "Today" and "Tonight" shows no longer feature paranormal claims the way they did in the past.

We cannot do this alone and we have been very pleased with the willingness of CSICOP people overseas to send us information. We have been able to return this favor by forwarding information on Australian paranormalists who have gained publicity for their claims overseas.

We do not know if Australians are more or less rational people than elsewhere, and if someone could design a test of paranormal beliefs in the community we would be happy to arrange its testing in Australia. •

Canada: Media Push the Paranormal

Henry Gordon

THE CANADIAN population has the same high percentage of belief in the paranormal as any other country. You don't have to look far to discover the main source of these beliefs—the print and broadcast media.

Here is a quick rundown of some of my own experiences with the media in

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Canada. This is only a capsule criticism—it would take many times the space allotted to me to relate the whole story.

"Canada A.M." is the country's prime morning TV show, a network program equivalent to "Good Morning America" or "The Today Show" in the United States. I have appeared on the program several times—once immediately after an appearance by Uri Geller, to straighten out one of his bent keys. In the past year or two it has had several features on the paranormal, always stressing the "unexplained." One feature was on animal mutilation in western Canada. One covered a group of Canadians visiting the Philippines for psychic surgery, without a word mentioned of the charlatanism involved. Another program showcased "psychic" Geraldine Smith. The latest promoted the *Book of Runes,* a totally nonsensical book that touts methods of medieval divination.

In each case I called the producers and offered to present their audience with explanations that would give some balance to their programs. For some strange reason they didn't seem interested.

"Morningside," a prestigious Canadian Broadcasting Corporation daily network radio show, is another program on which I have made many appearances over the years, mostly talking about the history of magic and great magicians of the past. When I take the opportunity to comment on the paranormal there seems to be a long interval before I am asked to come back. To quote a producer of the show, "People are tired of that stuff. They don't want to hear about it." What he really meant was that the people associated with "Morningside" weren't interested in hearing about the rational side of the controversy.

"Ideas" is Canada's leading cultural radio program. It's aired on the CBC network for one hour every evening. They called me recently to ask if I would appear on a three-hour series they would be doing on the paranormal. The program was to give a balanced viewpoint, they said. I later found that the host was to be Adam Crabtree, an active occultist.

A few days before taping time I was informed that my participation would not be required. The reason? There were enough skeptics on the program to give it balance. Do I detect the fine hand of Mr. Crabtree? When the show was aired I listened with interest. The balanced program went something like this:

Hour One: Pro-paranormal talks by Charles Tart, Ian Currie, Stanley Krippner, Gertrude Schmeidler, John Hasted, Raymond Moody. Skeptics? Antony Flew—one minute!

Hour Two: Same lineup of purveyors of the paranormal. Skeptics? None!

Hour Three: The same people. Skeptics? Paul Kurtz—2 minutes (from a half-hour interview). Jim Alcock—5 minutes. Antony Flew again—40 seconds. It would seem that someone had done some editing.

A fourth hour was added to the series. I was told that listeners' opinions would be taped and aired. Instead, the host asked listeners to phone in their psychic experiences. I needn't elaborate on how this hour turned out.

I should also point out that after Kurtz and Alcock appeared, the host criticized them for their dogmatism.

All this is not to say that I have given up. We can still use the media to present the case for rationality. A provocative debate or a challenging article will still catch their interest. They are not interested in helping our cause—they will publicize it only if we can find ways to make it novel and newsworthy.

It's an uphill struggle for CSICOP—but it always will be. •

France: Indifference in Scientific and Philosophical Circles

Michel Rouzé

IT MAY BE interesting to point out several characteristics of belief in the paranormal that I think are more or less specific to France.

There is an almost total absence in the academic world of any reference to belief in the paranormal. France's universities are under state control. The few private schools of higher education are for the most part Catholic. Cartesian tradition and religious tradition converge to deny scientific respectability to contemporary claims about paranormal phenomena. There is, though, Francois Russo, a Jesuit and a specialist in the history of science, who has developed the theory that, since the existence of miracles recognized by the church cannot be questioned, this also proves the existence of alleged "psi" powers. These powers can be exercised in secular form (for example, by Uri Geller) or with divine inspiration (such as miracles performed by saints). However, Russo's view is an isolated one: The Roman Catholic church does not easily accept claims of present-day miracles.

In spite of some misleading information diffused by the mass media, there doesn't exist in France either a university research center or a teaching program for paranormal phenomena. An example of an impostor in this field is Y. Lignon. a mathematics teaching assistant at the University of Toulouse. Having assembled around him several students interested in experiments in telepathy, and in spite of being disavowed by the president of the university, he appointed himself professor and director of a parapsychology laboratory that exists only in his imagination. This makes it possible for him to appear on television and to be interviewed by journalists.

This situation at the universities in France should not be interpreted necessarily as a general skeptical or hostile attitude toward paranormal phenomena. The average attitude is rather one of agnosticism or indifference tinged with eclecticism when confronted with contradictory opinions. Militant skeptics—such as the astrophysicists Evry Schatzman and J. C. Pecker, the physicist A. Kastler, and the neurophysiologist Yves Galifret—are a small minority and have great difficulty obtaining cooperation even from those colleagues who approve of them. High-level scientists who believe in the paranormal are even more unusual and are very isolated, for example, the physicist O. Costa de Beauregard, who has developed an interpretation of quantum mechanics that gives a theoretical base to paranormal phenomena, and the entomologist R. Chauvin, who is the author of several books about paranormal phenomena and has appeared on numerous television programs but carefully separates this activity from his professional work.

In university circles and among other educated people, a frequent reaction to skeptical reasoning is the following paralogism: "Since you cannot prove *all*

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paranormal claims are false, there may be *some* truth in them."

The lack of interest in paranormal phenomena among university faculty favorably inclined toward them, as well as among those who are skeptical, probably explains the low level of activity of the French Committee for the Study of Paranormal Phenomena (CFEPP), which was founded several years ago on the pattern of CSICOP. However, as secretary of this organization, I hope that in the coming months it will bring to a successful conclusion an experiment it has prepared concerning the neo-astrology of Michel Gauquelin, which has just entered into a new phase.

Television and radio stations in France are also state-run (except for smaller, local radio stations that have recently been authorized), but their attitude toward paranormal ideas is not the same as in the universities. Competition among the responsible authorities of the stations is as intense as in the private media, so a large number of programs are allotted to paranormal ideas in all forms: parapsychology, flying saucers, astrology, etc. To keep up the appearance of objectivity, they from time to time organize discussions presenting both points of view, but many qualified scientists are reluctant to participate because the discussions are too superficial. However, there have been several programs to counter mystifications. For example, when J. P. Girard, the French equivalent of Uri Geller, failed the experiments controlled by physicists, he had to admit that on occasion he cheated. But this was exceptional. All things considered, radio and television exert strong pressure in favor of the paranormal.

The new political administration in France has taken initiatives to promote a scientific turn of mind among young people, but it has not yet come to the conclusion that such an effort is incompatible with publicizing paranormal ideas. When President Mitterand gave an inauguration speech to an important scientific meeting in Paris, he used the word "astrology" instead of "astronomy." This slip, widely noticed by the audience, was later diplomatically attributed to a typing error.

Contrary to French radio and television, the print media belongs to the free enterprise part of the economy. Most wide-circulation daily newspapers as well as most monthly and weekly magazines (especially those with a feminine audience) have an astrology column and publish frequent articles about paranormal subjects and related themes.

The indifference of high-level scientific and philosophical circles toward the irrational wave contributes to the fact that in France there are few systematic studies on the subject and few skeptical works comparable to those published by Prometheus Books. Nevertheless, there are publications of the Rationalist Union, such as "Occult Sciences Are Not Sciences" by R. Imbert-Nergal (not very recent), an issue of the review *Present Reason* entitled "Parapsychology Yes or No?" and two good UFO books written by disillusioned former believers. Other publishers have produced a book by the magician Majax (who could be considered a counterpart of Randi), my own books, and articles printed in the monthly magazine *Science et Vie,* whose editor-in-chief, Philippe Cousin, is joint-secretary with me of CFEPP. A small monthly bulletin I publish under the title *AFIS* (French initials for the French Association for Scientific Information) has been giving more and more attention to a campaign against belief in the paranormal; sometimes it uses information from the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER. Due to a lack of capital at the beginning. *AFIS* has so far only about a thousand subscribers.

In 1971, the sociologist Edgar Morin published statistics related to belief in horoscopes among various social classes. A study done in 1980 for the French National Center for Space Studies (CNES) by two marketing specialists (J. N. Kapferer and B. Dubois) revealed that one Frenchman out of three believes the sun revolves around the earth and that nearly twelve million believe in visits aboard extraterrestrial UFOs.

To my knowledge, by far the most important French work on belief in the paranormal is a doctoral thesis presented in April 1983 in Paris by a young sociologist, G. Chevalier. Basing his analysis on the relationship between what he calls modern occultism and legitimate science, he made a methodical questionnaire survey of various population groups using data-processing techniques. The statistical matter presented in many numerical tables led him to conclusions I can only briefly summarize here: The growth of paranormal beliefs (and correlatively of their commercial exploitation) results, at least in large part, from the gap between the increase in the number of people with middle-level diplomas and the modest social level to which they belong. Paranormal beliefs are both a compensation for the sense of dissatisfaction created by this gap as well as a search for greater knowledge than what these people were actually able to acquire. Also, it is a form of alternative culture. These findings reinforce the conclusion of J. N. Kapferer and B. Dubois that belief in the paranormal is at a maximum in the middle social classes in France. •

Erratum

In the article by Ganoe and Kirwan in the Winter issue, the following two lines were omitted from the bottom of page 135:

lights while the performer is demonstrating "psychic sight."

The superficial skeptic may protest that turning off the lights