



# A d v e r s a r i a



The Association for Skeptical Enquiry Newsletter

Issue 1.3

**ASKE**

**FROM THE ASKE  
CHAIRMAN, MIKE HEAP**

*REPORT ON THE 10TH  
EUROPEAN SKEPTICS'  
CONGRESS, 17-19 SEPTEMBER  
AT MAASTRICHT UNIVERSITY*

Why is it that conferences on scepticism are so enjoyable? One thing is the range of topics discussed. There is something for everybody. A sample of the programme at Maastricht runs as follows: brainwashing cults (Rob Nanninga), Feng Shui (Gerd Aldinger), genetically modified food (Mark O'Leary), astrology (Mogens Winther), the teaching of science (Henri de Broch), and hypnosis (Mike Heap). Another ingredient is that many of the topics are relevant to our own everyday life. As well as the ones just mentioned, we were also treated to talks on dubious personnel selection methods (Jacques Theodor), eye-witness memory (Peter van Koppen), anti-semitism (Herman de Tollenaere), media presentations of paranormal phenomena (Chris French), alternative medicine (Willem Betz), and the placebo effect (Gerben ter Reit). In all cases, the attention of the listener does not flag, as the presentations are within the technical grasp of the non-specialist.

I was, incidentally, very interested to learn that integral to the Chinese philosophy and practice of Feng Shui is the

location and arrangement of the buried bodies of one's deceased parents in relation to one's own abode. Feng Shui is not to be dismissed as 'nonsense' in the context of 4,000 years of Chinese history and culture. What is nonsensical and corrupting, as I heard recently on the radio, is when western entrepreneurs extract it from that culture and sell it in, say, the business and Commercial centres of our cities, the promise to their clients being that by correcting the 'Yin and Yang' with some strategic rearrangement of the office furniture, productivity and profits will increase. Nothing about the bones of one's ancestors here!

Some of the presentations were also philosophical and thought-provoking, such as Joop Doorman's 'Varieties of Scepticism', Paul van Bendegem's 'Argumentation Theory' (more entertaining than it sounds), Wayne Spencer's discussion of what should be the scope of scepticism as we enter the third millennium, and Paul Kurtz's challenge to the audience that

scepticism should tackle religion in more fundamental ways than evaluating claims such as weeping statuettes and the Turin Shroud.

Yet it is not mere fascination with human irrationality that motivates those who are active in scepticism. It is a distaste for dishonesty, duplicity, the misuse of unwarranted power, and the exploitation of vulnerable and gullible people. This we saw, for example, in Ab de Neeling's scholarly, slide-show history of ghost surgeons.

Finally, whatever the topic, it is always possible to present it in an entertaining manner. I thoroughly enjoyed Massimo Polidoro's 'Investigating old Mysteries'. For all its triviality, there is something about a conjurer, 'magically' bending and then breaking a spoon, that is emblematic of what much of scepticism is about. In fact one of the images I still have with me is of Dr. Polidoro's video of Uri Geller on television, apparently causing his interviewer's watch to advance by

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several hours by rubbing the back of it with his finger. A child of eleven who did the same would be patted on the head and told "Now get on with your homework", but on this occasion the interviewer's jaw drops to the floor and the audience goes wild. But they have all missed the most fascinating part of it, revealed only by close-up camera-work. Just before the miracle happens the wind-up pin on the watch is clearly retracted. And afterwards? Mysteriously, it has gone back in again!

On the Saturday of the Conference, all presenters and delegates were invited to a walking tour of Maastricht and a dinner and 'Moonlight Cruise' that took us up and down the River Meuse. And of course it was no mean bonus to have the conference in such an interesting and beautiful city with so many good shops and restaurants. Congratulations to Skepsis, the Dutch Foundation of Sceptics, for organising such an enjoyable and successful event!

#### *FUTURE MEETINGS*

The next European Conference is in Prague in 2001. At the Maastricht meeting ASKE put in an oral bid to have the 2003 conference in the UK. Anybody who wants to be involved in this should get in touch with the ASKE secretary.

## ASKE Update

Those of you who are not on the ASKE e-mail discussion list may not realise that Wayne Spencer decided to step down as Editor of the *Skeptical Intelligencer* and resign as a Council member as while back. Meanwhile Martin Poulter had decided to stand for election to the Council and for a fleeting moment it seemed we might have a real election on our hands. However with Wayne's

resignation we had enough places for all so there seemed little point in going through the expense of an election when the result was already known. Since then Dave Unsworth's own circumstances have changed and his new commitments will now prevent him from taking an active part in ASKE. Therefore at the time of writing the Council is comprised of:-

Anne Corden (Secretary)  
Dr Michael Heap (Chair)  
Mark O'Leary  
Martin Poulter  
Tony Youens (Media Secretary)

Currently we are having difficulty in finding a new editorial team for *The Skeptical Intelligencer*. Dave Unsworth and Mark O'Leary were looking into how it might continue but with the advent of Dave Unsworth's change of circumstances everything has been out on hold. Is there anyone willing to help produce the *Intelligencer*? Perhaps you would be prepared to help with proof reading or looking for suitable articles. It will certainly help if you are on e-mail as there is much sending back and forth of copy. If you are interested then please contact any Council member and let them know. In fact if you consider you are in a position to help ASKE in anyway then let us know.

## The Newsletter

Meanwhile perhaps some of you would care to contribute to the newsletter. An awful lot of information is shared by e-mail via the discussion group and for those of you without access to a computer (as well as those with) you could use the Newsletter in a similar, albeit considerably slower way. If I



received more material than there could be more regular issues and the information would be that much more up to date. I am including a couple of articles detailing a recent trip to a local faith healing session and a rather tedious 'demonstration of mediumship' at our local Spiritualist church. Harriet Moore has written further about the health fair she went to in Belfast and Mike Heap has submitted some newspaper cuttings. Maybe you are thinking about buying a book and want some information, maybe a query about some aspect of skepticism. Why not ask then? Surely this is one of the reasons ASKE exists at all!

#### **Web Report** by Mark O'Leary

ASKE now has a dedicated web server of its own. You can locate it at:

<http://aske.mo.man.ac.uk>

We are currently investigating registering a domain for ourselves (something like 'aske.org').

For those not on the web, our site contains sections for the association, such as the programme of forthcoming events, the application form and constitution, a section for the *Intelligencer* which has complete texts of all the original articles from back issues to date, and quite a few extras, like hints for skeptics appearing in the media, or joint projects such as 'Skeptics in the Pub' and an issue of *Abduction Watch*. The site attracts a fair few enquiries, some of which have led to new membership subscriptions, so it's something we want to develop. Recent discussions on the mailing list have raised some great ideas for new features, and any other suggestions would be most welcome.

Out on the wider web, resources for skeptics and for believers of various kinds grow

apace. I'll close by highlighting a couple of the former. Firstly, the ASKE site is a member of the Skeptic Webring. A webring is a group of websites with a common theme that agree to link together such that a reader can move easily between related information. If you're looking for an archive of skeptical material on the web, the membership list of this webring is a great place to start, at:

<http://www.webring.org/cgi-bin/webring?ring=skeptic;list>

Finally, a site worth a regular visit on the web is Skeptic News, at:

<http://www.skepticnews.com/>

with a skeptical quote for the day, 'Today in History', and an overview of the days media and internet skeptical activity classified by topic, it's always worth a look.

In future Newsletters, I hope the Web Report will point out a handful of the best and worst on the web for skeptics. Any suggestions either for this column or for linking to the ASKE links page on the web would be most welcome!

### **Belfast Heath Fair II**

by Harriett Moore

To continue from my report on the Natural Health Fair in Belfast in the March issue, and to tie this into my trip to film an episode of Living With The Enemy [viewing in September '99]

One of the facilities on offer at the Belfast Health Fair was an 'Aura Camera'. For a fee of approximately £15 anyone could have an instant picture taken purportedly showing that persons aura. The queue was extensive. I watched while each individual in turn sat on a plastic chair and placed their hands on the blue boxes perched on a chair

at either side. After a few moments the camera operator took a photograph with a Polaroid camera, and handed this to the individual. No attempt was made to explain what was being shown in these pictures, which were all woolly images rather like an out-of-focus Wurlitzer.

In January, in England I had my aura photographed, followed immediately by some Reiki healing then a second aura photograph. The intention was to show the difference in my aura before and after the 'healing'.

I had never seen such a camera previously. It consisted of a Polaroid camera mounted inside a metal box, inside which some wiring was visible; from this box and camera more wiring extended to two blue boxes with silvery metal plates in the shape of a spread hand. The whole apparatus is powered by a link to main electricity. I placed my hands on the blue metal boxes where indicated, the camera flashed and a few minutes later, when the photograph's protective layer was peeled off my 'aura' showed on film, photographed for posterity.

Before the first photograph was taken I went to the bathroom, washed my hands in very hot water and dried them carefully. I exerted firm pressure on the metal plates when the photograph was being taken. After the Reiki session I returned to the bathroom, washed my hands in very hot water again, and dried them carefully. Again I exerted firm pressure on the metal plates while the photograph was being taken. The result - both auras are virtually identical.

I have drawn the following conclusions from my observations that day;

- 1 The equipment reacts to the heat of the users hands.
- 2 The equipment reacts to the moisture of the users hands.

- 3 The equipment reacts to the pressure of the users hands.
- 4 The body mass of the user could influence conductivity
- 5 The equipment reacts to variations of the above.
- 6 The user is completing an electrical circuit.
- 7 Until equipment has been designed to exclude these problems I will be unconvinced that such a phenomenon exists.

Subsequently, I have conversed with a number of otherwise sane and intelligent people who believe they have had their aura photographed.

They seem to be convinced that;

- 1 Auras exist
- 2 Auras can be photographed with this rather primitive equipment
- 3 They are not being conned.

I have asked some questions, which they usually get rather irritated about - questions like these;

- 1 What happens my aura when I am in a crowd?
- 2 If you can see auras what does a crowd of people look like?
- 3 Why can't I see your aura?
- 4 Can you see my aura?
- 5 Where do dead peoples auras go?
- 6 How does a new-born baby get an aura?
- 7 Do animals and birds have auras?
- 8 Do plants have auras?
- 9 Do rocks and such have auras?
- 10 Do auras get mixed up or bump into each other?
- 11 Can you lose your aura?
- 12 Can you spot an ill person in a crowd by his/her aura?

I have always pointed out to my True Believer acquaintances that this fascinates me. However, it appears that in order to become involved, I would have to release my grasp of science, the world as I know it, and simply 'believe'. As a clergyman once said to me

"Faith is beyond reason". I think I prefer reason.

**Faith Healing** by Tony Youens

In September I appeared on a Central Weekend Live debate about faith healing. It was easily to worst thing I've ever done. Still not to worry. The debate was prompted by the Reverend Melvin Banks who had carried out a healing session in Derby. The Reverend Banks was due to give similar sessions in Nottingham the following week on 6th September 1999 I decided to go along to the West Bridgford Baptist Church and witness the miracles first hand.

On arrival I was handed a 'Newsletter' which I noticed had a plea for money on the back. Although when I telephoned to enquire I was told I could reserve myself a seat I didn't need to do so as there was still plenty of room. The wooden pews were far from comfortable and I was grateful I wasn't waiting to be cured of arthritis or something. I noticed that there was a small book stall so I wandered over to have a look. It seems the Reverend Harris is a prolific author and although there was plenty to buy I managed to resist. The congregation were later told that profits go towards helping children in India. Although the church seemed quite empty I counted between 80 and 100 people.

We began with a brief introduction and sang a couple of fairly upbeat songs assisted by a small band of musicians. Melvin then talked for about 45 minutes. I thought he was, for the most part, a good speaker but his constantly saying (or asking) "Yes?" after almost everything got a bit tiring. He was amusing and entertaining but a far cry from the razzamatazz of the American Evangelists.

**The Healings**

Eventually the healing session got underway. Various people lined up, I'd say around 50. He began with a young boy called Matthew who was said to be schizophrenic. Whether he was healed or not I'll never know. Melvin made repeated requests for those 'with pain' and, cynic that I am, I thought that perhaps he realised that pain relief was his best chance of convincing us he had achieved a miracle. A few who had walking sticks were asked to hold them up following their healing. To me they all looked as before and had obvious difficulty walking with out aid. In addition to holding two walking sticks one man was also blind. Melvin asked that the man's sight be restored but seemed to place greater emphasis on easing his arthritis. As the man walked away Melvin drew attention to how well he was now walking - another miracle! Melvin didn't bother to enquire if his vision had improved.

Most of those queueing up seemed plagued by pain of some decription. Other illnesses were an 'enlarged heart' and breast cancer. To his credit Melvin told the people to continue any medication they were on, no matter how well they were feeling and to check with their doctors but no great attention was paid to this. It should have been mentioned before everyone started to queue. His general approach was to speak to people in quiet gentle manner and then suddenly, in a loud powerful voice, commanded in the name of Jesus for the person to be healed. He would virtually shouted, "in Jesus name!" which generally made people jump somewhat. He would then look slightly startled himself and make reference (somewhat unconvincingly I thought) to how he felt the 'power' really strongly.

After seeing about half the people 'healed'. I'd had

enough. I left the church and went back to my car. Driving passed the church the man who couldn't see and needed sticks to walk was stood alone on the pavement. He was still blind and was still using his walking sticks. Alas no miracles!

**Postscript**

Following the Central Weekend show I wrote to one of those claiming miracle healings and expressed my willingness to investigate anyone who felt they had been healed through faith. I never received a reply.

**National Science Week in Sheffield, March 17-26, 2000**

For the last two years ASKE has organised a successful public lecture at the University of Sheffield as part of this event. Also, last year I went to two local comprehensive schools to talk about science and scepticism. Anyone who wishes to be involved in the 2000 event should contact me soon. *Mike Heap.*

**Mediumship Demonstration**

Tony Youens

A *Demonstration of Mediumship by Les Driver* was advertised on the noticeboard of our local supermarket so on a cold Tuesday evening I went to see it for myself. Unlike my visit to the baptist church I had to pay an entrance fee of £3. Feeling lucky I also bought £1 worth of raffle tickets.

As I entered I noticed an ornament of a red indian chief, which struck me as a bit too stereotypical. There was display of books for sale which included many on a variety of alternative therapies, a Graham Hancock book and what might best be described as 'new age' stuff. What any of this had to do with Spiritualism I wasn't sure. I sat at the back. There were about 20 in the audience (or is it congregation?). I counted only 4 men all of which were elderly.

Les sat down quietly without saying much and was introduced by Beryl. She was President of the East Midlands Spiritualist something or other. I think Les was quiet so as to give a good contrast to his other 'personalities' who were to emerge later. We were now informed that Les was in fact a trance medium. Beryl asked if those who had not seen this before were okay with this. Luckily everyone was. We were assured that we were fortunate to be able to witness this rare phenomena. It was explained to us that this meant Les went into an altered state of consciousness. This explanation seemed to satisfy everyone and we were asked to be quiet so as not to startle the 'control' (the entity taking over Les).

A hymn was sung while Les went into his trance. The first spirit to arrived was 'Cyrrus' (*pron. Sire-rus*). I have no idea how to spell it but this is probably as good as any. It was apparent that a few regulars in the front had already met him. What followed was an incredibly tedious hour (maybe more) of questions and answers. Basically we should show love through our actions and deeds, meditate and use alternate healing methods. God if you were wondering is "energy and love". Jesus on the other hand was a medium or something and was always referred to as, "the man Jesus". One woman in the front row asked if he could contact her husband. Sadly Cyrrus couldn't as that was not the purpose of his being there (which was to teach and enlighten us) but maybe someone else could later. Les (Cyrrus) spoke in a sort of monotone which dragged on and on and I felt myself going into "an altered state of consciousness" - sleep!

Eventually another character emerged - 'The

Reverend' no less although since passing over he now simply calls himself George. He decided to "lift the vibration" by singing us three songs, one of which was 'Jerusalem'. 'George' it has to be said wasn't a bad singer. Next came 'Joseph' an 11 year old down syndrome boy. He (Joseph) acknowledged that he knew some people there such as Beryl and also two women (mother and daughter I would guess) who sat to his left on the front row. As Les had his eyes closed throughout this must have impressed them greatly. Now cold reading started, with those he knew well Joseph was very accurate indeed but seemed to do less well with others. He said he was learning clairvoyance which perhaps explained his occasional lack of success.

Lastly came 'Albert Ball' who was obviously a favourite with the regulars. Albert was a cockney or at least from London. Coming from the south myself I felt his accent needed a bit of work. Better than Dick Van Dyke in Mary Poppins but not very convincing. Albert continued the cold reading and once more was stunningly accurate with those he knew. He said many accurate things to Beryl although it later transpired that Les had known her for some 17 years. The woman who had earlier asked about her husband tried her luck again. Albert's first question was to ask what his name was. It was David, (this name was thrown out before). Albert tried several names without success. Old favourites were tried such as, "Was it a tragic passing?". It wasn't. Was she concerned about a younger person? She wasn't. Making a slight modification Albert said, "I'm thinking here more of a nephew or neice". Still no luck. It wasn't looking too good. Albert suggested that due to the tragic nature of her husband's passing (which contradicted what

she had said) he was probably undergoing a period of convalescence. She was urged to continue attending the spiritualist church and assured if she did the messages would improve. I have no doubt they would. However Albert finally struck gold. He threw out "is there a connection with engineering?" Yes. Does the word Derby mean anything (well known for engineering) and finally 'Rolls Royce'. All hits. Beryl nodded with obvious approval. The woman though still looked unconvinced.

We sang another hymn as Les emerged from his trance and took control of his body once again. Time for the raffle. The woman who had asked about her husband won third prize. I won forth. I followed the woman from the church and I said to her that she looked unconvinced. She agreed and I explained a little about cold reading and my own interest. She thanked me and said that it confirmed her own view of the demonstration. She ended by telling me that she had no intention of making a return visit. Amen to that.

### Bits and Bobs

#### *Living With The Enemy*

Hopefully you all got a chance to watch Harriet Moore on the 'Living With The Enemy' programme. If you did you will realise that she did extremely well at putting 'Argon and Isis' of the Shambhala healing centre on the spot. Their serenity had a definite tinge of irritation by the end of Harriett's week with them. Hopefully Harriett will be able to tell us some of the other things that happened in a later issue. It you missed it I understand that it will be repeated at sometime in the future. By the way I have been told that 'Argon' comes from the Greek meaning 'no effect'.

*Newspaper cuttings*

Sheffield Weekly Gazette: 25th March 1999.

Evidently a 'stunned Sheffield man', Keith Mallon, returned from a meeting of the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship in Canada after having witnessed teeth being turned to gold. Even more remarkable the Gazette tells us that, "some people are apparently experiencing the miracle after watching videos about it". Keith said: "I really wasn't expecting anything to happen." Really.

Another paper (I don't know which one but it's dated 26th September 1999) reports on the death of a woman, Verity Linn who was a follower of an Australian woman who calls herself 'Jasmuheen' (aka Ellen Greve). Greve has written a book about how we can all live on air and do away with food. This is known as 'breatharianism'. I saw this stupid woman on 'Newsnight' being interviewed by Paxman. She seemed supremely indifferent to the woman's death and tried to explain the 'science' behind this to Jeremy and he said, "This is nonsense isn't it?". I'd say that sums it up nicely.

### *the skeptic*

No not the UK one. This one's from Australia. Mark Gould has sent me some issues that we get in exchange for *Intelligencers*. If you would like to borrow (that is borrow) them please send me about 60p worth of stamps and I'll send you one. Please return it after a couple of weeks so that they can be circulated to other members.



### **Books**

For those of you not quick enough to get a copy of Ian Rowland's book '*The Full Facts of Cold Reading*' I am told that he is

going to start work on it again soon. I believe he is also going ahead with the '*Full Facts of Metal Bending*'. No publication date is available yet but I'll keep you posted.

**Magic in theory;** *Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman*. This is the blurb from the website:

<<http://www.herts.ac.uk/UHPress/parapsychology.html>>

"This unique book will appeal to anybody with a interest in deception and especially to amateur and professional magicians. Two psychologists specialising in parapsychology reveal the manner in which magicians through the ages have used, consciously or unconsciously, psychology to deceive their audiences into believing what they appear to see. Based on interviews with leading magicians, mainly in the USA."

*Publication:* October; *Price:* £18.99; ISBN: 0 900458 93 3.

I'm told the latest publication date is now November 14<sup>th</sup>,

### **Talk Radio - Medium Wave**

Tony Youens

Late one evening, coming back from Manchester, I tuned in to The James Whale Show on Talk Radio (1053 & 1089 AM) and heard a spiritualist medium babbling on about how he'd attempted to take the James Randi Psychic Challenge but was blocked by Randi who seemed to be putting unnecessary terms and conditions on the test. I came in halfway through so I didn't get the whole story.

The medium in question was Derek Acorah who is a member of the International Society for Psychical Research (ISPR). Anyway I e-mailed Randi and as might be expected they haven't even applied to take the challenge. It seems what the ISPR did instead was to dream up a ridiculous counter challenge

which would involve Mr. Acorah and an American woman, Deana Smoeller, attempting to cause Randi's heart to miss a beat on 31st December 1999. A particularly stupid and unscientific test. They also insisted Randi come to the UK for the 'test'.

I wrote to James Whale pointing out Acorah's error (deliberate or otherwise) but nothing was said when Acorah returned the following Sunday. He was one for about three hours doing what sounded for all the world like cold reading. If you ever listen to a medium you will invariably notice one very important aspect of their performance. They can come up with names (usually only first names) e.g.: "*Who's David?*" or "*Why am I getting the name Dorothy?*" and they will also get relationships, although unless the caller sounds fairly old they are usually limited to the grandparent age bracket. The curious thing is they never come straight out with an accurate combination of the two, "*I have your father here and his name is Cuthbert.*"

Another thing to look out for is the utter inanity of the messages received from loved ones who, having finally got through and are on a national radio station, simply say they are watching over you and you're not to worry about that recent problem you had.

The interesting thing about this is that Acorah was taken off on Sunday night due to the Radio Authority's Programme Code. I confess I was unaware of this code (if you write or phone they'll send you a copy free of charge).

7.11 states: (extract)

*Demonstrations of psychic or occultic practice, including contact with the dead, must not occur in factual programming, except where they are the subject of a legitimate investigation.*

Needless to say after discussion with the Radio Authority, Talk Radio managed to have Acorah back on two weeks later. Any changes were purely cosmetic.

However by coincidence I was contacted by the Kilroy Show about a programme they were doing on 'Talking to the Dead'. One guest turned out to be Derek Acorah himself. Luckily I had taped the shows and set myself the tedious task of analysing about 5 hours of readings. I counted that he asked 123 questions in one show and 177 in another. Believe me when I say I was being conservative in my counting.