

## TIES Helps Teachers Adapt to Their New Environment

Bertha Vazquez



Bertha having a laugh with Dr. Brian Hare, who recently hosted a free TIES webinar for teachers.

It's 11 a.m. on January 21. My physical science class and I are deep into a lesson on balancing chemical equations. We are interrupted by the assistant principal's voice on the PA system asking all the teachers to check their emails for the latest list of students to be sent home for quarantine.

My students groan. They know the drill.

As I read the list, they try to avoid making eye contact with me. "Kamal, Mason, Isabella, you have to go to the cafeteria and call your parents. You are going home." Kamal is almost in tears. It's his third quarantine in six weeks. And I can't even hug the poor child; the blue tape I have on my classroom floor keeps him six feet away from me as he walks out the door.

Then my cell phone rings.

My heart sinks as I see who it is: my principal. "Bertha, you have to go home. There was a confirmed

case in one of your classes. You can return to school on February 1."

And so begins my third quarantine this year.

I teach three different subjects. I have seven periods: three biology classes, three physical science classes, and one regular seventh grade class. Two classes are entirely online, and one class is a hybrid class with half of the students online and the other half in person. The other four classes are supposed to be all in person, but there are several students Zooming in from home on any given day. My school administration does an excellent job of supporting its teachers, but it's not easy.

Every teacher I speak with across the nation shares my frustration and fatigue. What can I say? We can only do the best we can with what we've got.

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## The Translations Project Aims to Bring Secular Knowledge Where It's Needed Most

Wafa Bahri



Midway through the process of writing this article, I received the following message from a fellow translator.

"Does a printed book version of *The Illustrated Magic of Reality* exist in Arabic?" they asked, referring to an edition of Richard Dawkins's book *The Magic of Reality*, specially illustrated by Dave McKean. "If it didn't, then I would be very much interested in translating it to Arabic. The book is such an excellent resource, and I am convinced that millions of Arabic speakers in the Middle East and beyond would benefit from its good science. Leafing through

[Continued on page 4]

## Rising to the New Reality: The Story of CFI's Progress in 2020

The year 2020 was one like no other. Misinformation, conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, and religious privilege were weaponized to an unprecedented level, exacerbated by once-in-

a-lifetime national and global crises that disrupted every aspect of society: a catastrophic pandemic, social upheaval, and a tsunami of

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## A Message from Connie

Dear Friends,

I hope this issue of FREETHOUGHT IN ACTION finds you well and thinking thoughts of spring! In these pages, you will learn more about the work that has been taking place at the Center for Inquiry (CFI) over the winter months—vital work that educates middle school students on evolution, provides access to secular literature to people all over the world, and influences policies that shape the legislation that governs our lives.

As we look forward, there are many exciting initiatives on the horizon. In particular, I am excited to share that, thanks to the support of a generous CFI donor, we will be working to close the \$160,000 gap needed to preserve the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum in perpetuity.

As you may know, Ingersoll is known as “The Great Agnostic” and was the foremost orator and political speechmaker of the late nineteenth century. His impact on the freethought movement cannot be overstated, and we at CFI are honored to help preserve his legacy by maintaining the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum in Dresden, New York.

Our own CFI hero, Tom Flynn, editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine, has generously offered his own funds to ensure the Museum is around for generations to come by personally matching gifts to the Ingersoll Endowment Fund. **All donations to the Ingersoll Endowment will be matched dollar-for-dollar**, up to \$40,000, by Flynn himself! You can read more about Flynn and his generosity in our Supporter Spotlight section on page 12.

If you are interested in supporting the Robert Green Ingersoll Endowment Fund and having your gift matched, you can do so at [secularhumanism.org/rgi-endowment/](http://secularhumanism.org/rgi-endowment/). Gifts of appreciated stock, paid-up life insurance policies, and planned gifts also count toward the match and are a great way to ensure your values are reflected through your philanthropy. I am happy to talk through options with you at any time.

Speaking of planned giving, we have a new website for legacy giving. If you visit [cfilegacy.org](http://cfilegacy.org), you will find various options for making a planned gift that can provide tax benefits to you and/or your heirs, a planned giving calculator, language for naming CFI as a bequest in your will, and more.

**You have the power to change the lives of countless people without impacting your current lifestyle with a planned gift to CFI.**

Thank you, as always, for your ongoing support. Please be in touch if you have any questions about your giving or if I can help you further your philanthropic goals in any way.

Best wishes to you and yours,

Connie Skingel  
Director of Development



(Vol. 7, No. 1) is published by the Center for Inquiry, a nonprofit educational corporation, P.O. Box 741, Amherst NY 14226-0741. Phone (716) 636-4869. Fax (716) 636-1733. © 2021 the Center for Inquiry.

This issue of FREETHOUGHT IN ACTION is distributed free of charge to selected members and supporters of the Center for Inquiry.

Items not specified are written in collaboration between Paul Fidalgo, Nicole Scott, and Julia Lavarney.

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Chris Fix and his wife, Tricia.

## Chris Fix, Our Former Art Director

The entire Center for Inquiry family mourns the loss of former Art Director Christopher S. Fix, who died of pancreatic cancer March 6 in Amherst, New York. He was only fifty-one. Fix joined our production staff in 2002 and became art director in 2008. Beginning with the January/February 2009 issue and ending with the May/June 2020 issue, when he had to step down due to his illness, Fix designed every *Skeptical Inquirer* cover and designed and laid out the inside pages, including the selection of most art and illustrations. He did the same for *Free Inquiry*, beginning with the February/March 2009 issue and ending with the August/September 2020 issue. He also designed promotional materials for the Center for Inquiry as a whole. A Buffalo native and graphic designer, Fix's working style was calm, quiet, and professional. He leaves his parents, Norman and Dorothy Fix; his wife, Tricia; daughters Samantha and Ava; and son, John. Our hearts go out to his family. We will miss him.

## Layout Artist (In Memory of Chris Fix)

Joe Nickell

And you'd analyze  
then dramatize  
a page,  
wizardry of computerized  
brush  
& pen.  
I'd stand  
hushed  
behind  
the horizon  
of your shoulder  
wearing  
admiring  
looks you'd never  
see.  
Bolder  
now, I flip blank  
pages:  
picture  
what could be—  
if only you were here,  
& not on break  
somewhere,  
far  
beyond the edges.

## CFI Insider: Many Remarkable Individuals, One Great Community

Melissa Myers



From left to right: Jen Beahan, Kendrick Frazier, Leighann Lord, and Timothy Binga.

We created CFI Insider last July out of the desire to keep the CFI community together and spotlight the work being done by various CFI departments, even during our current socially distanced reality. The program is hosted monthly via Zoom, and if you've missed an episode, the previous events are all available via CFI's YouTube channel and at [centerforinquiry.org/video](http://centerforinquiry.org/video).

The Zoom webinar format allows us to welcome the participation of

a large group of people without regard to their physical locations. We've had audience members join us from across the country and around the world. Each presentation is about an hour long and can take the form of an interview or lecture, depending on the guest and the content they share. The question and answer portion at the end of each program is a crowd favorite.

Our most recent past events have featured a fascinating

retrospective of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine with its longtime editor, Kendrick Frazier; a closer look at CFI's Translations Project with its director, Wafa Bahri; and a primer for surviving the holidays while secular featuring CFI Michigan Executive Director Jen Beahan and Julie Henshaw, a therapist who specializes in helping folks who are transitioning away from religion. In October, our best-attended presentation featured the chairman of our board of directors, activist and attorney Eddie Tabash, who joined us with an enlightening (and sobering) presentation on the U.S. Supreme Court, which aired just before the confirmation of Justice Amy Coney Barrett.

By the time you read this, we'll have also heard from Tim Binga, who oversees CFI's extensive onsite and online library catalog.

His presentation included some of his favorite pieces from one of the largest collections of skeptic and secular materials known to exist. It also gave us a peek into the history of freethought, as well as the nuts and bolts of maintaining such a collection. March brought the head of the CFI Legal Department, Nicholas Little, who joined me to discuss the various court cases brought by CFI to help fight the spread of pseudoscience and quackery.

We invite you to take a closer look at what's made possible through your generous support. You can register for each presentation for free, check for upcoming events, and catch up on past episodes at [centerforinquiry.org/insider](http://centerforinquiry.org/insider).

Melissa Myers is CFI's field organizer and host of CFI Insider.

## The Translations Project Aims to Bring Secular Knowledge Where It's Needed Most

(Cont'd. from page 1)

its compelling illustrations and illuminating text is a must for every Arabic speaker to promote scientific literacy and a secular worldview within Arab countries.”

While similar messages are common for the team at the CFI Translations Project, this message was a particularly enlightening moment for me, showing how translation is not simply an act of cultural, literary, and informational exchange between an original and a target text but also an invaluable tool for translators, researchers, and scholars to reshape and improve the historical, cultural, and intellectual realities of societies.

It is in this context, understanding translation as a practice that is more complex than merely importing and exporting information, that we approach secular knowledge translation at the CFI Translations Project. Translation scholar Claudia Elena Urrego Zapata, in her PhD thesis “The Role of Translation on the Development of Civil Engineering Codes: Cultural Transfer of Specialized Scientific Knowledge in the Second Half of the Twentieth Century in Colombia,” defines the term *knowledge* as encompassing all discovered and created fields of human-derived evidence. The term *secular knowledge* refers to all research and literature written from irreligious, non-creationist, humanist, and evolutionary perspectives. While the phrase “secular knowledge translation” draws a straightforward relationship between secularism and translation, concepts of transformation, reformation, change, and progress are firmly embedded in the process.

The scarcity of translated work carried out within a secular and scientific translation framework in Muslim-majority countries has prompted the development of a translation project at the Center for Inquiry (CFI) and the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science. The project aims to fill that gap and disseminate secular knowledge.

To achieve this goal, the Translations Project was launched to produce professionally translated versions of landmark books on science and nature in four major languages: Farsi, Indonesian, Urdu, and Arabic. How is the Translations Project working toward achieving its objectives, and what driving forces



contribute to its dynamics? I'll discuss two major points and then touch on our plans moving forward.

### Goals and Achievements

The mission of the Translations Project at CFI can be narrowed down to three main goals: (1) provide professional and quality translations of secular literature, starting with Richard Dawkins's works, into languages spoken in Muslim-majority countries; (2) reach a wide readership base with the translated materials in an attempt to push back against the teaching of religious dogma; and (3) facilitate access to the translations by providing free downloading options of all materials.

One sign of success is that we know, based on data from a 2020 report, our translated books have been downloaded in more than eighty countries around the world, with a download rate that exceeded 5,000 downloads in a period of a few weeks. The steady increase in website traffic also provides a good sense of momentum and reassurance that the project goals are being met gradually.

The website offers nineteen high-quality translations of nine brilliant and captivating books by Richard Dawkins, such as the eminent *The God Delusion*, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, and *River out of Eden*. In total, the number of translations is expected to reach twenty-five in March 2021 as two books new to the project, *The Four Horsemen* and *Outgrowing God*, are now through the editing stage in all target languages.

The impact of the Translations



Project is particularly evident from the constant positive and encouraging feedback that the team receives across various digital platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook.

### Driving Forces

The success of the project is driven by its secular objectives and our commitment to a process of knowledge transfer that elevates humanism, science, reason, critical thinking, and freedom from religion. Several recently conducted and very comprehensive surveys in Muslim-majority countries, such as the Arab Barometer research network in the Middle East, have shown the growth of secularization and a decline in religiosity. This is not to say that the Translations Project is the only reason behind the new trend of irreligion in those countries, but it would be hard to deny the impact



of Dawkins's work in that regard. The Translations Project's goals are very much in line with current calls for religious reformation and secularization in Muslim-majority countries.

The team of translators and editors who have been dedicated to working on this project over the years is another source of strength. In addition to their professionalism, accountability, motivation, and the high quality of the translations they deliver, our translators are key players in the secular knowledge transfer process upon which the entire project is based.

### Future Plans

In the short term, the Translations Project will switch gears for a time to begin translating some children's books written from humanist and scientific perspectives. Indeed, the secular and scientific mission of the Translations Project is not limited to adult readers. Introducing science and humanist concepts in beautifully illustrated literature to children in Muslim-majority countries is also of great importance.

The project will also produce a translation of a very compelling book by the humanist rights activist Yasmine Mohammed, *Unveiled: How Western Liberals Empower Radical Islam*. Driven always by the ideal of making secular content easily accessible, the project will also focus on translating and editing the subtitles of several videos from the Richard Dawkins Foundation YouTube channel.

In the longer term, the project will translate more books by Richard Dawkins and other secular writers. Adding more languages spoken in places where religious dogma and superstition still reign is another long-term goal to consider. Nevertheless, the ultimate aspiration of the project is to build a massive readership base in every country where Indonesian, Urdu, Arabic, and Persian are spoken. With the support of this community, we can achieve those aspirations and dare to do even more.

Learn more about the Translations Project and support its work at [translationsproject.org](http://translationsproject.org).

Wafa Bahri is the director of the Translations Project, a program of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science.

## TIES Helps Teachers Adapt to Their New Environment (Cont'd. from page 1)

I explain all this to plainly illustrate that traditional teaching has been simply impossible this year. Early in the pandemic crisis, the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science (TIES) realized that what teachers needed were lessons that were student-guided. The lessons needed to last for several class periods in case teachers could not connect with their students. So, TIES provided middle and high school science teachers with precisely these types of lessons.

The success of these free units is clear. Since the last issue of FREETHOUGHT IN ACTION, TIES has presented these student-guided units sixteen more times, partnering up with national and state teacher organizations across the United States. Teachers from Tennessee to Oregon were effusive in their expressions of gratitude for the TIES resources that allowed them

to teach evolution virtually as well as effectively.

Zoo educators also jumped on the TIES bandwagon, taking part in a half-day training on our resources on February 6. Zoo educators from thirteen different states participated in the session presented by Kate Davis of the Birmingham Zoo and Nathan Lents of City University, New York. Copies of Dr. Lents's books (*Human Errors* and *Not So Different*), along with TIES t-shirts, were raffled off at the event.

TIES also continued to offer teachers relevant webinars for their students. Last October, Dr. Brian Hare of Duke University presented his book, *Survival of the Friendliest*, to seventy-six teachers. Dr. Alex Wilson of the University of Miami answered student questions about what an evolutionary biologist does day-to-day in a webinar attended by 180 teachers and students. And all

our presentations are freely available to watch online any time.

Perhaps the most important achievement of this period occurred in partnership with two of our nation's largest school districts: Miami-Dade County Public Schools (345,000 students), the fourth-largest school district in the country, and Winston-Salem Forsyth Schools (52,000 students). Both districts have adopted the TIES virtual unit for all their middle school science classes. Thousands of students will now receive high-quality evolution education even if their teachers cannot present it to them in person. Teachers from these districts attended live TIES sessions while many more watched the recordings.

My honors students love good puns. They would roll their eyes if I told them that the job of helping teachers teach evolution has most definitely evolved. The educational environment changed drastically in

the past year. Thankfully, TIES had enough "variation in its genome" to adapt and prosper.

As I said before, traditional teaching is impossible right now, and we can only do the best we can with what we've got. The more you support TIES and its mission, the more we can do to help teachers and students through this very untraditional time.

If you would like to help make sure middle school teachers have the resources they need to learn about natural selection, common ancestry, and diversity so they can confidently teach these topics in their classrooms and fulfill their curriculum requirements, visit us at <https://centerforinquiry.org/donate/to/ties/>. Every gift helps!

Bertha Vazquez is the director of TIES.

## Employee Number Two Is Instrumental to Success: Meet TIES Associate Kenny Coogan



Kenny Coogan.

With her incredible drive and dedication, Bertha Vazquez, the dedicated director of the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science (TIES), seems like she does the work of thousands all on her own. While this is not *too* far from the truth, she isn't actually alone. After a period of running all on her own the program she helped found, she was finally joined by "employee number two," TIES Associate Kenny Coogan.

Coogan's passion for the natural world led him to earn a BS in animal behavior at the University at Buffalo, and then over the course of ten years he worked at an aquarium and two zoos in New York and Florida. While working in the education departments of their zoological facilities, he attended several conferences and befriended dozens of zookeepers and educators. Coogan then moved onto what he calls "the lucrative career of middle school science teacher."

In 2016, Coogan was awarded the Beginning Science Teacher of the Year Award for the State of Florida through the Florida Association of Science Teachers (FAST). At the same conference where he received the award, he also attended a very energetic and empowering session led by Bertha Vazquez.

"I was familiar with evolution in my previous job, but what she said regarding the scope and breadth of what middle school comprehensive science teachers are required to understand and teach rang so true," Coogan told us. "I understood evolution and biology, so I was good for a quarter of the year, but

what about those who majored in geography? I knew that TIES was a crucial education organization."

After the FAST committee summarized all the things he was doing in his classroom, Vazquez told him, "We need more teachers like you." They chatted, and he offered his voluntary services to help grow the TIES Facebook page and reach more people. Just a month later, Coogan became the second employee of TIES. He has been with TIES ever since.

When asked what exactly he does in his role with TIES, Coogan commented:

When there isn't a world pandemic, I reach out to my zoo and museum contacts and schedule day-long collaborative workshops. When we were approaching the last few states [to get TIES workshops in every state in the United States], I was able to get Montana, Utah, and Alabama by presenting TIES through zoos—a safe environment for scientifically minded teachers in conservative states.

"One of my favorite aspects of working with TIES is procuring all the freebies we put on the raffle table," he said. "In my classroom, I

have averaged over \$10,000 worth of donations for my classroom annually. I know that teachers do not have nor want to spend money on their classrooms. So I reach out to various organizations and ask for donations for raffle prizes (things like fossil molds, t-shirts, scientific themed jewelry, science games, books, etc.) during our professional development sessions. Teachers are eligible to win an item for answering questions or by winning a door prize."

In addition to venue searching, Coogan also prepares workshops by collating lesson plans and preparing teacher participant packets. He sends these out to the host institutions, which are usually school districts.

During the pandemic, TIES has had to shift its focus to the virtual world, and Coogan has been reaching out to authors and scientists to schedule and advertise the program's free webinars.

Bertha Vazquez describes Coogan as "wonderful" and "a big part of our success." She adds, "Few people know how instrumental he has been to TIES."

A few more do now.

## CFI and the Council Announce 2020 Forkosch Awards

The Council for Secular Humanism and the Center for Inquiry are pleased to announce the winners of the Morris D. and Selma V. Forkosch Awards for calendar year 2020.

Established in 1988, the Morris D. Forkosch Award recognizes the best humanist book of the year and carries an honorarium of \$1,000. The Selma V. Forkosch Award recognizes the year's outstanding article in *Free Inquiry* magazine, the Council's flagship journal, and carries a prize of \$250.

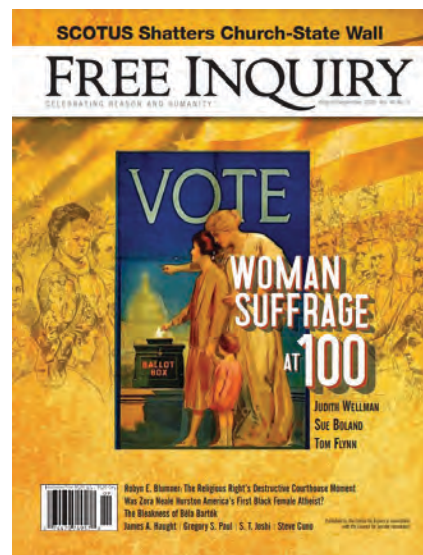
The Morris D. Forkosch Award for Best Book of 2020 goes to journalist Katherine Stewart for her exposé *The Power Worshipers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (Bloomsbury), a powerful and disturbing portrait of the authoritarian, divisive movement sometimes inadequately described as the religious Right.

The Selma V. Forkosch Award for Best Article for 2020 goes to historian Judith Wellman for her



Author Katherine Stewart.

essay in the August/September 2020 issue of *Free Inquiry*, "What Can Historic Sites Tell Us about the Movement for Woman Suffrage in New York State?" The article explores the role of historic sites in interpreting the history of the woman suffrage movement, which began in west-central New York State in 1848.



The most recent previous Morris D. Forkosch Award winners included Stephen Waldman for *Sacred Liberty: America's Long, Bloody, and Ongoing Struggle for Religious Freedom* (2019) and Catherine Nixey for *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World* (2018). Previous winners have also included Susan

Jacoby for *The Great Agnostic: Robert Ingersoll and American Freethought* (2012), Daniel C. Dennett for *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), and Stephen Jay Gould for *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (1989).

Previous Selma V. Forkosch Award winners have included Brian Bolton for "Still Not a Christian Nation: Every Reason America Is Secular, in One Place" (2019) and Lowrey R. Brown for "By My Own Hand: Suicide Can Be a Wise and Gentle Choice" (2018).

Nominations are now being accepted for the best book and best *Free Inquiry* article of 2021 and will remain open throughout the calendar year. Individuals wishing to nominate a work should email *Free Inquiry* Editor Tom Flynn at [tflynn@centerforinquiry.org](mailto:tflynn@centerforinquiry.org).

*Free Inquiry* is copublished by the Council for Secular Humanism and the Center for Inquiry.

## Right Now in *Skeptical Inquirer*



Subscribers to *Skeptical Inquirer*, the magazine for science and reason, are enjoying stories such as these in the March/April 2021 issue:

- Stephanie Kemmerer delves into the bizarre "quiniverse" of QAnon conspiracies in the first of a two-part series for SI. In this article, she interviews ex-members of the movement, and in their own

words they tell us how they got into the fringe theory—making the dive down the rabbit hole—and how they got out again.

- Wanton attacks on scientific truths—and even the existence of truth itself—are profoundly troubling. In his article "Science: The Gold Standard of Truth," preeminent evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins illustrates how science's history is a spectacular cascade of truths.
- In his article "Behe, Bias, and Bears (Oh My!)," Nathan H. Lents outlines how Lehigh University biochemist Michael Behe has focused his attention on several of the most high-profile examples of evolution research and has attempted to reinterpret them in a way that will support the theory of intelligent design creationism.

It's another swing and a miss for the unscientific theory.

- Charles H. Jones, in his article "Is There a Philosophical Magisterium?," argues that while some scholars—such as Massimo Pigliucci—are promoting the idea that philosophy studies questions that science cannot, an analysis of the scientific method finds otherwise. In answer, Massimo Pigliucci denies Jones's claims and states that science and philosophy exist on a continuum with areas of overlap and reciprocal aid. He believes each informs the other—or should.
- SI Deputy Editor Benjamin Radford looks at the case of an Ohio boy's disappearance from a small town around Christmas 2019, which was viewed as a genuine mystery.

It eventually garnered the attention of national news media—and psychics. Radford delves into the psychics' claims and shows how they did not help recover the boy.

- Also in this issue: Joe Nickell settles the case of the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce; Harriet Hall revisits hypnosis; Stuart Vyse looks at COVID-19 and its relation to the economic concept of the tragedy of our commons; D. Alan Bensley remembers the many valuable contributions of Scott O. Lilienfeld; and much more!

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## Legal Update: CFI Finds New Opportunities in a Tough New Reality

Nicholas J. Little



A new year, a new issue of *FREETHOUGHT IN ACTION*, and a new administration in Washington, D.C. While CFI is a nonpartisan organization politically, there can be no denying that the work we do is heavily influenced by who's in charge. Actions taken in the White House, on Capitol Hill, and at the Supreme Court all determine how we respond, what methods we use, and what areas we focus on.

CFI's Legal Department sees the new administration as an

opportunity to open a new front in the campaign against pseudoscientific nonsense in retail stores in the form of homeopathy. We are continuing to litigate our two groundbreaking consumer-protection cases against CVS and Walmart for their deceptive hawking of homeopathy, awaiting a decision from the DC Court of Appeals. But we have also taken the opportunity to encourage the new leaders in Washington, D.C., to better fulfil their obligations to properly regulate homeopathy.

To that end, CFI has been in communication with the Food and Drug Administration—which regulates what products can be sold as over-the-counter drugs and their labeling—and the Federal Trade Commission—which regulates the marketing and advertising of such products. We've asked these federal agencies to shrug off the irresponsible *caveat emptor* approach of the past four years and help CFI protect consumers from the multi-billion-dollar-per-year

fraud that is homeopathy.

We're also coming at the problem from a slightly different angle, reaching out to the Joint Commission of Pharmacy Practitioners (JCPP), a body that represents all the various pharmacist membership groups. Research commissioned by CFI shows that one-third of retail pharmacy customers rely on their pharmacist for advice on what over-the-counter products to purchase, fully three times the number who call their doctor for such advice. The pharmacist is therefore in a critical position of trust, and CFI asked the JCPP to ensure that its members remain worthy of that trust by refraining from ever recommending homeopathy to patients and whenever possible to educate patients about homeopathy and the fraud it represents.

While the new administration brings with it the possibility of increased government regulation in areas such as pseudoscience and climate change, the outlook for the

Legal Department's other main focus, the separation of church and state, remains much cloudier. In his inauguration speech, President Joe Biden made repeated references to the importance of faith in America. We waited patiently to see if he, like President Barack Obama at his first inauguration, would at least acknowledge the presence of a large and rapidly growing nonreligious community in this country, only to be disappointed. As under President Donald Trump, it may be that under President Biden those of us who do not subscribe to any faith are to be unrecognized. Fortunately, CFI has no intention of sitting quietly in the shadows!

The real damage to the Establishment Clause has become clear, as the previous administration packed the federal court system from top to bottom with judges and justices willing to grant increasing degrees of privilege to religion and, in particular, to Christianity.

(Continued on page 16)

## Point of Inquiry Update



*Point of Inquiry* cohost Jim Underdown's most recent episodes included guests who couldn't be much further apart on the belief spectrum. (His fellow cohost, Leighann Lord, has been very busy lately with her hosting duties on *Skeptical Inquirer Presents*.)

Just before Christmas 2020, *The Trouble with Christmas for Atheists* launched, during which Underdown spoke to Tom Flynn, affectionately known as the Anti-Claus. Flynn, whose day job is the editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine, is the author of *The Trouble with Christmas*, a book that delves into Christmas traditions, history, and origins. The two also

talked about the alleged "war on Christmas" and how atheists have found other ways to celebrate the December holidays—or not.

Underdown's next guest was Joe Manno, the pastor of the Revelation church in Florida, whom Underdown has known since their days as extras on the TV show *Cagney and Lacey* in 1984. While Manno worked in various capacities for alleged faith healer Benny Hinn, Underdown attended three of Hinn's "miracle" services, during one of which he almost made it on stage to be healed.

The purpose of the interview, though, had more to do with how polarized our country is and showed how two people who hold opposite religious beliefs can still be longtime friends and enjoy each other's company.

Other recent episodes of the *Point of Inquiry* podcast include:

**Revisiting the Life of Frank**

### **Sinatra—Living a Life of Homelessness**

In 1997, Underdown produced and directed a short documentary called *A Day in the Life of Frank Sinatra*, an exploration of what it was like to be a homeless man with a famous name. Twenty-three years later, Frank Sinatra is recently off the streets, lives in a government-funded camper in Los Angeles, and is trying to live a normal life. Underdown sat down with Frank and asked him about being a cab driver and a one-time contestant on the *Gong Show*. They also delved into Frank's homelessness in Los Angeles for the past twenty-eight years, the troubles and lasting damage addiction can cause, how Frank believes that no one is immune to turning to drugs, and Frank's hopes for the future.

**The Puritan Roger Williams, Church-State Separation and the Impact on Today**

What does the Puritan founder of both the state of Rhode Island and the Baptist Church have to say about modern evangelicals? Roger Williams had certain ideas that didn't fit into seventeenth-century England or its American colonies. Freedom of conscience, separation of church and crown, fair treatment of indigenous peoples, and supporting the rights of women were all a tough sell in the 1600s. But sell he did, and though Roger Williams is far from a household name in 2021, some of his ideas still reverberate through our country and our world. In this episode, Underdown spoke to Roger Williams's twelfth great-granddaughter, Becky Garrison, about her book *Roger Williams's Little Book of Virtues*.

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## Ten New Fellows Elected to Committee for Skeptical Inquiry

In a time when misinformation, pseudoscience, and conspiracy theories saturate our media and erode trust in science and reality, the role of the public skeptic has never been more critical. Science denial, alternative facts, and magical thinking test the very integrity of society and threaten the health and freedoms of everyone. Those at the vanguard for the advance of science, reason, and critical thinking are indispensable.

It is those individuals who we honor as fellows of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI). The ten remarkable men and women elected for 2020 represent a wide range of fields and areas of expertise, each making meaningful contributions to the promotion of scientific inquiry, critical investigation, and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims.

The new inductees join a venerable group of distinguished scientists, scholars, activists, authors, and creators, including Richard Dawkins, E. O. Wilson, Neil deGrasse Tyson, Elizabeth Loftus, Bill Nye, Susan Blackmore, Steven Pinker, Eugenie Scott, Steven Novella, and Susan Haack. Founding fellows of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry include renowned scientists, academics, and science writers such as Carl Sagan, Isaac Asimov, Martin Gardner, Paul Kurtz, Ray Hyman, Philip J. Klass, Sidney Hook, and of course the amazing James Randi, who died just this past October at age ninety-two.

The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry is the publisher of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine, and its mission is to promote scientific inquiry, critical investigation, and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims. CSI is a program of the Center for Inquiry.

Introducing the 2020 fellows of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry!

[Continued in next column]



### **Jann Johnson Bellamy: Tracker of Legislative Alchemy**

Bellamy is an attorney in Tallahassee, Florida, and a contributor to the website Science-Based Medicine, where she tracks state and federal bills that would allow pseudoscience in health care. In 2006, she left the active practice of law to form a nonprofit to educate Floridians about “alternative” healthcare claims. She is one of the founders of the Society for Science-Based Medicine (SfSBM), dedicated to providing accurate information about complementary and alternative medicine, which has now become a part of the Center for Inquiry.



### **Kenny Biddle: Inspector of Gadgets**

Biddle is a science enthusiast in Philadelphia who investigates claims of paranormal experiences with a particular focus on the use and misuse of media and technology to provide “evidence” of the paranormal. He promotes science, critical thinking, and skepticism through his online column at *Skeptical Inquirer*, his blog *I Am Kenny Biddle*, and his YouTube

channel. He frequently hosts workshops on how to deconstruct paranormal photography and solve mysteries at both science- and paranormal-themed events, and he hosts the live Q&A podcast *The Skeptical Help Bar*, which promotes open discussion between people of different beliefs.



### **Timothy Caulfield: Goop Buster**

Caulfield is Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy, professor in the Faculty of Law and School of Public Health, as well as research director of the Health Law Institute, all at the University of Alberta. He is the author of the newly updated book *The Science of Celebrity ... or, Is Gwyneth Paltrow Wrong about Everything?* and host of the acclaimed Netflix documentary series challenging mass-marketed health trends, *A User's Guide to Cheating Death*, which received the award for Non-Fiction: Science & Technology at the 2019 RealScreen Summit Awards.



### **William M. London: Consumer Health Crusader**

A professor of public health at California State University in Los

Angeles, London teaches and writes about the promotion of health-related misinformation, sensationalism, superstition, pseudoscience, fraud, and quackery. He is the Consumer Health online columnist for *Skeptical Inquirer*; the editor of Quackwatch's e-newsletter, *Consumer Health Digest*; and co-host of the Credential Watch website (a Quackwatch affiliate). He was cofounder and first president of the Ohio Council Against Health Fraud and later served as president of the National Council Against Health Fraud. This past year he has spearheaded the Center for Inquiry's online Coronavirus Resource Center and Dubious COVID-19 Treatments and Preventives website.



### **Matthew C. Nisbet: Critical Communicator**

Nisbet is professor of communication, public policy, and urban affairs at Northeastern University in Boston and a regular columnist at *Issues in Science and Technology* magazine. He is a leading researcher in the international fields of science communication and environmental politics. He was editor-in-chief of the three-volume *Oxford Encyclopedia of Climate Change Communication*, which was a finalist for the American Publishers' 2019 PROSE Awards in the reference/science category. He is past editor-in-chief of the journal *Environmental Communication*. Nisbet's “The Science of Science Communication” column has appeared regularly in *Skeptical Inquirer* since 2016. His new column there is “The Examined Life,” which provides “a skeptical dose of anti-self-help advice.”



### Natalia Pasternak: Brazilian Skeptic Star

Pasternak is a microbiologist with a PhD from the University of São Paulo, Brazil, where she studied the molecular genetics of bacteria. In 2018, she became the first president of the Instituto Questão de Ciência (IQC; Question of Science Institute), promoting scientific evidence in public policy. In combating the prevalence of coronavirus misinformation in Brazil, Pasternak has become a highly visible and passionate advocate for science and reason, making frequent appearances on television and writing a weekly science column in a Rio de Janeiro newspaper. She and Carlos Orsi wrote “Believing the Science Is Not Understanding the Science: Brazilian Surveys” for the March/April 2020 issue of *Skeptical Inquirer*.



### James Underdown: Hollywood’s Reality Check

Underdown is founder and chair of the Center for Inquiry Investigations Group (CFIIG), which investigates fringe science, paranormal, and extraordinary claims from a rational, scientific viewpoint and offers \$250,000 to

anyone who can prove paranormal or supernatural ability under controlled test conditions. Underdown is also the longtime executive director of the Center for Inquiry West, based in Los Angeles, where he promotes science-based skepticism, reason, freedom of inquiry, and secular values. He is one of the cohosts of the Center for Inquiry’s flagship podcast, *Point of Inquiry*, and writes the *Ask the Atheist* blog on CFI’s website. He also runs CFI West’s Carl Sagan & Ann Druyan Theater. In addition to his skeptic credentials, the multitalented Underdown is a writer, lead singer of a rock group, comedic actor and entertainer, and a frequent host of CFI and CSI events.



### Joseph Uscinski: Conspiracy Theory Theorist

Uscinski is associate professor of political science at the University of Miami, studying public opinion and mass media with a focus on conspiracy theories and misinformation. He is coauthor of *American Conspiracy Theories* and editor of *Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them* (both from Oxford University Press), and his most re-

cent book is *Conspiracy Theories: A Primer* (2020). He writes newspaper op-ed articles and makes frequent media appearances discussing popular and contemporary conspiracy theories, COVID-19 conspiracy theories, QAnon, and fake news. In 2015, he organized one of the first international conferences on conspiracy theory research, drawing scholars from ten countries. He spoke at CSICon 2018 and has published two *Skeptical Inquirer* articles on how to think about conspiracy theories.



### Bertha Vazquez: Empowering Evolution Educators

Vazquez has been a science teacher in Miami-Dade County Public Schools since 1991. Working with Richard Dawkins, she is director of the Teacher Institute for Evolutionary Science (TIES), a program of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science. Since its inception in April 2015, TIES has conducted over 200 innovative workshops, in person and online, for school teachers in all fifty states, providing science teachers at every grade level with the content knowledge and resources they need to effectively teach evolution and an-

swer its critics. Vazquez’s vision, energy, and leadership has been instrumental to its success. Vazquez was the 2017 recipient of the National Association of Biology Teachers Evolution Education Award.



### Mick West: Rabbit Hole Navigator

A science writer and skeptical investigator (and one-time video game programmer), West is the creator of the popular website Metabunk, which skeptically examines conspiracy theories, pseudoscience, UFOs, and the paranormal. His 2018 book *Escaping the Rabbit Hole: How to Debunk Conspiracy Theories Using Facts, Logic, and Respect* examined four of the most popular false conspiracy theories—chemtrails, 9/11 controlled demolition, false flags, and flat earth—using his preferred debunking technique of clear communication based on respect, honesty, openness, and patience. In 2019, he started the podcast *Tales from the Rabbit Hole* to explore these themes via long-form interviews. As a former believer while growing up in a small town in England, West now applies that experience and sensitivity to his investigations, interactions, and writings. He now lives in Sacramento, California.

#### **Skeptical Inquirer and Free Inquiry are now available for digital-only subscription.**

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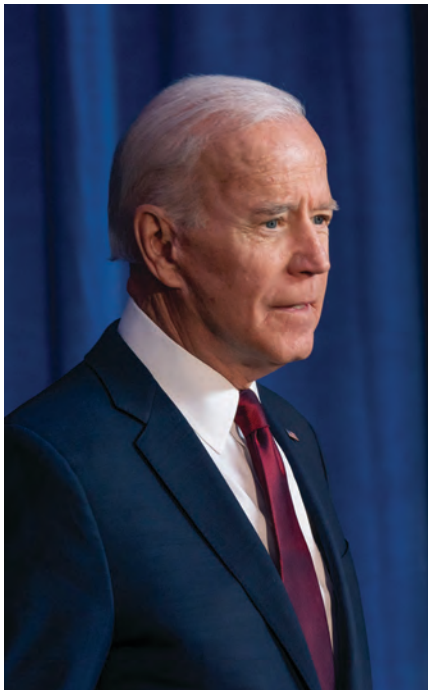
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## New Era in Washington, Old Battles across the Country: CFI's Office of Public Policy

Jason Lemieux



Credit: lev radin / Shutterstock.com

In the closing months of 2020, CFI's Office of Public Policy (OPP) continued its focus on opposing pseudoscience in federal and state governments.

A new administration has assumed power in Washington, D.C., and we're looking forward to

seeing how the Joe Biden White House will address the issues our community cares most about.

As we noted in the previous issue of *FREETHOUGHT IN ACTION*, in the days leading up to the 2020 presidential election, the OPP produced a major report detailing the Trump administration's systematic attacks on the pillars of CFI's mission: science-based policy and church-state separation. The report, which we represent with an easily glanceable timeline of events, demonstrates how actions taken in the early days of the previous administration laid the groundwork for four years of rules, orders, and guidance that helped entrench theocracy and pseudoscience in government. As the Biden administration settles in and starts making its own mark on these issues, we hope this report serves as a reminder of what we're fighting for and what the government needs to do better—in 2021 and beyond.

But as they say, all politics is local, and a lot of the action surrounding our core issues is taking place at the state and local levels. In happy

development, CFI celebrated a major victory when the Council of the District of Columbia voted to approve the Minor Consent for Vaccinations Amendment Act, which allows minors age eleven or older to give informed consent to CDC-recommended vaccinations.

I personally testified in favor of this bill in June 2019 (back when we could still do that sort of thing), arguing that when parents are unable or unwilling to provide vaccines to their dependent children, it is incumbent upon society to protect those children from contagious diseases that could rob them of their health and safety. The final step for this bill is a short review period during which the U.S. Congress can reject it, but we are hopeful that Congress will honor the self-governance of the District of Columbia and allow this historic legislation to become law.

We also rallied our grassroots supporters in New York and Indiana, where two of CFI's longstanding bugbears—anti-vaccine conspiracy and religion-privileging school voucher programs—once again

reared their ugly heads. This is an ongoing struggle, popping up in state after state, so look for more action alerts in coming months as state legislatures consider measures that would undermine our ability to halt the spread of the coronavirus through widespread vaccination.

Much of what the OPP does happens behind the scenes, and recently much effort is being put into compiling extensive documentation on our most prominent issues, such as homeopathy, naturopathy, and vaccine science. These informational packets will enable us to produce comprehensive web pages detailing these issues in a user-friendly format. Look for these to roll out this year.

And remember, none of the work we do, nor the change we seek, can happen without your energy, your voice, and your support. Let's make sure we don't let up in 2021.

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Jason Lemieux is the director of government affairs for the Center for Inquiry.

### Right Now in *Free Inquiry*



Subscribers to *Free Inquiry*, the world's leading secular humanist magazine, are enjoying stories such as these in the April/May 2021 issue:

- CFI's Communications Director Paul Fidalgo offers a sweeping perspective that encompasses both utopian and dystopian views of the human future in his article "Post-Humans on a Sterile Promontory: The New Myths of Transhumanism and the Dark Mountain."
- Joining the discussion on possible futures, Paul Bassett and Henry Grynsten examine if technological intelligence is self-limiting and the practicality and the ethicality of creating a true synthetic person, respectively.
- Tom Flynn's call for pivot points received many responses, so many in fact that this issue is the fourth to feature individuals' pivot points from religion to atheism. The ones highlighted here are categorized as One Book Did It.
- Christopher Doran looks at how racism against African Americans stems from Christianity.
- Hannah Wallace discusses French secularism in the face of its Muslim population.
- Also in this issue: Tom Flynn and James Underdown

comment on President Joseph Biden's inauguration; Gregory S. Paul discusses how secular Americans didn't vote enough in the 2020 election; John L. Prittie showcases an interesting springtime holiday; CFI CEO Robyn E. Blumner sheds light on the Church of Scientology; and much, much more!

On better newsstands now. Better yet, subscribe—each print subscription includes unlimited web access to the current issue and all back issues! Visit [www.secularhumanism.org](http://www.secularhumanism.org) and click on the magazine cover for more information.



## Supporter Spotlight: A Great Challenge to Honor the Great Agnostic

Tom Flynn



I've worked at what is now the Center for Inquiry since 1989. It was my principal source of income, so I was nobody's major-gifts prospect. At least, not until I came into a bit of money the old-fashioned way: by inheriting it. I knew I had one chance to make an "impact" gift, and the chance to do so would not come my way again.

**The Background.** I designed the museum at the birthplace of nineteenth-century freethought orator Robert Green Ingersoll, and I've been its director since 1993. In recent years, Ingersoll Committee Chair Jeff Ingersoll (a distant cousin of the Great Agnostic) and I have pushed hard to build the museum's endowment fund. Our target was \$400,000. With that sum invested, the museum could cover average-year operating costs without requiring annual subsidies from *Free Inquiry*.

The endowment rose slowly at first then gained speed. In 2018, it crossed the halfway mark. By early 2020, we'd reached \$240,000. Encouraging but not enough.

You see, previous rehabilitations of the Ingersoll birthplace had failed for lack of funds, first in the 1930s and again in the 1960s. Jeff and I were determined to make sure that would never happen to today's Ingersoll museum.

Jeff has retired, and I'll retire

before too long, so we felt growing urgency to reach that \$400,000 target.

**The Solution.** After consulting with CFI Director of Development Connie Skingel, I chose to make a \$40,000 challenge gift to the Ingersoll Museum endowment. That amount represents 10 percent of the endowment target. More important, if the challenge is met, it will raise the endowment to an impressive \$320,000. That's close enough to the target that, who knows, its momentum may stimulate a few more major donors to put the endowment over the top this year!

As *Free Inquiry* readers know, Ingersoll's freethought legacy is one of my obsessions. That's why I made this gift, and it's why I'm challenging my fellow Ingersollians to match me in hopes of doubling its impact.

If you'd like to have an outsized impact too—to benefit the Ingersoll Museum or any aspect of CFI's work—CFI's Development Department can help you tailor a gift that delivers maximum impact, whatever that phrase means to you and your financial situation.

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Tom Flynn is editor of *Free Inquiry* and director of the Ingersoll Birthplace Museum.

## CFI Local Branches: Close to Home, Open to the World

Because the CFI community takes science and the safety of its members seriously, CFI branch locations have soldiered on with exclusively online meetups and activities. Local groups have been using Zoom to conduct everything from book club meetings to coffee hours. This looks like it will be our reality for the foreseeable future, but the upside to all this is the opportunity to attend programs from all over the country—and indeed the world. We are closer than ever to being one community.

All virtual programming is open to everyone, so why not pop by for an event outside of your local organization? You will be more than welcome. Here's a look at what a few of our branches have been up to lately.

**CFI Indiana** had a very successful Civic Day in February. Hosted on Zoom, the day included a number of great guest speakers, including CFI Director of Government Affairs Jason Lemieux; Indiana State Senator J. D. Ford; Ashley Toruno, community engagement and policy advocate for the Indiana ACLU; and many more. They also host weekly Brew Your Own Coffee for Conversation meetups via Zoom on Sundays at 10 a.m. local time. Finally, CFI Indiana hosts monthly book club events. The March discussion, about the book *Oryx and Crake* by Margaret Atwood, took place on March 28. The best source of ongoing information on the activities of the CFI Indiana branch is their monthly email, and you can sign up to learn more at [cfiindiana.org](http://cfiindiana.org).

**CFI Michigan** always maintains a dense schedule of activities, and not even a global pandemic can stop them! They are as active as ever, with virtual Skeptics in the Pub meetings hosted every third Friday of each month. They also host regular online game nights via Zoom and the Jackbox.fm platform. Free preregistration is required, and space is limited for



these events. More information about Michigan's programming can be found on Facebook at [facebook.com/cfimi](https://facebook.com/cfimi).

**CFI New York City** has been hosting a weekly Sunday online Food for Thought program, alternating between events structured by an incredible volunteer staff and those on subjects proposed by members. For fans of the Skeptical Inquirer Presents lecture series, CFI New York City hosts a discussion session after each program, so consider joining them if you want to venture deeper into the weeds of each topic. You can find more information about these events by visiting the CFI New York City meetup website at [meetup.com/cfinyc](https://meetup.com/cfinyc).

**CFI Western New York** has been hosting weekly online meetups as well as quarterly book club events open to all. They have a Tuesday evening program called Online Cafe Inquiry for discussion and companionship that takes place at 7:30 p.m. ET. There is also a Sunday morning program called Secular Sundays, which takes place at 10:30 a.m. Details can be found on their Facebook page, [facebook.com/cfiwny](https://facebook.com/cfiwny).

More about our branches and information about their activities can be found at <https://centerforinquiry.org/about/locations>.

## A SKEPTICAL EYE

### Discovering the Rest of the Story

Joe Nickell



Late one night in the early 1970s in Toronto, a police officer was driving down Spadina Avenue as a bar was closing. Suddenly, a young man ran from there, across the lanes in front of him, toward a pedestrian, whom he knocked off his feet with a haymaker! As the assailant pummeled the prostrate victim, the officer made an abrupt stop, jumped out, grabbed the offender, and prepared to handcuff him.

But wait: Things are really quite different from what they first seem. Here's what happened minutes earlier, which the policeman arrived too late to see. The pedestrian had stopped at the bar where, since it was closing, he was refused entry. Angry, he assailed the doorman, a little old man, brutally knocking him down on the steps. Then he fled across the street—into the brief narrative you have already read.

As it happened, I had been the good guy pummeling the original assailant—a fact attested to by several waiters who came running from across the street. The policeman then handcuffed the criminal and apologized to me.

This preamble is an introduction to a detective concept: additional information can radically change the interpretation of what one has seen. Here are some “paranormal”

examples from my half-century repertoire.

**Eyewitness to a Sea Serpent.** I have long investigated the famous British Columbia cryptid “Cadborosaurus.” Its alleged habitat is scenic Cadboro Bay, where I once paid a nocturnal visit. Following an article I wrote on Caddy sightings for *Skeptical Inquirer* (January/February 2007), I received a letter from Steve Koerner, who had a great story to tell.

In 1996, Koerner had been on a cliff overlooking Telegraph Cove, just about half a kilometer farther east from the cryptozoologically famous bay. Suddenly, he spotted what appeared to be a great sea serpent coming toward him. Like others before, he witnessed the multiple undulating humps of the serpentine leviathan, which he saw clearly—and he was a committed skeptic! His eyes were transfixed on the incredible sight as the remarkable creature approached the beach.

But then the entire scene underwent an astonishing transformation: An otter emerged from the water, as Koerner explained, “soon followed by the rest of the family!”

**Flying Saucer ‘Dogfight.’** On the night of February 26, 1993, over Louisville, Kentucky, a police helicopter crew experienced a brief harrowing dogfight when they were fired upon by—well, was it an extraterrestrial craft?

The two Jefferson County police officers first sighted what looked like a fire off to the patrol craft's left. Then they saw a small UFO illuminated by their spotlight, drifting and then circling the chopper several times. It suddenly darted away before zooming back to shoot “fireballs” at the startled officers. Fortunately, those blazing missiles fizzled out before reaching the patrol craft. Then the police pilot pushed his speed to over 100 miles per hour, attempting to elude the UFO. But it shot past the helicopter and disappeared into the distance. What on earth—if it was from earth—had it been?

It was revealed a few days later. Not long before the frightening event, which prompted newspaper stories, a young man named Scott Heacock was amusing his wife by launching a small hot-air balloon. It was made from a plastic dry-cleaning bag, strips of balsa wood, and a dozen “relighting” birthday candles (the type that may sputter out then abruptly reflare). No

sooner had the balloon cleared the trees than the police helicopter encountered it, and you know the rest of the story: The chopper's prop wash pushed around the lightweight “UFO,” and the “fireballs” were apparently candles falling off, sputtering, or giving some other effect. (See my *Real-Life X-Files*, 2001, 49–53.)

**Fiery Horror.** At eight o'clock on Monday, July 2, 1951, a landlady in St. Petersburg, Florida, went to deliver a telegram to her tenant, a sixty-seven-year-old widow. The hall doorknob was too hot to handle, and the landlady's screams brought two workmen from across the street. Inside Mary Reeser's efficiency apartment were her gruesome remains, including a slippered foot, together with an overstuffed chair in which she had sat. It was now reduced to coiled springs and ashes, and arriving firemen extinguished a burning overhead beam. The scene reminded even some experienced investigators of other horrific burning deaths, fancifully attributed to spontaneous human combustion. Could they believe their own eyes?

In time, however, the mystery succumbed to investigation. The floor and walls of the apartment were concrete, impervious to fire. Under the remains was found a quantity of grease, leading investigators to conclude that the “plump” victim's own fat had helped fuel the fire. This can happen due to what is now known as the wick effect: melting body fat is absorbed by clothing or chair stuffing, etc. to efficiently fuel more fire to attack still more of the body. In this case, Mrs. Reeser had last been seen wearing a flammable nightdress and housecoat and smoking a cigarette after having taken sleeping pills. (See my *Secrets of the Supernatural*, 1988, 149–157.)

Joe Nickell, PhD, is the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry's senior research fellow.

## Zee the Poet: A Secular Rescue Story

Matthew Cravatta

Secular Rescue is not an island; it sits proudly among a chain of secular humanitarian organizations whose primary focus is helping endangered atheist-activists, predominantly ex-Muslims, find safety and hope in an angry world. Our program of love is sometimes dependent on the numerous friends and connections we make on our rounds as we work to find solutions to the complex and daunting problems that many face—be it those without faith since birth or those who later in life converted to atheism.

Our program gets many referrals, more than we can typically handle in any given year, but we take each one with the intention of doing what we can to provide the needed assistance. Just such a case came our way in mid-summer 2020. An Egyptian journalist and renowned poet, who we'll call "Zee," comes from a Muslim background but is now a professed atheist. He was forced to flee Egypt with his pregnant wife and move to a neighboring country. His wife is Christian, and they have since brought a baby daughter into the world. Such a marriage, though, means danger—not just for themselves but also for their child.

Zee's journey to atheism started when he was young and filled with questions, as most kids are. He was also a witness to the horrors that befall those said to have "sinned."

He told us about a girl in his neighborhood, about eighteen years old, who had played with Zee since he was a baby. When Zee was around five years old, his friend, to whom he felt deeply attached, disappeared. "When I asked about her, everyone shouted at me: 'Don't mention it again!'" said Zee.

"But I knew her father had killed her, buried her alive while standing on her feet in a deep hole. I accidentally heard about it in my grandmother's house, where a woman was telling other women how her husband helped the girl's father in the crime; the woman was describing the killing scene in all its hideous details," Zee said. "I ran out of my grandmother's house



crying and shivering until I reached home, and I fell unconscious at the doorstep. For days, my body shivered, and I was unable to move or speak."

What was Zee's young friend guilty of? "Because she had sex before marriage. [Her father] killed her in retaliation, for *honor*, and the whole village knew of this crime and everyone was proud of her murderous father," Zee said, adding that his own wife later faced the same kind of threat to her life. "In addition to being accused of blasphemy by the Church and hardline Christians because she entered into a relationship with a man other than her religion [Zee being an atheist], that is why she fled with me."

These so-called religious leaders—all of whom claim to speak in the name of God—exert incredible influence over the minds of millions; they incite their followers to attack those who are different. In Zee's native Egypt, one doesn't need to be a declared atheist to be subjected to assassination. Merely being known as secular will get you labeled an infidel and immoral in the eyes of society; even the official media describes seculars as infidels and agents of foreign countries. The same media declares that nonbelievers want to eliminate religion and the state altogether. Had it not been for Zee's mother calling and warning him not to return to the village at one point, Zee would have been killed

by someone years ago, he told us.

"I remember the simple people in my village, who were Muslims," he told Secular Rescue last summer. "When they went to my father's house and said to him, 'Your son Zee is atheist ... We have read what he writes on Facebook. You are his father, and you should talk to him and warn him of God's severe punishment.'"

"Most of the villagers had not received any education," Zee explained, "and none of them knew the meaning of the word *freedom* on any level." The increasing scrutiny and discrimination Zee and his wife faced because of their mixed-faith marriage, along with Islamists' rise to power in Egypt and the return of military rule, pushed Zee and his pregnant wife to flee for their lives. They were already facing the prospect of being denied basic services, including essential vaccinations for their baby, and had already been expelled from numerous apartments because of hatred and intolerance. So they went in search of hope and opportunities elsewhere and a safe life for their coming child.

They moved to a nearby country, a relocation that was facilitated by one of Secular Rescue's most trusted humanitarian organizations, based in Washington D.C. But this has proved immensely difficult because their marriage is not recognized in that country either; they were even forced to leave a hospital when Zee's wife

was about to give birth, because the hospital administrators also would not recognize their marriage.

To compound matters further, Zee was in the process of trying to get a novel published, an autobiographical work that references social transformations and the problem of sectarian strife in Egypt. But Zee feared he would be exposed to new threats because of his book's antireligious themes.

As a poet, Zee had won several awards in Egypt, and one of his anthologies has been featured in renowned publications such as *Al-Ahram* and *Al-Bawaba*.

Since arriving in their new country more than two years ago, Zee has been working at low-wage jobs and barely making ends meet. Then the COVID-19 pandemic wreaked its havoc in the region and around the world, taking lives and erasing employment opportunities, forcing many into poverty and some into the streets.

"I used to work in a car rental store before the pandemic," Zee said. "I was washing cars, but I was expelled when the pandemic started. I do not have legal residency [here] since we arrived ... and the cost of living here is very, very high, and it increased after the pandemic." Even Zee's friends, other writers and journalists who were able to help him when he first arrived, are now unable to do so; their salaries were slashed because of the pandemic. Zee and his family are also subject to deportation by the police because they cannot establish legal residency. Back in Egypt, they face imprisonment or murder by religious zealots. Between a rock and a hard place, indeed.

"I am ashamed to talk about my suffering away from literary writings," Zee told us. "I tried to commit suicide last September because I am unable to provide milk for my daughter—the simplest thing—but I was ashamed to leave my wife and girl alone to face a difficult fate."

"I hope you can help us," he said. "We need you ... my wife, my daughter, and I have gone days

without food. I can't even buy a single loaf of bread for my baby girl, and I cannot bear her starving screaming. I am ashamed to talk about this wound."

Secular Rescue has since provided as much financial support as we are able under our program's guidelines and limited resources. When our fund ran dry in late 2020, we worked hard with our friends to find more aid for Zee and his family. However, after a few months of hanging on with no work and a pandemic always lurking in the shadows, Zee again has found himself in the same darkness, uneasy with hunger and insomnia.

"There is no freedom here," Zee said. "We are in a big prison. We hope that things pass peacefully ... and we can someday move to a safe place. We want to work, settle down, teach our child, and look toward a secure future."

Fortunately, Secular Rescue was able to secure a grant from another renowned humanitarian organization in early 2021 and has since provided additional funding from its own aid pool to help Zee and his family get through this most difficult time in their lives. We are endeavoring to find a long-term home for them, and we continue to scour the planet for a country that is willing to take them in and make them feel loved and safe. But in today's anti-immigrant atmosphere and as nations grapple with the pandemic and ever-increasing civil unrest, such happy endings are hard to come by.

With additional resources, Secular Rescue could do more to help guarantee the safety and wellbeing of Zee and his family—and do much more to help the countless others in similarly dire circumstances. No matter what, we will not stop trying.

*Secular Rescue is a program of the Center for Inquiry that is specifically designed to provide emergency assistance to atheist writers, bloggers, publishers, and activists who face threats due to their beliefs or expressions regarding religion. Learn more at [secular-rescue.org](http://secular-rescue.org).*

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Matthew Cravatta is coordinator of Secular Rescue.

## Skeptical Inquirer Presents Series a Big Success; Fills CSICon Gap

Barry Karr



Another month passes by, and it seems another month is lost to the COVID-19 pandemic. I know many of us have used our time away from the normal world wisely. We've cleaned out each one of our closets, found all our hidden childhood toys in the attic, rekindled our bonds with our pets, and watched in horror as the events of January 6 transpired. And thousands of you have tuned in (or Zoomed in) to the CFI lecture series Skeptical Inquirer Presents.

It's almost hard to believe that we are now eight months into this series. As you know, we could not hold our CSICon conference in Las Vegas in October 2020 because of the pandemic. We started this lecture series to bring a little bit of CSICon to you. We started out featuring several speakers who were scheduled to take part in CSICon, and it's been fascinating to see how the series has evolved into something larger than we even expected.

When I am looking for speakers for Skeptical Inquirer Presents, in the back of my mind I now find myself thinking, "I want people who can tell us what the heck is going on. Why are so many people opposed to life-saving vaccinations? How did we get to the point where American

citizens felt compelled to storm the Capitol?" So far, the series has been heavily focused on conspiracy theories, countering anti-vaxxers, cognitive dissonance, medical myths, science denial, the "infodemic," QAnon, and related topics. You could say that the overall theme has been Dealing with Misinformation: Why People Fall for It and How to Combat It.

Here are some of the discussions and presentations we've hosted since the last issue of FREETHOUGHT IN ACTION:

- John V. Petrocelli on "Persuasive Bullshitters and the Insidious Bullshit Hypothesis"
- Bob Nygaard on "Combating Fortunetelling Fraud (a.k.a. Psychic Fraud)"
- Sean B. Carroll on "A Series of Fortunate Events: Chance and the Making of the Planet, Life, and You"
- Timothy Caufield on "The Infodemic: Debunking Works (Let's Get To It!)"
- Odaelys Walwyn-Pollard on "Disparities in the Midst of COVID-19: Education, Health, and Race"
- Maria Konnikova on "The Biggest Bluff: How I Learned to Pay Attention, Master Myself, and Win."

We recently completed our

most popular talk so far, with around 1,200 of your fellow skeptics tuning in live to hear Stephanie Kemmerer on QAnon with her talk "Blood Libel for the Digital Age." We also just heard from crusading climate scientist Michael Mann on "How to Win the Climate War." Coming up we'll have Dr. Paul Offit back to talk about the state of the COVID-19 vaccines, Andrew Norman on cultivating "mental immunity" to bad ideas, John Cook on using gamification to counter misinformation, and pioneering technologist Jeff Hawkins (the guy who invented the Palm Pilot) on his book *A Thousand Brains: A New Theory of Intelligence*.

Each event is hosted by Leighann Lord, stand-up comedian, cohost of the CFI podcast *Point of Inquiry*, and so much more. (You should visit her website, [veryfunnylady.com](http://veryfunnylady.com).)

Check out the dates of our upcoming events at [skepticalinquirer.org](http://skepticalinquirer.org). And come join 1,000 or so of your skeptical friends for the next Skeptical Inquirer Presents.

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Barry Karr is executive director of the Center for Inquiry as well as organizer of Skeptical Inquirer Presents and of past and future CSICon conferences.

## Legal Update: CFI Finds New Opportunities in a Tough New Reality (Cont'd. from page 7)

President Trump appointed three Supreme Court Justices, fifty-four judges to the Courts of Appeal (by comparison, Obama appointed fifty-five in twice the time), and 174 District Court judges. These lifetime appointments represent his payment to the evangelical community for their loyal and unwavering support of his presidency.

In February, in the case of *Roman Catholic Diocese of Brooklyn v. Cuomo*, Trump's three Supreme Court appointees joined the other conservatives in

granting an injunction to religious organizations in New York to exempt them from restrictions on services designed to limit the spread of COVID-19. The Court ruled similarly regarding California, and Circuit Courts of Appeal have been striking down many more such commonsense restrictions. In so doing, the courts have not only shown their willingness to privilege religion but have also been dismissing out of hand carefully researched and painstakingly justified scientific evidence of how religious services are plainly more

dangerous in terms of disease transmission than other activities.

When religion is privileged and science is denied, CFI will continue to fight. Recently we received a ruling from the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeal, dismissing our case to allow secular celebrants to solemnize marriages in Texas. Fortunately, this dismissal was on procedural grounds, so we will be back in court in Texas in the near future, fighting for this right for our community. We're also looking at other states where we can spread our success in allowing

nonreligious people to have the wedding celebrant of their choice.

The hard work continues, and while the courts are more unfriendly to us than they have been in decades, we're committed to finding the best way to use them to advance our interests and protect our rights. We'll need this community standing behind us, giving us support, so we can continue to stand up for you.

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Nicholas J. Little is the general counsel for the Center for Inquiry.

## CFIIG Update

Lou Hillman and James Underdown



The Center for Inquiry Investigations Group (CFIIG) currently administers the world's largest active Paranormal Challenge, offering the opportunity for those who claim to have supernatural or paranormal abilities to win \$250,000—if they can demonstrate their abilities under controlled testing conditions. (The James Randi Educational Foundation had offered a \$1 Million Challenge, but it has been dormant for several years.) Dozens of people apply for this prize every year. This requires quite a bit of work on the part of CFIIG's "first responder" team, which fields the initial inquiries and guides the challenger toward being tested.

From January 1 to December 31, 2020, the CFIIG received seventy-five formal challenge submissions and many other phone calls and inquiries. The COVID-19 pandemic slowed the usual traffic a bit.

As this issue of FREETHOUGHT

IN ACTION goes into production, however, our program has just been the focus of a feature at *OneZero* (an official publication of Medium.com). The article by Corinne Purtill, "Hex Factor," (available at [bit.ly/cfionezero](https://bit.ly/cfionezero)) profiled both CFIIG and one potential applicant who, alas, eventually declined to have his superpowers tested—even though he's entirely certain they're real. The publicity from this article has resulted in quite an uptick in applications over a very short period of time. Let's hope that some of them go all the way to the testing phase!

Paranormal Challenge applicants are often not very clear about the exact nature of their extraordinary abilities or what specifically their claim entails, so categorizing them is not an exact science. But we can generalize the applicant pool in 2020 and say that the plurality of applicants claim to have some sort of telepathic powers, with those who think they have abilities regarding telekinesis (moving objects with their minds) or communication with spirits also making up a significant portion of the would-be prize winners. Some also claim to have special "energy" powers, some skill with numerology, the ability to perform "miracles," and many more that are simply too vague to classify. Of course, several applicants claim

to have more than one ability in various combinations.

Several claims were rejected immediately due to CFIIG policies. These included those that involved possible physical harm to either the challenger or other people. For instance, a woman from Germany claimed to be able to (mentally) deflect a bullet shot directly at someone. She was informed that she must find a less deadly means to demonstrate her powers.

A challenger who claimed to be able to stop another person's heart did not necessarily strike fear into the group but was denied under the same "do no harm" policy. And, of course, we have to turn down anyone who insists on being paid for being tested, which misses the point.

Other challengers, particularly those claiming to be "psychic mediums," apparently did not understand that just saying they had made contact with dead people did not qualify as proof of ability! Others claimed to have correctly made very general predictions of events that were not tied to specific times or places.

By the end of 2020, seventy-two claims had been assigned to CFIIG investigators. Negotiations on four of those claims led to actual demonstrations, which you can read about in detail at [cfiig.org/investigations](https://cfiig.org/investigations). These included one

claim of telepathy, one of the ability to determine if a person was alive or dead by viewing a photograph, and one of teleportation and telekinesis.

So what happened to the claims that weren't immediately rejected or that led to failed demonstrations? In most cases, the challenger did not even respond to the first email from a team member within a reasonable time, which led to the challenge being closed. In other cases, our standard suggestion for the challenger to perform a self-test was also met with silence or else led to failure. These applications were also closed.

So far, no one has ever been able to offer sufficient proof of supernatural abilities to claim the \$250,000 prize. With a new year and a new influx of applications, maybe we're in store for a surprise! We can only hope. But of course, the point isn't really to find that one person who can read minds or talk with the dead but to show that it's evidence and critical thinking that lead us to the truth. If someone makes an extraordinary claim, they need extraordinary evidence to back it up. Even ordinary evidence once in a while would be nice!

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Lou Hillman is challenge coordinator for the Center for Inquiry Investigations Group. James Underdown is the founder and chair of the CFIIG.