
From the Chairman

Is There Intelligent Life on Earth?

Paul Kurtz

IN RECENT MONTHS, we have witnessed a sharp rise in uncorroborated paranormal claims—much to the dismay of skeptics who thought they were making some headway in the case for rationality. The level of credulity seems to have reached new heights.

Shirley MacLaine's gushings have lured millions to join her out on a fantasy limb. Her déjà vu experiences, regressions to earlier lives, precognitive visions, channeling, UFO visitations, and astral projections have been touted far and wide in best-selling books and in a TV miniseries. Large segments of the public are impressed by the "profound spirituality" of her accounts.

Uri Geller is back again after virtually a decade of hibernation, back to moving compass needles by means of hidden magnets and claiming "psychokinesis," and secretly peeking at pictures he has asked various subjects to draw and then claiming his ability to duplicate these drawings is due to "clairvoyance."

Incredibly, Geller secretly met in Washington with Senator Claiborne Pell, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Congressman Dante Fascell, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, in an attempt to convince them—with some apparent success—that the Soviet Union is ahead of the United States in the "psychic arms race," even alleging that skeptics are doing the work of the KGB by discouraging such research by the U.S. government. CSICOP's facetious response was to suggest that the United States launch a "skeptics' rapid deployment force"—for, if it is the case, as psychics maintain, that skeptics inhibit real "psychic energy" by their negative vibes, then this could defend the Western democracies against enemy intrusion!

Launched by his publisher to sell his new book, *The Geller Effect*, Geller's recent highly publicized tour included not only the United States, but France—where he appeared virtually unchallenged for two hours on national television—Great Britain, Canada, and other countries.

In addition to these antics, the discredited spiritualism of the nineteenth century has returned as "trance-channeling." Channelers claim to go into

trances and communicate with spirits on the “other side” who reveal information they “could not possibly have known in any other way.”

The 35,000-year-old “Ramtha” speaks through a woman known as J. Z. Knight, while other channelers call upon “Dr. Peebles” (William Rainan) or other discarnate spirits, inspiring the adulation of thousands, perhaps millions, of uncritical New Agers. *Channeling* is just a new word for “spiritualism,” but today there is not even a pretense of providing hard evidence—no darkened séance rooms, no levitating tables, no ectoplasmic emergences—but simply the claim of instantaneous communication with the spirit world, without any kind of objective verification.

Last, but not least, is the sudden revival of UFOlogy after a period of quiescence. Three major new UFO books have been launched: *Communion: A True Story*, by Whitley Strieber; *Intruders*, by Budd Hopkins; and *Light Years*, by Gary Kinder.

Communion (published by Morrow/Hearst Corporation) has been on the best-seller list for several months. Whitley Strieber, who has written many fictional horror stories, claims to have been in touch with semi-divine extraterrestrial beings. Budd Hopkins's *Intruders* (Random House/Newhouse Publications) is based on the author's “careful analysis” of 125 frightened “abductees” who have been hypnotically regressed under the eye of the artist-sculptor-author (he now claims to have talked to 140 of them). Some of his hysterical women subjects claim that the extraterrestrials are engaged in genetic engineering and have impregnated ova taken from their bodies; and Strieber has intimated that even he has been raped. Random House publisher and CEO Howard Kaminsky was so taken by *Intruders* that he placed a full page ad in the *New York Times* personally recommending the book to “all open-minded people.”

The new UFOlogy is based on largely uncorroborated events, often revealed in hypnotic sessions. The paucity of evidence is unnerving: a scar, a lost hour, some bright lights in the sky, and—oops!—someone claims to have been abducted by aliens from outer space. Usually the subject has no memory of the abduction until it is revealed in all its stark terror under hypnosis. In April, I challenged Whitley Strieber (on the Tom Bauerle Show on WGR-Radio in Buffalo) to submit his evidence to us for scientific investigation. He adamantly refused, claiming that CSICOP was “biased.”

On “Good Morning America” (ABC-TV, May 19), I asked Budd Hopkins to provide a list of the names of his “abductees,” but he said that most of them were “fearful of ridicule” and hence preferred to remain anonymous. However, he promised on the air to promptly send me a list of the “scientists who support” his work. As we go to press, I still have not heard from him.

Hypnosis is an unreliable method for eliciting the truth. As Martin Orne, a leading authority on hypnosis, points out, it may evoke a vast store of unconscious dreams and imaginative fantasies mixed with reality. In many instances, the subject's “memory recall” is influenced by suggestive questions from the hypnotist.

In regard to Hopkins's “abductees,” many of those he hypnotized had

read his earlier book *Missing Time* and had been influenced by its extraterrestrial interpretation. CSICOP is of course open to the possibility of intelligent life elsewhere in the universe. We devoted an entire session to this subject at our 1987 conference in Pasadena in April. But *possibility* does not translate into *verified actuality*; nor does it mean that we are being visited by extraterrestrials who engage in kidnapping and rape.

It is clear that the communications industry must shoulder a good deal of the responsibility for the current spate of New Age nonsense. Today's media conglomerates have apparently abandoned all reasonable standards of credibility in an effort to package and sell paranormal claims; they leave little doubt that they are more interested in achieving high profits than in pursuing the quest for truth. At the annual American Booksellers Association convention held in Washington, D.C., over the Memorial Day weekend (May 22-26, 1987), some 52 publishers announced the formation of the New Age Publishers Alliance to promote the sale and distribution of occult, paranormal, and spiritual books.

Today, uncorroborated subjective claims are being heralded as unvarnished truth. In regard to trance-channeling and hypnotic regression, alternative states of consciousness are being offered as special paths to another reality. The quasi-religious character of channeling is strikingly similar to classical mystic trances by means of which seers and prophets allegedly received revelations from gods and angels. In the case of UFO abductions, the entities are science-fiction extraterrestrials, and the analogy to the ancient gods of classical religions who impregnated mortals is unmistakable. Any demand for confirming evidence from true believers falls on deaf ears, often eliciting angry retorts.

UFO pundit Jerome Clark, associate editor of *Fate* magazine and editor of the *International UFO Reporter*, has derided skeptics. He berated me in the *IUR* (January/February 1987) for asking the question: "What is the difference between claiming that you have been raped by an extraterrestrial and claiming that you have seen a pink elephant?" Clark attacks skeptics for being closed-minded and dogmatic, yet he is easily impressed by questionable evidence. Since extraordinary claims require substantial evidence, skeptics have a right to be cautious. Reports of individual subjective experiences are hardly sufficient in themselves. One cannot and should not reject these reports out of hand—*prima facie*, they are the data given. What is at issue is how to *interpret* such subjective reports. The interpretation that the subjects have been abducted by aliens from outer space is highly suspect. There are viable alternative explanations. One would think that a dash of common sense would dictate some careful checking. But this is apparently foreign to the many UFO buffs who have climbed aboard the media bandwagon.

Skeptics have embarked on an uphill journey. Every time we think we are making progress, a new wave of nonsense overtakes us. Perhaps the "transcendental temptation" (i.e., the tendency for magical thinking) is too strong to be overcome, but can it not be tempered by rationality? To borrow from William Blake's chastisement of the skeptics of his day: We "throw the sand

against the wind, and the wind blows it back again.”

I must confess that I have asked myself several times in recent months whether the task that CSICOP and the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER have set for themselves—to raise the level of rationality—is insuperable. Yet I write this just after CSICOP convened its most successful conference, in Pasadena, California, where more than 1,500 people attended one or more sessions and which received considerable worldwide coverage. Moreover, local and national skeptics groups that share CSICOP's aims are now experiencing an unparalleled period of growth. We seem to have crystallized a point of view, and we have strong support from a growing number of scientists, scholars, and other skeptics.

Perhaps the recent surge of untested paranormal claims can be attributed to the effort by the media to sensationalize and exploit them as marketable products. Still, although the scientific search for extraterrestrial life goes on, as it should, given the mass of uncorroborated beliefs, we wonder sometimes to what extent intelligent life exists on Earth!

—*Paul Kurtz*