

Society for Scientific Exploration Tilts Wildly at Paradigms

DAVE THOMAS

The Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE), publisher of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, held its eighteenth annual meeting June 3–5 in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and it was a wild ride.



John Mack

The sessions were organized into four major topics: shaking pillars of the paradigm, cold fusion, anomalous phenomena, and suppression of new science. Almost every type of “paranormal” or “anomalous” phenomena imaginable was discussed, and one outlandish claim after another was apparently accepted uncritically by most of the attendees.

The meeting began with attacks on relativity and evolution. Other speakers enthusiastically promoted cold fusion, spoon bending, “creation” of trinkets, the healing effects of prayer, alien abductions, the face on Mars, and the measurement of bacterial contamination at distances of thousands of miles.

The SSE is the same organization that last year got international publicity for a supposedly “independent” and credulous report it issued on UFOs that was based on testimony only from UFOlogists and believers (SI, September/October 1998). One telling measure of how different this science group is from the mainstream involves

the deliberate rephrasing of scientific or skeptical aphorisms. For example, the Discovery Institute’s Jonathan Wells, who spoke on why biology would benefit from consideration of “Intelligent Design,” declared his desire to replace Theodosius Dobzhansky’s famous statement “Nothing in biology makes sense except in light of evolution” with the revised version “Nothing in biology makes sense except in light of *evidence*.” Wells also stated that the benefits of introducing “design” to biology would include avoidance of “wasted efforts, that is, looking for [natural] causes where none are to be found.”

Former astronaut Brian O’Leary, who maintains that “The fat lady hasn’t sung yet” regarding the proposed artificiality of the “Face on Mars,” declared that the phrase “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” would be better stated as “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary *investigation*.” O’Leary also urged attendees to explore “outside the box” into such areas as UFO studies, planetary anomalies, healing psychokinesis, consciousness, new energy, reincarnation, mediumship, and more.

The cold fusion talks were among the best of the conference. Many of the speakers (Ed Storms of Los Alamos National Lab, George Miley of the University of Illinois, Melvin Miles of the China Lake naval center, and Michael McKubre of SRI International) claimed to have replicable measurements of tritium or other table-top nuclear products, and of excess (purportedly fusion-caused) heat. These speakers presented serious measurements, and many frankly discussed difficulties with their research. In some ways, it was like traveling back in time to late 1989: no one knows exactly why the phenomenon happens, it produces many fewer neutrons than “conventional” fusion, repeatability is very difficult (sometimes the anomalous effects

are observed for one bar of palladium, but not for another from the very same batch), and so on. But at least the presenters acknowledged the need for replicability and evidence.

Not so for Lee Pulos of the University of British Columbia, who discussed his trips to Brazil to study the “extraordi-



David Jacobs

nary” powers of one Thomaz Green Morton. Morton supposedly received his psychokinetic powers at the young age of twelve, when he was struck by lightning. He performs spoon-bending, “transmutation” of metals, and other impossible feats. One example cited was the direct transformation of a U.S. silver dollar into a larger Pisces medallion made of a different metal! But Pulos didn’t think these were simply magic tricks, because he personally observed Morton bending spoons without touching them. If the “powers” of Thomaz Green Morton are real, modern science is totally wrong about the forces of nature (such as electromagnetism). Or, perhaps, Morton is simply a magician out to fool the gullible public.

After the talk, I asked Pulos why he hadn’t rushed Thomaz Morton over to Florida to take James Randi’s \$1 million challenge. After all, *if his powers are real*, I said, it would be like taking candy from a baby. But Pulos dismissed this suggestion, replying that Morton wasn’t interested in investigations like that.

Larry Dossey discussed effects of prayer on cardiac patients, and mentioned that almost half of U.S. medical universities were looking into the phenomenon in one way or another. Like it or not, he said, "Prayer is back in medicine." Paul Marmet of the University of Ottawa presented his "Simple Theory of the Perihelion of Mercury," which is based on Newtonian mechanics, and not relativity (except for the convenient mass-energy equivalence part). Marmet demonstrated his principle with a spring and various weights—as the mass was increased, the period got longer, just as he claims happens in the advance of Mercury's perihelion. But a handout paper, available at www.newton.physics.on.ca, showed that Marmet's entire development is based on assumption of circularity of Mercury's orbit. For example, Marmet states repeatedly that "The kinetic energy of an orbiting mass is always half of the [magnitude of the] potential energy," a fact which holds only for *circular* orbits. But Mercury has the most eccentric orbit ($e=0.2056$) of all the solar planets except Pluto, a fact which demolishes Marmet's derivation, and which should not have escaped any peer reviewer.

David Jacobs of Temple University talked about alien abductions, as did John Mack of Harvard's Cambridge Hospital the next day. Both Jacobs and Mack agree on the reality of the abduction phenomenon, based mainly on the recollections of thousands of hypnotized "abductees." But Jacobs considers the aliens to have malicious designs for hybridization and colonization, while Mack perceives the aliens as "emissaries of the divine" that profoundly touch the humans they contact, and who probably are more concerned with the fate of Earth than with the fate of humanity.

Jacques Benveniste presented his research on the "Role of Water in the Transmission of the Molecular Signal." Benveniste claims that chemical reactions in cells are not mediated by physical lock-and-key receptor mechanisms, but instead by *electromagnetic signals* received



Jacques Benveniste

by the receptors. He believes that a simple voice recording of white noise of this "signal" can be transmitted via water molecules, even at fantastically diluted homeopathic solutions. Indeed, he thinks that the signal can be transmitted over the Internet or by radio waves, enabling *remote detection of chemical effects* caused by, say, bacteria. Benveniste admitted to having no idea why this phenomenon occurs, and suggested that it was the job of the physicists to determine how the "molecular signal" actually produces long-term changes in water molecules.

Many of the conference speakers complained about suppression of research into anomalies by mainstream scientists and skeptics. But they misrepresented the mission of organizations like CSICOP when they claimed that skeptics want to suppress the very discussion of such ideas, or even the existence of organizations like the SSE. I suspect that most skeptics would instead champion the SSE's quest to perform investigations of paranormal phenomena. We just wish that they would be more skeptical and self-critical. Although a very few attendees strongly questioned some of the claims presented, most seemed content to not rock the boat, lest their own boat be rocked in return. Invited speaker William Tiff, an astronomer from the University of Arizona who has published several papers in serious journals regarding his radical hypothesis of quantization of global redshifts, told the attendees that he left SSE because the organization needed to be closer to classical science, and that con-

ventional scientists *could* be changed, but that such change requires a lot of work. In my opinion, the too-quick acceptance of wild claims by top SSE members reduces the credibility of their work to that of tabloid stories. They could (and should) do much better. In the words of attendee Robert L. Park of the American Physical Society, writing on the conference in the June 11 edition of his *What's New* newsletter: "Alas, to wear the mantle of Galileo it is not enough that you be persecuted by an unkind establishment, you must also be right."

David E. Thomas is a SKEPTICAL INQUIRER consulting editor and president of New Mexicans for Science and Reason. He is a physicist.

Bennett Braun Update: Poznanski Settles, Will Testify Against Braun

As reported in previous issues (see SI March/April and January/February 1999), the Illinois Department of Professional Regulation (IDPR) filed a complaint against psychiatrist Bennett Braun, a leader in the repressed memory movement, child psychiatrist Elva Poznanski, and psychologist Roberta Sachs over their treatment of Pat Burgus and her sons. The Braun proceedings have been postponed until November so the Burgus children would not have to miss final exams. Sachs has not been assigned a hearing date yet.

In surprising news, the Poznanski case has been settled without action being taken against her medical license. A consent order between Poznanski and the IDPR explains the terms of this agreement, and lead prosecutor Thomas Glasgow further clarified why they settled with her.

The most important part of the order discusses her future cooperation in the Braun case. It says she must "cooperate fully with the Department, and with any federal, state or local law enforce-

ment agency as directed by the Department, in any investigation connected to the treatment of any person or persons in Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center's Dissociative Disorders Unit, or in any Medicare or Medicaid fraud investigation resulting from any action of physicians, health care workers or staff members at Rush-Presbyterian-St. Luke's Medical Center related to patients treated in that Unit during the period the Unit was in existence."

In other words, she will testify against Braun and Sachs in the IDPR hearings, and will then continue to help in any further cases. Glasgow, when asked if this meant there were going to be such cases in the future, said he was not at liberty to discuss any cases or investigations that might or might not be ongoing.

The order spells out that she must step down as the head of child psychiatry at Rush hospital within two years and she cannot provide any future recovered memory or satanic ritual abuse therapy. Poznanski also conceded that, given what she knows now about the Burgus family history, the therapy given to Pat Burgus, and research "documenting the lack of reliability of memories of abuse elicited in recovered memory therapy, including the substantial evidence suggesting that numerous patients in such therapy have been induced to describe nonfactual 'recovered memories' of satanic ritual abuse," she would not have treated the Burgus children the way she did in this case.

A number of factors were considered in the decision to settle. The most important was that Poznanski, unlike Braun and Sachs, has apparently only been involved in this one case. The other two have had several complaints filed against them, and played major roles in the treatment of those involved. Poznanski played a minor role and treated the children as though they had been abused—not as if they were part of a satanic cult.

Glasgow noted that Poznanski, in her seventies, has already lost much of her good reputation because of this case. In

addition, she "took remedial action" by withdrawing cooperation from Braun and Sachs less than halfway through the treatment, when Braun allegedly brought guns in with the children. Up until then, she had agreed to work with Braun due to his standing in the psychiatric community, but finally decided things had gone too far. After that, she did keep the children under her care because she did not feel Patricia Burgus was a fit mother at the time (Burgus was still under Braun's care).

Glasgow noted that having somebody from the "inside" testify will be very helpful and overrides any need to prosecute her separately.

Also, the Burgus family—the victims in this case—were consulted and agreed with the settlement before it was reached.

Glasgow took pains to point out that he would never make a deal like this with Braun, and the only thing he would settle for, should Braun seek a deal, would be the indefinite suspension of Braun's license to practice medicine—which is what he hopes to gain from prosecuting Braun anyway.

—David Bloomberg

David Bloomberg is the chairman of the Rational Examination Association of Lincoln Land and can be reached at chairman@reall.org.

Psychologist Wants Constitutional Protection for Exorcism Done in Therapy

A clinical psychologist told a federal appeals court that he has a Constitutional right to perform exorcisms, according to a decision July 1 from the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in California.

The psychologist, Kenneth Olson of Phoenix, performed an exorcism on a child referred to him by Child Protective Services of Arizona. An ordained Lutheran minister, Olson insisted he had a First Amendment right

to practice his religion by ordering demons to leave a patient's body during a therapy session.

The appeals court decision, entitled *Olson v. Morris*, says that the boy's foster father believed the child to be the victim of satanic abuse by his biological parents. The foster father discussed the matter with his own minister, and was referred to Olson.

The foster father gave Olson's name to the boy's caseworker at Child Protective Services. The caseworker, in turn, referred the child to Olson and agreed to have the State of Arizona pay for the therapy.

According to court records, Olson held an exorcism on at least one occasion. The doctor laid his hands on the child and prayed to the Holy Spirit to reveal and remove the youngster's demonic spirits. He later sent a bill to Child Protective Services for the "treatment."

When the caseworkers realized what was going on during the psychotherapy, they complained to the Arizona licensing board responsible for psychologists. The board held a hearing, and revoked Olson's license for "unprofessional conduct."

Olson did not bother to bring an attorney with him to the licensing board's hearing, he said, because he never imagined they might rule against him. He simply told the board that his treatment modality was appropriate. The licensing board did not agree.

Olson responded by filing a federal lawsuit for violation of his Constitutional right to religious freedom. He expressed outrage that the licensing board would restrict his use of prayer therapy. His lawsuit alleged violation of federal civil rights law that forbids any state from abridging a citizen's Constitutional rights. In addition, he demanded an injunction to stop the licensing board from interfering with his religious freedom.

The federal judge dismissed Olson's suit against the licensing board. Undeterred, he appealed to the U.S.

Circuit Court of Appeals in California.

Without commenting on the merits of exorcism, the appeals court ruled against Olson, noting that he should have appealed the licensing board's decision through proper channels before filing suit in federal court.

Ironically, Constitutional rights to religious freedom probably contributed to the child's plight in this case. Child protective workers are employed by the government. When someone applies for a foster care license, government employees are reluctant to ask about the applicant's religious beliefs.

The foster father described in this case may actually believe that witches are lurking about, performing secret satanic rituals at midnight in cemeteries, and exhibiting supernatural powers. That belief would not have affected his ability to apply for a foster care license, since government agencies do not discriminate against foster parent applicants on the basis of religion.

—Martha Churchill

Martha Churchill is an attorney in Michigan who writes on many issues including false memory syndrome and hysterias.

Hubbard Statistics Course Taken to Court

When Susan E. Morgan became a receptionist for dentist Roger N. Carlsten of Providence, R.I., she discovered a whole new way to look at statistics.

Carlsten told her she needed to take a course in Hubbard Administrative Technology. He described it as a "statistics" course. But the course on "How to Increase Productivity by Managing Personnel on Statistics" included references to "the God dynamic" and "the Supreme being." It turned out to have been written by the late science fiction author L. Ron Hubbard, the founder of Scientology.

Morgan, a Catholic who suspected that Carlsten was trying to convert her to

Scientology, refused on religious grounds. Carlsten fired her.

The dispute surfaced after Morgan sued Carlsten in Rhode Island Superior Court, alleging a violation of the Rhode Island Employment Fair Practices Act. Morgan said Carlsten failed to accommodate her beliefs as a Catholic and fired her "based on religion." She claimed \$12,000 in lost wages, medical benefits, and costs.

Carlsten testified that he learned about Scientology after traveling to California to learn about Hubbard *Management Technology*. The courses were given by Sterling Management, a taxable corporation licensed by the Church of Scientology. A year later, he returned to California and embraced the religion.

He said he urged Morgan, over an eight- or nine-month period, to take the course, which began in February 1991. He said the courses contained no religious content.

When Morgan asked if she could take a course elsewhere, Carlsten turned down that request. "I didn't have any faith in the content of that course," he testified.

As part of the effort to get Morgan to take the statistics course he wanted, Carlsten hired a business consulting firm, Precision Management, to help persuade her. Precision's consultants, both Scientologists themselves, ultimately recommended that Morgan be fired. Carlsten took that advice, but claimed in the trial that the firing was for poor job performance.

Precision Management is run by Randy Baxter, also a Scientologist. Baxter testified that he also teaches the course Carlsten wanted Morgan to take. The consultant told the court that he received his consultant license through Hubbard College of Administration in Los Angeles. Hubbard College is, in turn, licensed by the World Institute of Scientology Enterprises.

"These courses are not Scientology, or related to religion," Baxter testified.

Morgan didn't agree, claiming that the course was "thinly veiled Scien-

tology" and noted that the glossary in the course materials included this explanation: "The eighth dynamic is the urge toward existence as infinity. This is also identified as the Supreme Being. This is called the eighth dynamic, because the symbol of infinity stood upright makes the numeral '8.' This can be called the infinity or God dynamic."

Judge Alice B. Gibney told the six-member jury that the first question that they should consider was whether "the courses were religious in nature and violated her religious beliefs." The jurors took forty minutes to decide that the answer was "no" and Carlsten had won.

Morgan's lawyer vowed to appeal, saying that Gibney was wrong to not allow evidence about the beliefs of Scientology to be introduced. The judge decided to keep that evidence out because it would likely "inflame the jury into 'punishing' Carlsten" for his "unusual religion."

—C. Eugene Emery Jr.

Gene Emery is a reporter for the Providence Journal. This summary is based on Providence Journal articles written by Karen Lee Ziner.

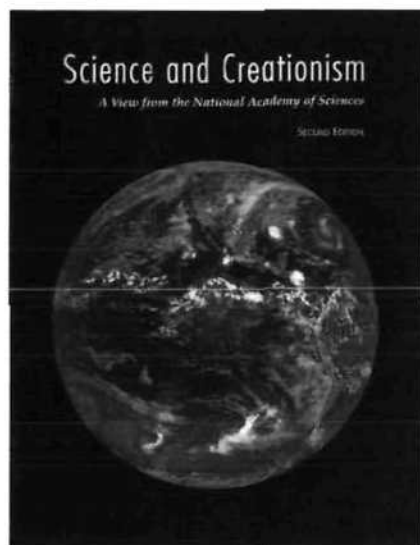
NAS Publishes New Version of Science and Creationism Report

A major revision of the National Academy of Sciences' 1984 publication *Science and Creationism*, updated with the latest discoveries in evolutionary science and including refutation of the "new" intelligent design creationism, has just been published.

Science and Creationism: A View from the National Academy (see New Books, p. 56) is a companion volume to last year's widely publicized Academy publication, *Teaching About Evolution and the Nature of Science* (SI, July/August 1998), which was addressed to teachers, educators, and policy makers. Like the 1994 report, *Science and Creationism* is a brief,

easy-to-read, well-designed publication filled with color photos and illustrations and pertinent discussions and definitions about evolutionary science and the problems with creation "science."

Key sections cover the origin of the universe, Earth, and life; evidence supporting biological evolution, including findings from paleontology, comparative anatomy, biogeography, embryology, and molecular biology; and human evolution. An appendix of "frequently asked questions" is borrowed from the 1998 report.



Science and Creationism can be ordered from the Academy, but both the 1998 and 1999 reports are also on the Web at: <http://books.nap.edu/html.creationism/>. The new one is 35 pages long.

Academy President Bruce Alberts says the new edition of *Science and Creationism*, like the 1998 NAS report, summarizes some of the key evidence supporting evolution and analyzes arguments by creationists, but he says that it nevertheless has "a somewhat different purpose."

"This document lays out for a broader audience the case against presenting religious concepts in science classes," Alberts says.

"Scientists, like many others, are touched with awe at the order and complexity of nature. Indeed, many scientists are deeply religious," says Alberts.

"But science and religion occupy two separate realms of human experience. Demanding that they be combined detracts from the glory of each."

"Intelligent design theory" is one of the neocreationist positions addressed in the new publication. "Molecular evolutionary data counter a recent proposition called 'intelligent design theory,'" the report says. Intelligent design has its roots in the views of eighteenth-century cleric William Paley, who saw the hand of an omnipresent designer in the intricate anatomy and workings of complex organisms.

Proponents of modern-day intelligent design argue that molecular structures such as DNA, or molecular processes such as the steps blood goes through when it clots, are so irreducibly complex that they can function only if all the operational steps are in place at once—therefore seemingly making gradual evolution an impossible explanation.

"However," says the report, "structures and processes that are claimed to be 'irreducibly' complex typically are not on closer inspection." It gives many examples. "Similarly, evolutionary mechanisms are capable of explaining the origin of highly complex anatomical structures," such as eyes, which developed independently many different times.

"Creationism, intelligent design, and other claims of supernatural intervention in the origin of life or of species are not science because they are not testable by the methods of science," concludes the report. "No body of beliefs that has its origin in doctrinal material rather than scientific observation, interpretation, and experimentation should be admissible as science in any science course."

CSICOP Fellow and Executive Council member Eugenie Scott, an anthropologist, was one of the contributors to the report, which was reviewed by an expert panel.

—Kendrick Frazier

Kendrick Frazier is Editor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.

Missing Bodies Found Despite Psychics' Tips

Detective Barbara Bergen, the lead investigator on an Orlando missing-persons case, received a tip this past June from a caller advising her to search a retention pond near Disney World. In the preceding six months, authorities had already removed about a half-dozen vehicles—some ditched by thieves, others there by tragic accident—from the body of water, which (until a restraining wall was recently erected) had been a slam-dunk for drivers failing to negotiate a sharp left turn near Interstate 4 in the town of Celebration.

Heeding the caller's advice, the pond was again searched, and a sport utility vehicle, along with the bodies of three Massachusetts men missing for nine months, was found. High speed, not foul play, was the suspected cause of what had been a mysterious disappearance.

The three men had arrived in Florida in September 1998 for a short vacation. The men's families sought information on their whereabouts through a Web site and a television campaign.

Just who was the prescient prognosticator being credited by the police for cracking the case? Psychics from three states had contacted family members with various suggestions as to where to look, including a storage facility in northern Florida, a remote wildlife area in central Florida, and a marshy area in southern Florida.

But the tipster, whose advice had led to the successful extraction of the vehicle and bodies, turned out to be—naturally—a dentist! Detective Bergen told the *Boston Globe*, "He was driving along talking to his wife when he realized he'd missed the turn and nearly skidded over the curb and into the pond." Hearing of the missing men and recalling his own chilling near-miss, "He suggested we search the pond."

—Gary Posner

Gary Posner is founder of the Tampa Bay Skeptics and a CSICOP consultant.

Sorcerers and Psychics in Politics

The Reagan White House was not the only place mixing the paranormal with politics. In La Plata, Argentina, a sorcerer was enlisted to remove a curse preventing the current governor of Buenos Aires from becoming president. No Buenos Aires governor has ever been elected president, and many believe it to be the result of an 1882 curse by a witch named La Tolosa. According to legend, she cursed the province's rulers while walking counterclockwise around Moreno square, in the city center.

Self-proclaimed psychic and sorcerer Manuel Salazar exorcised the curse in June, repeating the witch's ritual but in a clockwise direction. As of this writing, current Buenos Aires governor Eduardo Duhalde is slightly trailing his opponent, although his difficulty is likely due to Argentine president Carlos Menem's long reluctance to support him.

In Jakarta, Indonesia, fortunetellers and psychics were heavily consulted in the months prior to Indonesia's parliamentary elections in June. One of Indonesia's most famous psychics, Permadi, is a candidate for the popular Indonesian Democratic Party-Struggle, headed by Megawati Sukarnoputri, daughter of Indonesia's founding president Sukarno. Sukarno is said to have routinely consulted psychics before deciding important matters of state policy. Other high government officials are rumored to have asked wizards to cast spells to boost their careers or undercut rivals.

Permadi foresees victory for Megawati, framing his prediction in Nostradamus-like cryptobabble: "There will be disruptions and chaos before or after the elections," he said in a Reuters interview. "There will be deadlock. And, amid the disruption and chaos . . . a white knight will emerge." Another soothsayer, Lukito, who based

his predictions on Chinese *feng shui* geomancy, helpfully suggested, "There is a possibility of a bloodbath if people cannot control their emotions."

—Benjamin Radford

Ben Radford is Managing Editor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER.

Bible Code Redux: McKay Rebuttal Published in *Statistical Science*

One of the chief arguments employed by proponents of the Bible Code is to mention that the original code proponents, Witztum, Rips, and Rosenberg, published a paper supporting the phenomenon in the journal *Statistical Science* in 1994, and that, to date, no rebuttal has ever been published there. But just such a paper, authored by Brendan McKay, Dror Bar-Natan,

which the lists of modern names and dates were chosen. These methods have so much "wobble room" that spectacular results can also be achieved in secular, "non-coded" texts such as *War and Peace*. McKay and his co-authors also show that several very reasonable measures of code effectiveness, much less convoluted than the complicated one chosen by Witztum and Rips, show no trace of the alleged "encoding" in Genesis or other books of the Torah. The article, and many others, are available on the Web at <http://cs.anu.edu.au/~bdm/dilugim/torah.html>.

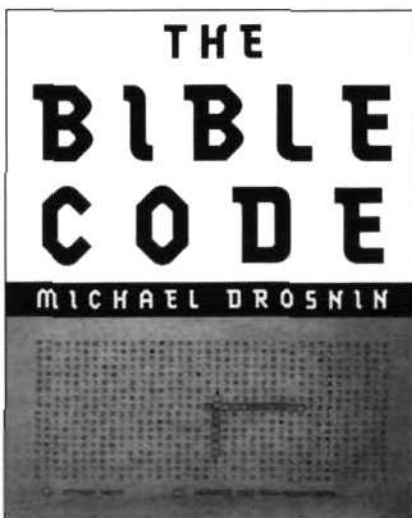
—David E. Thomas

Psychic Hotline Provider Accused of Fraud

In June, the Federal Trade Commission forced a major provider of 900-number psychic hotlines to drop nearly \$40 million in "phantom" phone charges to consumers. The company, American Tel-Net Inc., will also pay \$2 million for customers who had already paid disputed charges. The FTC had accused American Tel-Net of falsely billing consumers even though the consumers had not used the company's services. The company was also accused of failing to properly disclose prices and charging consumers for "setting up" time that is required by law to be free. This marks the second time the FTC fined the company; in 1994 American TelNet paid \$2.5 million over similar improper billing practices.

Also in June, Cheryl Burnham, a clerk at a county juvenile facility outside of Los Angeles, was accused of racking up \$120,000 worth of telephone calls to psychic hotlines while at work. The 39-year-old woman faces charges of felony grand theft and commercial burglary. The calls, some 2,500 of them, were made at night and on weekends between June 1997 and November 1998.

—Benjamin Radford □



Maya Bar-Hillel, and Gil Kalai, was published in the May 1999 edition of *Statistical Science*. The authors show definitively that the secret of the codes lies not in any special properties of Genesis, but rather in methods by