

## In Defense of the Higher Values

KENDRICK FRAZIER

When Paul Kurtz brought us to the SUNY–Buffalo campus thirty years ago to found CSICOP, the nation was awash in what he called “The New Irrationalisms.”

Velikovskism saw ancient world history through a bizarre prism of civilization-affecting planetary pinballs.

Von Dänikenism attributed major achievements of ancient history, especially in the New World, not to the ingenuity of indigenous peoples but to ancient astronauts visiting Earth and stimulating creation of its archaeological wonders.

Gellerism promoted a showman conjuror as a real psychic with an ability to bend spoons with his mind and to cause several prominent but credulous physicists to lose their grips on reality.

Astrology had gained such a foothold on thought that astronomer Bart Bok and Paul Kurtz provoked worldwide controversy over a simple “Objections to Astrology” statement signed by 192 prominent scientists saying that astrology was bunk and had nothing to do with astronomy.

Paranormalism seemed everywhere, and New Age mystical thought that arose as part of the counterculture revolution of the late ‘60s influ-

---

*Kendrick Frazier is the editor of the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER. This commentary is based on his talk at the CSICOP 30th anniversary observance at CFI headquarters in Amherst, New York, April 1, 2006.*

enced and entwined broad segments of society.

And reports of UFOs, despite the critical Condon report only seven years earlier, flew in regularly and gained credulous publicity in the press.

**We have never limited ourselves to just the paranormal and pseudoscience. We deal with all topics at the intersection of science, public perception, and public misperception, with emphasis on those that attract large notice or that raise important public issues.**

In the intervening three decades the specific claims that we might broadly label paranormal or pseudoscientific have changed dramatically. Most of the specific manifestations of the enthusiasms I just mentioned have waned. Some have even disappeared.

The situation has changed so much that Paul sometimes argues that no one is interested in the paranormal anymore. (I almost detect a certain longing!) We have some interesting internal debates about that, but to the degree it is true I have argued, and still do argue, that one key reason has been the remarkable work of CSICOP and the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER . . . and the network of scientists, scholars, and

investigators worldwide it invigorated in forcefully addressing these and similar claims, providing detailed scientific analyses that showed their empirical poverty, and—in the end—debunking them. Solidly. Convincingly. Comprehensively. I think it has been a remarkable achievement.

Of course, as many of us note, although the cultural climate has shifted a lot, and in some respects for the better, the modern communications revolution has multiplied almost exponentially the number and types of outlets now available for the rapid promulgation of all new information and ideas, good and bad, reliable and unreliable—and that goes for pseudoscientific and paranormal nonsense and all its popular manifestations.

I won’t even begin to detail all this here. We’ve dealt with all these matters in the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER now for years—and of course will continue to do so. Also, we have never limited ourselves to just the paranormal and pseudoscience. We deal with all topics at the intersection of science, public perception, and public misperception, with emphasis on those that attract large notice or that raise important public issues.

What I want to do here is sketch out some new and—I think—disturbing aspects of the cultural climate we find ourselves in and emphasize the higher values that CSICOP and the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER exemplify and promote—values that seem essential to a modern, progressive, humane society; values that are under assault from broad quarters of society here and abroad. No matter the specific, topical subjects we analyze and critique—the defense of these values is what we are really all about.

If thirty years ago Paul Kurtz and others were worried that we were in danger of descending toward a new dark age of superstition, paranormalism, mysticism, and pseudoscience, we in fact seem now to be in danger of descending toward a new dark age of a slightly different—and perhaps even more dangerous—sort. The first was

more one of credulous, wide-eyed acceptance of wondrous, incredible claims. In retrospect, it all has a certain air of innocence. These claims all had their counterparts, after all, in science and could be seen or interpreted as just misguided but understandable fascinations uninformed by real science. Show people the real science and they might easily—at least in principle—shift their support to it. UFOs → the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence. Astrology → astronomy. Van Däniken pseudoarchaeology → real archaeology. Psychic powers and parapsychology → experimental psychology and modern studies of neuroscience and cognition. And so on.

But the new areas you and I are most concerned about now aren't like that. Not at all. They arise from deep-seated ideologies. They arise from a dangerous capturing of mainstream, liberal, open-minded, religious viewpoints by those with far more extreme, narrow, rigid, authoritarian, judgmental religious viewpoints. They arise from a willingness, even a devout—many think God-sanctioned—determination to impose those viewpoints on everyone else. We've seen this abroad, but it is happening here in American too.

Their attacks are on many things, but among those that concern us here are—

The open-minded tolerance of others slightly different from oneself that marks a progressive society.

The love of learning and the quest for new knowledge that mark a progressive society.

The willingness to entertain and examine new ideas that marks a progressive society.

A free and open society's distrust of authoritarian dogma, whatever the source—biblical or otherwise.

Freedom of expression and the clear separation of church and state on which this nation was founded.

Reliance on science-based evidence over unexamined belief and prejudice.

The basic rights of women to make their own choices, to be educated, and to shape their own futures.

A deep appreciation for education and a nurturing of environments for creativity and achieving novel solutions to problems.

A related deep appreciation for not just the useful achievements of science but for the methods of science in determining and advancing provisional new truths, small and large, about the natural world.

An acceptance that those methods of science often result in reliable judgments about what is real and what is not.

**The new areas we are most concerned about arise from deep-seated ideologies. They arise from a dangerous capturing of mainstream, liberal, open-minded, religious viewpoints by those with far more extreme, narrow viewpoints.**

A realization that we humans—while unique in our humanity—are nevertheless part of the natural world, and derived from and influenced by a long co-evolutionary history with the other life forms, large to microscopic, of the natural world.

In short, these attacks are on many key aspects of the modern world first shaped by the Enlightenment and the beginnings of science—when we began to develop the first abilities to actually deeply understand nature and, to some degree, exert some fledgling, limited controls of it for the well-being of people. They are attacks on curiosity and learning and on the

scientific outlook itself. They are attacks on intellectual inquiry and thought—the open-minded, no-holds-barred examination of competing ideas and claims that is essential to an open, democratic society.

In many respects — although their proponents in America would no doubt dispute being so characterized—these are attacks on democracy itself. For these fundamentalist partisans would—if allowed—willingly impose their own, very specific ideological views on those they oppose.

We have to fight these trends.

We *will* fight these trends.

Our efforts at CSICOP and in the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER can't and don't deal with these issues in the abstract. Instead, we examine, critique, review, and report on specific, concrete topics, within the broad context of science and reason.

But it is important to keep in mind the higher values we nevertheless are defending:

- Reason and rationality, among the highest, most hard-won attributes of thinking, independent people.

- The scientific outlook, with its rich tradition of creative, open-minded, empirical inquiry and evidence-based probing of nature's secrets.

- The skeptical attitude, a key component of the scientific outlook, with its obligation to put all new assertions to tests of empirical evidence.

- The traditions of learning—real learning, deep and broad—and the value of education not only in achieving a better life for each person but in creating reflective minds and in improving the lot of society.

- The deepest traditions of democracy—valuing human dignity and rights, drawing on the free and open interplay of ideas, and depending upon an educated, informed citizenry for making wise decisions.

No small matters. No small challenges.

Are we up to it? We have to be. There is no choice. □