

Autism-Vaccine Link Researcher Andrew Wakefield Accused of Faking His Data

STEVEN NOVELLA

Andrew Wakefield, the researcher who in 1998 sparked the public controversy over whether the MMR (mumps measles and rubella) vaccine is linked to autism, may have faked his data. Wakefield and others published a small study of only twelve subjects in *The Lancet* claiming it was evidence for a link between the MMR vaccine and autism (Wakefield 1998). As a result, compliance with the MMR dropped from 92 percent in the U.K. down to 85 percent, and measles cases soared from only fifty-eight cases in 1998 to 1,348 cases in 2008. Fears have also spread to the U.S., where measles cases are also starting to increase.

Wakefield's paper has already been thoroughly discredited, and subsequent studies have shown convincingly that there is a lack of association between MMR or vaccines in general and autism. For example, one of the key components of Wakefield's theory is that autism is linked to gastrointestinal disorders in some children, potentially allowing the measles virus from the vaccine to enter the bloodstream and wreak havoc. A replication of Wakefield's experiment by Mady Hornig was published last September in *PLoS ONE* (Hornig 2008). Hornig found no correlation between MMR and autism and also did not find the measles virus in the guts of children with autism and GI complaints, directly contradicting Wakefield.

Far larger than the scientific controversy stirred up by Wakefield, which has largely been settled, is the storm of ethical concerns regarding his scientific behavior. In 2004, ten of Wakefield's co-authors withdrew their names from the original publication, and *The Lancet's* editors published a retraction, citing undisclosed conflicts of interest by Wakefield (*Lancet* 2004).

Specifically, Wakefield did not disclose a large consulting fee he received from attorneys representing clients suing over claims that their children's autism was caused by MMR. In fact, eleven of the twelve children in Wakefield's study were part of the litigation. Further, nine months prior to publishing the study, Wakefield applied for a patent for a new



Dr. Andrew Wakefield attending the G.M.C. in London, which is investigating him for ethics violations.

MMR vaccine that he claimed was safer. He therefore stood to make phenomenal profits from scares over the current vaccine's safety (Deer 2008).

Investigative journalist Brian Deer has been putting the pieces of the Wakefield puzzle together for several years now. His investigations recently uncovered evidence that Wakefield may also have faked his original data. He writes: "Our investigation, confirmed by evidence presented

to the General Medical Council (GMC), reveals that: In most of the twelve cases, the children's ailments as described in *The Lancet* were different from their hospital and GP records. Although the research paper claimed that problems came on within days of the jab, in only one case did medical records suggest this was true, and in many of the cases medical concerns had been raised before the children were vaccinated. Hospital pathologists, looking for inflammatory bowel disease, reported in the majority of cases that the gut was normal. This was then reviewed and *The Lancet* paper showed them as abnormal" (Deer 2009).

Andrew Wakefield remains under investigation by the U.K.'s General Medical Council for ethics violations. He remains unrepentant about his claims and has since moved to America, where he runs the Thoughtful House autism center in Austin, Texas.

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Steven Novella, MD, is a clinical neurologist and president and co-founder of the New England Skeptical Society.

More Studies Reject Vaccine-Autism Link

As if more scientific support was needed, a new review of the evidence has again shown no link between vaccines and autism. And a new study from Italy bolsters the case even further.

Concerns by some parents have kept alive the idea of some link, which has not been supported by the scientific literature (see “The Anti-Vaccination Movement,” SI November/December 2007).

Jeffrey S. Gerber and Paul A. Offit of the Division of Infectious Diseases at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia published a review in the February 15 (2009) *Clinical Infectious Diseases* (48:456–61) of twenty peer-reviewed scientific studies published between 1999 and 2004. The studies show no connection.

The authors examined three specific claims some have proposed: the combination measles-mumps-rubella vaccine causes autism by damaging the intestinal lining; the mercury-containing preservative thimerosal, formerly in some vaccines, is toxic to the central nervous system; and the simultaneous administration of multiple vaccines overwhelms or weakens the nervous system.

They reviewed the relevant epidemiological evidence and found no support for these claims. In one study, for instance, researchers in England evaluated 498 autistic children born from 1979 through 1992. No change in the rates of autism diagnoses after the 1987 introduction of the MMR vaccine was observed. A study in Denmark compared the incidence of autism in children who had received two different levels of thimerosal or no thimerosal at all. There was no relationship between thimerosal exposure and autism. On the third claim, they note that vaccines “do not overwhelm the immune system . . . even conservative estimates predict the capacity to respond to thousands of vaccines simultaneously.”

“Twenty epidemiologic studies have shown that neither thimerosal nor

MMR vaccine causes autism,” conclude Gerber and Offit. “These studies have been performed in several countries by many different investigators who have employed a multitude of epidemiologic and statistical methods. The large size of the studied populations has afforded a level of statistical power sufficient to detect even rare associations.

“These studies, in concert with the biological implausibility that vaccines overwhelm a child’s immune system, have effectively dismissed the notion that vaccines cause autism. Further studies on the cause or causes of autism should focus on more-promising leads.”

The new Italian peer-reviewed study was carried out over a ten-year period and published in the February issue of *Pediatrics*. Thousands of healthy Italian babies in the early 1990s were given two different amounts of thimerosal as part of their routine vaccinations. Ten years later, 1,403 of those children were identified and given a battery of brain-function tests. Researchers found small differences in only two of twenty-four measurements, and “they might be attributable to chance,” they said. Only one case of autism was found, and that was in the group with the lower thimerosal.

“Put together with the evidence of all the other studies,” said the study’s lead author, Alberto Tozzi of Bambino Gesù Hospital in Rome, “this tells us there is no reason to worry about the effect of thimerosal in vaccines.”

—Kendrick Frazier

Scientists Hail Gallo’s ‘Unsung’ Role in Nobel HIV/AIDS Discovery

When the 2008 Nobel Prize in Medicine was awarded to two French virologists for discovering and identifying the HIV virus, a number of scientists questioned why American scientist Robert Gallo wasn’t also named. He is generally credited as a co-discover of the HIV

virus and the person most responsible for proving it causes AIDS.

The Nobel foundation obliquely acknowledged that situation by saying the prize went for the *discovery* of the virus, not for detection of the link between the virus and the AIDS disease (SI News and Comment, January/February 2009).

Biomedical scientists (106 in all) from seventeen countries have published a letter in a prominent scientific journal saying Gallo deserves equal credit. And a major event is planned in May honoring Gallo on the twenty-fifth anniversary of his co-discovery.



U.S. biomedical researcher Robert C. Gallo gives a press conference on World AIDS Day in Rome.

In a letter titled “Unsung Hero Robert C. Gallo” (*Science*, 323: 206, 2009), the international group of scientists say that while Nobel Prize recipients Françoise Barré-Sinoussi and Luc Montagnier “fully deserve the award, it is equally important to recognize” Gallo’s contributions.

“Gallo definitely proved HIV-1 as the cause of AIDS through the successful isolation and long-term cultivation of HIV-1 and developed a diagnostic kit that prevented new infections and saved thousands of lives. These contributions

... warrant equal recognition. . . ."

The letter continues: "Barré-Sinoussi and Montagnier isolated a virus but . . . could not establish whether it was the AIDS virus, an achievement accomplished by Gallo and colleagues just one year later. Gallo . . . learned to grow the virus and, furthermore, discovered its role, saved the blood supply, and opened the way for drug and vaccine development. Without Gallo's contributions, the relevance of the virus to AIDS might not have been recognized and many thousands more lives would have been lost. Given the enormous impact of these developments on the lives of countless thousands globally, Gallo's contributions should not go unrecognized."

Gallo also has been outspoken against those who try to deny that HIV is the cause of AIDS ("AIDS: Denialism vs. Science," September/October 2007).

An endnote to the *Science* letter says the letter-writing initiative was done independently of Gallo's influence. The coordinator of the letter effort is Guido Poli, head of the AIDS Immunopathogenesis Unit at San Raffaele Scientific Institute in Milan, Italy.

Poli says he and the letter writers, many of them leaders in the HIV field, felt the Nobel committee had an unfortunate anti-Gallo bias. Poli worked at the National Institutes of Health for seven years and witnessed the development of AIDS research during its first years.

He told the SKEPTICAL INQUIRER he hadn't heard from Gallo directly, "although people in his staff told me that he was happy about the letter."

May 4, 2009, marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of Gallo's paper in *Science* reporting his findings identifying the AIDS virus. To commemorate the discovery, the University of Maryland School of Medicine is hosting a three-day celebratory event in Baltimore May 9–11. It includes a gala honoring Gallo, "Celebrating a Visionary's Quest for Discovery," and a symposium, "25 Years After Discovering HIV as the

Cause of AIDS." The National Cancer Institute, where Gallo did his research, is co-sponsor.

Poli told SI he has been invited as a speaker to the celebration. "I interpret that as a way to say 'thanks!'"

—Kendrick Frazier

Selective Memory at Work When Patients 'Predict' Own Death

Can medical patients predict their own deaths using some fancy type of "insight" that is more accurate than the medical tests and expertise of physicians? The answer is yes, according to an article by Dr. Sandeep Jauhar, a Long Island, New York, cardiologist. The article "The Instincts to Trust Are Usually the Patient's" appeared in the January 6, 2009, *New York Times* Science Times section (D6). Jauhar describes just two instances in his practice where patients who were not expected to die said that they expected to die and, some time later, did exactly that, thus suggesting to Jauhar that patients "have a sixth sense about their own deaths." In the first case, an "elderly" gentleman with congestive heart failure was admitted to the hospital. At one point he said, "I am going to die here." Initially, his case was "relatively mild. But then he became sicker." He died several days later. The second case was that of a woman who "told us calmly on morning rounds that she had a feeling she was going to die that day." Later that day she did die.

Neither of these cases seems particularly surprising. Both patients were already in the hospital and not for trivial reasons. Both must have been anxious. Undoubtedly many patients in such situations express anxiety and fear of death, even when they are not expected to die. When, as expected, they do not die, it's no big deal and isn't remembered. But when such a patient does die, it's a notable event and is remembered.

This type of selective memory is an important cause of belief in many nonexistent phenomena. Another from the medical arena is the belief that more babies are born when the moon is full. This is simply false. There have never been any well-done studies that support such a belief. So from whence did the belief spring? Selective memory on the part of maternity-room personnel. When there happens to be a lot of births during a full moon, it is noted and remembered. Neither slow nights when the moon was full nor busy nights when it wasn't are taken into account as evidence against the relationship. Selective memory also plays an important role in the belief in such things as astrology, biorhythm theory, prophetic dreams, and the like.

But memory is not only selective, it is constructive. The physician who believes in the prophetic abilities of patients to foretell their own deaths will be very likely to misremember patients' comments as more prophetic than they actually were. Any claim that is based only on such selective memories should be viewed with great suspicion.

—Terence Hines

Terence Hines is a professor of psychology at Pace University, Pleasantville, New York, and author of Pseudoscience and the Paranormal (Prometheus 2003). E-mail address: TerenceHines@aol.com.

A Modern Witch Craze in Papua New Guinea

Newspapers internationally reported a recent spate of witchcraft-related murders in rural Papua New Guinea. The media interest began with a case in which a young woman was stripped naked, bound and gagged, tied to a log, and set on fire by a band of villagers. She burned to death in the blaze. Local authorities believe she was suspected of being a witch. Within days, a man was accused of using magic to kill another

villager. Pronounced guilty by an ad hoc court, the man was slashed to death with bush knives by an angry mob.

Belief in witchcraft is rampant in rural Papua New Guinea, and murder for suspected sorcery is a common practice. In 2008, some fifty people were victims of witchcraft-related murder in the Highlands provinces. While there are no exact figures, many incidents occur in remote areas and remain unreported. When a death occurs, the locals often close ranks and refuse to cooperate with the authorities.



Accused of being a witch by the local community after all of her children and her husband died, this Tanzanian woman was attacked by a man with a machete who chopped off her arm.

This modern witch craze is worldwide. As Leo Igwe of the Center for Inquiry/Nigeria has noted, ritual killings and witchcraft-related murders are prevalent in many parts of Africa. These crimes are also widespread in South America and Asia, especially in India and Malaysia. There are scattered cases in Europe, especially in the United Kingdom, and even in Australia.

The practice also exists in America. Last year there were two reports of witchcraft-related murder trials in

the United States—the cases of Carla Mendez in Los Angeles and Lawrence Douglas Harris Sr. in Sioux City, Iowa. Voodoo, santeria, animal sacrifice, and other forms of “black magic” are still practiced in some parts of the country, particularly in communities in Miami and New Orleans.

Belief in sorcery is strongly rooted in Papua New Guinea. Many believe in the existence of *sangumas*, witches, sorcerers, or people with magical powers. *Sangumas* are accused of invoking curses, hexes, and spells to bring misfortune to their villages. These victims are held responsible for occurrences where natural explanations can be offered but aren’t recognized. *Sangumas* are often blamed for natural disasters and seemingly inexplicable deaths, for example, from cancer or HIV/AIDS.

The legal proceedings that follow the accusation are a sham. The victims are usually tried by church pastors and unqualified officials presiding over a kangaroo court. The inevitable punishment is execution, performed immediately in a public place by a frenzied group of tribespeople. Victims are sometimes hanged, stoned, shot, beheaded, butchered, buried alive, or burned at the stake after being doused with gasoline and set on fire. Others escape death but suffer attempted murder, sexual abuse, and torture, often to extract a confession.

Disturbingly, accusations of witchcraft are not invariably indicative of superstitious belief. Sometimes there are ulterior motives underlying the claims. Some deaths are crimes of vengeance or of an accuser seeking resolution in an ownership dispute. Some murders are drug-related. In a real-life version of Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*, some victims have violated social taboos and are guilty of socially stigmatized behavior, such as infidelity, unmarried pregnancy, or homosexuality. To shift blame and avoid punishment for real crimes, charges are often laid against innocent individuals or even animals. In Kwara,

Nigeria, a goat was held in custody for attempting to steal a vehicle. A literal scapegoat, it is claimed that the human culprit transformed magically into a goat to escape arrest.

Papua New Guinea is in dire need of skepticism, education, and legal reform. It appears that the latter is finally happening. These latest horrific killings, and no doubt the ensuing media outrage, have prompted the country’s Constitutional Review and Law Reform Commission to create new laws to prevent (or at least reduce) witchcraft-related deaths.

—Karen Stollznow

Karen Stollznow, PhD in linguistics from the University of New England, is editor of The Skeptic magazine (Australia), a director of the Bay Area Skeptics, and a committee member of CFI/San Francisco.

Remembering Henry Gordon, Magician, Skeptic, Debunker

Kemo Kimo Merinickel Pumpnickel. Henry Gordon invented this phrase to use as an incantation in his magic, just as he created or taught himself everything he needed in life. They were spoken again by his granddaughter Sandra at his funeral in January. Gordon—magician, skeptic, columnist, broadcaster, entrepreneur, co-founder of the Ontario Skeptics, and fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry—died January 24, 2009, at the age of eighty-nine.

In 1940 Montreal, Henry was a young man interested in radio repair and Morse code. Zita, Henry’s then-girlfriend and later beautiful assistant in his magic shows, remembers walking down St. Catherine Street. The Royal Canadian Air Force was advertising its need for radio operators. Henry quickly enlisted and was sent to help start an air training camp in western Canada.

“As a relaxation, away from his daily demands, he became interested in the

fine art of magic,” says Zita. “That’s where the love of this art and the psychology of it and what it can do for an individual began.” A year later he and Zita were married. A terrific writer, he proposed through the mail.

Henry was honorably discharged from the service in December 1941. With his knowledge of electronics and his entrepreneurial spirit, he built the first recording studio open to the public in Montreal.

In the exciting atmosphere of the 1960s, it seemed appropriate to experiment by opening the first party supply store in the city. “Henry Gordon’s Party Centre” opened to great fanfare, selling “everything for enjoyment under one roof,” as its motto proudly declared. It was a great success. “Henry always said, if you want to try something you’ve got to find the timing and go along with the bumps,” explains Zita.

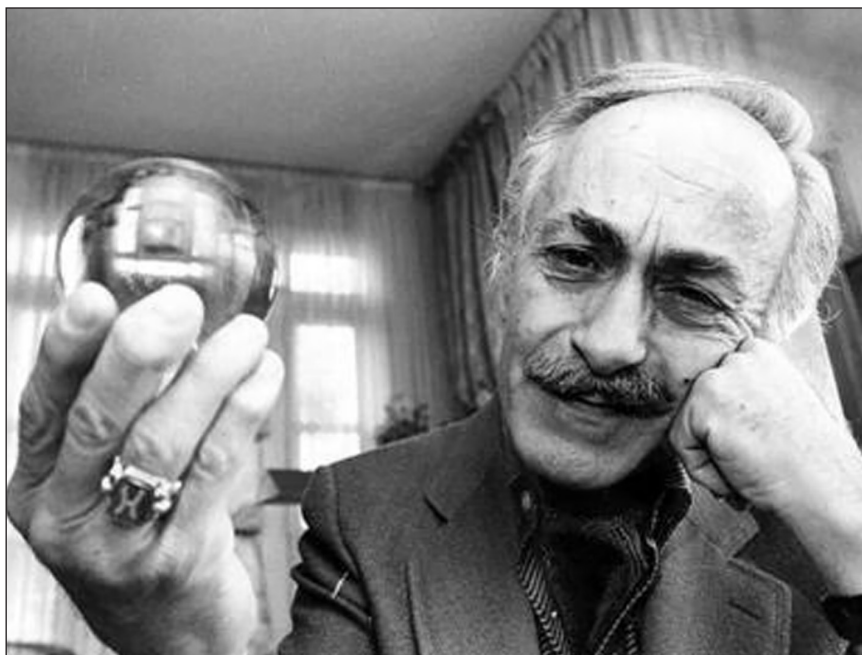
He opened a school for magic in the store, which thrived for nineteen years. Having always referred to magic as a fine art and to himself as an honest fraud, he became very annoyed by the famous magicians who cashed in on the psychedelic period by calling themselves psychics and destroying the integrity of magic.

One of the earliest debunkers, in the 1970s he (with Zita) performed magic and debunking on cruise ships. “It proved to be very successful, particularly when sailing through the Bermuda Triangle,” Henry joked in his article in the book *Skeptical Odysseys*, edited by Paul Kurtz. In 1978, Kurtz attended a skeptical symposium in Montreal, and shortly afterward Henry was elected a scientific and technical consultant to CSICOP.

For two years Henry wrote the debunking column “ExtraSensory Deception” for the *Toronto Sun*, which was the first such column in North America. He went on to write a regular column called “Debunking” for the *Toronto Star*’s Sunday paper.

Editor Gerry Hall, who wanted to

introduce facts and science to counter the generally pro-paranormal tone of many newspapers, was attracted to Henry’s work because of his diligence and care for detail. “He was a skeptic who was willing to do the work to track something down,” says Hall. “There were a coterie of people who made yearly predictions and he would have probably had a complete file on them and he would find the twenty things they predicted that were wrong.” Henry turned his critical eye to everything from UFO sightings to psychic detectives and chiropactors.



Henry Gordon was a fellow of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP), now CSI. He was well-known internationally for his exposures of Uri Geller, Shirley MacLaine, and other paranormal practitioners in his books, articles, and television appearances.

His writing and skepticism fed on each other. By now a CSICOP Fellow, he would often report on its activities. Meanwhile, his writings attracted a great many people—especially students—into the movement. Two physics students helped him start the Ontario Skeptics, along with Eric McMillan.

“When I first met him he was writing a column in the *Star* about debunking,” McMillan recalls. “That was mind

opening for me, for me that was what turned me on to skepticism.”

There was a great deal of excitement at the launch of the organization. “It was often said, we light our little candle in the dark and hope to attract people to that light, but still we realize we’re just one little light in the dark.”

There were instances when that light seemed quite a bit brighter. In 1987 Henry Gordon appeared on WBZ-TV Boston along with Uri Geller. Geller attempted to perform his well-known trick of moving a compass needle by waving his hands. After much grunt-

ing, Geller had to give up. Henry had strapped a much stronger magnet to his knee.

Another high point occurred when Henry appeared at Montreal’s popular Saidye Bronfman Theatre disguised as psychic Elchonen. He fooled the audience and then later returned on stage as himself. Some asked to have their money refunded, but many returned to hear Henry speak on the paranormal.

These incidents, as well as many of his columns, are described in his book *Extrasensory Deception* (Prometheus Books 1987). Henry authored magic books for children as well as one focusing almost exclusively on Shirley MacLaine, titled *Channeling into the New Age*.

A gifted performer before audiences of hundreds, Henry was equally comfortable entertaining small groups. He was a real family man. At his funeral ceremony his granddaughter affectionately referred to him as Zaida, noting that his magic took place both on and off stage. The spotlight didn't shine on every magical moment Henry gave his family and the world, she added, but at that moment the spotlight was shining on Henry one more time.

Henry was indeed involved in one last bit of magic. A broken wand ceremony was carried out by Ron Guttman, past president of the Sid Lorraine Hat and Rabbit Club, the Toronto branch of the International Brotherhood of Magicians (IBM). The broken wand symbolizes broken hearts at Henry's absence. It also represents the fact that a wand without its magician is of no use. "We send Henry into the mystery of all mysteries," said Guttman, concluding the ceremony.

The Club had awarded Henry an Order of Merlin, which recognizes a member's service of over twenty-five years to IBM. Skepticism was a vital part of Henry's magic, and in turn, magic informed his skeptical enterprise.

Throughout his life, Henry was a major figure in city life wherever he lived, and he appeared regularly in the media, from *Larry King Live* to opera. Once on CBC's *Radio Noon* he was introduced: "We're going to talk about ghosts today, and here is Henry Gordon who has come to spoil our day again." A skeptic is not usually rewarded, but Henry was a hero, and, according to Gerry Hall, he made a difference. "He was one of the great skeptics in Toronto and we are lucky we got him."

To McMillan, Henry demonstrated that "a skeptical life is not necessarily

a life with a narrow focus, that we just focus on paranormal nonsense and science to correct it. A skeptical life is being interested in everything . . . everything that has to do with human beings."

"He had an intellectual curiosity, whether it was mechanics, whether it was music . . . [he was] self taught. . . . My goodness, he was full of surprises," said Zita.

—Justin Trottier

Justin Trottier is executive director of the Center for Inquiry/Ontario.

Report Knocks Baylor Claim about American Religiosity

Do nonreligious people in America represent a larger group than has been portrayed?

The Council for Secular Humanism (a sister organization to our Committee for Skeptical Inquiry) made some headlines in February with a report released to the national media calling into question many of the findings contained in a widely cited Baylor University Religion Survey of 2008. Baylor, a Baptist university, claimed in its survey that America is as religious as it has always been, adding that belief in religion is a universal characteristic displayed by all peoples around the world. Baylor researchers recently published their findings in a book called *What Americans Really Believe* (Baylor University Press, 2008).

The CSH report, "Is the Baylor Religion Study Reliable?" (www.secularhumanism.org/greg-paul-baylor.pdf), contradicts these claims, suggesting that Baylor and lead researcher Rodney Stark may have improperly evaluated the data and consequently misinformed the public and the media.

The Council's report points to a growing body of research by academic institutions and major survey organiza-

For the Record:

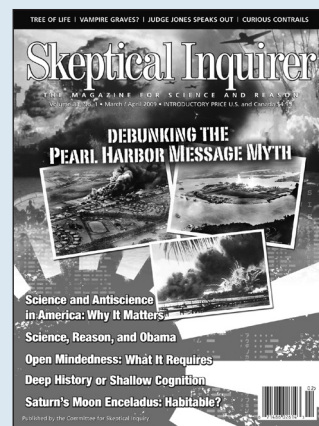
The USS *Missouri* was not commissioned until June 1944 and thus was not one of the ships damaged in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941 (caption error, page 29, May/June 2009). Our 2008 photo showed the USS *Missouri* Memorial at Pearl Harbor, where since 1999 the *Missouri* has been a museum ship. On September 2, 1945, in Tokyo Bay, the *Missouri* hosted the signing of Japan's official unconditional surrender, ending World War II.

* * *

Amos Tversky died in 1996, not 2006, as written in a New Books listing of Stanovich's *What Intelligence Tests Miss* (March/April 2009, page 56). Tversky thus missed out sharing the 2002 Nobel Prize in Economics with his longtime collaborator, cognitive scientist Daniel Kahneman. The error was ours.

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John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963, not October 22 ("What Do Skeptics Need to Explain?" March/April 2009, page 58).



tions that clearly documents a downward

shift of religious adherence in the United States. Why does the Baylor study contradict this? Independent scholar Gregory S. Paul, author of the Council's report and author of a major article on these matters in *Free Inquiry* (December 2008/January 2009) says that Baylor relied on a flawed methodology.

"The Baylor team has adopted a curious way of treating atheism, forms of unbelief short of atheism, and religious belief. This approach places a disproportionate emphasis on convinced atheism—the confident rejection that a personal God exists—at the expense of more moderate forms of nontheism," said Paul. The report suggests that Baylor has failed to document large numbers of Americans who reject conventional religious beliefs, such as those who self-define as agnostic or "spiritual but not religious." The Council's report declares that "Baylor's methods largely ignore these doubters, making nonbelief appear less prevalent in society than it truly is. The Baylor team treats almost any deviation from strict atheism as a sign of religiosity. Doing so falsely maximizes the apparent level of faith."

The United States is still the most religious country in the First World, but the Baylor thesis that "'faith American style' is holding its own is clearly false," states the report. "Religious belief and activity in America are trending downward in so many ways that it is simply untenable to pretend that the nation is growing more religious."

Spanish Skeptics Magazine *Pensar* Suspends Publication

Pensar, the Spanish-language skeptics magazine launched in 2004, has suspended publication as of 2009. The magazine covered many topics, including global warming, AIDS denial, miracles, and ghosts, as well as lesser-known regional topics specific to Latin America.

According to Editor Alejandro Borgo, though *Pensar* was well-received

during its five-year run, the magazine was unable to achieve the subscription and distribution levels needed to maintain publication. The rising cost



of paper, printing, and postage—combined with the global economic recession—finally made *Pensar* too costly to maintain in its current form. The *Pensar*

editorial staff and writers expressed their appreciation to readers for their support and are looking for ways to keep some of the material in circulation.

CFI/Los Angeles Celebrates Darwin's 200th Birthday with Readings, Plays, Lecture

More than 300 Southern Californians celebrated the 200th birthday of Charles Darwin by crossing the threshold at the Center for Inquiry/Los Angeles and attending three special events, crammed into just a few days, enthusiastically presented by CFI staff, volunteers, and participants.

Before the gatherings at the Steve Allen Theater, CFI/Los Angeles announced *Darwin Aloud*, an international project collecting video from around the world of people reading from *On the Origin of Species*, Darwin's groundbreaking book outlining evolution by natural selection. This planet-wide gesture honoring the father of evolution will be edited into a short film this spring in Hollywood. See



Actors Charles Shaughnessy and Gary Cole as Charles Darwin and Steve Allen, respectively, riveted the audience in the hour-long reading that pitted historical actors from different eras engaging in discussions about their lives and ideas. The episode and others were originally written by Steve Allen and performed on PBS in the 1970s.

www.cfiwest.org/darwinaloud for more details.

On Darwin's birthday (February 12), more than 100 people crowded into a theater-in-the-round for a staged reading from an episode of *Meeting of Minds*, Steve Allen's PBS series that brought together famous historical figures. The reading was the companion piece to the episode staged last year involving the same characters.

Five noted television and movie actors played Darwin, Galileo, Emily Dickinson, and Attila the Hun discussing and debating their ideas with moderator Steve Allen. Reprising their characters from last year were Oscar nominee Robert Forster (*Jackie Brown*) as Galileo; Dan Lauria (*The Wonder Years*) as Attila, and Wendie Malick (*Just Shoot Me*) as Emily. Portraying Darwin this year was Charles Shaughnessy (*The Nanny*), and bringing Steve Allen to life was Gary Cole (*The West Wing*). Directing the episode again was Frank Megna, and it was again co-produced by Diana Ljungaeus and Bob Ladendorff.

Steve Allen's son Bill attended the performance. Jayne Meadows, Allen's widow, could not be present but sent a warm note (read by Cole as Steve) praising last year's production and wishing us the best for this year's performance. The reading was followed by a champagne toast led by CFI/Los Angeles Executive Director Jim Underdown and a Darwin birthday cake.

The following Sunday morning, author David Contosta spoke to more than 100 attendees at CFI/Los Angeles and in Orange County about his new book on Darwin and Lincoln (born on the same day as Darwin in 1809). *Rebel Giants: The Revolutionary Lives of Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin* (Prometheus Books) was nominated for the Lincoln Prize for the best book about Abraham Lincoln in 2008.

Rounding out the week's events on Sunday afternoon was a performance of *A Dangerous Descent*, playwright/biochemist Colin Cox's Garden-of-Eden clash between Adam, Eve, and Adam's

first wife Lilith (yes, *first* wife.) The three find a pocket watch and dive into a scorching argument about whether it was intelligently designed or not. Even the primarily CFI-minded audience had to hang on for dear life as the three (fictional) characters blazed through an array of arguments that spanned both centuries and many branches of learning. More than a hundred attended, including the noted actor Michael York.

It was a truly exhilarating week at

CFI/Los Angeles honoring the life and ideas of the scientist whose work has withstood the test of time—and creationists.

—Jim Underdown and Bob Ladendorff

Jim Underdown is the executive director of CFI/Los Angeles and Bob Ladendorff is its chief operating officer.

QuoteWorthy

My father was very well known. Less well known was that he was responsible for the Roswell incident [when people believed they'd spotted a UFO]. He was the chief scientist [in a secret military/CIA project] and was looking for a sound channel in the atmosphere for the purpose of detecting bomb tests.

—Fred Spilhaus, retiring executive director of the American Geophysical Union, speaking of his late father, meteorology professor Athelstan F. Spilhaus, who was director of research for the secret New York University constant-level balloon experiments launched from New Mexico in June 1947 that became known as Project Mogul. Interview in *Physics Today*, February 2009.

There are many steps between detecting an Earthlike planet and reliably assessing whether it has a biosphere. Life's origin on Earth is still a mystery, so we cannot lay firm odds on its likelihood elsewhere. But we may learn, in the coming decades, whether biological evolution is unique to the pale blue dot in the cosmos that is our home, or whether Darwin's writ also runs in the wider universe.

—Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal and professor of cosmology and astrophysics at Cambridge University, in an editorial in *Science* (323:309), "Pondering Astronomy in 2009"

Darwin's great idea has moved on. Twenty-first century evolutionary science, if Darwin could return to see it, would enthrall, excite, and amaze him. But he would recognize it as his own. We are just coloring in the details. For my money, the most important thinker the human species has ever produced was Charles Darwin.

—Richard Dawkins, "The Power of Darwin," *Free Inquiry*, February/March 2009