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# Skeptical Adversaria

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The Quarterly Newsletter of The Association for Skeptical Enquiry



## FROM THE ASKE CHAIRMAN

Michael Heap

An article that appeared in a recent issue of the *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine* will, I am sure, appeal to ASKE members and other readers of this newsletter.

The article<sup>1</sup>, by dermatologists at the University of Norwich, explores a common claim and belief, supported by anecdotal evidence, that has defied orthodox scientific explanation and therefore should be deemed 'extraordinary'. The authors review early hypotheses (from over 100 years ago) that assume the authenticity of the phenomenon and are based on physical mechanisms that only those with specialist knowledge would be fully able to understand and evaluate.

The authors find that there is no support for these hypotheses and, accordingly, they reject them. Instead they favour two simpler explanations that would certainly account for the phenomenon. An intelligent layperson would have been able to offer the first of these and probably make a guess at the second.

Many people will be acquainted with someone claiming either to have observed the above phenomenon or to know a person who has, namely that someone had such a terrible shock that his or her hair turned white over night.

The paper's authors refer to well-known historical examples, including Sir

Thomas Moore and Marie Antoinette, both on the eve of their executions.



**Marie Antoinette**  
'Her hair turned white on the eve of her execution'.

Early documented examples are very dramatic, as in the case of a Benagali sepoy who was surrounded and stripped by hostile soldiers and whose jet-black hair turned white *in 30 minutes!*

Even setting this unusual example aside, it seems that there is a problem accounting for how hair follicles could collectively become de-pigmented in such a short space of time. Does the reader have any suggestions that would not require this process?

One hypothesis is that the victim normally dyes his or her hair but is unable to or (through being in a state of shock) neglects to do so. The dye could also be washed out. This might explain the examples given earlier, though we have to assume that the victims did indeed use artificial hair colouring. (In the case of the sepoy one could suggest that any hair colouring was washed out by sweat during his ordeal.)

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The second hypothesis is that the victim has mixed white and pigmented hair and has an episode of alopecia (hair loss), which can occur rapidly (e.g. in reaction to shock) and may selectively affect pigmented hair.

Obviously we need direct evidence from case examples to support these claims. Despite this, we have here a good example of the implicit application of Occam's Razor in the analysis of a common preconception, which may turn out to be largely a myth.

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<sup>1</sup> Skellett, A.-M., Millington, G.W.M. & Levell, N.J. (2008) Sudden whitening of the hair: An historical fiction? *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, **101**, 574-576.

## LOGIC AND INTUITION

A recent edition of Radio 4's 'More or Less' examined the concept of *average*. One topic was the finding of psychologists that most of us rate ourselves higher than average on positive attributes but lower than average on negative ones (including characteristics such as risk of heart disease).

There was once a rumour that an American president (I think it was Ronald Regan but it could equally well have been George W. Bush) was severely vexed by the fact that half of American children are of lower than average intelligence. The story may be a myth. Nevertheless it sometimes seems to me that our government is spending billions of pounds trying to make all the nation's children better than average.

'More or Less' discussed in depth the various ways of measuring averages, the three common methods being the arithmetic mean, the median and the mode. As you probably know, the mode is most useful for quantities that have a severely constricted distribution like the number of toes people have (mode = 10). The median – the value at which 50% of the sample or population score above and 50% below - can be the most useful for skewed distributions like

annual income, for which most people earn below the arithmetic mean (which is disproportionately affected by very high incomes). An interesting tit-bit from the programme was that average income in the private sector is higher than in the public sector if you calculate this using the arithmetic mean, but lower if you use the median. (The reason for this is not difficult to understand.)

I had to wrestle with all of this when doing my PhD research, which involved measuring reactions times. These, like incomes, are negatively skewed. So my dilemma was should I use the mean or the median, or use the mean of the logarithm of the scores, or have cut-off points to exclude very high and very low scores, and if so what values, etc., etc. Mercifully I have long since put all this behind me and moved on, as we now say.

Enough! Here is a nice puzzle involving 'the average' which was presented on the programme in a somewhat different form.

### **What's the average mark?**

A class of students are enjoying a drink in the university bar, having just received their percentage marks for an important piece of work on their course. None of them is prepared to communicate to anyone else his or her own mark but all are keen to know the average mark of the class for comparison. Suddenly one of the students, Helen, says, 'I can work out the group average without any of us having to tell anyone what our marks are'. How can Helen do this?

See page 12 for the answer.

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## ONE OF US

The alternative medicine industry is a prime target for sceptical criticism. Probably disproportionately less attention is paid to commercial, over-the-counter 'medicines' (cough and cold remedies, ointments for skin conditions, insomnia cures, tonics and pick-me-ups, and so on).

Related to this is the cosmetics and beauty industry. Think of all those advertisements over the years for soaps, shampoos and hair conditioners and all their extravagant, pseudoscientific claims.

'Protein shampoos' always make me laugh. They remind of something I saw my mother's hairdresser do, decades ago, when she came to the house one day. She literally gave my mother an 'egg shampoo', cracking one open and rubbing it into her hair. Years later I read a piece of commonsense advice on this matter. Yes, eggs are good for your hair (and other parts of your body) but

the best way of benefiting from them is the most natural: put them in your mouth and swallow them - don't try to rub them into your head!

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### **Now it's official: the entire beauty industry is built on the peddling of pernicious nonsense.**

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Step onto the podium Mr Sam Leith! In a feature in the *Guardian* on March 5<sup>th</sup>, Mr Leith gives 'beauty journalist' Ms Eve Cameron a thorough verbal beating-up for her promotion of

something called Olay Regnerist 'anti-ageing' cream.

Mr Leith starts his article in cracking form with the headline 'Now it's official: the entire beauty industry is built on the peddling of pernicious nonsense' and goes on to say, 'It sells products that don't really work to people who don't really need them at prices they can't really afford'.

Apparently, the magic ingredients in the product in question are pentapeptides. In an advertisement Ms Cameron claims that scientific research has shown that these are effective in reducing the appearance of lines and

wrinkles in your face. However the Advertising Standards Association has declared this claim to be misleading (Google “*Eve Cameron*” ASA).

As Mr Leith says, ‘You cannot rub a mixture of water (or “aqua” as they, with embolism-inducing pretentiousness call it on the pots) and vegetable oil into your skin, however many scientific-

sounding branded ingredients they’ve stirred into it, and have any effect whatsoever on the process of ageing that is taking place in the cells throughout your body’

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## FROM THE BOOKSHELF

**Tony Flinn**

‘Paranoia: The 21<sup>st</sup>-Century Fear’ by Daniel Freeman and Jason Freeman. Oxford University Press, 2008. ISBN-13: 9780199237500/ ISBN-10: 0199237506.

In this small book, the authors describe the phenomenon of paranoia, try to show that it is on the increase, attempt to describe what might cause paranoia, and then pose ways of ameliorating the ‘problem’.

Paranoia is defined as the unfounded belief that someone is out to hurt us. The authors claim that paranoia is contained within a wide spectrum from the mild - for example an occasional, soon forgotten thought - to the severe, full-blown paranoia symptomatic of serious psychoses such as paranoid schizophrenia. This is apparently generally accepted in the psychology community but seems a bit far-fetched. By suggesting this is widespread, the authors try to add credence to their cause. Serious paranoia undoubtedly exists in those individuals with mental problems but to suggest a continuum involving everyone is, in my humble opinion, stretching things and is not necessary.

Is the approach Scientific? I don’t think so: ‘It’s often difficult to rule out the possibility that a paranoid thought is

actually correct.’ We are dealing with humans with all the problems associated with illogical thought and failures of rationalisation. Instead of logic we use all kinds of short cuts, hunches, stereotypes and rules of thumb to make sense of the world. I agree, many people are usually completely unable to objectively assess risk.

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**Paranoia is surely just a symptom and does not need to be elevated to a problem in its own right.**

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Chapter 3 asks, ‘Is paranoia increasing?’ but what follows is an unconvincing argument involving increasing urbanisation, isolation, population migration and victimisation as proposed causes. The authors later admit that they ‘don’t have the data to say for certain whether paranoia is increasing’. Plenty of anecdotal data are cited but little hard evidence is presented.

Possible causes of paranoia are described including the experiencing of ‘anomalous experiences’ and erroneous reasoning. In the end, all is not doom and gloom for those of us who may be concerned about our paranoia. The authors come to the rescue and reassure the reader that the psychiatric and psychological professions (for a suitable fee no doubt) using ‘Cognitive Behaviour Therapy’ can sort us out. That’s a relief.

Like many books based on the flimsiest of concepts, this book is riddled throughout with statements of the obvious. Paranoia is surely just a symptom and does not need to be elevated to a problem in its own right.

Let’s hope the authors don’t come after me in the dead of night to correct such negative views!

### *Call for Contributions*

If you have attended a conference or presentation, watched a programme, or read an article or book that would be of interest to readers, why not write a review of this, however brief, for the *Sceptical Adversaria* or the *Skeptical Intelligencer*? Or would you like to take over one of the regular features in the *Adversaria*?

# LANGUAGE ON THE FRINGE

Mark Newbrook

## It's All Irish To Him

Michael Tsarion is an 'alternative historian' and conspiracy theorist, one of the latest representatives of a fringe amateur tradition which holds that the accounts of ancient history presented by orthodox scholarship are utterly false and that powerful covert forces which have long controlled the world further their own agendas by jealously guarding the true knowledge of the remote past which they possess and ensuring that this remains unknown to others. Orthodox scholars are either part of this conspiracy or dupes. Tsarion believes that anyone who examines their ideas honestly and intelligently will see that these ideas are so obviously riddled with bias and error that they can be rejected, and that he himself has unearthed the gist of the real truth despite the vast conspiracy to conceal it.

In Tsarion's version of ancient history, Atlantis really existed as a primeval civilisation (contrary to all mainstream scholarship, but as in many other alternative accounts). He discusses this in a book which cannot be examined here. The source of later civilisation and culture, following the fall of Atlantis, was Ireland, with its 'Druid' religion. Tsarion is encouraged by his use of highly unreliable sources (see below) in adopting this implausible account of these matters and further bizarre reinterpretations of early history. These involve extreme claims too numerous to be dealt with here, e.g. the view that the Egyptian civilisation lasted 30,000 years.

Tsarion himself is Irish-born. The ascription of special status to a writer's own background culture is common on the fringe and excites reasonable suspicion – although this alone does not, of course, show that he is mistaken, or even biased.

Part of Tsarion's theory involves the Irish (Gaelic) language: he advances novel etymologies for very many words

which involve an ultimate Irish origin. Naturally, those with other loyalties prefer other source languages (Aymara, Basque, Greek, Hebrew, Hungarian, Korean, Latvian, Russian, Sanskrit, Turkish, the Finnish dialect of Swedish, etc). Typically, their cases are about as persuasive as Tsarion's (i.e. not persuasive at all). And, as noted below, all but **one** of them **must** be wrong; very probably, **all** of them.

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## In Tsarion's version of ancient history, Atlantis really existed as a primeval civilisation.

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Tsarion cites as one of his authorities Maxwell, as in Maxwell, Tice & Snow (2000), reviewed by me in Newbrook (2007). Jordan Maxwell and his co-authors hold that there is a specifically linguistic conspiracy, part of a vast overall conspiracy also involving religion, which involves (a) keeping humanity divided by enforcing the use of many mutually unintelligible languages and (b) blocking humanity from discovering the original/'true' meanings of words. Tsarion also cites Conan MacDari, who claims that the scriptures were originally written in Irish and that the Irish names were changed in order to conceal their source. Other fringe writers make similar claims, albeit differing on the real original language (see above). But once one alleges significant deliberate manipulation of word-forms (without concrete evidence), as these writers do, all philological bets are obviously off. With deliberate manipulation, forms can alter in any way whatsoever, and almost any language can be seen as a source. For more examples of this and some discussion, see Newbrook (2005). (There is, of course, no good reason to believe that such massive linguistic manipulation has occurred on the scale proposed by most of these writers. Even if adequate

motivation existed, the task would surely be infeasible, and there is no concrete evidence of its being even attempted.)

The linguistic element in Tsarion's work is not as salient or as central as it is in e.g. Maxwell et al. (2000). Nevertheless, it does bulk large, and his book on the alleged Irish origins of civilisation contains many passages dealing with these novel etymologies and an extensive appendix presenting more examples.

The use of Maxwell and MacDari illustrates Tsarion's tendency to regard earlier alternative thinkers, some of them highly fringe in nature, as authoritative. We return to this point later.

The etymological/historical linguistic research methods used by Maxwell, like those used by most alternative philologists, are the best part of 200 years out of date, and it can easily be shown that they are totally unreliable, which is why they have long been superseded in orthodox historical linguistic scholarship. (See below; for another account of this matter, see the early pages of Newbrook, 2005.) When I first encountered Tsarion's work I suspected (rightly, as it emerged) that he too might have fallen into this basic error. The context was an oral report on a talk which he had given at a convention of alternative thinkers in Liverpool in 2008. I emailed him to ask exactly what he had said and had a somewhat testy interaction with him over the next two days, during which time I also read through extracts of his book which are available online, including the lengthy appendix on etymology.

Tsarion's talk involved the alleged cognatehood (shared origin) of a series of superficially similar words and word-parts, drawn or derived from a range of related (Indo-European) languages but themselves currently deemed unconnected. Regarding these forms as cognates, he proposed that their meanings were originally the same. The

forms in question were *arya* (a key term in Indic studies which has had a range of uses), *area*, *terra* (Latin for 'earth'), the *-aria* in *Bulgaria*, *Hera* (Greek goddess-name), etc.

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**It rapidly emerged that Tsarion is not interested in actually arguing that his etymologies are to be preferred to orthodox etymologies.**

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It became clear that Tsarion had not sought to defend his etymological claim about these forms as more soundly based than the orthodox etymologies for the forms (or, in some cases, the orthodox view that no plausible etymology can yet be advanced; see below). He told me: 'I like it when my audiences start to observe terms and words and when they begin investigating the various meanings of them'. He had obviously merely invited the audience to accept his etymologies. Most of them, not being tutored in linguistics or the relevant languages, would have been unaware that these were more than controversial. Whatever the strength of Tsarion's case as presented elsewhere, this approach is clearly unacceptably one-sided.

And in fact it rapidly emerged that Tsarion is not interested in actually arguing that his etymologies are to be preferred to orthodox etymologies. When I asked him 'What is the **evidence** that *arilarya* is cognate or has any other actual link with *-aria*, *area*, etc?' he responded, 'Where's the evidence that it doesn't?' (This is reminiscent of Ralph Ellis's response to my similar query about his linking of the forms *Deseret* and *desert*: 'Why can't I say that they're connected?') I replied:

Re evidence for and against etymologies: There are millions of words and word-parts in thousands of languages; and there are only so many common sounds and sound combinations. Superficial similarity between words and/or word-parts taken from different languages,

especially short ones, is in itself no evidence of a genuine connection, even if the meanings are similar. If the meanings are **not** especially similar, or are merely alleged to be related as part of someone's theory, the case is even weaker.

The upshot of this is that - except where languages or groups of connected words are demonstrably related ('genetically' or through contact) **and** where the level of systematicity (see next paragraph) is high - **the onus has to lie upon those who present novel etymologies or claims about cognatehood to show that there is at least a good case.** No-one can be obliged to present evidence that such forms are **not** connected, as you seem to suggest. Indeed, for recent times where hard evidence is plentiful, there are very many superficially similar forms, often with similar meanings and/or in related languages, which are nevertheless **demonstrably** unconnected and only accidentally similar.

In the course of 200 years of intensive study, linguists have learned much about the strength of evidence that is required to demonstrate (probable) connectedness between such forms. The main issue is that of systematicity: language change is very largely systematic. It is almost universally agreed that sets of unsystematically similar forms with similar meanings are not at all likely to be cognates, and there is certainly no reason to regard them as demonstrably cognate.

Anyone who wishes to overturn these points needs to develop arguments to the effect that the scholarly tradition of historical linguistics (with which I assume you are familiar) is mistaken in these respects. Any such project, informed by a good knowledge of the tradition, would obviously be of vast interest.

Another issue here involves known or very well-grounded established etymologies for words. Proposers of alternative etymologies need to argue

that these are more plausible than the established ones.

(Re this last: In some cases, as intimated, the origins of words or word-parts are obscure and/or very remote in time and cannot be established, at least by current methods. Here, the problem with unsupported etymologies such as Tsarion's is not that they are known to be false but rather that there is no good reason to believe that they are true.)

Tsarion now declared that he was not interested in convincing anyone of his case or in getting his work commonly known. These were my assumptions only and they were presumptuous and incorrect. As I pointed out to him, my assumptions were hardly presumptuous; his position is highly unusual and difficult to understand. Surely there is no point in the establishment of rival camps of thinkers, each of which assumes that they have already found the right general approach or the right outline answers and which therefore do not talk to each other or try to reach a conclusion or a synthesis. Sceptical linguists such as myself will therefore feel free to critique any alternative views which seem to warrant this, whether or not the writers in question welcome this attention or wish to defend their positions.

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**Tsarion admits that he himself is in no way an expert on linguistics. This is true of most alternative writers on language matters.**

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Tsarion admits that he himself is in no way an expert on linguistics. This is true of most alternative writers on language matters; they typically demonstrate only that they have very little if any knowledge of the subject and often that they are not even aware that it exists. But someone who presents new theories of language origins obviously **should** know a good deal about the subject, even if only to disagree with current ideas on a well-informed basis.

Tsarion did claim to have 'dealt with' many scholars of individual languages, also with senior etymologists and philologists, and to have read extensively on these subjects. But he never stated whether or not any of the thinkers he had consulted had come to **endorse** his views. And he began at this point a rant about the gross failings of orthodox scholarship (see above) which continued throughout the rest of our exchange and which made me wonder why he had paid any attention to the views of mainstream scholars! But in fact such writers often come to exhibit a curious tension between the rejection of hostile orthodoxy and a continuing desire to be embraced by scholarship; the latter is manifested in appeals to published academic writings at any point where these can - even if with distortion - be adduced in support of the 'fringe' claims. And, as will be seen, most of Tsarion's sources are **not** in fact orthodox or genuinely authoritative in any case; they are earlier fringe sources which he chooses to regard as authoritative (for whatever reason).

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**Very few historical linguists feel 'threatened by alternative researches' as Tsarion suggests.**

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Tsarion suggested that instead of attempting to critique people like himself I should spend my time within my 'ivory tower establishment' critiquing the mass of error and falsity therein. This comment is often made by alternative thinkers. I have in fact proved myself more than willing to examine problems in my own mainstream (see Newbrook, 2000). But, at least in my own main area of expertise, it seems to me that for all its faults the mainstream tradition of scholarship has been much more fruitful (to the point of predicting linguistic forms later found in written form by archaeologists) and is much better grounded than any alternative tradition or proposal that I have ever seen.

Naturally, for Tsarion I am a dupe or worse in thinking as I do.

Tsarion also sang the praises of alternative thinkers (obviously including those listed earlier whom he regards as authoritative sources and indeed as 'masters'), wrongly stating that most intellectual progress has arisen from alternative work and describing its practitioners as much more modest and rational than orthodox scholars. In my view, while there certainly is some bombast and prejudice in the mainstream, the reverse of this latter view would be nearer the truth; few alternative thinkers are willing to consider that they might be wrong. Tsarion also apparently believes (obviously unreasonably) that alternative thought is validated merely by its long history and its breadth. In fact, alternative thought is itself so varied, in its 'findings' at any rate, that most of it **must** be wrong. In the field under discussion, for instance, any major loosening of the standards of evidence for cognatehood etc, such as most such sets of claims require, would have the consequence that very many alternative proposals (involving e.g. a whole range of different languages of origin) would be roughly equally plausible. But these proposals all contradict each other; only one of them, if any, could be correct. (In that event, the reasonable conclusion would probably be that we could not say much at all about philology or ancient etymologies with any confidence. Orthodox linguists would regard this conclusion as a last resort and as not warranted by the actual evidence.)

In addition, very few historical linguists feel 'threatened by alternative researches' as Tsarion suggests. Most of the alternative theories that come to their attention appear so weakly supported and so implausible that they scarcely warrant detailed examination, and they certainly do not inspire apprehension. Some linguists, notably Lass, have nevertheless devoted much time to honest appraisals of such material. And even within the 'mainstream' there are a few scholars with minority views that

are very divergent. Ruhlen is an obvious example. For my own part, I would be delighted to find radical alternative conclusions or methods which I found persuasive. So far that has not happened, but I continue to look.

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**It does indeed become clear that he has no intention of actually supporting his etymologies.**

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When one examines the relevant parts of Tsarion's book as excerpted on his site, notably the appendix on etymology, it does indeed become clear that he has no intention of actually supporting his etymologies, or comparing the linguistic evidence supporting them (if any exists) with that supporting the established etymologies for the same items. Here is an example: parts of his account of the etymologies surrounding a Tarot card (his conventions retained):

**Aton and the Fool**

The Hebrew letter that corresponds to this card is *Aleph*. Aleph, from the Arabic *Aleim* and Irish *Ailim*, is the origin of the modern word *Alive*. The Irish *Ailim* gives our first letter of the alphabet "A." It became the Hebrew *Aleph* and the Greek *Alpha* .... Additionally, the term *Elohim* that derives from *Ailim* and *Aleim* can still be found in *Jerus-alem* .... The word *Fool* is a corruption of the word *Soel*. The long letter "S" was often mistaken for "F." *Soel* or *Sol*, means "the Sun."

These statements about etymologies (often deriving forms in other languages from an ultimate Irish source) are unsupported. Many of them also fly in the face of well-established etymologies. The Hebrew letter-name *aleph* has an Arabic cognate *alif* (albeit attested only much later), and a similar form in the closely-related Semitic language Phoenician is demonstrably the source of Greek *alpha*. Irish is not involved; there is indeed no evidence that (very

early) Gaelic was written (in letters or otherwise) at the date when these words were first used, and in fact the Gaelic of that date is reconstructed philologically, not actually attested. The English word *alive* is obviously related to *livellife*, which has a very clear Germanic source; the *a-* is not part of the root, as Tsarion's Irish etymology implies, but a prefix. The form *elohim* also has clear Semitic cognates and no known link with early Indo-European (including Gaelic). And the forms *fool* and (Latin) *sol* have known, quite separate, old etymologies; *fool* derives from a well-documented 'slang' use of the Latin word *follicis* ('bellows') and cannot possibly have arisen by way of scribal error at the relatively recent time when the letters S and F were written similarly in Europe.

Similar items in Tsarion's appendix include the following:

The word *Hebrew* did not relate to a particular race but to the wise ones or Elders known as the *Ibaru* or *Ibri* of Ireland, and later, of Egypt. The ancient name for the land of Ireland was *Hibernia*, and the ancient Irish were known as *Hibernians*. This is an Irish word and it also denoted those Gaelic tribes, descended from the ancient Irish, which temporarily inhabited Spain. Spain's old name was *Iberia*.

PASTOR: Here is a word commonly used by persons in the Christian religion, in reference to someone with clerical duties. The word has two syllables, *Pa* and *Stor*. The first syllable is the root of the word for father, elder and great. The latter stands for *Star*. This is where we derive the word *aster*, and *asteroid*, meaning "star."

Many place names contain the prefix or suffix *EL* (see Elstree, meaning *EL's Tree*) [! MN].

'*Bishop* is one of the oldest words we have referring to those who knew the sky. Bishop comes from the word *vishnu* - god of the sea, god of the fish, and astrologically of Pisces - the sign of the fish, and of Christianity. Bishops wear the fish-headed

headdress to commemorate their connection to Piscean symbolism. One of the earliest and most important Sumerian-Babylonian gods was Oannes, the Fish-God. It is from Oannes, or Joannes, that we derive certain personal names, such as John.'

Etc, etc. Similar comments to the above could readily be made on all these examples. For instance, there is a very well-established Greek etymology for the form *bishop*, and Tsarion's rival etymology receives no defence in linguistic terms at all.

Despite obviously knowing something of these matters, Tsarion also displays conceptual confusion over the use of terms such as *Indo-European* and *Celtic*, which are properly – and validly – used of **linguistic** (not racial/ethnic) groups.

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**He makes no use at all of mainstream or even near-mainstream work on the linguistic aspects of these matters.**

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The use of Maxwell and MacDari, as noted above, illustrates Tsarion's tendency to regard earlier fringe thinkers as authoritative. Other fringe (and highly dated) sources which he takes seriously include the works of Comyns Beaumont, Godfrey Higgins, and L. A. Waddell – all thoroughly discredited. (Tsarion does list a few more reliable sources, though these are mainly concerned with mythology considered as such.) In his appendix on etymology, he refers frequently to these fringe sources. But he makes no use at all of mainstream or even near-mainstream work on the linguistic aspects of these matters, not even to criticise or dismiss it. I am not sure that he has actually read any such material.

The excerpts from Tsarion's book quoted above are available online. Chapter 14 in Volume 1, **not** available online, deals with 'The Lost Language of the Ancients'. Because the book is a)

expensive and b) available only from Tsarion's website and from a postal source in the USA, I have not seen this chapter. It is possible that Tsarion's treatment of linguistic matters in this chapter is better, though given his overall display I strongly doubt this.

At no point in what I **have** seen does Tsarion explain what exactly he sees as 'the egregious fallacies and errors, compromised teachings', etc which according to him are typical of mainstream scholarship, in the specific field that is in question here, that of historical linguistics.

I welcome interest in linguistic matters from all comers, whatever their non-linguistic ideas and whatever their initial degree of expertise. And (*pace* Tsarion) I (like all fair-minded modernist mainstream linguists) do not decry novel historical linguistic theories merely because they are non-standard – whoever proposes them and whatever their apparent motivation. But, as in any learned discipline, advancing such theories is pointless if one does not first acquire (or gain access to) a reasonable degree of expertise – as noted, if only to disagree rationally with well-supported positions that one now understands. And, given the bizarre nature of Tsarion's historical linguistic claims and most of all his failure to support them with argumentation or evidence (particularly **linguistic** argumentation or evidence), his own specific ideas on this front should obviously be disregarded as they stand. Anyone who appears inclined to accept them should be directed to this review.

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## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

**A**SKE is a member of the European Council for Skeptical Organisations. It has an Internet Forum on which you can read comments on sceptical issues from contributors and post your own. To access this, log on to <<http://forum.ecso.org/>>.

### Contact details for ECSO are:

Address: Arheilger Weg 11, 64380 Roßdorf, Germany  
Tel.: +49 6154/695021  
Fax: +49 6154/695022  
Website: <<http://www.ecso.org/>>.

However the new website is also now up and running: <[new.ecso.org](http://new.ecso.org/)> (user name, skeptiker; password, joom1a).

The 14th European Skeptics Congress, 2009, will be hosted by the Hungarian Skeptic Society in Budapest in 2010. The ECSO website will have updates on this but why not visit the Hungarian Skeptic Society website, which is very informative and is in English?  
<<http://www.szkeptikusarsasag.hu/en/in dex.php>>.

### An invitation from CICAP (Comitato Italiano per il Controllo delle Affermazioni sul Paranormale), the Italian sceptical organisation)

As some of you may know, the 2010 edition of the EuroScience Open Forum (<http://www.esof2010.org>) will be held in Torino, Italy, after the previous 2008 edition was held in Barcelona, Spain. Torino hosts one of the more active branches of CICAP).

Critical appraisal of paranormal and unusual phenomena, modern myths and pseudosciences is not only a commendable activity in itself, but also a valuable exercise to promote and indeed teach critical thinking skills. Going one step further, it is often found that such appealing topics can be effectively used as a pretext to explain science and the way science works.

One example of this approach was presented at Science on Stage at CERN, Geneva, in 2005. Some materials from the festival can be found here: <[www.cicap.org/SoS2005](http://www.cicap.org/SoS2005)>.

There is also actually a relevant track in the ESOF2010 Themes:

#### 6. Science, knowledge and belief

- Science as a cultural activity based on human curiosity; cultural differences in science, knowledge and belief; is need the mother of invention? neuroscientific approaches to belief; the role of (science) education; scientific knowledge vs belief; past, present and future of the interaction between science, knowledge and belief...

So what is the idea?

We are going to submit a proposal for an interactive exhibition, the title being something like *Solving Mysteries by Learning Science (and vice versa)*. We will provide a proper exhibition set-up and local support along with a few exhibits of our own; you can contribute in several ways:

1. Build an interactive exhibit that, starting from a mystery or something allegedly paranormal, helps teaching a modicum of science. Send us the description so that we can accommodate it in the exhibition and in June 2010 come to Torino and help us manage the exhibition.

2. If you can't come, send the exhibit itself and we will showcase it for you (obviously giving all the relevant credits).

3. If you have a good idea and the money to build the exhibit, but no opportunity to do so, please send both: we will take care of everything.

4. If you have a good idea but no money, or lots of money but no special idea, please send whatever you have: we will try to match money with ideas and build as much as possible.

The deadline for ESOF proposals is June 15, 2009, and we need to know somewhat earlier what we will be able to show. So please send us a short description of your ideas, together with your plans, by **May 15, 2009**. We will collect all ideas and suggestions, put together a formal proposal and see how it is received by the program committee. Depending on the funding we will obtain from different sources, we will finalise the exhibition and take care of all local management.

Send your suggestions and ideas at <[ESOF2010@ciacap.org](mailto:ESOF2010@ciacap.org)>. At this time, obviously, we have no guarantee that our proposal will be accepted. It will be reviewed by the ESOF Local Organising Team and the selection process results will be announced by the end of October 2009.

We hope to hear from you soon, and to meet in person in Torino.



## OF INTEREST

### RANDI IN LONDON

From the website:

<<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=58881253486>>

'Official Facebook Group of TAM London. the first James Randi Educational Foundation conference outside the USA. A celebration of science, critical thinking and comedy. Line- up, costs and Central London venue to be announced soon! TAM London is on 3rd and 4th October 2009'. (No news yet of venue. Keep your eye on <<http://www.tamlondon.org/>>.)

### MUNCASTER CASTLE PARANORMAL CONFERENCE

**Date:** 18-20 September 2009

**Websites:**

<<http://www.ukskeptics.com/conference-2009.php>>,

and (for bookings and further info):

<<http://www.muncaster.co.uk/muncaster-castle-paranormal-conference>>.

This exciting event organised by the UK Skeptics will feature many well-known speakers on sceptical topics.

### THE SKEPTIC (UK)

From Chris French: As from issue 22.1, the *Skeptic* (UK) will be expanded from 28 pages to 40 pages - an increase in size of more than 40%! Unfortunately, this does mean that our subscription rates will also have to increase but only by a mere 33% - and that is the first increase in over ten years!

Our special offer is still on and there has never been a better time to take out a subscription. If you take out a subscription now:

(a) you get a year's subscription (4 issues) at the CURRENT rate (£15 for UK subscribers, £18 for the rest of the world) and do not have to pay the increased subscription rate (£20 for UK subscribers, £24 for the rest of the world) until it is time to renew your subscription, AND

(b) you get your first issue (21.3) absolutely free!

If you wish to take advantage of this offer, send a cheque made payable to

'The Skeptic' (with your address for delivery and your email address) to Prof C. French, APRU, Dept of Psychology, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW.

### THE ANOMALISTIC PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH UNIT AT GOLDSMITH'S COLLEGE LONDON

Seminars are held on Tuesdays at 6:10 p.m. in Room 256, Richard Hoggart Building, Goldsmiths, University of London, New Cross, London SE14 6NW. All talks are open to staff, students and members of the public. Attendance is free and there is no need to book in advance. For further information, visit

<<http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/apru/speakers.php>> or email:

<[c.french@gold.ac.uk](mailto:c.french@gold.ac.uk)>.

### SUMMER TERM

**12 May: Simon Singh**

*Trick or treatment? Alternative medicine (and the media) on trial*

### SKEPTICS IN THE PUB

#### LONDON

**Website:**

<<http://www.skeptic.org.uk/pub/>>

**Email:**

<[pub@skeptic.org.uk](mailto:pub@skeptic.org.uk)>

**Venue:**

Skeptics in the Pub, London, meets (usually) once every month at The Penderel's Oak, Holborn. A £2 donation is requested to cover the guest speaker's travelling expenses and sundries. All are welcome. Turn up at any time during the evening. The room is open for food and drink from about 5.30pm and talks start at 7pm.

There is also an associated Facebook group you can join (see website).

#### Programme

**20 May Edzard Ernst**

*Trick or treatment? Alternative medicine on trial*

#### LEICESTER

**Website:**

<http://leicester.skepticsinthepub.org/>

**Email:**

<[leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com](mailto:leicesterskeptics@googlemail.com)>

**Facebook:**

<<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=12736582903>>

**Venue:**

The Park, 5-9 Hotel Street, Leicester, LE1 5AW

**Programme**

The following presentations will begin at 7.30 pm:

**21 Apr: Kevin Byron**

*Science and uncommon sense*

**19 May: Stephen Law**

*Empirical evidence against the god hypothesis*

**16 Jun Richard Wilson**

*'45 Minutes from attack!': WMD and other state-sponsored conspiracy theories*

**21 Jul: Richard Wiseman**

*Investigating the impossible: A sceptical approach*

**20 Oct: Nick Davies**

*Bad news: What's wrong with the media.*

#### Social Skeptics

There is also a social meet at 7:30pm on the first Tuesday of each month in the Swan & Rushes There is no speaker or topic just some sceptics in a pub. 'Show up any time from 7:30pm onwards and look round for people talking about woo.'

#### EDINBURGH

**Website:**

<<http://www.geocities.com/edinburghskoptics/skepticsinthepub.html>>

**Email:**

<[chimaeraproductions@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:chimaeraproductions@hotmail.co.uk)>

**Venue:**

Nicol Edwards Public House, 29-35 Niddry Street, Edinburgh, EH1 1LG  
Telephone (info):0131 556 8642

**Programme**

Meetings (with the exception of the April 2009 presentation) are on the first and third Thursdays of the month, the first one being a 'social sceptics night'. The following presentations (exact titles are sometimes not on the programme)

will begin at 8.00 pm. Donations on the night (£2.50) are welcome to cover expenses.

**Wed 15 Apr: Richard Wiseman**

*The Paranormal*

The remaining talks are on Thursdays.

**14 May: Simon Singh**

*Trick or treatment?*

**18 Jun David Luke**

*'You never know your luck': Psychology and superstition*

**16 Jul: Richard Wilson**

*Conspiracy theories, etc.*

**20 Aug: Special 'Fringe' meeting**

*Details to be announced*

**17 Sept: Caroline Watt**

*Parapsychology*

**15 Oct: Nick Pope**

*UFO sightings*

**19 Nov: Evolution: Special Debate**

*Details to be announced*

## **BIRMINGHAM**

For details of latest developments email Jon donnis at:

<jonnodonnis@yahoo.co.uk>

### **HAUNTINGS: THE SCIENCE AND HISTORY OF GHOSTS**

On 4th April 2009. The event will take place in the University of Edinburgh's Anatomy Lecture Theatre, an atmospheric, spectacular and historical venue not usually open to the public.

Richard Wiseman and a host of leading experts will gather to examine the science and history of hauntings. This unusual event will explore the results of scientific investigations into 'haunted' houses, how the brain can be fooled into seeing apparitions, whether spirit photographs offer evidence of the afterlife, and how poltergeists once panicked the nation. There will also be a unique opportunity to witness a genuine Victorian phantasmagoria, and meet the man who creates ghostly goings-on in Harry Potter movies. Talks are as follows:

**Richard Wiseman**

*Investigating haunted locations: A scientific approach*

**Gordon Rutter**

*Imaging the impossible: Investigating spirit photography*

**Caroline Watt**

*Things that go bump in the mind: The psychology of apparitions*

**Owen Davies**

*The haunted: A social history of ghosts*

**Mervyn Heard**

*'No more ghosts': The regency phantasmagoria*

**Stephen Volk**

*'Dialogue with the dead': Creating ghosts for television*

**Paul Kieve**

*Grappling with ghosts: The practicalities of staging ghost effects in the modern theatre*

'Hauntings' is part of the Edinburgh International Science Festival.

Further details at:

<[www.scienceofghosts.com](http://www.scienceofghosts.com)>

### **SENSE ABOUT SCIENCE**

At <[www.senseaboutscience.org](http://www.senseaboutscience.org)>.

'Detox' has hit the headlines again with Edzard Ernst raising concerns about Duchy Original Detox tincture. Following on from Voice of Young Science's (VoYS) recent investigation into detox products, Professor Edzard Ernst has criticised the Prince of Wales and his company Duchy Originals for selling a herbal detox tincture made with globe artichoke and dandelion.

Tom Wells, VoYS: 'It seems outrageous for companies to be making money selling meaningless products, but for the heir to the throne to be doing so, at £10 a pop, is even more inappropriate. We'd like to see an end to detox products on the British high street, starting with Prince Charles's detox tincture.'

The story has made it into many outlets including:

**BBC Website:**

<<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/health/7934568.stm>>

**The Guardian:**

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/mar/11/prince-charles-detox-tincture>>

**The Telegraph:**

<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/health/heal/4967749/Prince-Charles-is-exploiting-the-gullible-with-dodgy-detox-remedy-scientist-argues.html>>

**The Scotsman**

<<http://thescotsman.scotsman.com/features/Ditching-the-Detox.5030664.jp>>

### **The Sense About Science Annual Lecture**

The Sense About Science Annual lecture was given in London by Dr Olivia Judson, an evolutionary biologist and award-winning writer, on the theme Why Experiment?. Links can be found at:

<<http://www.senseaboutscience.org.uk/index.php/site/other/297/>>.

### **CENTRE FOR INQUIRY LONDON**

**Website:** <<http://cfilondon.org>>.

The following events have been announced:

*Legal Note: CFI reserves the right to change or cancel events without notice.*

#### **25 Apr: Science and Religion**

A day exploring the relationship between science and religion with Simon Singh, Mary Warnock, Jack Cohen and Stephen Law

Date: Saturday, 25th April, 10.30 a.m.-4 p.m.

Venue: Conway Hall, 25 Red Lion Square, London, WC1R 4RL

Fee: £10 (£5 for students)

To book tickets, send a cheque payable to 'Centre for Inquiry London' to: Executive Director Suresh Lalvani, Centre for Inquiry London' at the above address. Alternatively payment can be made by PAYPAL. Use the 'become a friend' link at <[www.cfilondon.org](http://www.cfilondon.org)> and follow the instructions.

#### **10.30 a.m. Registration**

#### **11-12 a.m. Jack Cohen**

*Why I believe in evolution - or in Omphalos!*

The evidence for evolution converges from at least three directions: from the fossils, from the DNA sequences, and from contemporary examples (Darwin's finches, African cichlids, bacterial and insect resistance). 'Creationism' and 'Intelligent Design' are out because they don't explain, they haven't the Authority, and Grand Canyon/Flood ideas are simply absurd. But there are other choices, particularly if you Believe: the Plymouth Brother Philip Gosse wrote 'Omphalos' a few years before Darwin's 'Origin...' (his son Edmund wrote 'Father and Son'). The

problem is that the rock column is genuinely and persuasively ancient, while the Bible insists on some thousands of years of history. God made Adam mature, with a navel (omphalos) and that's the clue... It's such a pretty idea, and makes so much more sense than the standard Creationist's story! If only there were a God, that's how It would've done it!

### **12-1p.m. Simon Singh**

*Big Bang: The gospel according to Monsignor Georges Lemaître.*

Simon Singh, author of best-selling scientific and mathematical books including 'Big Bang', 'Fermat's Last Theorem' and 'Trick or Treatment?: Alternative Medicine on Trial', will talk about the Big Bang model and how science develops its theories. He will also explain how the concept of the Big Bang was initially developed by George Lemaître, who successfully combined his careers as a cosmologist and a priest.

### **2-3 p.m. Stephen Law**

*Empirical evidence against the God hypothesis.*

Stephen Law will look at what appears to be powerful empirical evidence against the existence of the Judeo-Christian God, and at how the faithful respond to that evidence. (See 'Weird Science' above for his biography.)

### **3-4p.m. Mary Warnock**

*Religion as humanism.*

Baroness Mary Warnock is one of the Britain's leading public figures. She is perhaps best known for her recently expressed views on assisted suicide, and her role in the production of the Warnock report, an inquiry into human fertilisation by the Committee of Inquiry into Human Fertilisation and Embryology, which she chaired.

## **CENTER FOR INQUIRY**

### **12th World Congress: Science, Public Policy, and the Planetary Community**

April 9-12, 2009, Bethesda, MD, Hyatt Hotel (just outside of Washington, DC)

#### **Website:**

<[www.centerforinquiry.net/worldcongress](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/worldcongress)>

'Please join us as scientists and scholars from around the world analyze the role of science, explain how it works, explore its connection to public policy, and examine its significance for the global community'.

'Speakers already confirmed include NASA climatologist Drew Shindell, Roger Bonnet from the International Space Science Institute, author and social critic Christopher Hitchens, acknowledged authority on evolutionary biology Michael Ruse, skeptical investigators James Randi and Joe Nickell, renowned psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, (and renowned psychologist Richard Wiseman – Ed.) and many others.'

## **SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH**

Details of the forthcoming programme, maps, etc. available at:

<<http://www.spr.ac.uk/expcms/index.php?section=4>>.

## **THE ECOLOGY, COSMOS AND CONSCIOUSNESS LECTURE SERIES**

At the October Gallery, 24 Old Gloucester Street, London, WC1N 3AL

**Tel:** 44 (0)20 7831 1618

**Email:** <[rentals@octobergallery.co.uk](mailto:rentals@octobergallery.co.uk)>

If you wish to attend either of the talks below, please RSVP as space is very limited. Pay on the door or in advance by credit card.

Entry £7 /£5 Concessions

Arrive 6pm for a 6:30pm start (Wine available)

### **31 Mar: Rupert Sheldrake**

*A new science of life: Morphic resonance and the habits of nature*

According to Rupert Sheldrake's hypothesis of formative causation, all self-organising systems, including crystals, animals and societies contain an inherent memory, given by a process called morphic resonance from previous similar systems. All human beings draw upon a collective human memory, and in turn contribute to it. Even individual memory depends on morphic resonance rather than on physical memory traces stored within the brain. This radical hypothesis implies that the so-called

laws of nature are more like habits, and evolution, like human life, depends on an interplay between habit and creativity.

### **28th Apr: Jay Griffiths**

*The songlines of wildness*

Jay Griffiths will talk about her book, "Wild: An Elemental Journey", the result of a seven-year odyssey among Native people, listening to their philosophies; meeting cannibals; anchoring a boat to an iceberg where polar bears slept; joining Inuit hunters on a whale hunt; drinking shamanic medicine with Amazonian healers; visiting sea gypsies; and journeying to the freedom fighters of West Papua.

She will discuss the songlines of the earth, the paths in the Papuan highlands remembered in song, and the ethereal music of shamans, as well as the songlines of Aboriginal Australia. The talk will explore the words and meanings which shape ideas of wildness and it will illustrate the anarchic nature of wildness, as well as the kindness of what is wild, both in nature and the human mind. She will also explore some of the political resonances of wilderness and the corporate invasions of indigenous lands, arguing for the essential freedoms, and the necessary wildness of the human spirit, everywhere.

If you have any suggestions for future speakers please contact <[DrDLuke@Gmail.com](mailto:DrDLuke@Gmail.com)>.

'Talks, inexhaustibly, cover such topics as consciousness and altered states, magic, cosmology, folklore, mythology, shamanism, ecology, interspecies communication, parapsychology, quantum physics, alternative science, mysticism, archaeology, art, liberty and probably almost anything your imagination can stretch to, held loosely together under the title of ecology, cosmos and consciousness.'

## **WEBSITES OF INTEREST**

### **UK-Skeptics Paranormal Conference**

John Jackson invites you to join this Facebook group. John says, 'I have created this group for the UKS

paranormal conference. Please consider joining and supporting it and, of course, inviting others to join too and spread the word. To see more details and confirm this group invitation, follow the link below:

<<http://www.facebook.com/n/?group.php&gid=71593479781&mid=270730G2242cecG1ffb4aeG6>>.

**The Guardian Online's science pages** are featuring regular monthly columns by Simon Singh, PZ Myers, Andy Miah and Chris French. Further details at:

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2009/mar/01/simon-singh-chris-french-pz-myers-andy-miah-new-science-writing>>.

Chris's first column appeared on:

<<http://www.guardian.co.uk/science/blog/2009/mar/09/chris-french-sceptic>>.

**Michael Shermer:** For a very amusing and informative talk on scepticism (and comments and rejoinders by viewers that provide much insight into the minds of those who adhere to irrational beliefs and practices) go to:

<<http://www.ted.com>> and search for 'Shermer'.

**Michael Shermer interviews creationist Georgia Purdom:** Thanks to ASKE member Brian Robinson, you can view this on:

<<http://www.4shared.com/file/90251452/e751edf5/Dr-Shermer-and-Dr-Purdom.html>>,

which in short form is:

<<http://tinyurl.com/ckcbbw>>.

'You should be able to download it. You'll see part of the video when you reach the website, but it is only some 7 minutes. It's best to click the Download button' (Brian).

**From Juan De Gennaro of the Argentinean Skeptics:** As of March 1st, 2009, our website address will change from

<<http://www.argentinaskptics.com.ar>> to

<<http://argentinaskptics.blogspot.com>> (under construction)

Our email address is the same as always: <[argentinaskptics@gmail.com](mailto:argentinaskptics@gmail.com)>.

**From Dr Guy Osborn,** Professor of Law, University of Westminster (via Richard Wiseman): The University has recently advertised some PhD studentships and we are trying to advertise these as broadly as possible. There is one in particular: 'Regulation and Reception of Paranormal Media': <<http://www.wmin.ac.uk/pdf/LAW%203.pdf>>.

**Photographs of 'ghosts':** 'Hundreds of paranormal pictures are expected to be submitted online as part of the Edinburgh Science Festival. They will be posted on a website and examined to see if any defy explanation. Ghost-debunking psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman is heading the experiment'. At:

<<http://scienceofghosts.wordpress.com/>>

**Tim Minchin** is a brilliant Australian comedian and a sceptic. See:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RF06ZhUW38w>>.

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## LOGIC AND INTUITION

The answer is as follows:

Helen thinks of a number at random and adds her mark to this. She then whispers the result to one of the other students, telling him to add his mark to this and

whisper the answer to the next student, with the same instructions, and so on. The last student then whispers the final sum to her. All she has to do now is

subtract the random number that she originally chose and divide the remainder by the number of students, thus giving their average mark.

### About ASKE

ASKE is a society for people from all walks of life who wish to promote rational thinking and enquiry, particularly concerning unusual phenomena, and who are opposed to the proliferation and misuse of irrational and unscientific ideas and practices. This is our quarterly newsletter and we have an annual magazine, the *Skeptical Intelligencer*.

To find out more, visit our website (address below).

If you share our ideas and concerns why not join ASKE for just £10 a year? You can subscribe on our website, write to us at the address below, or email [m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:m.heap@sheffield.ac.uk)

ASKE, P.O. Box 5994, Ripley, DE5 3XL, UK  
email: [aske1@talktalk.net](mailto:aske1@talktalk.net)  
website: <<http://www.aske-skeptics.org.uk>>