

Hansen, G. P. (2001). CSICOP and the debunkers. In G. P. Hansen, *The trickster and the paranormal* (Chapter 12). Philadelphia, PA: Xlibris Corporation.

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## CHAPTER 12

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# CSICOP and the Debunkers

I am an enemy to all the gods.

Prometheus<sup>1</sup>

The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP, pronounced “sigh cop”) is the most aggressive antagonist of the paranormal today. As such, analysis of the group provides a wealth of insight. CSICOP’s personnel, its organizational structure, its operations, and its demographics tell us much about the paranormal and its status in our culture.

The Committee was founded at the 1976 convention of the American Humanist Association. It quickly grew, and its magazine *The Skeptical Inquirer* has a circulation of over 50,000.<sup>2</sup> A survey of its readership found that 54% have an advanced degree and 27% hold a doctorate.<sup>3</sup> CSICOP’s Fellows have included Francis Crick, Murray Gell-Mann, Leon Lederman, Glenn Seaborg, and Steven Weinberg, all Nobel laureates, as well as paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould, psychologist B. F. Skinner, astronomer Carl Sagan, writer Isaac Asimov, zoologist Richard Dawkins, and philosopher Sidney Hook, among others. CSICOP is headquartered just off the Amherst Campus of the State University of New York at Buffalo in a new 25,000 square foot office building costing \$4,000,000, a figure they surpassed in their fundraising for the project.<sup>4</sup> The Committee has spawned more than 65 local and international groups with similar aims. All this is an impressive accomplishment, and CSICOP is highly visible within academe and elite culture. Its success is in marked contrast to scientific parapsychology. The circulation of the *Journal of Parapsychology* is 757.<sup>5</sup> Understandably, many see the Committee as a legitimate scientific authority on the paranormal.

While it purports to be impartial, CSICOP’s early rhetoric revealed its actual agenda. In an interview for *Science* magazine, Lee Nis-

bet, Executive Director of the Committee, articulated its position: "It's [belief in the paranormal] a very dangerous phenomenon, dangerous to science, dangerous to the basic fabric of our society . . . We feel it is the duty of the scientific community to show that these beliefs are utterly screwball."<sup>6</sup> Since the early days, CSICOP has slightly tempered its rhetoric but not its stance. It still aggressively denounces the paranormal and labels it as irrational. CSICOP serves as a force for marginalizing the supernatural, and that is its primary function.

Parapsychologists, not surprisingly, sometimes see CSICOP as the enemy. However, such an attitude keeps them from recognizing the larger picture. The Committee only exemplifies pervasive patterns and personifies social forces at work today. CSICOP benefits parapsychology because its antagonism is explicit rather than hidden, and detached examination can clarify issues. The Committee should become an object of study and contemplation.

CSICOP can be profitably compared and contrasted with those who intentionally attempt to elicit paranormal phenomena. A number of such groups will be covered in later chapters, including parapsychologists, spiritualists, the New Age movement, and modern-day witchcraft. Please remember CSICOP when reading about them, because they provide stark contrasts with the Committee and its constituency. CSICOP upholds the status quo. It is structural rather than anti-structural; it values hierarchy over *communitas*; it desires stability rather than liminality. Nevertheless, because it directly confronts the paranormal, it cannot escape a certain influence from it, and as I will show, the trickster manifests with both the supernatural and its opponents.

In 1992 I published a 45-page overview of CSICOP. I identified four distinguishing features of the Committee: association with high status scientists, heavy dominance by males, pervasive anti-religious sentiment, and an active role by magicians. That paper was largely descriptive; it had extensive documentation but little interpretation. The presentation here is more interpretive. Those wishing greater detail about specifics of CSICOP might seek out my earlier paper.

### CSICOP and Science

CSICOP purports to be scientific, but for many years it had an official policy against conducting research itself. The genesis of that policy is amusing. In 1975, before CSICOP was founded, philosopher Paul Kurtz produced a manifesto denouncing astrology, and 186 sci-

entists signed it. That generated intense media coverage and served as a springboard to establish the Committee. Kurtz went on to urge newspapers to label their astrology columns as follows: “*Warring. If taken seriously, this column may be dangerous to your health!*” (Kurtz’s emphasis).<sup>7</sup> At that time, Kurtz was editor of *The Humanist*, and he had allowed some scientifically erroneous attacks on astrology to be published in the magazine.

Under pressure to defend his position, Kurtz was challenged to undertake a scientific study to confirm or dispute some astrological findings of Michel Gauquelin. He and a few colleagues accepted the challenge. Very early on, Dennis Rawlins, an astronomer and member of CSICOP’s Executive Council, warned them of serious problems with their approach, and he later volunteered to assist with the calculations for the project. Data were collected and analyzed, and the results supported Gauquelin’s findings that the position of Mars at a person’s birth was related to sports ability. Rawlins understood that Kurtz’s method was flawed and was unconvinced by the data, but he also said that the outcome, favorable to Gauquelin, should be frankly acknowledged. Kurtz was enraged by that advice, and he refused to heed it. Rawlins charged Kurtz with covering up the mistakes, and he repeatedly tried to bring the problems to the attention of other CSICOP members. Rawlins was rebuffed, and eventually forced out of the Committee, and a number of other CSICOP members resigned because of the cover-up. Rawlins published a 32-page expose in the October 1981 issue of *Fate* magazine, and that same month CSICOP adopted a formal policy of not conducting research.<sup>8</sup>

After the scandal became public, sociologists Trevor Pinch and Harry Collins published a study of CSICOP. They explicitly warned the Committee that if they actually conducted research, they would no longer be able to hold the views of science that they did. Scientific processes are not nearly as objective as commonly thought, and social factors play a significant role in interpreting results. This is entirely counter to CSICOP’s ideology. If one does research, one runs the risk of obtaining uncongenial results, a danger Kurtz by then undoubtedly understood. In any event, the Committee’s policy accorded with the advice of Pinch and Collins to not undertake research.<sup>9</sup>

Instead of scientific investigation, CSICOP’s primary efforts are directed to influencing public opinion. Its magazine carries innumerable articles decrying the media’s treatment of the paranormal and describing CSICOP’s attempts to combat the favorable coverage. The priorities are particularly striking in its *Manual for Local, Regional and*

*National Groups* (1987). Seventeen pages are devoted to “Handling the Media” and “Public Relations”; in contrast only three pages are given to “Scientific Investigation.” No scientific references are cited in that section, and the reader is referred to Paul Kurtz’s book *The Transcendental Temptation* for an explanation of the scientific method. That volume is by no means a scientific handbook, and among other things, it suggests that Jesus and Lazarus had a homosexual relationship.<sup>10</sup> This is an example of promoting an essentially religious work as a scientific text, a tactic CSICOP frequently accuses their opposition of using.

CSICOP’s actual function can be seen by contrasting it with scientific organizations such as the American Physical Society, the American Anthropological Association, and the American Chemical Society. These and hundreds of others share some common characteristics. Their goals, organizational structure, operations, and demographics indicate how scientific societies advance their fields. Table 6 lists some contrasts between them and CSICOP.

Table 6, by itself, should alert any reader that scientific research is not a high priority of the Committee. This is not surprising, given that of the four members of its board of directors, only one, James Alcock, is a scientist.

Though it has a building worth several million dollars, a paid staff, and a good size library, CSICOP has no research program. In fact for the first 15 years of its existence, none of the scientist-members of its Executive Council ever published a report of a parapsychology experiment in a refereed journal. CSICOP has not established a laboratory in which researchers might attempt to elicit paranormal phenomena; it makes no effort at research similar to that of a scientific organization. However, occasionally a member conducts an ad hoc test of a psychic during an afternoon and writes up a brief report for a popular periodical.

The Committee should not be criticized too harshly for all this, because scientists firmly ensconced in the academic establishment rarely if ever explicitly address paranormal claims, but CSICOP does. Their willingness to confront the paranormal acknowledges its importance, at least indirectly, and this has consequences. To some extent, CSICOP holds a betwixt and between status. It is headquartered just off a university campus, and that is symbolic of a larger pattern. CSICOP serves as a buffer between the academic establishment and claims of the paranormal. The claims are not brought inside academe but handled at its border. The most eminent scientist-members have

**Scientific Societies**

Scientific societies publish technical, peer-reviewed journals that are primarily geared for specialists in the discipline.

Scientific journals are edited by specialists who have training in the discipline and who have made technical contributions to that field.

Scientific societies are headed by eminent scientists who have made major contributions to their fields.

Heads of scientific societies typically serve for a year or two.

Scientific societies' governing boards are typically elected, and their members serve for a few years.

Scientific organizations arrange conferences for specialists. Calls for papers are printed in journals, and submitted papers are refereed.

Scientific organizations promote professional development among students in academic departments.

Status in scientific organizations depends upon publication of papers in professional journals of an appropriate specialty.

**CSICOP**

CSICOP publishes no journal. It produces a popular magazine carrying cartoons and caricatures and recommends that technical papers be submitted to scientific periodicals.

The *Skeptical Inquirer* is edited by a journalist.

CSICOP is headed by a philosopher-businessman who has never published any empirical research on the paranormal in a refereed scientific journal.

The chairman of CSICOP has held his position for over two decades.

Many members of CSICOP's board of directors and executive council have maintained their positions for decades.

CSICOP puts on conferences for the general public with particular emphasis on the media. Calls for papers are not issued. Presentations are geared for the general public rather than technical specialists.

CSICOP promotes lay organizations.

Status in CSICOP is dependent upon status in science or the media, but it is unrelated to investigation of the paranormal.

Table 6 Characteristics of Scientific Societies Contrasted With Those of CSICOP.<sup>11</sup>

virtually nothing to do with the running of CSICOP; they serve as mere figureheads. They lend their names to campaigns but rarely comment publicly on the paranormal. When they occasionally do, they reveal a vast ignorance. Consequently, the scientists are not the main debunkers; that task is relegated primarily to journalists, magicians, and philosophers. The most active are Kendrick Frazier, journalist and editor of *The Skeptical Inquirer*; Joe Nickell, writer; Martin Gardner, writer-magician; James Randi, magician; Philip J. Klass, journalist; Paul Kurtz, philosopher and chairman of CSICOP. The four psychologists who are active debunkers, namely Ray Hyman, James Alcock, Susan Blackmore, and Richard Wiseman, certainly do not rank among the more eminent of the scientists.

Although markedly different from scientific societies, the Committee still has some parallels with science. For instance, CSICOP is particularly attuned to status issues. The Committee honors high-status scientists, invites them to conventions, gives them awards, and writes favorable articles about them. CSICOP's members<sup>12</sup> are typically recruited because of their prestige rather than for their research on the paranormal. Their status allows the Committee to speak with a voice of authority, and those who disagree are portrayed as marginal or without scientific standing, and thus can be disregarded.

Structure, status, and hierarchy are now central to science, and to bureaucracies generally. In the classic, *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), C. Wright Mills devoted an entire chapter to science's "bureaucratic ethos." Many years of training are required before one becomes a practicing scientist, and there are many levels of status after becoming a practitioner (ranks of professorships, grades of schools, and varying levels of professional honors). The hierarchy is international in scope. Those who have been most amply rewarded by this system give it their allegiance. They have spent their lives building and climbing the edifice that will perpetuate their legacy. The personalities most suited to operating in the hierarchical institutional structures have great vested interests. They obtain positions of influence, award grants and honors, and permit publication of papers. Max Weber pointed out that bureaucracies are part of the rationalization process. They help disenchant the world and are inimical to pure charisma, which involves manifestations of supernatural power. Considering all this, it should be no surprise that sociologist James McClenon found that the so-called elite (i.e., high status) scientists were some of the most hostile to parapsychology.<sup>13</sup>

### Anti-religion and Rationalism

In my 1992 overview of CSICOP I provided an extended discussion of religious factors affecting the Committee. Later, some of its members and supporters complained to me privately that I devoted too much space to that. It was obviously a sensitive issue for them, and they were clearly uncomfortable with the implications.

CSICOP is pervaded with anti-religious sentiment, and I easily compiled a list of 29 members who had publicly identified themselves as holding nontheistic or atheistic views. This constituted more than 25% of the official membership of the organization. That percentage was not unexpected given the group is composed primarily of academics, but it was the aggressive public profession of religious unbelief that was so striking. Those people vigorously promote their religious opinions, and a number of them contributed to periodicals such as Madalyn Murray O'Hair's *American Atheist*.

As an organization, CSICOP is formally allied with atheistic groups. It shares a building, personnel, office equipment, and fund raising with the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (CODESH). The two organizations overlap extensively, and both are headed by Paul Kurtz. When I visited their offices in 1991, I sat in the reading area that happened to be next to a copy machine. Several times I overheard employees inquiring whether copies should be charged to CSICOP or CODESH, further illustrating the lack of demarcation between the organizations. Some might be puzzled why such a long cumbersome name was selected for the Council and also why the acronym CODESH was used, rather than CODASH, with "A" for "and." When one knows that "kodesh" is Hebrew for holy, it makes sense. The acronym was obviously chosen as a slap at the Jewish religion.<sup>14</sup> Someone probably complained because the name was changed to the Council for Secular Humanism as of June 1996.

The Council publishes *Free Inquiry*, a magazine that belittles religion; it also published the *Secular Humanist Bulletin*, which was edited by Tim Madigan, a cofounder of Catholics Anonymous. Kurtz founded the Academy of Humanism to honor eminent people who have held secular humanist beliefs; roughly a third of the Academy members were affiliated with CSICOP. Another organizational connection is the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) in Great Britain, with several of its Honorary Associates being CSICOP Fellows. In addition, the *American Rationalist* was edited by CSICOP member and employee Gordon Stein.

The explicit affiliation of rationalists with debunker organizations is in keeping with historical precedent. Rationalism is inherently antagonistic to the paranormal and supernatural, and this was seen in the early days of the societies for psychical research. A century ago, the RPA served in a capacity similar to Prometheus Books today. Under their imprint, Watts & Co., the RPA published a number of volumes attacking spiritualism and psychical research. This long antagonism is inherent, because fundamentally, the debunkers are a force for the rationalization and disenchantment of the world (in Max Weber's terms).

CSICOP is an exceedingly rich example of rationalization and its consequences. As discussed in the chapter on Weber, rationalization is a long-term, ongoing process. It is particularly marked in academe, but it is also found in religion. The marginalization of mysticism and miracles in mainline Protestant denominations is an example. In fact virtually all religions acknowledge supernatural power but put strictures around it. They keep it somewhat distant. Early peoples understood that the supernatural was dangerous. It needed to be hedged off from the mundane world. There were rules, prohibitions, and taboos surrounding it. The process continues today, but at an unconscious level. Establishment religion and CSICOP, each with their own means, discourage engagement of the phenomena. Both impose taboos. Religions decree occult dabbling a sin; CSICOP marginalizes it by ridicule. Both enforce the taboo, but in slightly different ways.

The skeptical movement exemplifies trends in scientific and academic thinking. It makes them explicit. Many social scientists and psychologists have been predicting the demise of religion for decades and have largely avoided studying it. The eminent sociologist Peter Berger stated "in recent years sociologists, with very few exceptions, have shown very little interest [in religion], probably because they have sworn allegiance to a scientific 'progressivism' that regards religion as a vanishing leftover from the dark ages of superstition and do not care to invest their energies in the study of a moribund phenomenon."<sup>15</sup> Many psychologists are even puzzled by people who believe, yet a 1994 survey by *U.S. News & World Report* found that 93% of adult Americans believed in God or a universal spirit.<sup>16</sup> Obviously many social scientists cannot comprehend a vast realm of human experience. They are isolated from ordinary people, and their alienated, ivory-tower existence destroys their understanding.

Even scholars sympathetic to religion are heavily influenced by the trends. For instance, Peter Berger, who is actively religious himself, in



his book *A Rumor of Angels* (1990) refers to the supernatural saying: “It is impossible to know for sure whether any such rediscovery [of the supernatural] will remain the property of more or less *isolated cognitive minorities*” (emphasis added).<sup>17</sup> Yet a 1993 survey by *Time* magazine showed that 69% of adult Americans believed in angels.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, it is the academicians who are the “isolated cognitive minorities.” Berger specializes in the sociology of religion. His ignorance of basic data of human experience is comparable to a physicist who doesn’t know the density of water, and publicly flaunts it. Yet Berger is typical! This is difficult for ordinary people to understand, but much academic work is marked by extreme abstraction, and that is inimical to comprehension of the supernatural.

In some ways, the skeptics are more astute than the average academic, and philosopher-businessman-debunker Paul Kurtz probably has a greater intuitive feeling for the problems posed by the supernatural than do the vast majority of religious scholars. Most of them no longer comprehend the numinous and the supernatural and the deep problems they present. Many consider the supernatural to be only a crude superstition, and the issues have been banished from the awareness of academe, even though they were extensively discussed at the beginning of the twentieth century. In *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), the eminent German religious scholar Rudolf Otto recognized that “In truth the enemy has often a keener vision in this matter than either the champion of religion or the neutral and professedly impartial theorist. For the adversaries on their side know very well that the entire ‘pothor about mysticism’ has nothing to do with ‘reason’ and ‘rationality’.”<sup>19</sup>

The personality dynamics of some skeptics may make them unconsciously sensitive to crucial issues. Perhaps they feel the subversive, destructive, chaotic potential of the trickster, anti-structure, and the paranormal.<sup>20</sup> Sociologist Nachman Ben-Yehuda in his book *Deviance and Moral Boundaries* (1985) noted: “The sense of awe and bewilderment experienced repeatedly in science fiction and occultism necessarily brings one very close to what O’Dea (1966) called existential ‘breaking points,’ or to a liminal situation, that is, a state of existential transit . . . It becomes impossible to encounter either science fiction or occultism and remain indifferent to them, *unless one is well shielded by some other strong belief*” (emphasis added).<sup>21</sup> He went on to state that “occult-related phenomena [ghosts, possession, reincarnation, trances, seances, automatic writing] can have a deeper, more pervasive experiential impact on an observer than science fiction.”<sup>22</sup> As will be dis-

cussed in the chapter on totemism and the primitive mind, these passages hint at the power of the numinous.

Whereas religions place strictures against dabbling in the supernatural, atheists and rationalists prefer to banish (i.e., repress) the ideas entirely. Yet the supernatural is found in all cultures, and it cannot be effectively eliminated with rationalistic incantations such as: “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence.” The paranormal is part of the human condition, and its repression has consequences. John Wren-Lewis, a mathematical physicist and religion professor, writing in the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* discussed the antagonism to parapsychology and noted that “*the plain fact is that the clearest evidence of strong emotion nowadays comes from those who have antireligious feelings*” (Wren-Lewis’ emphasis).<sup>23</sup> He wrote this in 1974, even before CSICOP was formed. Others have recognized these strong feelings. John F. Schumaker, a clinical psychologist as well as a debunker, reported that based on data from his own studies “people with traditional religious beliefs had significantly fewer symptoms of mental illness than the atheists.”<sup>24</sup> He concluded that there was a need for paranormal belief, and that those lacking it had higher levels of stress and anxiety.

Some authors have noted the irrational behavior of skeptics when they confront paranormal claims. Walter Franklin Prince’s book *The Enchanted Boundary* (1930) was devoted entirely to the matter. Prince was an Episcopal clergyman and one of the most careful and respected psychical researchers in the first decades of the twentieth century. His extensive and detailed analyses demonstrated over and over that when many critics cross into the realm of psychical research and attempt to examine the evidence, they lose the common sense and good judgment that they display in other activities. CSICOP’s inability to mount a systematic scientific research program and their choice to denounce, rather than investigate, the paranormal indicate the power of the enchanted boundary. In essence, Prince’s enchanted boundary is the limen of van Gennep and Turner.

### The Trickster Figure

The sheer volume and intensity of the debunkers’ activities suggests something other than dispassionate inquiry; rather, one suspects the operation of some energetic, unconscious, archetypal process. The trickster figure Prometheus illuminates this, and he has much in common with the skeptics. Prometheus was not a god, but a titan,

who stole fire from the gods for the benefit of humanity. He shares some, though not all, of the qualities of Hermes. In his book *Hermes and His Children*, Rafael Lopez-Pedraza explains: “Prometheus in no way shows the undignified, weakened side of Hermes; on the contrary, he wants to rule the world, but because of the undifferentiated energy of his Titanic nature, it becomes only a power-ridden ambition. He shows only a suspicious and boastful rebellion against the archetypal forms of life, forms he is keen in finding ways to blackmail or destroy. He shows a lack of tolerance, which we feel in the many ways of missionarizing so predominant in today’s life, so different from the variety in a Hermes attitude.

“Hermes thieves and then sacrifices to the gods all that he has thieved, whereas Prometheus sacrifices to the gods and within that sacrifice he cheats and thieves. If the Hermes sacrifice seems to be the religious sacrifice *par excellence*, then the Prometheus sacrifice is just the opposite—it is openly anti-religious. From this we can assume that the anti-religious function in man is Promethean.”<sup>25</sup>

Lopez-Pedraza’s comments were made in regard to a psychological understanding of Prometheus and were totally unrelated to the psi controversy. In light of that, they are all the more striking when one knows that Prometheus Books is the most active publisher of debunking works and a major purveyor of atheistic and anti-religious tracts; it was founded by Paul Kurtz, chairman of CSICOP.<sup>26</sup> (In keeping with the trickster constellation, Prometheus Books also publishes a number of titles that challenge conventional sexual morality.)

Although the above aspects of Prometheus are not flattering to the skeptics, he does have many positive attributes. For his theft of fire, Prometheus was chained to a rock by order of Zeus, and an eagle ate his liver. It grew back daily, but to Prometheus’ agony, it was eaten again and again. Prometheus suffered for helping humans and upholding their dignity; he defied the gods who could be vain, unreliable, vengeful, and even malicious. Their powers needed to be curtailed.

The trickster’s influence on CSICOP is also seen in the disproportionate number of magicians in the organization. In my 1992 study, I found that at least 13 magicians had been official members of CSICOP (approximately 10% of the official membership). This goes back to the beginning, and in fact, the immediate predecessor to CSICOP was RSEP (Resources for the Scientific Evaluation of the Paranormal), a group of magicians including Martin Gardner, Ray Hyman, James Randi, and Marcello Truzzi. Truzzi and Hyman are also professors, and Gardner is a writer, but all three have made sub-

stantial contributions to conjuring and are well recognized therein. Randi and Gardner have been some of the most effective promoters of CSICOP, and they have been leading figures in the popular-level debates on parapsychology.

### CSICOP's Contributions to Scientific Parapsychology

I have focused on CSICOP's social role and given little attention to its contribution on technical matters in parapsychology. That is a minor aspect of its activities. Nevertheless, two of its members deserve special mention. Psychologist Ray Hyman has provided detailed comment on various parapsychological experiments, and he must be considered the preeminent outside critic on technical matters. Though I must add that some of his critiques are seriously marred by flaws, a number of which have been documented.<sup>27</sup> Martin Gardner has incisively criticized shortcomings in controls against deception in parapsychological studies. He is an exceedingly important figure in the skeptical movement, and his work will be addressed later in this book.

The Committee has made a valuable contribution in emphasizing the paranormal's frequent association with deception. They were a strong influence for my interest in that topic. I have published a number of critical papers myself, and CSICOP members Philip J. Klass and Martin Gardner provided valuable help on some of them. Many of my colleagues in parapsychology ignore the problem of deception, and most have been unwilling to seek training in conjuring to help exclude trickery in their studies. Indeed, in my 1990 survey of 23 former presidents of the Parapsychological Association, only 4 had ever taken a course in magic and only one owned more than eight books on the topic.<sup>28</sup> Their training of students perpetuated what I have labeled the "legacy of magical ignorance."<sup>29</sup> The 988-page *Handbook of Parapsychology* edited by Benjamin Wolman (1977) is revealing. Its 30-page index contains no entries under "conjuring," "deceit," "deception," "fraud," "legerdemain," "sleight of hand," or "trickery." All entries under "magic" and "magicians" refer to the anthropological or occult types. It is perhaps not too strong to say that such neglect has been pathologically naive.

### Summary

CSCIOP was founded during a period of surging popular interest in the paranormal, and its expressed purpose was to combat that tide. The Committee has since become the most visible institutional body

addressing the issues; it speaks with the voice of establishment science. The Committee is a fascinating organization and deserves far more analysis than it has heretofore received.

CSICOP is a valuable specimen for anyone studying the role of the paranormal in our culture because its hostility to the paranormal is overt, not hidden. CSICOP's social position, its demographics, its operations, and its constituency tell us much about the supernatural in the world today. The Committee's primary function is to marginalize the paranormal. Yet almost paradoxically, its activities serve to emphasize the paranormal's importance because it has expended such great energy in its endeavor.

Analysis of CSICOP illuminates many issues, but here I'll select only three for brief summary comment: the trickster figure, the Committee's concern with status, and rationalization (in Max Weber's sense). These are central to this book.

Trickster characteristics manifest overtly with CSICOP. Magicians have been involved in paranormal controversies for hundreds of years, and many conjurors are now associated with the Committee. In fact James Randi and Martin Gardner have been the most effective publicists for the skeptical movement. The mythical Prometheus is a trickster associated with humanism and with anti-religious feeling. Thus it is entirely appropriate that CSICOP's Chairman, Paul Kurtz, used his name for his publishing company, Prometheus Books.

Status consciousness is one of the Committee's salient characteristics. CSICOP goes to considerable lengths to assure its status and respectability in the eyes of scientific, academic, and media elites. It has gathered an impressive roster of members, including five Nobel laureates (though none of them have ever published research on the paranormal). The readership of its magazine, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, is very highly educated, with 54% holding an advanced degree. The Committee is an influential voice, and it reflects and reinforces beliefs of scientific elites.

Because CSICOP is so status conscious, scientific investigation is inappropriate for it. If a serious, sustained effort were undertaken to investigate the paranormal, that by itself would confer status upon the topic. It would signal the paranormal to be worthy of study. Instead, the Committee belittles such efforts, and its magazine carries cartoons and caricatures that ridicule researchers.

Perhaps the Committee's most striking feature is its intimate affiliation with rationalist and anti-religious organizations. Such groups have long opposed paranormal claims and psychical research. The ex-

PLICIT connection with rationalist belief manifests a fundamental pattern, for CSICOP is an aggressive agent for the rationalization and disenchantment of the world. As Max Weber explained, those require the attenuation of charisma, and the elimination (or marginalization) of the magical and miraculous. The Committee furthers those ends, and it provides a living example of Weber's theories.

Rationality and rationalization have limits, but those are rarely recognized. In its (unconscious) avoidance of scientific research, CSICOP subtly signals the limits of science and rationality. Science is part of the foundational myth of much of academe. But rational methods cannot fully establish their own foundations, and probing them provokes anxiety. As will be explained in later chapters, wariness toward the supernatural is nothing new for humankind; it goes back millennia. There have always been taboos, prohibitions, and restrictions surrounding the supernatural. There are undoubtedly good reasons for this. Religious orthodoxy decrees dabbling in the paranormal to be a sin; CSICOP ridicules such dabbling. The effect is the same. Both religious orthodoxy and atheists enforce a taboo; both shun paranormal phenomena, and this commonality is key to understanding them.



## Chapter 12—CSICOP and the Debunkers

<sup>1</sup> *Prometheus Bound* by Aeschylus. Translated by Rex Warner. New York: Heritage Press, 1966, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Circulation figures from *Skeptical Inquirer*, November/December 1999, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> Personal communication from Barry Karr, CSICOP Executive Director, August, 19, 1991.

<sup>4</sup> The size of the building is unclear. *Skeptical Inquirer*, Spring, 1993, p. 249 gave it as 25,000 square feet; the September/October 1995 issues, p. 55, gave 20,000 square feet; the July/August 1995 issue, p. 8 gave 15,000 square feet.



CSICOP announced that it has raised \$4,200,000 exceeding its fundraising goal; see *Skeptical Inquirer*, May/June 1995, p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> Circulation figure from March 1997 issue.

<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Wade, A Pyrrhonian Sledgehammer, *Science*, Vol. 197, 1997, pp. 646-647, see p. 646 for quote.

<sup>7</sup> Astrology and Gullibility by Paul Kurtz, *The Humanist*, 1975, November/December, Vol. 35, No. 6, p. 20.

<sup>8</sup> Policy on Sponsoring Research, Testing Individual Claims, and Conducting Investigations of Alleged Paranormal Powers and Phenomena, *Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 6, No. 3, Spring, 1982, p. 9. The CSICOP Executive Council approved the policy, October 22-24, 1981.

<sup>9</sup> Pinch and Collins (1984). [Pinch, T. & Collins, H. (1984). Private science and public knowledge: The committee for the scientific investigation of the claims of the paranormal and its use of the literature. *Social Studies of Science*, 14, 521-546.]

<sup>10</sup> Kurtz, 1986, p. 146. [Kurtz, P. (1986). *The transcendental temptation: A critique of religion and the paranormal*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books.]

<sup>11</sup> Kurtz's book *Toward a New Enlightenment: The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz* (1994) contains a list of his publications. Though hundreds of articles are listed, I found no reports of empirical research, of any type, that were published in refereed scientific journals.

<sup>12</sup> I refer here to the Full Members. According to CSICOP's by laws these comprise the Fellows, Scientific and Technical Consultants, Board of Directors, and Executive Council.

<sup>13</sup> McClenon, 1982, 1984. [McClenon, J. (1982). A survey of elite scientists: Their attitudes towards ESP and parapsychology. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 46, 127-152; McClenon, J. (1984). *Deviant science: The case of parapsychology*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.]

<sup>14</sup> wish to thank Jennie Zeidman for bringing this to my attention.

<sup>15</sup> Berger, 1990, p. 4. [Berger, P. L. (1990). *A rumor of angels: Modern society and the rediscovery of the supernatural*. (Expanded edition). New York: Bantam]

<sup>16</sup> Sheler, 1994. [Sheler, J. L. (1994). Spiritual America. *U.S. News & World Report*, April 4, pp. 48-59.]

<sup>17</sup> Berger, 1990, p. 182. [see Note 15]

<sup>18</sup> Gibbs, 1993. [Gibbs, N. (1993). Angels among us. *Time*, December 27, pp. 56-65.]

<sup>19</sup> Otto, 1917/1975, p. 4. [Otto, R. (1917/1975). *The idea of the holy: An inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*. (Translated by John W. Harvey) London: Oxford University Press.]

<sup>20</sup> See Stillings, 1984. [Stillings, D. (1984). The darker side of psi: Letters to Dr. Charles T. Tart. *Newsletter of the Archaeus Project*, 3(6), December, pp. 12-15.]

<sup>21</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 1985, p. 91. [Ben-Yehuda, N. (1985). *Deviance and moral boundaries: Witchcraft, the occult, science fiction, deviant sciences and scientists*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.]

<sup>22</sup> Ben-Yehuda, 1985, p. 93. [see Note 21]

<sup>23</sup> Wren-Lewis, 1974, p. 43. [Wren-Lewis, J. (1974). Resistance to the study of the paranormal. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 14(2), 41-48.]

<sup>24</sup> Schumaker, 1990, p. 82. [Schumaker, J. F. (1990). *Wings of illusion: The origin, nature and future of paranormal beliefs*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books]

<sup>25</sup> Lopez-Pedraza, 1977/1989, p. 61. [Lopez-Pedraza, R. (1977/1989). *Hermes and his children* (new expanded edition). Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Daimon Verlag.]

<sup>26</sup> For Kurtz's interpretation of Prometheus, see Promethean Love: Unbound, in his *Toward a New Enlightenment: The Philosophy of Paul Kurtz* (1994, pp. 279-291).

<sup>27</sup> Hansen (1991). [Hansen, G. P. (1991). The elusive agenda: Dissuading as debunking in Ray Hyman's *The Elusive Quarry*. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 85, 193-203.] For other statistical errors by Hyman, see On Hyman's Factor Analysis by David R. Saunders, *Journal of Parapsychology*, Vol. 49, No. 1,

1985, pp. 86-88. See also Rejoinder by Jessica Utts, *Statistical Science*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1991, pp. 396-403, especially pp. 398, 399.

<sup>28</sup> Hansen, 1990a, p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Hansen, 1992d.