**1/4/9 THESKEPTICARENA.COM**

**ANCIENT ASTRONAUTS**

**The term 'ancient astronauts' designates the speculative notion that aliens are responsible for the most ancient civilizations on earth. The most notorious proponent of this idea is Erich von Däniken, author of several popular books on the subject. His Chariots of the Gods? Unsolved Mysteries of the Past, for example, is a sweeping attack on the memories and abilities of ancient peoples. Von Däniken claims that the myths, arts, social organizations, etc., of ancient cultures were introduced by astronauts from another world. He questions not just the capacity for memory, but the capacity for culture and civilization itself, in ancient peoples. Prehistoric humans did not develop their own arts and technologies, but rather were taught art and science by visitors from outer space.**

**Where is the proof for von Däniken's claims? Some of it was fraudulent. For example, he produced photographs of pottery that he claimed had been found in an archaeological dig. The pottery depicts flying saucers and was said to have been dated from Biblical times. However, investigators from Nova (the fine public-television science program) found the potter who had made the allegedly ancient pots. They confronted von Däniken with evidence of his fraud. His reply was that his deception was justified because some people would only believe if they saw proof ("The Case of the Ancient Astronauts," first aired 3/8/78, done in conjunction with BBC's Horizon and Peter Spry-Leverton)!**

**However, most of von Däniken's evidence is in the form of specious and fallacious arguments. His data consists mainly of archaeological sites and ancient myths. He begins with the ancient astronaut assumption and then forces all data to fit the idea. For example, in Nazca, Peru, he explains giant animal drawings in the desert as an ancient alien airport. The likelihood that these drawings related to the natives' religion or science is not considered. He also frequently reverts to false dilemma reasoning of the following type: "Either this data is to be explained by assuming these primitive idiots did this themselves or we must accept the more plausible notion that they got help from extremely advanced peoples who must have come from other planets where such technologies as anti-gravity devices had been invented." His devotion to this theory has not dwindled, despite contrary evidence, as is evidenced by still another book on the subject, Arrival of the Gods : Revealing the Alien Landing Sites at Nazca (1998).**

**There have been many critics of von Däniken's notions, but Ronald Story stands out as the most thorough. Most critics of von Däniken's theory point out that prehistoric peoples were not the helpless, incompetent, forgetful savages he makes them out to be. (They must have at least been intelligent enough to understand the language and teachings of their celestial instructors--no small feat!) It is true that we still do not know how the ancients accomplished some of their more astounding physical and technological feats. We still wonder how the ancient Egyptians raised giant obelisks in the desert and how stone age men and women moved huge cut stones and placed them in position in dolmens and passage graves. We are amazed by the giant carved heads on Easter Island and wonder why they were done, who did them, and why they abandoned the place. We may someday have the answers to our questions, but they are most likely to come from scientific investigation not pseudoscientific speculation. For example, observing contemporary stone age peoples in Papua New Guinea, where huge stones are still found on top of tombs, has taught us how the ancients may have accomplished the same thing with little more than ropes of organic material, wooden levers and shovels, a little ingenuity and a good deal of human strength. Nova's "Secrets of Lost Empires" made no appeal to alien teachers in the attempt to figure out how the ancient Egyptians might have raised a giant obelisk, how the medieval warriors built their catapults and how & why the sculptors of Easter Island did what they did.**

**We have no reason to believe our ancient ancestors' memories were so much worse than our own that they could not remember these alien visitations well enough to preserve an accurate account of them. There is little evidence to support the notion that ancient myths and religious stories are the distorted and imperfect recollection of ancient astronauts recorded by ancient priests. The evidence to the contrary--that prehistoric or 'primitive' peoples were (and are) quite intelligent and resourceful--is overwhelming.**

**Of course, it is possible that visitors from outer space did land on earth a few thousand years ago and communicate with our ancestors. But it seems more likely that prehistoric peoples themselves were responsible for their own art, technology and culture. Why concoct such an explanation as von Däniken's? To do so may increase the mystery and romance of one's theory, but it also makes it less reasonable, especially when one's theory seems inconsistent with what we already know about the world. And why restrict one's examples to Egypt, Mexico, and other non-European countries? What about the builders of Newgrange or Stonehenge? The ancient astronaut hypothesis is unnecessary. Occam's razor should be applied and the hypothesis rejected.**

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**THE SCIENCE SEGMENT**

**VIRGIN BIRTH**

**A blacktip shark at a Virginia aquarium got pregnant despite not having been around a male of her kind for a decade, the Virginian-Pilot reports. Scientists have long suspected that sharks, like some smaller vertebrates, could reproduce asexually but this is only the second confirmed case. Tests showed the baby shark had genetic material purely from its mother.**

**Nobody is sure what triggers asexual reproduction—known as parthenogenesis—in female sharks, but experts suspect it may be a shortage of males. It is unlikely to help dwindling shark populations, scientists say, as the lack of genetic diversity is equivalent to the result of many generations of inbreeding. "It's kind of a crapshoot, last-ditch way to reproduce," said one of the researchers, whose findings appear in the Journal of Fish Biology.**

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**THE ARENA GOES ABROAD**

**Cemetery in Mumbai Won't Bury Terrorists**

**12/1/8**

**A Muslim graveyard has refused to bury nine gunmen who terrorized Mumbai over three days last week, leaving at least 172 people dead and wreaking havoc at some of its most famous landmarks. The shooters, whose bodies are unclaimed thus far, are not true followers of the Islamic faith, according to an influential Muslim trust that runs a 7.5-acre graveyard in downtown Mumbai.**

**"People who committed this heinous crime cannot be called Muslim," said a trustee. "Islam does not permit this sort of barbaric crime." The gunmen’s bodies now lie in a morgue awaiting last rites, while the lone surviving militant is in police custody. Normally, unclaimed bodies thought to be Muslims are given to the nearest Muslim graveyard for burial after three days.**

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**SPECIAL BONUS SEGMENT: RELIGION**

**(unknown date - but several years ago)**

**Saving one of his most audacious initiatives for the twilight of his papacy, John Paul II yesterday attempted to purify the soul of the Roman Catholic church by making a sweeping apology for 2,000 years of violence, persecution and blunders.**

**From the altar of St Peter's Basilica in Rome he led Catholicism into unchartered territory by seeking forgiveness for sins committed against Jews, heretics, women, Gypsies and native peoples.**

**Fighting through trembles and slurrings caused by Parkinson's disease, the Pope electrified ranks of cardinals and bishops by pleading for a future that would not repeat the mistakes. "Never again," he said.**

**Centuries of hate and rivalry could not recur in the third millennium. "We forgive and we ask forgiveness. We are asking pardon for the divisions among Christians, for the use of violence that some have committed in the service of truth, and for attitudes of mistrust and hostility assumed towards followers of other religions."**

**Plea for brotherhood**

**Defying warnings from some theologians that the unprecedented apology would undermine the church's authority, the 79-year-old pontiff asked God to forgive the persecution of the Jews. "We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer, and asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood."**

**Wearing the purple vestments of lenten mourning, the Pope sought pardon for seven categories of sin: general sins; sins in the service of truth; sins against Christian unity; against the Jews; against respect for love, peace and cultures; against the dignity of women and minorities; and against human rights.**

**Ethnic groups had endured "contempt for their cultures and religious traditions". Women were "all too often humiliated and marginalised". Trust in wealth and power had obscured the church's responsibility to the poor and oppressed.**

**There was no reference to homosexuals, who had asked to be included for suffering theocratic violence. The Pope did not identify guilty individuals or name the crusades, the Inquisition or the Holocaust, but the references were clear.**

**Five Vatican cardinals and two bishops confessed sins on behalf of the church during the ceremony. Cardinal Edward Cassidy recalled the "sufferings of the people of Israel" asked divine pardon for the "sins committed by not a few &#91;Catholics&#93; against the people of the covenant". <**

**'Warped' view**

**Several Jewish leaders praised the sermon as historic and significant but Israel's chief rabbi said he was deeply frustrated by the Pope's failure to mention the Holocaust, and described the service as "a severely warped view of history".**

**Rabbi Israel Meir Lau joined other Israelis in expressing hope that the pope had omitted acknowledging the church's passivity during the Holocaust only because he was planning a specific apology during next week's pilgrimage to the holy land.**

**Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the congregation of the doctrine of the faith, confessed to the sins of the congregation's predecessor, the Inquisition. "Even men of the church, in the name of faith and morals, have sometimes used methods not in keeping with the Gospel," he said.**

**Applause from the congregation greeted the Pope's arrival in the basilica. He kneeled before the Pieta, Michelangelo's statue of the dead Christ in the arms of his mother, before being wheeled to the altar. He leaned on his silver staff and it took several attempts for him to get out of his chair to kiss a crucifix. The Vatican no longer denies the Pope has Parkinson's disease. An operation to remove a tumour, several falls and an assassination attempt have left him hunched and stiff.**

**Seeking forgiveness has been a leitmotif of his papacy since his election in 1978. He has apologised for the crusades, the massacre of French Protestants, the trial of Galileo and anti-semitism.**

**Yesterday's apology was by far the most sweeping and an unprecedented act for the leader of a major religion. One of the highlights of this year's jubilee, or holy year, it was the result of four years' research by a panel of 28 theologians and scholars.**

**Disquiet that the apology was a beautiful gesture but a theological mistake bubbled to the surface last week.**

**Echoing widespread concern from liberal as well as conservative theologians, the Bishop of Como, Alessandro Maggiolini, said: "In whose name, exactly, is the holy father asking pardon? He is relying on a group of experts, but tomorrow another group of experts might come up with different examples."**

**Other churchmen said the gesture would be seen by Muslims as a sign of weakness and by secular enemies as a cue to launch further attacks.**

**The Pope's persistence in ramming through the initiative, despite resistance inside the Vatican, has doused claims that he has effectively retired and abandoned policy-making.**

**The document that provides the theological framework emphasises a distinction between the sins committed by the church's sons and daughters and the church itself, which remains holy and immaculate.**

**Speaking after the ceremony to the crowd in St Peter's Square, the Pope stressed he was seeking forgiveness not from those who had been wronged, but from God. "Only he can do that."**

**2,000 years of violence and persecution**

**The Crusades**

**Pope Urban II, anxious to assert Rome's authority in the east, sent a military expedition in 1095 to reconquer the holy land. The crusaders ravaged the countries they passed through and massacred the Muslim, Jewish and even Christian population of Jerusalem after capturing it in 1099. After 200 years of conflict Muslim armies drove them out for good, but the crusaders' symbol of the red cross remains provocative.**

**The Inquisition**

**The attempt to combat suspected apostates, Jews and Muslims at the time of the Reformation spawned tribunals in Europe and the new world that tortured and executed thousands. Ecclesiastical queasiness about flowing blood led to the use of racks, thumbscrews and red-hot metal instead of blades; 2,000 people were burned at the stake during the tenure of Spain's first grand inquisitor, Tomas de Torquemada.**

**The Holocaust**

**Pope Pius XII never publicly condemned the Nazis' persecution of Jews, even when they were being rounded up and deported from Rome. His silence is partly blamed for the failure of Germany's Catholics to resist Hitler. Anti-Jewish Catholic doctrines such as the claim that the Jews murdered Christ were said to have ideologically underpinned nazism. Vatican officials allegedly helped Nazis escape Europe after the war.**

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**FAMOUS QUOTES**

**GEORGE BERNARD SHAW (1856-1950) 94 years**

**He was an Irish playwright. Although Shaw's first profitable writing was music and literary criticism, his talent was for drama, and he authored more than 60 plays. Nearly all of his writings deal sternly with prevailing social problems, but have a vein of comedy to make their stark themes more palatable. Shaw examined education, marriage, religion, government, health care, and class privilege and found them all defective. He was most angered by the exploitation of the working class, and most of his writings censure that abuse. An ardent socialist, Shaw wrote many brochures and speeches for the Fabian Society. He became an accomplished orator in the furtherance of its causes, which included gaining equal political rights for men and women, alleviating abuses of the working class, rescinding private ownership of productive land, and promoting healthful lifestyles.**

**Shaw married Charlotte Payne-Townshend, a fellow Fabian, whom he survived. They settled in Ayot St. Lawrence in a house now called Shaw's Corner. Shaw died there, aged 94, from chronic problems exacerbated by injuries he incurred by falling.**

**He is the only person to have been awarded both the Nobel Prize for Literature (1925) and an Oscar (1938). These were for his contributions to literature and for his work on the film Pygmalion, respectively. Shaw wanted to refuse his Nobel Prize outright because he had no desire for public honors, but accepted it at his wife's behest: she considered it a tribute to Ireland. He did reject the monetary award, requesting it be used to finance translation of Swedish books to English.**

**"The fact that a believer is happier than a skeptic**

**is no more to the point**

**than the fact that a drunken man**

**is happier than a sober one."**

**"What is wrong with priests and popes**

**is that instead of being apostles and saints,**

**they are nothing but empirics who say**

**'I know' instead of 'I am learning,'**

**and pray for credulity and inertia**

**as wise men pray for skepticism and activity."**