

## Humanists and Skeptics: An Uneasy Peace

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science has merged with the Center for Inquiry. The former president and CEO of RDFRS, Robyn Blumner, became the CEO of CFI as of January 25, 2016. Dawkins is a member of CFI's board of directors, and RDFRS is a division of CFI. The merger will not be complete until the spring of 2016, but leaders of the organization are planning for a smooth transition. (For more information, see [www.centerforinquiry.net/newsroom/cfi\\_dawkins\\_merger/](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/newsroom/cfi_dawkins_merger/).)

Many people see this merger as welcome news. Two of the biggest freethought groups in the world coming together at last. However, CFI is more than just a freethought group. It also houses the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, publishers of *the Skeptical Inquirer*.

Organized skeptics foster skepticism of paranormal claims such as beliefs in ghosts, UFOs, alien abductions, haunted houses, clairvoyance, psychokinesis, cryptozoology (beliefs in Big Foot, the Loch Ness Monster, Yeti, etc.), astrology and similar claims. To a lesser extent, they also foster skepticism of fringe science and pseudoscientific claims.

On the surface, it might seem as though skeptics and humanists should get along smoothly, and that they should actually be one and the same. However, such is not necessarily the case.

When the late Paul Kurtz, the founder of CFI, headed the organization, he would often have to persuade skeptics to work with humanists. On the other hand, he never had to persuade humanists to work with skeptics. This was mainly because a lot of skeptics are scared to death of being identified with atheism and atheists.

Many skeptics, like theists, believe that religion deserves more respect than any other belief or belief system. They believe it is in bad taste to be too critical of religion. Others believe that if they are as openly skeptical of theism as they are of paranormal claims, it will become more difficult to get people to become skeptical of paranormal claims. They therefore do everything possible to avoid discussions in which a belief in God is challenged. (However, they are willing to

examine certain religious claims such as a belief in weeping or bleeding Christ or Mary statues, the Shroud of Turin, the supposed burial cloth of Christ, and so forth.)

Some skeptics are simply afraid of the negative consequences that could greet those that openly challenge a belief in God. After all, no one has ever been killed in the name of Big Foot. No one has ever been discriminated against because she did not believe in astrology. No one has ever lost a job for not believing in UFOs. No one has ever launched a war against people that rejected a belief in alien abductions. However, history is full of examples of people that have been persecuted, ostracized and killed for challenging the God concept.

There are some humanists that do not like the term “skeptic.” They believe that skepticism should be implied if one identifies with science and thinks scientifically. Others believe that the term is too vague and could lead people to believe that what is meant is skepticism of politics, politicians or some other area.

What is especially noteworthy about this merger between CFI and RDFRS is that Richard Dawkins might be one of the most hated and polarizing atheists ever – with the exception of Madalyn Murray O’Hair. Indeed, some of Dawkins’ biggest critics are other atheists. It will be interesting to see how all of this plays out at CFI.

The numbers of organized humanists are low. One of the main reasons this is so is because so many humanists are afraid to come out of the closet. Even with the advent of the New Atheism, the recent success of the Reason Rally in Washington, D.C. (with some reporting as many as 30,000 in attendance and 60,000 expected this year), the propagation of organized humanist groups all over the globe, and so on, many non-theists are still afraid of coming out of the closet.

Contrast this to the courage shown by believers in bizarre sects such as the Nation of Islam and other fringe religious groups. They are proud, loud and visible. If people with such unconventional belief systems can stand up and be counted, why is it that people that foster reason, good science and secular ethics cannot do the same?

The fight for civil rights, women's rights, LGBT rights and similar struggles has made a difference because people believing in those causes decided to stand up, be counted and demand what is rightfully theirs. Non-theists should do no less, and they should not have to downplay who and what they are while merely identifying themselves as skeptics. Skepticism and humanism are not mutually exclusive, and both labels can be embraced and worn with dignity and pride.