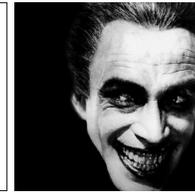


Garvarn's Blog



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On Swedish Skepticism

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What would motivate Jane or John Doe to join the skeptic movement? That is a question the Swedish Skeptic society may need to address very soon. Because in the public eye, it seems like the Swedish Humanist Association has already found an answer. Under chairman Christer Sturmark, the secular humanists have had an exceptional growth in the last five years. Sturmark has achieved lots of media exposure and he is often the preferred choice when TV producers cast debates on issues concerning religion, creationism, and, yes, New Age, occultism and paranormal phenomena - issues that one would think are more appropriate to be dealt with by the skeptic society. There is a reasonable possibility that the Humanist Association soon will start to attract support and members with a main interest in skepticism rather than secular humanism, if it doesn't already.

Is such a development necessarily a bad thing? Of course not. The skeptic cause needs active promotion and the keyword in the term "skeptic movement" is movement, i.e. the opposite of standing still. I would also like to add being open to change, and ability to adapt according to the conditions provided by the environment in which the movement aspires to have an influence. An organization not willing to actively promote the skeptic cause, not willing to move in a direction beneficial to the growth of skeptical influence, and not able or interested in adapting to its environment should not carry the skeptic torch. An organization willing, able and interested should, even if it means that the torch in Sweden is carried by the Humanist Association or a completely new skeptic society. As New Age is spreading and getting increasing support, acceptance, and media exposure, the skeptic cause has to be furthered through active effort. A skeptic movement has to oppose and even confront this development. Just being available to provide rational and natural explanations to supernatural claims, if somebody wants them, is not enough - such an approach is in reality a non-approach, it is lack of movement and activity.

In a recent article in the public online article portal Newsmill.se, skeptic chairman Hanno Essén and former

chairman Jesper Jerkert stated that they mainly see the Swedish Skeptics as a sort of consumer agency that students, authorities, journalists and people in general can turn to with questions about paranormal claims. They also noted that public official statements from the organization will continue to be scarce in the future. They do, however, encourage members and supporters to actively defend a scientific perspective. So the message is clear and explicit: availability, not activity, is to be expected from the board of the Swedish Skeptics, i.e. the core of the organized Swedish skeptic movement does not include movement. That this is the strategy dominating the actual work of the board is admitted by a board member on the skeptic forum; the board isn't that active in public discussion and when it is, it's only after long and slow discussion aimed at not offending anyone. Is that a rational adaptation to a modern society characterized by the information highway and communicative speed? Is that a rational strategy in a media climate where individual cranks make the effort to seek attention and very often gets it? In a culture where new media collides with old, where the distance between media consumption and production is shrinking at rapid speed and audience mobility is a striking feature - is a public relations policy of the 1960's sound? When technology, economy and accessibility is more favorable than ever for small and relatively poor actors on the opinion market - is this the time to chose silence, or answering only when questioned, as a principal approach?

The Humanist Association has chosen a very different strategy. Whenever a media discussion that concerns the organization's interests emerges, chairman Sturmark or someone else on the board makes a contribution in the form of an article or a public statement. Always. Regarding ongoing issues such as creationism, religious influence on education, or confessional schools, the board initiates public debate in every way and media they can. Representatives from the board regularly participates in arranged panel discussions on topics like humanism, religion, and even New Age. They

also arrange such events and seminars themselves. Last year, the Association ran a nationwide ad campaign themed "God probably doesn't exist." They engage in networking and even have a group in the Swedish parliament. And, as indicated earlier, media increasingly tend to pick them as representatives for a skeptic view as well as for secular humanism - even when the Swedish Skeptics would be a more appropriate choice.

Devoted skeptics are complaining, of course. However, they don't arrive at the conclusion that skeptics can learn from the humanists. Instead, they've started to engage in bashing them. Chairman Sturmark has a history in computer and internet market speculation which means that he is immoral and a bad representative for the humanist movement. Whenever he appears on TV, he fails to explain all relevant facts and arguments and relies heavily on repeating catchword phrases. During the expansion, the humanists have also attracted some celebrities and that's always a big help. Oh, and they receive donations. And the humanist boom is not an effect of the efforts of the Swedish humanists, but of a global secular humanist boom. Etcetera, etcetera. What the complaining skeptics fail to realize is that the undeniable success of the humanists is the result of strategy and organizational change. Their member stock has increased with 500% since 2005, which means that they once were a rather small organization with very limited resources, much like the Swedish Skeptics is now and has been since it was founded in 1982. But the humanists are going somewhere, they have made a change. They are able to convey their message in a more effective and attractive way now as a result of intentional effort. The key elements in this effort are not celebrities or donations - those are bonuses, but motive and intent. They have also realized that promoting secular humanism will upset a lot of people but chosen their cause over the convenience of their opponents, i.e. they have remained loyal to their reason to exist, even if it means that some, or even many, will consider them evil or immoral.

Sadly, it appears as if the skeptics are inclined to chose the convenience of their opponents over the cause. At the moment, the main topic of interest at the skeptic forum is the current "tone" of argument. Apparently, some members are afraid that heated discussion and frank dismissal of certain woo-woo claims might scare people off. Don't take this the wrong way; the skeptic forum has an excellent staff of moderators who are doing a great job, it offers the standard possibilities to report abuse and of course the obvious choice not to take part in heated discussions or the forum in general, but some say that isn't enough to prevent people from "feeling bad". There is a lack of empathy among some of the forum members. Not among the hordes of attending woo-woos - their everlasting claims of being subject to "intellectual oppression" has rooted successfully, but among skeptics. There has even been a motion submitted for the upcoming annual meeting suggesting that the board appoints a committee to define ethical guidelines for member behavior. So, instead of worrying about how to promote the skeptic cause effectively, the concern is how to cripple it.

But let's go back to the initial question: What would motivate Jane or John Doe to join the skeptic movement? Well, if Jane or John are predisposed for New Age or some related lunacy, the chance they would join the skeptic movement is nil. What if they are "sitting on the fence"? Well, the probability that they are interested at all in these issues is rather low and to make them interested under the conditions stipulated by the media culture we live in would demand resources that even the humanists lack. But what if Jane and John have started to react negatively on the current

swarm of psychics, healers and miracle mongers and would be inclined to contribute to an organization that is against woo-woo? Would they be attracted to an organization that is available for questions and mainly concerned with not upsetting anyone, or would they be more attracted to an organization that often, actively and publicly denounces woo-woo claims in a clear-cut and uncompromising manner? I know the bulk of devoted skeptics will yell that there is a middle course, but in the end I think the Swedish Skeptics will have to come up with rational answer to this question. I know the Swedish Humanist Association has done so.

Comments:

Concerned ex member of the Swedish Skeptic Society said...

I agree completely, it's almost that we need a new Swedish Skeptic organisation that can take the WooWoos by the balls!

March 5, 2010 7:20 PM

R Franklin said...

I totally agree. I think it's time more "No more mr Nice guy" kind of actions. What about file a mass complain towards some of the best known psychics in the country regarding false marketing? That would bring some well needed focus to the public on these issues.

March 6, 2010 7:46 AM

Anonymous said...

That's the honourable thing to do. Don't stay under the cover of science - by all means go forward to further expose the unscientific roots of the denialism you call scepticism. Sturmarks public utterances often includes unfounded claims and exaggerations ;-)

March 6, 2010 11:51 AM

mia said...

The debate at the Swedish sceptic forum has previously left me slightly confused regarding the point you were trying to make, this blog post does certainly clarify things, thanks! Keep going, although I would like to point to the obvious; that the rather agitated tone at the forum somewhat blurred the message, something that may very well be the case in other debates as well. I find that to be a fairly good reason for keeping the tone more than civilised while letting the argumentation to the slicing.

March 14, 2010 7:36 PM

Garvarn said...

Mia, thanks for commenting. I think that the Skeptic forum is one thing and the public approach of the Swedish Skeptics another, in the sense that the forum is an open platform for discussion and not a representative of the Skeptics. Opponents claim it to be, but I don't think we should give them the satisfaction of behaving like it is.

March 14, 2010 9:24 PM

mia said...

My intention with the reference to the forum was rather to point to an example of when a message gets distorted as the discussion evolves in an irrelevant direction caused by a less objective way of viewing the arguments put forward (not implying this was your doing) imposed by agitated feelings, than to suggest that the Swedish Sceptics and the forum are synonymous. Either way, an internet forum is in my opinion merely a source of entertainment, whereas the Swedish

Sceptic movement needs to mobilize immediately and get involved in the public debate more fiercely through other channels, mainly those pointed out in your blog post. The Sceptic Society needs to redefine itself from being merely a response to a growing anti-intellectual movement, which by necessity and definition means counter strike and defensive argumentation, to actively moving into the sphere of public debate, regaining the initiative by setting the agenda and formulate the questions to be discussed. As for now, the other side (pardon my playing with words) are getting their message reinforced, not attenuated, by the way the Sceptic Society keeps repeating their arguments every time they want to counter them. As long as we can't get this issue sorted the anti-intellectual movement will win every debate, regardless of the arguments put forward by one side or the other.

March 15, 2010 11:35 AM

Garvarn said...

Sorry Mia, I misunderstood. And well put!

March 15, 2010 5:40 PM

Anonymous said...

regarding Soufanieh, you are full of crap

March 15, 2010 9:14 PM

Garvarn said...

Nope, regarding Soufanieh I'm right on target. The woman is a conartist.

March 16, 2010 2:21 AM

Anonymous said...

The problem with the arguments is, that it not even works for you, Garvarn. Recently there was a long period when even your skeptic friends was very tired of your behavior and you yourself had a lot of problems with administrators on a lot of sites. People have begin to ignore you, and they don't even write comments in this blog.

Until now, though. But I have a feeling that the first three comments here is written by your own hand.

April 3, 2010 9:44 PM

Garvarn said...

Anonymous, it takes some intellectual skill to separate confounding variables from independent ones, a skill I fear you lack. I am also in the habit of signing my comments, wherever and whenever I make them. Although I use an alias, I don't feel the need to fake a following. Perhaps you should try it.

April 4, 2010 12:34 PM

Anonymous said...

Of course you don't agree with me. And you see, I am not more anonymous than you. Can you, once again, explain why you are so afraid for revealing your identity, when you so often "help" other to do it?

April 4, 2010 3:25 PM

Garvarn said...

Anonymous, I cannot recall ever having "outed" anybody that wasn't out already. I do, however, take some pleasure in pinpointing Rickard Berghorn from time to time, when he is trying to create the impression of a multitude of "anonymous" persons defending his insane claims and arguments. Much like right now. But if you care to indulge me, who have I "outed"?

April 4, 2010 3:58 PM

Anonymous said...

Not outed? I'm sorry, but you lie as you use to do. Regarding Rickard Berghorn, I suppose it is the man who owns the blog Nymodernism? <http://nymodernism.blogspot.com>

As anybody can see there, he have pointed out a lot of things which have been very embarrassing for VoF and VoF-members.

But you have some shit to answer even this with, haven't you, my dear Garvarn? ;-)

(For our few international readers, I can explain that the swedish skeptic movement have a bad reputation because of a very noisy, bullying and dishonest attitude, which foremost Garvarn have been "famous" in establishing. This criticism is of course regularly answered with a lot of noise, bullying and lies.)

April 4, 2010 6:18 PM

Garvarn said...

OK, I will repeat the question: who have I "outed"?

April 4, 2010 6:22 PM

Anonymous said...

I think our readers are bright enough to not need an answer on that ;-)

April 4, 2010 7:28 PM

Garvarn said...

So, you can't back up your claim?

April 4, 2010 8:08 PM

Kepler said...

Excellent article garvarn. This is something you should try to get published in *Folkvett* to stimulate this important discussion among members.

April 7, 2010 4:47 PM

Kepler said...

to anonymous:

yes, I hope readers are bright enough to see. Your comments are enough ...

April 7, 2010 4:48 PM

Anonymous said...

There is no reason to believe that Kepler is not Garvarn himself. And yes, the bright readers do not need an answer.

April 8, 2010 11:01 AM

Anonymous said...

I take back everything I said earlier ... ;-)

April 8, 2010 10:41 PM

Råland said...

"For our few international readers, I can explain that the swedish skeptic movement have a bad reputation because of a very noisy, bullying and dishonest attitude,"

You're quite the obnoxious little liar, anon.

For potential international readers, I can explain that the Swedish public hardly has much of an opinion at all about the Swedish skeptic "movement", since it isn't very visible (which is unfortunate, in my opinion). The "movement" does, however, have a bunch of critics, but it's safe to say that a vast majority of these subscribe to pseudoscience in some form or another, and so that they would criticise the "movement" is neither surprising nor something for skeptics to worry about. The only thing that would satisfy these people is if the skeptics would keep completely quiet.

"This criticism is of course regularly answered with a lot of noise, bullying and lies."

Lies and bullying, no. The tone can be pretty harsh sometimes, though, especially when the critics are obnoxious little liars, like anon here.

April 11, 2010 2:36 PM

Anonymous said..

>For potential international readers, I can explain that the Swedish public hardly has much of an opinion at all about the Swedish skeptic "movement", since it isn't very visible>

Nobody have said it is very visible, so it is hard to understand what your point is. That in particular VoF have a bad reputation among the few who know them - yes, it is so. Never wondered why VoF still have only about 2000 members, even after exponation in the swedish low brow-press (Expressen, for example)?

>The "movement" does, however, have a bunch of critics, but it's safe to say that a vast majority of these subscribe to pseudoscience in some form or another, and so that they would criticise the "movement" is neither surprising nor something for skeptics to worry about.>

You talk shit. There is a bunch of considerable academic criticism, especially from Martin Gustafsson (doctor in theoretical philosophy).

And Martin Rundqvist, one of the front members in VoF, have revealed the opinion among science journalists: they call VoF "Aspergare Mot Vidskepelse" ("Aspies Against Superstitions").

>Lies and bullying, no.>

Yes.

April 12, 2010 12:09 PM