

“Religious Bias and Paranormal Inquiry, or, Albert Einstein Meets Johnnie Cochrane”



Joseph M. Felser

Not long ago I found myself in a local hospital emergency room in the middle of the night with my wife, who was suffering from the kind of excruciating abdominal discomfort that tips to the screaming side of the pain scale. After performing a battery of tests, the doctors determined that she had probably suffered a ruptured uterine cyst, which was described as more painful than childbirth—Eve's curse squared. To be on the safe side, they decided to keep her in the hospital for 24 hours, just for observation. Many sleepless hours later, an empty bed was finally located in a semi-private room. As the orderly wheeled her gurney onto the elevator, I groggily tagged along, more asleep than awake.

Her roommate proved to be a cheerful, pleasant, if rather garrulous and overbearing woman whom I'll call Martha. Martha's daughter was visiting, and, in fact, she was to have a parade of visitors all day long, trooping in and out. It was impossible not to overhear their animated conversations, which were liberally sprinkled with religious buzzwords such as “minister,” “missionary,” and “church.” At one point, despite my brain fog and irritation over the constant noise, the exchange really grabbed my attention.

Martha was telling her daughter that her nephew, who was attending a Bible college somewhere in the Midwest, had developed an interest in—gosh, of all things—natural history. Now he wanted to become a scientist, Martha fretted, apparently concerned as to how this might affect his missionary zeal. The dreaded “E” word wasn't uttered, but you could just about hear the mournful shades of Aristotle and Darwin in the background, groaning and sighing even louder than Al Gore.

“But you know,” Martha explained, “he doesn't go in for any of that billion year stuff,” in an apparent reference to the age of the earth. “Maybe

ten thousand, tops,” she added with bubbly reassurance.

Well, I thought wearily, some scientist *he'll* make. I could see the headline shocker now: “Bible-thumper paleontologist admits Bishop Ussher wrong after all; world 10,000 years old, not 6,000 as previously believed!” Paste it right up there on the wall of intellectual infamy with the other gem I clipped from a 1992 newspaper: “Vatican says Galileo right, after all.” Now that's progress!

The issue of religious bias in scientific inquiry is not irrelevant to the study of the so-called “paranormal.” Particularly if and when, as philosopher Michael Grosso has argued, what parapsychologists term *psi* is finally accepted for what it surely is: an entirely natural phenomenon, a potential inherent in the human (and undoubtedly non-human) species. This admission would, of course, entail an enlargement our concept of nature to include a non-physical dimension (or dimensions). But the old notion that science as a method of inquiry is forever wedded to a creaky 18th century metaphysical materialism is increasingly open to question.

What should also be open to question is the ability of researchers who are steadfastly committed to traditional religious perspectives to provide a genuinely unbiased assessment of the *psi* aspects of nature. For all traditional religions are ultimately grounded in certain assumptions about the nature of nature (and, correlatively, of human nature) that are not only unquestioned, but also, in principle, unquestionable. This epistemological and theological fideism leads to escapades of playing false with interpretations, not to mention fast and loose with the facts. That rigid old bed of Procrustes really gets a workout.

Some scientifically respectable paranormalists might disagree. As long as the religious researchers are upfront about their perspective and do not attempt to conceal it, so the argument goes, it is not really a “bias.” Only when such beliefs are hidden do they threaten to distort the data and mislead other researchers.

But I believe that this rejoinder misses the boat. At issue is not the personal or professional honesty of particular individuals, but rather, a fundamental incompatibility between the role and function of the religious apologist on the one hand, and that of the scientific researcher on the other. One can't be *both* Albert Einstein *and* Johnnie Cochrane. Science aims at the truth and must, therefore, be open to criticizing and revising its own assumptions. Like any good defense attorney, however, religious apologists are obliged only to give their client the best possible defense. Whether indeed the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth emerges from such a defense is not the direct concern of the defender, who is not required to consider all sides of the argument, or to present even obvious counter-evidence. As barrister Cochrane himself might advise, only if the glove doesn't fit should you wear it.

Which is exactly why when scientific theories become unassailable bulwarks and scientists start acting more like defense attorneys than scientists (say, like Dr. Freud, or even Einstein himself in his more theological moods), they begin to sound cranky and lose credibility. Religious apologetics and scientific inquiry have different aims and values, not to mention rules of method. Each has its own distinctive ethos.

This socio-epistemic tension is only exacerbated when the subject of inquiry is our (psychic) awareness of the non-physical aspects of nature, for this has historically been religious turf. Whereas the naturalizing of the "supernatural" merely calls for a revision of our (materialist) idea of nature, it threatens the power and very existence of traditional religions by de-mystifying the non-physical and democratizing access to it. We could hardly expect the entrenched religions to take such a development lying down.

Hence, when we are confronted with individuals claiming to be paranormal researchers who "just happen" to be religious adherents, alarm bells ought to ring. After all, as my old philosophy professor used to quip, Flat Earthers don't get invited to address geography conventions. So why should sincere parapsychologists interested in the future of their inquiry feel bound to include in the debate those who are committed, a priori, to undermining the field altogether? What's wrong with this picture?

Which brings me to the contretemps that has recently embroiled the field of Near-Death Experience (NDE) studies. Questions have been raised about the validity of certain findings by several fundamentalist Christian NDE researchers. In response, at least one of those researchers has denied that his religious faith skewed either his presentation of the evidence or his interpretive conclusions. To buttress his claim that it's perfectly reasonable and genuinely empirical-minded to believe that the "loving" Being of Light encountered by NDErs is really Satan in disguise, he has called as (admittedly hostile) witnesses for the defense famous "occultists" like Whitley Strieber and Robert Monroe. Their experiences with non-physical entities that act like demon-deceiver types is cited as independent evidence in favor of the Satanic snare hypothesis. Satan's legions are real, and they'll suck out your soul like a cosmic Chupacabras if you don't watch out. The moral of the fundamentalists' story: Stay away from the paranormal!

Normally I would steer clear of such infernal fireworks. Rational arguments with True Believers tend to deteriorate into the kind of pugilistic self-parody made famous years ago when *Saturday Night Live* lampooned the old "Point/Counterpoint" segment on *Sixty Minutes*. ("Jane, you ignorant slut," bellowed Dan Aykroyd in reply to Jane Curtin's "commentary.") But it just so happened that I was re-reading Robert Monroe's books just as I came across the fundamentalist NDE researcher's

assertion that Monroe's experiences provide independent confirmation of the fundamentalist belief in demons (and the deceptive character of the NDE). And I could not help but wonder: Had this guy really read the same books I was now reading?

Monroe in fact devotes an entire chapter of his first book, *Journeys Out of the Body* (1972), to his unpleasant encounters with what he calls "intelligent animals" that exist in the non-physical realm. He speculates that such encounters may very well furnish the experiential basis for the ancient myths of demons, goblins, sprites, etc. In a 1960 journal entry, he describes how two rubbery entities attached themselves to his non-physical "back" just as he was exiting his physical body. But no matter what he did—including reciting the Lord's Prayer (as suggested to him by some "theologically minded" friends)—the suckers stubbornly hung on. At one point, the creatures indeed briefly morph into facsimiles of his two young daughters—at least until Monroe caught on to the "trick." Finally, a mysterious yet hauntingly familiar robed figure appeared and calmly collected the "demons" by cradling them in his arms, where they went limp, their limbs and necks drooping.

Was this an attack by demon deceivers? Was the robed figure none other than the Evil One himself? To his great credit, Monroe resists such literalism. He speculates as to whether the entities' "trick" of transmuting themselves into likenesses of his daughters has a symbolical, psychological (non-Freudian) meaning. Perhaps, he muses, this signifies that the "demons" are his own "children," that is, parts of himself that he has unconsciously disowned. As such, they are neither good nor evil. They are merely asking for his attention.

Interestingly, this was not the last word Monroe was to have on this particular episode. Years later, in his third and final book, *Ultimate Journey* (1994), he reports that he was on an out-of-body excursion when he answered a psychic call for help. A (non-physical) man on a cot was thrashing about wildly while two young children were hanging on to his back. The victim was frightened and sobbing for help. So Monroe gently plucked the tots off the grateful man's back, and, as he did so, noted with surprise that they transformed themselves into intelligent animals: two cats, whose bodies went limp, their limbs and necks drooping, as he cradled them in his non-physical arms. Then he realized with astonishment that the two felines were beloved pets (like children) he himself had owned many years before. They were apparently on their own out-of-body excursion when they tried to play with the man on the cot—who, he now recognized, was none other than his 1960 self. Monroe was re-experiencing the same frightening episode from the past, but this time from the point of view of the hauntingly familiar robed figure he had seen in 1960—his interpretation of his future self. No wonder the figure had looked so familiar.

Only on the most thoroughgoing misreading, then, could Monroe's testimony about

his paranormal experiences be construed as offering aid and comfort to fundamentalist demonologists and their Manichaeian ideas of good and evil. On the contrary, Monroe's ultimate self-help narrative lends credence to physicist Arthur Eddington's dictum that reality is not only stranger than we imagine, it is stranger than we *can* imagine.

Alas, it is not in the interest of the old-time religions and their ardent defenders to permit the imagination to range so freely. Which is why, when push comes to shove, open-minded paranormalists who wish to make progress in their discipline ought to heed Shakespeare, and, before proceeding any further, get rid of all the lawyers. Then, perhaps, the scientific investigation of non-physical nature can finally get down to business, unencumbered by the dubious necessity to genuflect before the hollow idols of the past.