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Jack Hunter and Mara Steenhuisen

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Contents

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Editorial

Jack Hunter
University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Mara Steenhuisen
Independent Researcher

Welcome to the (belated) 2023 issue of the *Journal for the Study of Religious Experience*! This new issue addresses non-ordinary experiences in the tradition of Sir Alister Hardy and presents three approaches to the study of religious experience. The first focuses on the over 6,000 personal accounts of experiences reported by ordinary citizens who donated their written narratives on the non-ordinary to the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) archive. The second paper addresses the role of Spiritualism and mediumistic experience on the Women's suffrage movement in the US, and the third paper deals with a famous saint's ecstatic experiences and miraculous associated phenomena. This is followed by a commentary on 'pseudo-skepticism.'

The first article presents the annual Alister Hardy Memorial Lecture from 2022, delivered on October 15th at the Friends Meeting House in Oxford by Marianne Rankin, Director of Communications of the Alister Hardy Trust. It reflects her PhD-research - sponsored by the trust - which delves deep into the archives of the Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, to research the thematic "fruits" - or consequences - that follow from religious and spiritual experiences. Notably, Rankin explores the concept of altruism as an underlying characteristic of the varieties of those fruits.

The second paper by Sarah Porch-Lee examines the role of Spiritualism and the mediumistic experience in galvanising both the Women's Suffrage movement in nineteenth century America, and the academic study of religious experience. The three social and cultural phenomena - Spiritualism, Women's Suffrage and the Study of Religious Experience - frequently overlapped and vitalised and reinforced one another in a variety of very interesting ways.

The final two papers focus their attention on what might be considered a 'high strangeness' form of religious experience (Hunter, 2020) - *levitation*, and the controversies that surround it. To begin Bob Rickard - founding editor of the *Fortean Times* - addresses the 'flying saint' of the seventeenth century, Saint Joseph of Copertino (Giuseppa Desa of Copertino, 1603-1663), building on 35 years of eyewitness accounts of his 'flying career' the paper critiques the skeptical dismissal of human levitation, in particular Joe Nickell's

ISSN: 2057-2301

explanation for Joseph's ecstatic flights, published in the *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine (Nickell, 2018). As Bob Rickard points out in his extensive paper, for Saint Joseph, these bouts of levitation were spontaneous, induced by his prayers when raptures occurred, and not as a demonstration of self-centred power to those who witnessed them. Saint Joseph was renowned for his 'spiritual humility' during his life, as Rickard puts it. And here we may find a link with Rankin's research on altruism and spiritual experiences in the previous article. Rickard's paper is a revised and expanded version of an article published in the *Fortean Times* earlier this year (Rickard, 2024).

Following Rickard's extensive discussion, Michael Grosso, author of *The Man Who Could Fly: St. Joseph of Copertino and the Mystery of Levitation* (2016), offers his own thoughts on the content of Joe Nickell's review of the book, which proposes some alternative explanations for Joseph of Copertino's levitations. Grosso suggests that these skeptical explanations fail to account for the huge quantity of eyewitness testimony and documentary evidence that exists for Joseph's miraculous levitations.

Finally, to round out the issue, we have a new call for papers focusing on the fascinating topic of 'AI and Religious Experience,' so if you have any interest in submitting a paper to this forthcoming special issue exploring any aspect of this theme, please don't hesitate to get in touch with us to discuss your ideas. Details can be found on page 78.

We sincerely hope that you enjoy the issue!

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ISSN: 2057-2301

The 2022 Annual Alister Hardy Lecture

Is Altruism a Principal Fruit of Spiritual Experience? An Exploration of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre Archive

Marianne Rankin
Director of Communications, Alister Hardy Trust. mariannerankin@icloud.com

This paper focuses on the 'fruits' or consequences of religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) recorded in the Archive of the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC). My first research question asks, 'What, in the RERC Archive, are the fruits of RSEs in terms of inner transformation and outward behaviour?' A quantitative, numerical analysis of the range of consequences, including religious and spiritual changes is given, and in a qualitative approach specific accounts are explored in more depth. My second research question became, 'Is the designation "Intense Experience" as expounded by Wesley J. Wildman in his *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (2011) helpful for researchers when evaluating RSEs, particularly those of people who do not consider themselves religious?' Study of the literature gave rise to the third research question, 'Can the hypothesis that a turn from self-centredness to altruism is the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience be supported through analysis of the RERC Archive?' A mixed methods approach to the data appeared to lend support for this hypothesis.

Key Words: Religious; spiritual; experience; fruits; transformation; altruism.

Introduction

My involvement with the Alister Hardy Trust is long-standing and I wrote an introduction to religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs) as an Occasional Paper and then a book, *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience* published in 2008 by Bloomsbury. I have given talks in schools and to many spiritual groups and recently completed a PhD on 'Researching the Fruits of Religious and Spiritual Experience in the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre Archive.' So I have a long-term interest in the subject, the organisation and in reaching out to others.

The contents of the Religious Experience Research Centre (RERC) Archive were my data and I chose the fruits of religious and spiritual experiences as my research focus. Over the years, I have become increasingly interested in the effects of the enormous range of experiences which we have in our collection. Many researchers have focused on different types of experience and there is an enormous range in the approximately 6,600 accounts in the Archive – Near-Death Experiences (NDEs), Out-of-Body Experiences

ISSN: 2057-2301

(OBEs), End-of-Life Experiences (ELEs), encounters with the deceased, with angels, hearing voices, visions of light, feelings of love, guidance and comfort as well as negative experiences. But I have always been fascinated by how people were changed and their lives altered by these experiences.

Methodology

For my PhD I formulated three research questions. My first question was a general one, asking, "What, in the RERC Archive, are the 'fruits' of RSEs in terms of inner transformation and outward behaviour?" This formed the basis for further exploration. My second research question arose as I considered that so many people these days would not describe themselves as religious, so I asked: "Is the designation "Intense Experience" as expounded by Wesley J. Wildman in his *Religious and Spiritual Experiences* (2011) helpful for researchers when evaluating RSEs, particularly those of people who do not consider themselves religious?" I explored the category of Intense Experiences (IEs), as an alternative term for RSEs, but as this aspect involves an understanding of Wildman's research and analysis, I do not propose to look at it in depth in this lecture. However, I did find that a category which enabled people to accept their experiences as natural, rather than linked to religion was helpful. My third question arose because as each experience was embedded within a personal story, giving a great variety of individual fruits, I wanted to draw out a common theme, or underlying pattern, by formulating a hypothesis. Study of the literature – religious and scholarly, plus several pilot studies – gave rise to the question: 'Can the hypothesis that a turn from self-centredness to altruism is the dominant category underlying the variety of fruits of experience be supported through analysis of the RERC Archive?'

This turn from a focus on the self to concern for others was an aspect which I wished to attempt to tease out of the data, as I believed it to be present in many accounts, even if not specifically mentioned. Jesus linked the love of God and the love of others in his two great commandments, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind' (NRSV, 2015, Matthew 22:37) and 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' (Matthew 22:39). I wanted to find out whether that link is borne out by the fruits of experience found in the RERC Archive, whether an experience of a higher dimension, or power beyond the self would lead to altruism. For the title of my lecture, I have slightly amended this question – changing 'the dominant category' to 'a principal fruit.' I bore the three questions in mind throughout my research as I tackled each in turn in more depth. I chose a mixed methods approach to my data – quantitative and qualitative. I offered a quantitative, numerical analysis of a range of consequences of

ISSN: 2057-2301

experience, which I recorded on Microsoft Excel spreadsheets. This offered percentages of different fruits of RSEs found in the first and final accounts, and an overview of secular, religious and spiritual responses. My Qualitative Research involved a careful reading and close analysis of individual accounts, with attention paid to the triggers or antecedents, the experience itself, its interpretation and the fruits. The experiences tell of significant events in the lives of the correspondents, and how they make sense of them.

Briefly, in terms of methodology, I was mindful of the interpretations by both the correspondent and the researcher, and I found Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009/2012) to be a helpful approach. IPA involves a double hermeneutic: The researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what happened to them. Although IPA is predominantly used with small samples of homogenous groups, and is usually based on semi-structured interviews (Smith, 2017), such an approach was nonetheless helpful in my research. Although no interviews took place, the accounts in the Archive are in a sense answers to an open question, The Hardy Question: “Have you ever been aware of or influenced by a presence or power, whether you call it God or not, which is different from your everyday self?”

Data

As it was based on the online contents of the RERC Archive, my research did not involve interviews or questionnaires (so I was not affected by Covid lockdowns). Although nowadays researchers are deprived of the original documents, the convenience of being able to refer to all the experiences and to return to particular accounts at will, makes up for that. I decided to record and analyse the fruits of 2,000 accounts – the first and approximately the final thousand accounts in the Archive. This was to enable comparisons between accounts submitted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, many in response to Sir Alister Hardy’s original appeal, with those of the twenty-first century, particularly in respect of religious background. I expected the increasingly secular nature of society to be reflected and wanted to know how that affected religious attitudes following the RSEs.The most enjoyable part of my research was reading the accounts. Each told a personal story, many of which were very moving and so often had not been shared before – particularly in the early letters. It was Hardy’s standing as a respected scientist undertaking research into spirituality which encouraged people to send those precious accounts to him. To remind us – the Archive was established when Hardy asked for people to write to him in answer to what is now known as The Hardy Question. He would frequently link this to an article or interview, illustrating the kind of experience he meant and he also used questionnaires. In

ISSN: 2057-2301

a pamphlet, Hardy explained more clearly what he sought, giving a subtler understanding of the nature of the experience, as inner and outer, where he also mentioned the consequences:

> All those who feel that they have been conscious of, and perhaps influenced by, some Power, whether they call it God or not, which may either appear to be beyond their individual selves or partly, or even entirely, within their being, are asked to write a simple account of these feelings and their effects (Hardy, 1971, p. 2).

These appeals resulted in a flood of responses with descriptions of all kinds of experiences which had meant a lot to people, but which they often found difficult to understand. The results of Hardy's research and analysis of the first 3000 accounts were first published in *The Spiritual Nature of Man* in 1979. In my thesis I made use of Hardy's understanding of religious experience as:

> A deep awareness of a benevolent non-physical power which appears to be partly or wholly beyond, and far greater than, the individual self (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 1).

According to Hardy, RSEs are not the exclusive property of any one religion, or for that matter of religion in general, but can occur to anyone at all at any time (p. 1). Such experiences may be described in religious, non-religious and even anti-religious language but in my analyses, I refer to religious and spiritual experiences (RSEs).

The Use of Metaphor

Rather than just use the term effect or consequence, I decided on the metaphor of fruits. As religious and spiritual experiences are difficult to describe, David Hay suggests that 'we would expect metaphor to play a large part in religious language' (Hay, 1998/2006, p. 236). Having decided to focus on the consequences of RSEs, the choice of the metaphor of fruits arose quite naturally as it is widely used, by Jesus and St Paul in scripture; and in scholarship – notably by William James – as the criterion for evaluating whether or not an RSE is genuine. As such experiences are subjective and open to doubt by third party observers, Jesus, Paul and William James stress that it is by their fruits that they are to be judged. My focus is less on fruits as proof of genuineness, more an exploration of the range of effects of RSEs in the lives of the experiencers and specifically on whether altruism is a principal fruit.

ISSN: 2057-2301

A metaphorical view of the outcomes of RSEs as fruits in contrast to their roots (Donovan, 1979/1998, pp. 126-130) opens new avenues of thought. Fruits grow, develop, ripen and can be shared and nurtured, but they may also be left, ignored and even rot. Of course, fruits contain seeds, which are an important part of the metaphor. Fruits depend on how the seeds germinate. Some RSEs lead to prolific fruit whereas other experiencers maintain that they were not much affected.

The exploration of RSEs as seeds put me in mind of the parable of the Sower, which illustrates that not every seed bears fruit. Much depends on how the seeds respond to different types of soil. Some fall on the path, where they cannot take root; others on stony ground where their roots are shallow; some spring up but quickly wither or are choked by weeds; whereas others grow, spread and multiply. I linked the types of soil to religious or secular responses to the experiences and explored just how that affected the fruit, whether the effects remained with the experiencer or whether they spread more widely, affecting others. This led to an appraisal of the links to altruism.

The Fruits of Experience

As a researcher, I engaged with the experiences recounted in the Archive, and I juxtaposed the interpretations given by the correspondent with my own. Some correspondents included a clear account of the consequences of the experience, but although the current RERC form for submission of accounts includes a section for 'Fruits of the Experience,' not everyone uses the form, and in fact many correspondents do not mention any consequences at all, making research problematic as Hardy noted:

> …while one person will devote a couple of pages to the ways in which his or her life has been transformed, another will merely say, *'I have never been the same person since'* (Hardy, 1979/2006. p. 99).

In many cases, the fruits had to be searched for and extrapolated from the account. Some fruits are instantly evident – to the experiencer and the researcher, but particularly if there is a gradual growth in understanding over time, this may only be implicit in the account and the fruits often only become apparent when the narrative is studied carefully. Changes are found to be inner, in terms of religious and spiritual beliefs and attitudes to self and others; and outer, in terms of behaviour relating to religious practice, relationships with others and often choice of profession. Here is an unusually concise example:

ISSN: 2057-2301

> My experiences have had a profound influence on my life. I now live with a refined purpose to uplift myself and in doing so to help uplift others where I can [005505].

As I have referred to the parable of the Sower and am considering RSEs as seeds, I would like to share an interesting account, which shows how an experience is never forgotten, even if not immediately acted upon. The correspondent gives a lengthy description of an extraordinary experience in 1917 between battles on the Somme in the First World War. He was walking in the moonlight along a canal tow-path and had an experience of seeing and hearing heavenly harmonies – the music of the spheres. It made him think – how wonderful it would be to die at this moment – but after about thirty seconds the experience faded and the magical scene receded. It was when he heard that his 'old friend A.C. Hardy had become interested in experiences of this sort' that he revisited the incident, wrote it down and reflected on it. Paul's experience on the road to Damascus came into his mind in a similar manner, which prompted the thought 'By their fruits you shall know them' and he asked himself what the fruits of the experience had been in his life. He admitted that:

> …no inner change had been wrought: I was the same man after as before: my behaviour, purposes and conduct were the same; no one saw, or knew of any difference.

Yet on further reflection, he analysed his experience with reference to the parable of the Sower, in terms of seeds germinating over time. He wrote:

> Scepticism may have reduced the potential fertility of the soil. But I cannot at the same time say that it had no effect. Some of the seeds may have germinated over the ensuing years without my knowledge. Others, it now occurs to me, may yet germinate, half a century later. The remarkable thing, as I now see, about such seeds…is their capacity to remain dormant for long periods, perhaps waiting inertly for an auspicious change in the soil which contains them. I would like to think that my old friend A.C. Hardy, who had unwittingly prompted me to include my neglected tow-path experience in a biographical sketch of the first war, may have been responsible for a (perhaps belated) improvement in the receptivity of an area of ground wherein there has been insufficient change for too long [000035].

I found this assessment that it is never too late to respond to an experience not to be unusual. Often experiences are forgotten until something triggers the memory – frequently

ISSN: 2057-2301

just when it is needed – and it is often then that people reflect on whether or not there have been fruits from the RSE.

Quantitative Research

In composing the spreadsheets for my quantitative research, I bore in mind Hardy's categories of the consequences of experience:

1. a sense of purpose or new meaning in life;
2. change in religious belief;
3. change in attitude to others (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 29).

I worked on several pilot studies, leading to the final selection of 21 codes: account number; sex; religious background; change to spiritual but not religious; change to religious; change to religious and spiritual; change to neither religious nor spiritual; no change; strengthened convictions; sense of purpose or new meaning in life; feeling loved; loving attitude; sense of comfort; sense of guidance; sense of assurance of survival of death; awareness of unity and interconnectedness; supports the hypothesis; opposes the hypothesis; negative consequences; intense experiences; notes. I applied these to the two thousand accounts and recorded the percentages of the first and final thousand separately. I expanded Hardy's second category of consequences: the changes in religious beliefs. I recorded the religious background as given in the form – almost always answered and mostly Christian – 87% in the early accounts but down to 57% in the later years, although I noted other religions too (see Figure 1). I then focused on the subsequent changes. I considered the variations within religious, spiritual and non-religious responses to RSEs, the equivalent of the different locations where the seed falls:

Figure 1. *Changes in religious attitude from Christian background*

	Religious Background (Christian)	Spiritual but not Religious (SBNR)	Religious Xn/Other	Religious and Spiritual	Neither Religious nor Spiritual	No Change	Strengthened Convictions
First Thousand	87%	36%	2%/5%	12%	0.7%	10%	30%
Final Thousand	57%	34%	1%/3%	6%	0.8%	4%	16%

ISSN: 2057-2301

I explored whether there was a difference in the fruits, depending on whether or not they were spiritually nurtured. Some people find support in religious or spiritual practice or in groups of like-minded folk, enabling them to build on their experiences, whereas others go it alone. Many people changed to 'spiritual but not religious' – 36% and 34% because their experiences did not seem to tie in with what their religion taught. They felt led to a more open, spiritual approach to life. However, in the early years 30% did find their convictions strengthened but this was down to 16% in more modern times, with 10% and 4% showing no change. Some correspondents undertook a spiritual search, but very few changed religion – 2% and 1% finding Christianity and 5% and 3% finding other religions. Even fewer (less than 1%) decided against any kind of religious or spiritual response. Quite a number of correspondents became both religious and spiritual – 12% in the early years although only 6% in more recent times. Those people found their faith deepened. I found that a more in-depth engagement with life – and often death – was evident, whether this was overtly considered as spiritual or not.

As regards Changes in Religious Attitude, in a more qualitative approach, I explored whether or not correspondents received understanding or support from their religion after their experiences. I used the different categories to explore individual accounts to find out whether the fruits of experience were nurtured by religious or spiritual support. Like the soil on which the Sower's seeds fell, I evaluated whether or not the seeds were able to take root. To balance the religious and spiritual perspective, I also considered how the fruits of Intense Experiences were or were not nurtured. People reacted in a number of ways to integrating their experiences with their religious beliefs. If the parable of the Sower is borne in mind, all types of soil are evident in the Archive. Sometimes regret at the lack of fruits was expressed, a recognition that more could have been made of an experience, the seeds falling on the wayside. Some people found immediate solace from their experiences, but then did not explore further, they are stony ground, where roots are shallow. Others intended to respond more fully to their experiences, but the duties and cares of life – or life's more enticing distractions took over – the seeds falling among thorns. But it is evident that the fruits are best nurtured where the experiences take place within a religious tradition or where a deeper development of spiritual practice or awareness is found. That is the good soil, where the seeds produced grain, growing and yielding fruit thirtyfold or even a hundredfold. Continuing my empirical research, I explored Hardy's sense of purpose or new meaning in life. Where he found 18.5% (Hardy, 1979/2006, p. 29), I recorded 25%/24%. This often involved a change from depression or unexplained lack of direction to a new vision. It is significant that Hardy recorded 18.4% of RSEs being triggered by depression or despair (p. 28) as such times of trial do seem to lead to a re-evaluation of the purpose of life. Other fruits I recorded were:

ISSN: 2057-2301

Feeling loved – 22%/19% with a number of people finding this moved them to a Loving attitude – 20%/12%.

The figures in the spreadsheets indicate that almost everyone who featured in the 'loving attitude' category was also in the 'feeling loved' category, although not vice versa. This seemed to point to a link between an awareness of love, however experienced or analysed, and altruism. Once again, a slight fall in these percentages is recorded in the more recent accounts, possibly reflecting a more secular outlook.

Sense of Comfort – 44%/40%
Sense of Guidance – 43%/30%

High percentages of people felt a sense of comfort and guidance. Correspondents told of being lifted out of depression, having their fears calmed, their problems solved, of being sustained in bereavement or being aided in a spiritual search. Many seemed to be shown a path in life, and to receive assistance in taking it. People felt changed in unexpected ways, in terms of their own inner attitudes and in how they responded to outer reality. Those changes seemed significant, and I detected an underlying pattern of receiving help to cope with life leading to a change of perspective, from looking inward to outward. Putting these two changes together, I decided that rather than focus on comfort or on guidance *per se*, I would explore the direction of that guidance, which seemed to be towards universal love and compassion. In order to include mystical experiences in my research, rather than focus on different types – such as introvert or extravert, I retained my focus on the fruits. So I decided to record an awareness of unity and interconnectedness – often a consequence of NDEs too, and I recorded 21%/15%. This was a long-lasting, new way of experiencing the world, often fundamentally altering the experiencer's perspective, their views on life, death and consciousness. They were transformed and became aware of a deep connection with the natural world and with other people. I also undertook an exploration of a darker side of RSEs, as not all are pleasant. Merete Jakobsen in her Occasional Paper (3rd Series Paper 1) recorded 4.25% negative experiences. As my focus was on fruits rather than the experiences themselves, I recorded negative consequences of experience. I found 0.8% rising to 4% in the final thousand. However, further exploration led me to consider that although it would be unrealistic to imagine that all spiritual experiences are positive, it does seem to be the case, as Caroline Franks Davis found in her *Evidential Force of Religious Experience* (1986, p. 17) that many negative

ISSN: 2057-2301

experiences, especially those where we face our own shortcomings, do eventually lead to a positive outcome and spiritual fruits. As might be expected, the percentages of those considered Intense Experiences were high as I was recording the nature of the experience, rather than a category of fruits. In the first thousand I found 61%, in the final thousand 68%. It is possible that if RSEs are reconsidered and renamed IEs - intense experiences - or another secular designation – 'transformative' perhaps – and accepted as part of human nature, people without religious views would be able to accept such experiences as meaningful.

Qualitative Exploration of the Link to Altruism

The constraints of the length of the lecture resulted in a shortened exploration of the qualitative aspect of my research and the link to altruism. Beginning with the quantitative results, Hardy's third consequence of experience was Changes in Attitude to Others, which he recorded at 7.7%. This was related to my hypothesis – the turn from self-centredness to altruism – a definition of which I accepted from the Buddhist scholar Matthieu Ricard:

> Altruistic love is characterized by unconditional kindness toward *all beings*…It permeates the mind and is expressed appropriately, according to the circumstances, to answer the needs of all (Ricard, 2013/2018, pp. 25-26, his italics).

I explored the accounts and highlighted examples of the hypothesis and found 34% in support in the first thousand accounts with 0.5% opposing it, and in the final thousand 23% supporting the hypothesis and only 0.1% opposing it. As I was not sure whether there was indeed a turn to altruism, I recorded 'no turn' in the final thousand but found only 7% indicating no evidence of a change. The higher percentage in the early accounts seems to reflect a greater acknowledgement of the need to help others than is perhaps evident today. About a third of correspondents illustrated this turn to altruism in the early accounts but just under a quarter in the later sample. This may be linked to the higher percentages of Christian background in the early years, where the commandments to love God and neighbour were taken as the norm, or possibly linked to an increase in social services being available for the vulnerable and elderly today, lessening the need for individual help. I found that some accounts exhibit a clear transformation from self-centredness to altruism, as in the following account, the second in the Archive:

ISSN: 2057-2301

> I think it may be relevant to say that from 1957 to 1966 I was almost all the time very unhappy indeed. I suffered from acute pain in the back, lived in poverty, in a state of sorrow and a good deal of loneliness. I experienced unhappy relationships with relatives and neighbours and suffered from doubt in God or after life and many other troubles. In 1966, I was one day alone in the house when quite suddenly I became aware of my own attitude to life. I realised that I was wrapped up in deep self pity, that my thoughts were all for myself and my own sorrows, that I had not thought of others. I thought how others in the world suffered too. I was rather shocked at my selfish attitude and was filled with compassion for others; then, as if without thinking I knelt down in the room and made a vow to God that from then on for the rest of my life I would love and serve mankind. The following morning when I awoke I had a sudden experience, for into my mind poured knowledge (which knowledge has remained with me ever since). I knew that the love and service of mankind was the will of God for mankind…To explain my experience figuratively, it was as if all my life I had been in a darkened room and then I had suddenly walked out of it into the sunlight of day… [000002].

This extract offers a clear example of the hypothesis, showing how the correspondent's recognition that the root of her misery, both physical and psychological, was self-pity, led to an RSE and to altruism. She was comforted and received help and guidance for the rest of her life. The fruit of the experience was not only a lifting of her own unhappiness but an abrupt and lasting change, expressed in love for all. There were moving experiences of correspondents feeling filled with love, which led them to love others and to help those in need. Other accounts, particularly those of experiences of unity and interconnectedness, altered people's view of the world, linking them to everyone and everything as in this example:

> Fruits: This was experienced almost twenty years ago but I have never forgotten it. It changed my life, giving me a strong feeling of empathy for all the people around me and even all those I have never met…[from questionnaire]: it made me much more aware of the feelings and needs of other people. It made me realize that we were all part on [of] one great whole [004764].

I had decided to use the binary categories recording 'supports hypothesis' and 'opposes hypothesis' on the spreadsheets to get an understanding of the views of the correspondents. I did not find any accounts in the Archive which led to self-centredness, nor any which elicited malevolent attitudes towards others. It may be that such negative

ISSN: 2057-2301

attitudes preclude response to the Hardy Question, so that the Archive does not reflect the more selfish, even evil side of human nature. Under 'opposes hypothesis' I recorded those who mentioned that there was no turn towards altruism as a result of their experiences. But closer inspection of those accounts showed that they did not record opposition to the principle that RSEs lead to a transformation to altruism, but contained an admission that despite an RSE, there had been no change in their own attitudes or behaviour (rather like in the tow-path experience). The expectation that there would or should be a change towards altruism seemed to be universally accepted in the accounts.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I returned to the main research questions to evaluate my findings on the fruits of RSEs. It was evident that trust in a transcendent power, however conceived, whether within or beyond the individual self, helps to nurture the wide range of fruits of experience. Prayers uttered in extremis, at times without faith in whatever or whoever was appealed to, when there was simply no other way to cope, were answered – often to the surprise of the correspondent. Handing over to a higher power, with or without any certainty of a response seems to work and frequently leads to a re-evaluation of the meaning of life. One way of changing direction from self-centredness to altruism is through having the humility to recognise that one needs help in order to help others, that one's own capabilities are limited. People often find that by handing over their problems to a higher power, they are able to cope in ways beyond what they feel they could manage alone. Hardy suggested an experimental faith, sincerely placing trust in a power beyond the self. He explained that:

> On so many occasions men and women have achieved, by what they call divine help or grace, that which they, and others who knew them, would have regarded as being beyond their normal capabilities (Hardy, 1966/1978, p. 26).

The data from this study support the assumption in the literature, scholarly and religious, that altruism is an expected fruit of RSEs and in the Archive there is evidence of a turn from a focus on the self, to a concern for others. I wanted to explore whether or not people are by nature altruistic and co-operative. Although few described themselves as being self-centred before their experience, many were in personal difficulties. In those cases, the RSE seemed to liberate them by offering them comfort and often a new path in life. In my research I have found that humans seem to be compassionate by nature or at least aware of a seed of goodness within them, but that this is often hidden, submerged through force

ISSN: 2057-2301

of circumstance or personal problems. RSEs often help to resolve these issues, allowing innate altruism to emerge. So often the focus in the media and in scholarship is on the negative, reinforcing an underlying assumption that everyone is ultimately out for themselves. Of course this is often true and news reports tend to focus on tragedy and wrongdoing, but I have not found this to be the case in the Archive accounts. The seeds of RSEs, even if dormant, are able to germinate in time and bear fruit.

The Archive offers a rich database, ripe for further exploration of the meaning and value of life as reflected in personal testimonies of spiritual and religious experiences, however interpreted or named. My research indicates that some of the most profound, life-changing experiences that people have, lead them to become more loving and altruistic. These fruits of experience are significant, particularly in today's secular, sceptical, often selfish society, where instances of isolation and depression seem to be on the increase. The fruits of the religious and spiritual experiences collected in the RERC Archive seem to encourage a change of focus from 'I' to 'We.' The importance of this on a personal level and for society as a whole, is encapsulated by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and I will leave the last words to him:

> I believe that our strong focus on material development and accumulating wealth has led us to neglect our basic human need for kindness and care. Reinstating a commitment to the oneness of humanity and altruism toward our brothers and sisters is fundamental for societies and organizations and their individuals to thrive in the long run (Dalai Lama, Facebook post, February 25th 2020).

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ISSN: 2057-2301

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Exploring the Connections Between Religious Experience, Spiritualism, and Women's Rights

Sarah Porch-Lee
Independent Researcher

Applying a feminist viewpoint to an anthropological analysis of the religion of Spiritualism, the study of religious experience, and the American women's rights movement shows these worlds to be interconnected. The objective of this article is to articulate these connections by first describing the foundations of the study of religious experience and the historical background of the American Spiritualist religion and then moving into a discussion of how the women's rights movement was intertwined with Spiritualism. This piece was part of a larger research project, and the sections included here review key pieces of literature connected to religious experience and Spiritualism which reveal how vital each field has been to the aforementioned women's rights movement. Ultimately, it is revealed that the three inter-connected worlds of religious experience, Spiritualism, and the women's rights movement were largely dependent on each other for success in a kind of symbiotic relationship.

Keywords: feminist study of religion; women's mediumship experience; women's religion in Victorian America; women's rights agitation and religion; feminist religious history

Having been raised in a conservative religion that attempted exacting control over the women within its ranks, I became interested in a feminist approach to religion. I wanted to see examples of female empowerment being exhibited throughout time in religious works. Spiritualism and mediumship quickly became apparent as important vehicles for religious women to act with authority over their religious lives and to become spiritual leaders for others. Analysing the religious experiences associated with mediumship and Spiritualism shows how empowering each can be for their practitioners. This has been true throughout history, as well. This paper connects the broad academic field of religious experience to Spiritualism and the act of mediumship, while showcasing how Spiritualism

ISSN: 2057-2301

and mediumship were used in the women's rights movement and how they serve as examples of historical feminist religious experience.

This article was part of a larger study on mediumship that I conducted for my master's dissertation. That paper took a feminist anthropological approach to analyse how mediumship is experienced by practitioners. Modern American mediumship has close ties with the American religion of Spiritualism, which was integral to the women's rights movement in the United States. A review of current literature shows a fascinating background for women's mediumship, which includes William James's foundational work on religious experience and moves through the Spiritualism movement in Victorian America.

Background

Because this paper addresses the field of religious experience research, it is helpful to include here a general overview of the field itself. While the phrase 'religious experience' is a generally understood and common-enough term, the implications are somewhat more complicated on a micro level – especially when analysed within an academic framework. Rankin provides an excellent overview of the various threads of meaning that stem from the use of the term 'religious experience' (2005, p. 2). She describes the types of people who have been connected to religious experience: famous founders and teachers of the world's religions, renowned adherents to these religions (Biblical characters, gurus, and saints), and every-day religious followers (Rankin, 2005, p. 2). Yet, these are not the only ones who have experiences that might be considered 'religious.' Special experiences are also felt by 'non-religious people who have mystical or spiritual intimations' (she offers artists, musicians, and poets as examples) (Rankin, 2005, p. 2). The individuals who have religious experiences are dynamic and deserve proper representation in analysis.

The way individuals feel about their experiences is also dynamic. Religious people who have special experiences within a church setting, during sacred text readings, or merely 'in the context of a religious tradition' may tend to view their experiences as religious (Rankin, 2005, p. 4). In fact, they may view the event as validation of their religious beliefs (Rankin, 2005, p. 7). However, people of no religious category may also have unique experiences which they would never classify as 'religious' (Rankin, 2005, p. 2). Some may categorise their experience as 'paranormal,' or something out of the ordinary from everyday life (Rankin, 2005, p. 8). The complexities of the types of experiences and the beliefs of the people who have them can feel murky to a scholar

ISSN: 2057-2301

attempting analysis of a potential religious experience. Rankin offers the insightful suggestion that these experiences should be considered on 'a continuum of experiences, a range of different types of awareness of something beyond, a transcendent reality or of the divine within' (2005, p. 9). This idea can be developed to provide a clear analytical framework of mediumship experience among individuals.

In spite of a myriad of experience categories, Rankin (2005, p. 9) utilised the phrase 'religious experience' for most of her descriptions within her paper. Adopting a consistent terminology at the outset of analysis can allow a range of experiences to be considered while not reducing or explaining away a practitioner's own thoughts on an event. This terminological consistency is especially helpful for a discussion of mediumship, which has been adopted as the official practice of the Spiritualist religion, while also existing as an individual practice and experience outside of religious settings.

The Foundational Value of the Study of Religious Experience

There is overarching value in undertaking academic analysis of religious experiences. Religious differences are among the most volatile on Earth, so perhaps learning from other religions' documented experiences will allow people to settle their religious arguments (Hardy, 1997, pp. 4-5). Organisations like the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre (AHRERC) provide opportunities for this type of harmonious religious future by offering an academic holding place for important experiential records (Hardy, 1997, p. 5). Scientific methodology is being utilised within the field of religious experience to document experiences and build a written record for the field; these records can be filled in with interviews from people who constitute as 'more interesting cases' (Hardy, 1997, p. 5). Anthropologists have undertaken religious research for some time and have never found a people group without some record of religion in their culture (Rankin, 2005, p. 12). This illustrates how important record keeping is for religious studies (including the study of experience). There is much we do not understand about religion, its ontological status, or implication on our lives, and the existence of religious experience may point to a reality about which we are still learning (Rankin, 2005, p. 39). In this case, careful academic measures are imperative for the historical record. Taves (2009, pp. 139-140) concurs with the necessity of an academic approach to religious experience (but for less grandiose reasons); she hopes a record of experiences will be built through 'careful empirical studies' that will reveal which events are consistent throughout different cultures. Whether it be for world peace, the historical record, or a future database that highlights experiential consistency, a formalised academic approach to religious experience is a valuable scholastic undertaking.

ISSN: 2057-2301

William James and the Development of the Field of Religious Experience Research

The academic approach to religious experience can largely be attributed to William James. He was influenced by his prior student's work *Psychology of Religion* (by Edwin Starbuck, published in 1899) for which he wrote the foreword (Hardy, 1997, p. 2). Shortly after this influential encounter, James went on to deliver his famous series of lectures, published under the name *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (VRE) in 1902, and which is considered to be a foundational work on religious experience (Hardy, 1997, p. 2). James worked to develop an academic approach to his study of religion that would not only honour religious adherents, but also theologians and scientists, as well (Taves, 2003, p. 306). Upon the publication of these works, anthropologists were credited as the only group to actually follow the lead of James and Starbuck, as they travelled out into other cultures (for better or for worse) to study others' 'spiritual experiences' (Hardy, 1997, p. 2). It is important to note that James's work placed heavier weight on individual religious experience over corporate experience ('religious doctrine, practice, or institutions'), and this focus would continue to influence the wider western concept of religious experience, as well (Taves, 2009, p. 5). This also had related effects on western ideas about mysticism (Taves, 2009, p. 5). Spiritualism and the field of religious experience research would go on to have a symbiotic development in connection to their interest in mystical experience.

James was clear in his preference towards individual experience. He stated in the VRE that 'In critically judging the value of religious phenomena, it is very important to insist on the distinction between religion as an individual function, and religion as an institutional, corporate, or tribal product' (James, 2011, p. 278). On the one hand, he speaks of merely distinguishing one from the other, but on the other hand, he began his statement by opening a discussion of value judgements (James, 2011, p. 278). The temptation to move into value judgments of one experience over another seems to be a strong human impulse, but it is best for anthropologists to generally avoid these judgments. James then clearly ties individual experience into mystical experience with his suggestion that 'One may say truly, I think, that personal religious experience has its roots and centre in mystical states of consciousness' (2011, p. 311). He takes this further by connecting the mystical to the divine (something that would be very attractive to religious Victorian Americans) by saying:

> "This overcoming of all the usual barriers between the individual and the Absolute is the great mystic achievement. In mystic states we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and

ISSN: 2057-2301

> triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by differences of clime or creed" (James, 2011, p. 339).

Looking at religious experience with this lens certainly paints individual experience as an attractive and promising venture. However, we now understand that such broad generalisations of belief systems are not appropriate and may not always be true. In spite of his generalisations and value judgments, James's work on individual experience was connected to Spiritualism and mediumship in some interesting ways (see 'Spiritualism and its Connection to the Study of Religious Experience,' below) after a brief introduction to Spiritualism.

Spiritualism: Origins

The simple and well-known origin story of Spiritualism in the United States is that in the mid-1800s in New York, the Fox sisters began hearing rapping noises in their house. These raps were attributed to spirit communications and the Fox sisters became famous. Eventually, the religion of Spiritualism was formed and grew to extreme popularity in Victorian America as women gathered to practice séances. As time passed, Spiritualism's popularity burned out, its mediums were debunked, and it now holds a charmed place in American religious history.

In reality, the literature brings much more depth to the Spiritualist religion and proves it earned its place as a religious and social organisation woven into various aspects of Victorian American life. Taves (1999) goes into great depth describing Spiritualism's initial ties into the advent of popular psychology in the mid-1800s. As Americans' interest in psychology grew they began to consider ideas such as 'animal magnetism,' and its proponents were given to participate in new religious movements growing in the US (such as Spiritualism, Christian Science, Theosophy, and Seventh-day Adventism) (Taves, 1999, p. 124). The rise of Spiritualism came at a time when religious pluralism 'diluted the authority of competing Christian sects while the natural sciences, professionalized medicine, and literary criticism of the Bible all began to challenge religious truth claims' (Nartonis, 2010, p. 362). These trends would allow people to have more freedom in their religious ideas and choices. Spiritualists also accepted the idea of mesmeric psychology (as explanations of phenomena such as spirit rapping), and viewed trance mediums as icons of their group (Taves, 1999, pp. 163, 165). Spiritualists were not strictly focused on psychology and trance sessions, though. Like most western religions, they looked to the Bible for religious background, but also sought for 'primitive' or 'true

ISSN: 2057-2301

Christianity' - a form of pure or original Christianity that was not marred by biased doctrine or leadership (Taves, 1999, p. 186). These Spiritualists believed that their current religious experience should reflect the religious experiences previously recorded (in the Bible, for example), and that animal magnetism and psychology could offer explanations for biblical miracles (Taves, 1999, p. 186). It is worth noting here that this type of action can be attributed to toxic western tendencies to appropriate and explain cultural material found in global religious documents into western mindsets and religions.

Spiritualism's interest in primitive Christianity was also indicative of its iconic activity: spirit communication with humans (Nartonis, 2010, p. 363). The Bible is full of examples of angels speaking with humans. Taves states that Spiritualists equated angels and spirits in the Bible (1999, p. 186). Spiritualists considered spirit communication to be natural (not supernatural); they believed 'animal magnetism provided a natural doorway to the other world' (Taves, 1999, p. 166). In more common language: they posited that trance opened the door to the spirit world (Taves, 1999, p. 166). Herein lies the pull of Spiritualism for those who reject the idea that death must separate people from their loved ones (Braude, 2001, p. 202). This exciting idea exploded in popularity after the fame of the previously mentioned Fox family and their phenomena, and groups throughout the northern and eastern US began meeting to attempt these 'manifestations' for themselves (Braude, 2001, p. 19). Formal instructions began to circulate in print to aid people interested in spirit communication (Braude, 2001, p. 20). The American Spiritualist movement had truly taken off by this time.

Today, séances and spirit communication are commonly associated with non-Christian practices; however, that was not the case at the time that American Spiritualism came to popularity in the mid-nineteenth century. During its origins, Spiritualism was considered as 'a religious revival' among Protestants (Taves, 1999, p. 167). It sought to challenge the formal nature of existing churches, and instead promoted its own brand of gatherings: 'circles, Sunday lectures, and camp meetings' (Taves, 1999, p. 167). These types of assemblies seem less formal and were possible to conduct outside of a typical church building. In fact, it is noted that Spiritualists discussed separating from their original churches (Taves, 1999, p. 167). This indicates Spiritualists could be fully encapsulated within other churches, and Spiritualism was such a sweeping movement that they had enough converts to consider launching out on their own.

Spiritualists in the American South commonly considered themselves to be Christians; they kept their actions honed on spirit communication, rather than any sweeping religious or social changes that northern Spiritualists promoted (Braude, 2001, p. 30). Ultimately, Spiritualism was quite compatible with socially normalised Christian religions. Speaking with deceased loved ones did not break any rules of Christianity; it

ISSN: 2057-2301

was only when Spiritualists attempted to apply lessons from spirit communications that they were challenged (Braude, 2001, p. 43).

Spiritualism was actively engaged with the religious ideas of its surrounding physical environment, as well. As mentioned above, Spiritualists considered their newly formulated concepts as adequate explanations for ancient religious experiences described in the Bible (Taves, 1999, p. 186). This extended into their desire to find one 'essence of religion' that applied to all religions; indeed, they believed Spiritualism was the answer, and that it underpinned every other religion (Taves, 1999, pp. 195, 198). Spiritualism promoted a novel religious concept that there existed 'a universal faith in spirit communication through "mediums," which, in their view, characterized all religions' (Taves, 1999, p. 349). Taves attributes this to a specified religious theory developed by Spiritualists (1999, p. 198). Unfortunately, this encourages religious reductionism and appropriation of marginalised groups; nevertheless, this was part of the originating considerations of American Spiritualism. British Spiritualist James Burns believed 'Indian spirits' had influenced American Spiritualism (Taves, 1999, p. 196). Spiritualism also found adherents in African slaves held captive in the southern U.S., because spirit possession and mediumship were already commonly practiced in their home cultures (Braude, 2001, p. 28). Although groups are always influenced by the people and environments surrounding them, it is important to acknowledge when a white social organisation (like a religious group) takes from a marginalised and antagonised minority group without clear permission or cohesive inclusive measures.

Having looked at the environment and the cultural trends that fostered interest in Spiritualism, I now turn to Spiritualism itself and what is offered adherents. At its heart, Spiritualism was built as a religion with the goal of showing the 'immortality of the soul;' the proof of which was revealed through speaking with spirits of the deceased (Braude, 2001, p. 2). There were several types of interest in Spiritualism which all worked together to bring it into the common culture by the mid-1800s. People came to Spiritualism because they found comfort after a loved one died, while others came to it for entertainment value (Braude, 2001, p. 2). Spiritualism seemed to offer evidence of immortality and introduced an appealing option in lieu of the existing religious institutions (Braude, 2001, p. 2). 'It held two attractions that proved irresistible to thousands of Americans: rebellion against death and rebellion against authority' (Braude, 2001, p. 2). Spiritualism's original popularity in America is credited to three causes: 1) interest in processing grief by speaking with the deceased, 2) an interest in empirical proof of the soul's immortality, and 3) a dismissal of evangelicalism and Calvinism as interest grew in liberal religious teaching (Braude, 2001, pp. 33-34). Spiritualism gave fresh opportunities

ISSN: 2057-2301

to people seeking religious teachings and communities who were open to these new ideas.

Spiritualism also had a unique attraction for women. Originally, people learned about Spiritualism in homes throughout their community, and the mediums were usually women (or girls) (Braude, 2001, p. 21). This came at a time when women were not typically allowed into leadership of anything (especially religious institutions). While this openness to female religious leadership seems revolutionary (and it was, in some ways), it was not quite as progressive as it appears on the surface. Women were (and still are) taught by western society to be caretakers; and this learned role was part of the reason why women were interested in Spiritualism (Scheitle, 2005, p. 239). Additionally, nineteenth century American ideals equated 'the qualities of piety with the qualities of femininity'; therefore, it was quite natural for Spiritualists to view women as ideal candidates for mediumship (Braude, 2001, p. 24). More acutely, women were also conditioned into use of their emotions and 'non-rational, or intuitive, forms of knowledge' (Scheitle, 2005, p. 239). All valuable skills for the mediumship role and the communicative trance experience.

Perhaps due in part to the new opportunities for women, Spiritualism drew in social activists who felt nineteenth-century society needed changes and called out the religious establishment as oppressive (Braude, 2001, p. 2). Mediums were known to speak on women's rights during trances (Braude, 2001, p. 79). The Spiritualists' calls for social change did not end with women's rights; they famously promoted abolition of slaves, as well (Braude, 2001, p. 29). Its abolitionist connections possibly reduced Spiritualism's popularity in the American South, where slaveholding was incredibly lucrative for the white population (Braude, 2001, p. 30). Spiritualism's popularity either benefited or declined depending on its surrounding social structure. Nartonis measured the growth of Spiritualism through a study of its periodicals and found its original ascent was over by 1873 (Nartonis, 2010, p. 364). Braude states that Spiritualism began to grow again in the 1880s, but it was at the centre of the women's rights movement any more (2001, p. 192). Spiritualism was no longer considered radical as an institution (Braude, 2001, p. 192). Although it did not have a permanent position as an essential social tool, Spiritualism's effect on women's autonomous religious experience was nevertheless tangible.

An Introduction to Spiritualism

Spiritualism holds a special place in American religious history. It began in the US in 1848 and thrived in a world that had started to resist violent Protestant doctrines of judgement

ISSN: 2057-2301

and eternal damnation (Braude, 2000, p. xi). Spiritualism's religious activities and theology were very unique at the time and provided a more encouraging view of death for religious seekers (Braude, 2000, p. xi). As a religion, Spiritualism is attributed to American origins and Spiritualist churches still exist throughout the US (Braude, 2000, p. xi). Although it is credited as American, Spiritualism views itself as a kind of religious umbrella that uses and includes religious practices and beliefs from other religions around the globe (Braude, 2000, p. xii). In a (now twenty-year old) study on Cassadaga (a large Spiritualist group that still exists in central Florida), Braude found that the group has focused its teachings on historical Spiritualist leanings: that of healing, relationships with deceased indigenous people, and utilising 'Asian wisdom' (2000, p. xii). It was not possible to confirm with Cassadaga whether this appropriation of other cultural activities continues, or if they include indigenous groups in their work. It is important to acknowledge that it is unethical for white Americans to non-consensually appropriate the identities and religious beliefs of minority groups and global religions - especially in profit generating activities which most local Spiritualist churches promote. This is particularly relevant to modern-day institutional Spiritualism, wherein mediumship is gate-kept behind paywalls. Most religious activities in local Florida Spiritualist churches are accessed via donation or registered fee access, which is a structural complexity of Spiritualism.

Institutional structure has long been a matter of contention for Spiritualism. This structural difficulty creates problems for scholars who wish to study Spiritualism, because there is ambiguity over who or what can be categorised as 'Spiritualist' (Braude, 2001, p. 7). Historically, Spiritualists hosted conventions, but they did not initially form a denominational style church organisation (Braude, 2001, p. 7). This made group promotion problematic, because they did not have official buildings and could not pay lecturers (Braude, 2001, p. 163). Over time, various Spiritualists (typically men who desired leadership roles) started calling for structure that would encourage unity (Braude, 2001, p. 163). The calls for structure resulted in the formation of the American Association of Spiritualists in 1865 (Braude, 2001, pp. 165-166). In spite of new organisational structure, a lot of Spiritualists (who had left rigid churches behind) were not interested in being a part of yet another restrictive and formalised religious group (Braude, 2000, p. xii). Another significant organisation was founded in 1893: the National Spiritualist Association (NSA) (Carroll, 2000, p. 21). The NSA has faced internal conflict over the direction of the group; its members have critiqued its focus on proving scientific validity and séance activity to the detriment of spiritual and philosophical development (Carroll, 2000, p. 22). Braude thusly sums up the internal Spiritualist struggle, 'The conflict between the desire to protect spiritual freedom and individual conscience and the need to organize to promote the faith has plagued Spiritualism from its earliest days' (2000, p. xii). In addition,

ISSN: 2057-2301

Spiritualism has struggled with fiscal viability, disagreements between adherents, accusations of fraud, and the desire to prove its scientific validity (Carroll, 2000, p. 22). Ultimately, the division is between the experience of the individual versus the requirements of institutional survival. Interestingly, this difference between individual and corporate religion is considered vital to the very essence of the study of religious experience.

Apart from its organisational woes, the activities within Spiritualism are fascinating to consider. Hunter (2018, loc. 2688) notes that Spiritualism provides 'a particularly interesting case study in the "domestication" of the supernatural' as the movement evolved from randomised rapping activity in New York to some form of organised mediumship services in churches throughout the US and the UK. Spiritualist churches now look very much like the surrounding Protestant churches in America: the authority of the Bible is touted and the service flows through hymn singing, prayers, and sermons (Carroll, 2000, p. 16). Yet, there is still a distinct Spiritualist activity included in its meetings: mediumship (Hunter, 2018, loc. 2702). Additionally, the sermon material itself is exclusive to Spiritualism because it cites their own doctrine and may be presented by a person in trance state (Carroll, 2000, p. 16). Although Spiritualism has prided itself on global religious commonalities, it still retains a certain uniqueness in the US.

Not only is this uniqueness directly connected to the field of religious experience research, but it is also relevant to the emerging field of supernatural or paranormal studies. Religious work like that produced by Spiritualism falls within the interests of an academic approach to the paranormal. In a discussion on physical mediumship, Hunter discusses the downfall of the practice into ill repute; however, he posits that anthropology can act as a witness to document its recent return to the public interest (2018, loc. 1078). As an academic field, anthropology can provide proper documentation and analysis for mediumship activities (Hunter, 2018, loc. 1078). Supernatural and paranormal experience need not be avoided or criticised in academic settings, but rather can be engaged with (refer to Bowie, 2010, p. 4). Bowie further advises that there is not one standard by which to measure the idea of 'normal' or 'natural' (Bowie, 2010, p. 5). Using such an open-minded approach aids an anthropologist in her work with groups or people who may differ from a cultural majority.

The structural difficulties felt by Spiritualism over the years have an interesting connection to experience. During its origins, 'individual freedom in all things' was a primary concern for Spiritualism, and this had direct consequences on their inability to form group cohesion or cooperation (Braude, 2001, p. 163). However, this focus on individual experience is commonly considered to be a hallmark of both paranormal experience and religious experience. Hunter suggests that paranormal phenomena are

ISSN: 2057-2301

accessible to all, and that participation is the key to this experience (2020, p. 70). He states, 'This would appear to be a fundamental aspect of the paranormal in general, it requires our participation in the moment to be experienced, whether spontaneously or in a ritualised context' (Hunter, 2020, p. 70). Participation is enacted by individuals and occurs at an individual level. Even within corporate groups, like Spiritualist churches, it is individuals who have experiences. Mediumship may be promoted by Spiritualism, but ultimately it is practiced by the medium and the sitter. Spiritualism is an interesting corporate vehicle of mediumship, but mediumship is an individual experience. Even so, groups of mediums have organised to promote ideals and guarantee the success of mediumship for future practitioners.

Spiritualism and its Connection to the Study of Religious Experience

At the heart of this paper lies the field of religious experience research. In this section, a review of the academic discussion of religious experience's connection to mediumship will be undertaken. This type of work is generally unique to the fields of anthropology and religious experience research, since, according to McGuire, 'Thus far, only a few scholars have given serious research attention to religious experience' (2008, p. 94). She continues to explain that anthropological studies, specifically, have only focused on a few types of phenomena experiences that typically fall within the category of 'altered states of consciousness' (McGuire, 2008, p. 94). Therefore, anthropological analysis of religious experience in connection to mediumship and gendered issues is a unique and exciting opportunity with which to engage.

The idea of 'authenticity' was a key concept in the development of religious experience study. William James famously referred to 'the fruits of religious experience' as determinant factors of authenticity (Rankin, 2005, p. 32). The debate over authenticity of religious experience was woven into the origins of Spiritualism. In the nineteenth century, religious movements and groups disagreed 'over the legitimacy of religious experience' – specifically within groups that engaged in 'visionary' and mesmerist experiences versus formal church traditions, as various groups tried to explain away the experiences of other groups (Taves, 1999, p. 164). The latter activity is still a common practice among American religions (especially traditional evangelical groups). Spiritualists engaged in this legitimacy/proof debate as well. They attempted to prove their authenticity by appropriating biblical references into their doctrines - for example, they taught that spirit communication was noted in the Bible (Taves, 1999, p. 186). Not only did they attach the authenticity of their religious experience to the Bible, they also showed that their form of 'biblical' religious experience could still occur (during their trance

ISSN: 2057-2301

sessions) and was not relegated to the Bible (Taves, 1999, p. 186). There was also a driving trend at the time to connect religion and science - a desire to prove the veracity of religious beliefs through a scientific framework (Taves, 1999, p. 349). Generally, academics who study religious experience today no longer attempt to reduce religion or science into the same box, yet religions themselves may still attempt to do so. The Southern Cassadaga Spiritualist Camp (SCSC) (located in central Florida) still promotes its beliefs as scientifically proven (SCSC, n.d.). Still, McGuire cautions her readers to be mindful that 'religious traditions' are social constructions and no specific religions should be described as 'unitary, unchanging, pure, or authentic' (2008, p. 200). The implications for religious experience research are to keep an open mind and to view the field broadly (through an interdisciplinary eye, if possible).

This fascination with combining science and religion tied Spiritualists into the very formation of the academic field of religious experience research itself. Spiritualism's explanation of 'true religion' as inclusive of spirits and mediums, brought an original amalgamation between religion and historical works on magic and enthusiasm (as a particular action) (Taves, 1999, p. 180). This was considered to be a psychologically based understanding of religion (especially Christianity); this new psychologically religious approach set the stage for serious religious experience academics such as William James to expound upon in the future (Taves, 1999, p. 180). (Of relevance to anthropology: Spiritualism inspired famed anthropologist Edward B. Tylor's materialist religious theory (Taves, 1999, p. 180). Even today, learning about New Age spiritual concepts (including modern-day Spiritualism) takes the student back into the nineteenth-century where they must absorb the influence of James who was duly influenced by historical Spiritualism (Pearson, 2003, p. 418). It was the Spiritualists' use of trance, opening a path 'to the other world,' that encouraged them to claim empiricism within religious experience; an experience that they viewed psychologically, rather than theologically (Taves, 1999, p. 167). The popularity of Spiritualism was acutely responsible for the opportunities later undertaken to combine religious experience and psychology in academia.

Spiritualism was grounded in the idea that they were relevant to all other existing religions. A current lens may show this concept is rooted in appropriative, white, colonial language (and this could be true). Spiritualists may have another belief at the heart of their internalised understanding of themselves, though. Spiritualists did not view themselves as exclusive or elite, rather they taught spirit communication (their identifying experience) 'required no special knowledge, and that it was equally accessible to everybody' (Braude, 2001, pp. 178, 179). This open-handed approach to religious experience is reflected in McGuire's study of religious experience: she questions the validity of considering traditional religious experience norms as more religious than private, personal religious

ISSN: 2057-2301

experiences (2008, p. 88). She critiques academia's favouritism of formalised religions over other spiritual practices that may be found outside of established religious institutions (McGuire, 2008, p. 96). Spiritualism does have formal church settings, yet mediumship is an experience that can be felt outside a formal religious building or gathering. The experiences of these mediums are just as valid and important as those of mediums working in a Spiritualist building. McGuire does not accept that individual religious practice is 'anomalous,' and she criticises the belief that the 'definitional boundaries that distinguish religious practices of one religious group from another's' causes them to be fundamentally oppositional (2008, p. 186). From this standpoint, Spiritualism's religious inclusiveness both promotes their own ideas, while simultaneously allowing individuals to flourish within its walls.

The Individual Nature of the Mediumship Experience

The power of individual experience is made evident in Spiritualism. It has been the driving force of Spiritualism through the years, which has also limited the ability of structural and organising forces to unite it in a clear, doctrinal way (Carroll, 2000, p. 22). On an individual level, mediumship is open to everyone and anyone – with correct training; however, there is no cohesive and overriding method for mediumship training (Emmons, 2000, p. 76). This lack of structure and information will drastically affect individual experience.

This discord between individuals and corporate entity has been evident even in my own fieldwork with Spiritualist mediums. Local corporate entities were either dismissive of attempts for academic observation and discussion or were too disorganised to respond in a cohesive manner. However, individually, mediums were free to interact as they choose – while still being gate-kept by disinterested "corporate" individuals. Systemically, Spiritualism is not set up for longevity in a world where electronic organisation and religious open-handedness are expected (and therefore necessary) for survival.

On the individual level, western mediums risk personal judgment and marginalisation; they struggle to find environments that allow them to thrive (Emmons, 2000, p. 80). Because of the unwelcoming nature of their surrounding social environment, mediums find encouragement by looking to the individual experiences of other mediums (Emmons, 2000, p. 80). On a micro level, it is the experience of the individual that allows mediums to thrive. McGuire further stresses the importance of individual experience for religious study; she encourages research into the individual as opposed to the generic religious experience expected by a corporate religious organisation (2008, p. 4). James also stressed the importance of individual religious experience in *The Varieties of*

ISSN: 2057-2301

Religious Experience, especially in lieu of corporate experience. According to these ideas, the experiences of mediums as individuals (in contrast to the corporate expectations of a Spiritualist church) is worthy of analysis.

Spiritualism's Connection to the Women's Rights Movement

An integral theme in this paper is the connection of the formulation of women's rights agitation to Spiritualism and American mediums. This connection fosters interest in feminist research on each of these topics separately: religious experience, women's rights, mediumship, and Spiritualism. These interconnected topics each have a place here because of their impressive influences on each other (especially in the US). This section will analyse Spiritualism's effect on women's rights in the US, and will then undertake a deeper investigation into women's (typically unequal) experiences with religion, at large. Although women's rights are topics of historical significance, women are *still* working to improve their rights in the American religious scene. Again, the confluence of topics here illuminates connected areas of interest: historical activity with modern day work which remains somewhat understudied.

A Social Move Towards Equality

Spiritualism not only provided women with religious opportunities, it also specifically worked to improve women's day-to-day existence. According to Braude (2001), Spiritualists worked to emancipate women in relation to restrictive dress codes, negative medical experiences, economic disparity, and the socially implied marriage obligations of the day. Nineteenth-century Spiritualists understood that women's fashions not only restricted bodily movements, but could also cause harm to internal organs, and they worked to change these dress expectations (Braude, 2001, p. 142). Spiritualists resisted medical ideas that women were 'encouraged…to view themselves as weak' and restrictions that kept women out of paid healthcare work; they also worked with other agitators who sought to transform women's health treatment (Braude, 2001, p. 142).

Spiritualists were also involved in a 'marriage revolution' which taught that 'marriage commonly resulted from parental or social pressure, women's lack of economic alternatives, and men's lust' (Braude, 2001, p. 119). While supporting marriages built on love, they 'condemned the conditions imposed on such unions by a society that made women subservient to men' (Braude, 2001, p. 118). Mediumship provided a direct response to women's economic problems, as some women found financial success

ISSN: 2057-2301

through it (Braude, 2001, p. 118). On the other hand, Spiritualism grew in initial popularity at the hands of unpaid female mediums (Braude, 2001, p. 21). Ultimately, Spiritualism played an active part in working for women's equality through many aspects of their lived, day-to-day experiences, and by the end of the nineteenth-century (when Spiritualism's popularity had diminished), many women had found paying jobs and were part of a growing cultural revolution which provided 'social and legal equality with men' (Sered, 2011, p. 44).

These issues discussed above contributed to the unequal status that women receive in the US Some of these areas continue to plague women (restrictive dress codes that are expensive and uncomfortable to maintain still exist in educational institutions and work places), unequal pay for women (risking economic dependence on others), and regressive health care complications relating to reproductive rights or inability to access affordable healthcare.

The Threatening Feminine

Spiritualist women found cultural and religious liberation and opportunities during the exciting days of nineteenth-century America. Yet, this liberating wave of women's rights activity had its limits. A 'national moral panic' had been moving across the US which focused on Spiritualists and various of their activities; this social upset resulted in the Comstock Law – considered to be a landmark law in censorship (McGarry, 2000, p. 9). By the late 1800s, the Spiritualist desires to abolish slavery and engage with women's rights, free love, and dress reform had been demonised enough to create a kind of culture war that resulted in censorship so strict that it worked its way into US law (McGarry, 2000, p. 10). Spiritualists, known to be prolific publishers of printed works, felt the brunt of the censorship law, which specifically addressed and regulated printed material sent through US mail (McGarry, 2000, p. 13). Women's interests have long been regulated in both public and private settings, and the creation of laws that allow prosecution and legal consequences continue to oppress women in the US.

At the same time legal struggles began to plague certain Spiritualists and their publications. Female leaders within their ranks began to experience a loss of public reputation, as well. This loss of reputation seems to be connected to the social construct that women are emotionally unstable and to the religious idea that women are sexual temptresses. This was part of the loss Spiritualism felt in the religious scene of Victorian America, specifically through the leadership of Helena Blavatsky and Victoria Woodhull (Braude, 2001, p. 191; McGarry, 2000). These two women were famous Spiritualist

ISSN: 2057-2301

leaders, but by the late 1800s their reputations were diminished so dramatically that it cast doubt that women, in general, had the capabilities to ever be religious leaders (Braude, 2001, p. 191). In Woodhull's case, her public disapproval resulted in the Comstock censorship law discussed above (McGarry, 2000). Both women displayed their sexuality to the public; while this is morally neutral today, it provided reason for public censure at the time (Braude, 2001, p. 191). Blavatsky and Woodhull confirmed the public's worst fears about the dangers of exposing female sexuality to the amoral public sphere. In the popular mind, the passivity believed to be inherent in women's nature made Woodhull and Blavatsky pawns for the spread of licentiousness, not vehicles for revelation (Braude, 2001, p. 191).

The concept of 'woman as temptress' was eating away at the female religious empowerment that had begun to be publicly embraced. Additionally, Braude finds that Woodhull and Blavatsky were focused on their own, individual leadership opportunities, rather than working for general female leadership liberation (2001, p. 191). While this is not necessarily a shortcoming in either case, it does speak to the lack of intersectionality that has plagued feminist work throughout its time in the American social and political scene. Ultimately, Braude believes by that time, Spiritualism was no longer a central force for women in either the political or religious realms (2001, p. 191). Some of its female leaders were being subjected to too much public censure, while these same leaders were not focused on the wider goals of women's rights agitation. This is not to say that Spiritualism, in general, fell away from its humanitarian work, though; Spiritualists remained consistent in their support of free love, racial equality, and rejection of Christianity's hierarchical divisions – which separated them from the larger group of American suffragettes who toned down their messages in order to be heard by society (Braude, 2001, p. 200). In conclusion, two major social complications contributed to a decline in Spiritualism's organisational effect on the women's rights movement (as cited above): public perception of 'woman as temptress' and its leaders' lack of cooperation with the suffragettes' specific goals.

Spiritualism and Women's Rights Agitation

The connection that Spiritualism has to women's religious and daily empowerment has been made, and it may now be interesting to consider why Spiritualism had these effects on women's lives and how they occurred. Women's rights agitators were closely aligned with Spiritualism when both movements started and grew (Braude, 2001, p. 3). Winkel comments that, 'religion is discernible as a social "variable" that is contingent on "culture"; in other words, religion is a social sphere that mirrors socio-cultural beliefs and

ISSN: 2057-2301

(gender) codes like any other social field' (2019, p. 247). With this consideration, it is evident why most pre- and early nineteenth-century religions reflected subjugating roles for women just as wider cultural norms did. Yet, the mid-nineteenth century introduced some unique changes for women in both culture and religion; it seems both areas of change fed off of, and encouraged, the other to continue. Braude credits Spiritualism as possibly being the most effective promoter of the original women's rights movement in the US (2001, p. 57). Specifically, Spiritualists clearly condemned established social hierarchies of the day (i.e. authority structures of slavery, church domination of members, males above females, and even that of government above citizenry) (Braude, 2001, p. 56). These condemnations were quite radical for the time (and still are); Spiritualism easily delivered a 'religious anarchism' that meshed well with extreme reformists (Braude, 2001, p. 62). As a religious movement, Spiritualism gave women's rights speakers a place to find an audience and an entire community that was ready to act (Braude, 2001, p. 80). These agitators fought for the end of slavery, the rights of children (who were used as labourers), marriage reform, and socialism (Braude, 2001, p. 3). Because they centred their beliefs on the relevancy of the individual as a receptor of truth, Spiritualists adopted an individualistic ideology which could not accept the domination of one person over another (in any realm: political, social, or religious) (Braude, 2001, p. 6). In agitation, Spiritualism seemed to both work with a wider social movement (the fight for women's rights) and provide that movement with ideology and enough participants who would cause the movement to succeed.

This is not to say that Spiritualists or women's rights advocates were anti-American. Patriotism has always been (and continues to be) a required quality in Americans and their movements. Julia Schlesinger, a prominent nineteenth-century author, has been credited with noting 'that spiritualism [sic] is essentially more patriotic than typical nationalism, and that part of the patriotism of spiritualism [sic] is its commitment to women's rights' (Youngkin, 2010, p. 283). With such extreme positions being connected to their ranks, it would have been necessary to tie American patriotism closely to their. movement's identity. Spiritualism inspired so much empowerment for women, that Braude identifies the women's suffrage movement as having 'benefited more than any other movement' from this specific empowerment (2001, p. 192). It accomplished this by being the first to create large numbers of women who spoke publicly and who led in religious settings (Braude, 2001, p. 201). Although today women's religious options are still limited in the US, women's suffrage has continued to be honoured as a majorly important moment in US history.

ISSN: 2057-2301

Conclusion

What can be seen through this analysis of religious experience research, Spiritualism, mediumship, and their connections to American women's rights is that each realm was fully realised due to the existence and influence of the others. The original, academic study of religious experience was due (at least in part) to William James's interest in Spiritualism. It was the existence of Spiritualism which allowed the American women's rights movement to flourish in its early days. Taking a feminist approach to the study of religion shows that when religious experience is fully realised on an individual level it should bring individual empowerment and – hopefully – the ability to find equality in a supportive community as evidenced through Spiritualism's historic origins.

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ISSN: 2057-2301

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ISSN: 2057-2301

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ISSN: 2057-2301

The Levitations of St Joseph of Copertino: Explained?

Bob Rickard
Independent Researcher

A Life in the Air

This article concerns a critique by the author Joe Nickell (Nickel, 2018) of Michael Grosso's two books on Joseph of Copertino: *The Man Who Could Fly: St Joseph of Copertino and The Mystery of Levitation* (2016); and *Wings of Ecstasy: Domenico Bernini's Vita of St Joseph of Copertino* (2017). Dr. Grosso (1937-) is an independent philosopher who taught humanities at several New York universities and writes on religious and other aspects of consciousness research.

The idea of human levitation is, by its very nature, subversive and surreal. The phenomenon – if we temporarily accept such a thing in order to examine it – rests upon eye-witness testimony that the human body is seen to rise into the air, hover, or even move some distance on a trajectory. At the same time, the idea of levitation as a symbol of transcendence is both profound and ancient. Narrative accounts of it, usually by surprised witnesses, have been reported from most cultures and ages. Despite this historical and cultural persistence, there has been little scholarly discourse about such reports, leaving unresolved the puzzle of how to reconcile eye-witness evidence with the common experience of everyday physics.

Whether 'real' or imagined, in many societies, levitation is the prerogative of a shaman, ascetic or holy person; a token of divine favour; and sometimes imitated by magicians and occult adepts. In the context of anthropology, it is seen as a component of a shaman's journey (in both the symbolic and mystical senses). In the context of modern scientific discourse, however, it is aggressively dismissed as an embarrassing error made by the ill-informed, the piously credulous or the deliberately fraudulent.

In my own research into the subject, it was inevitable that I would encounter the levitations associated with the seventeenth century Catholic Saint, Giuseppe Desa of Copertino (1603-1663) – to whom I will refer as Joseph – because of the exceptional nature of the deposed evidence. Joseph is of particular interest because the three major

ISSN: 2057-2301

scholars of historical levitation narratives – Josef Görres (1776-1848),[1] Fr. Herbert Thurston (1856–1939),[2] and Olivier Leroy (1876-1976)[3] – all agree that Joseph is the single most impressive example of a Christian levitator; a man, of whom it was said, "spent half his life in ecstasy in the air" (Cendrars, 1949, p. 137).[4]

His phenomena, as reported in the narratives about him, have two main interrelated components: the levitant is typically experiencing an ecstatic state of consciousness, and yet, by some unknown process, the elevation, it is claimed, is observed to be enacted bodily in our consensual reality. I offer no theories of my own here; there are, currently, only guesses and suppositions about the nature of that hypothetical process. We understand why skeptics and scientists regard this contentious subject with suspicion. Reports of it are, like those of many anomalous phenomena, exceedingly rare. It also seems to manifest spontaneously; therefore, first-hand and eyewitness accounts of it must be treated with appropriate care. In Joseph's remarkable case, however, his levitations occurred with some consistency for more than three decades, providing many opportunities for good observation and documentation.

His witnesses were of two kinds. The first were from the religious community in which Joseph was embedded, for they were able to observe the phenomenon at close quarters. This familiarity adds considerable value to their testimony and invites closer examination. Testimony from the other group – occasional visitors and the like who, despite having an expectation of witnessing a levitation (due to Joseph's fame), were nevertheless taken by surprise by the sudden and intense nature of his flight. These must inevitably be treated with greater caution.

Of course, reliability and accuracy are important considerations, especially with historical documentation. Most biographical accounts of historical saints were compiled long after they died and often include elements of mythologising, so it is only right to test their veracity. Fr. Thurston, a Jesuit scholar, acknowledged this in his influential chapter on levitations. He highlights the problem that arises when:

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[1] Görres – a historian and philosopher of religion published his four volume encyclopedia *Die Christliche Mystik* between 1836-1842. It was reprinted in French in 1802 as *La Mystique Divine, Naturelle et Diabolique*, as five volumes. I have used second French edition, published in 1861.

[2] Thurston first wrote on the subject in a two-part article in the Catholic periodical *The Month* (April and May 1919), which Leroy credits with inspiring his own efforts. Both parts were united to become the first chapter in Thurston's pioneering study *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952).

[3] Olivier Leroy's survey – *Levitation* (1928) – published in French and English in the same year – is reckoned to have the most comprehensive list of levitants. Leroy is also significant because he devised and applied a five-point test for assessing the evidential value of historical narrative accounts. His biographical dates (absent from the literature) were acquired from the general catalogue of the Bibliothèque nationale de France.

[4] I used the Paragon House edition *Sky: Memoires* (1992) p. 78; translated by Nina Rootes.

ISSN: 2057-2301

> …the marvellous event, deposed to by a single witness in extreme old age who had heard the story in his youth from some third person unnamed, is set down as a fact with the same trustful confidence with which the biographer records the details attested independently by a dozen different contemporaries who had lived in daily intercourse with the Saint and had been the spectators of all his actions (Thurston, 1952, p. 2).[5]

In Joseph's case, however, the key sources easily fulfil the second part of Thurston's prescription; eyewitness. Eyewitness accounts were recorded during Joseph's lifetime by people who knew him well. Joseph's case is also remarkable for involving 35 years of nearly continuous eye-witness testimony. The number of levitations (in their various forms) attributed to him far exceeds that of any other saint in the extensive annals of Christian hagiography.

In reviewing Joseph's levitations for his encyclopaedia of Christian mysticism, the German historian and philosopher Görres declared that, as far as he knew, "with no historical fact has so much care been taken to bring the truth to light" (Görres, 1861). A more recent agreement came from a review in the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* by the philosopher and former head of the Parapsychological Association, Professor Stephen Braude, who wrote: "the case of St. Joseph provides the earliest outstanding evidence for human levitation and quite possibly the best from any era" (Braude, 2016).

Joseph Desa and his Elevations

Joseph's spontaneous ecstasies began "immediately after his ordination" as a priest at the age of 25, in March 1628 (*Acta Sanctorum*, cited by Thurston, 1952, p.101), and increased gradually to occur nearly every day – sometimes several times a day – until his death in 1663 (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p. 272). These levitations would proceed from a singular state of consciousness, described in the accounts as a rapture (*rati*). Joseph's diarist and close friend, Don Arcangelo Rosmi (d.1654) – who stayed at the Franciscan sanctuary in Assisi for most of Joseph's 14 years there (ie. 1639–1653) – reckoned that he

[5] There can be no more relevant example of Thurston's first type – ie. the absence of hagiographical rigor – than in the life of St Francis of Assisi (c.1181–1226). Despite earnest statements by his later biographers – written around half a century after Francis' death – that he levitated during ecstatic prayers, both Thurston and Leroy found no evidence in the earliest accounts of his life that Francis had risen into the air. Yet the idea persists that he had and is still being stated as a fact on some Catholic websites today, eg: the *Franciscanmedia* webpage; see: tinyurl.com/c6xfawjx .

ISSN: 2057-2301

had recorded around 70 of these elevations by Joseph during that period alone (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p.137). When Joseph was moved to Pietrarubbia his ecstasies were observed daily; and, again, in his stay at Fossombrone, these ecstasies were described as “uninterrupted” (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, pp. 97,101-104).

In emphasising this remarkable continuity, Abbot Rosmi makes an extraordinary statement: he felt that it would be superfluous to record any more of Joseph’s elevations because they had become *so frequent and so familiar*. He reasoned that “if [70] is not proof enough another three hundred would be meaningless.”[6] Many of these events would have been in the privacy of Joseph’s tiny cell where, according to Bernini. “Every time he would say his devotions he would go up." Who knows what important details have been lost to this unfortunate (but quite understandable) decision?

By the time Joseph died, Rosmi’s 70 examples were certainly exceeded. The modern Franciscan scholar Fr. Gustavo Parisciani, who studied the witness depositions in the Vatican archive for Joseph’s time in Assisi, noted that they included at least 150 eye-witness accounts (Grosso, 2017, pp. 224-225). This is just a fraction of Joseph’s almost daily manifestations over 35 years, and many of them – as the pictorial references remind us – were outside, in the open, and in the midst of many people.

Joseph was also observed levitating nearly every time he said Mass. On other occasions his levitations were spontaneous, apparently triggered by his heightened aesthetic sensitivity. Whenever he noticed something beautiful or heard some pious phrase or inspiring music, he was thrust instantly into an intense ecstasy. Invariably, as he rose into the air, he would utter a great cry – more of a scream than a shout – which frightened onlookers. Many of these first-hand narratives describe clear observations made under good conditions by different types of observers in a variety of environments and were deposed under solemn oath by serving Catholics, during his life or within a few years of his death.[7]

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[6] Arcangelo Rosmi*, I tre diari* (1645-1652) *dell’abate Arcangelo Rosmi su san Giuseppe da Copertino*, (‘The three diaries (1645-1652) of the abbot Arcangelo Rosmi on St. Joseph of Copertino’), sometimes translated as *Diary of 14 year tenure in Assissi*. This diary was included with Nuti’s *Vita*, in Fra Giuseppe Desa da Copertino, *Proceso Assisano di Beaificazione* (1666) published in 2013 by the Historical Society of Lecce.

[7] A witness would be cautioned: “whether everything he had written might be nothing more than an hallucination, or imagination, and the transport he had glimpsed simply a reflection of the sunlight, an optical illusion or the result of some other natural cause” and again “warned to take extreme care not to exaggerate the facts out of a misguided sense of devotion, and to describe them without altering them in any way, since saints have no need for their causes to be upheld by misrepresentations of this kind” and finally, before signing asked “if he wished to modify any part of his deposition” (Cendrars, 1992, pp. 96-97). The result is somebody’s carefully considered statement of what he believed he saw.

ISSN: 2057-2301

These oaths are significant because they were usually administered by a person's Superior or Confessor under solemn caution of eternal peril to their souls. In the Catholic milieu of those days there could hardly be a more serious vow. It was common, too, for such evidence to be sealed until after the death of both the witness and the levitant. Therefore, Fr Thurston argued, this evidence was "often more remarkable, and notably better attested, than any to be found in the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*."

Send in the Clown

It is not my intention, here, to make a case for the reality of levitation; instead, I argue that the historical narratives of Joseph's elevations are of a quality that deserves an impartial discussion. My critique was precipitated by two short articles by Joe Nickell for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI),[8] in which, without much research and with assumptions beforehand, he dismisses the voluminous and complex subject of human levitation, and Joseph's elevations in particular.

In both of his articles, Nickell makes it clear that he attaches very little importance to the authority or the reliability of the extant documentation of Joseph's elevations. In fact, he employs the same rhetorical strategy that CSI publicly deplores in its campaign against the proponents of 'pseudoscience.' This is sometimes called the 'straw man' technique – in which parts of the testimony are cleverly adapted, or omitted, to set up a false argument, making it all the easier to demolish later.[9] In Nickell's method, this is to show how his own ready-made hypotheses are correct.[10] Nor does Nickell show much intellectual curiosity

[8] Joe Nickell, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Fellow for the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI). A former stage magician, private investigator, and teacher, he is author of numerous investigative books on mysteries and anomalous phenomena. For further details, see: tinyurl.com/55684565. Nickell wrote on "both the topic of levitation and Joseph himself briefly"; firstly in *Looking for a Miracle* (1991, pp, 211–216); and in an article 'Secrets of 'The Flying Friar': Did St. Joseph of Copertino Really Levitate?' in *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol.42, no.4 (July/August, 2018). All my Nickell citations are taken from this latter work. It is online at: tinyurl.com/55684565. It seems that the publication of Michael Grosso's two books on the life and phenomena of St Joseph galvanised Nickell to refute Grosso's conclusion that levitation was an actual but unknown force.

[9] Straw man – see its Skepdic webpage: tinyurl.com/yjsd2vrw "One of the characteristics of a cogent refutation of an argument is that the argument one is refuting be represented fairly and accurately. To distort or misrepresent an argument one is trying to refute is called the straw man fallacy. It doesn't matter whether the misrepresentation or distortion is accidental and due to misunderstanding the argument or is intentional and aimed at making it easier to refute. Either way, one commits the straw man fallacy."

[10] Skepdic - ibid: "In other words, the attacker of a 'straw man' argument is refuting a position of his own creation, not the position of someone else. The refutation may appear to be a good one to someone unfamiliar with the original argument."

ISSN: 2057-2301

about the subject, apparently more concerned with discovering Joseph's fraudulent activities for which there is not the slightest evidence.

Why is it important to challenge Nickell's explanations? The debate might benefit the study of religious experience by improving our understanding of religious experiences and their deniers; for example, there is a distinct possibility – due to the impressive outreach of CSI propaganda – that Nickell's errors and misconceptions will enter public consciousness as 'received wisdom' and a lauded example of how to combat 'superstitious' beliefs. A natural scepticism should offer a *balanced* alternative to the extremes of disbelief as well as of belief.[11] It is logically a sounder strategy to suspend judgement until better information or further investigation can establish the grounds for a more decisive acceptance or rejection. If rejection is made simplistically, frivolously, or with prejudice beforehand, it is neither fair, nor honest, and clearly 'unscientific' scholarship.

Of course, Nickell and the CSI are correct in demanding a good standard of evidence for extraordinary claims such as human levitation, but they lose the plot in demanding that only "extraordinary" evidence is permitted.[12] Nickell's own upfront claim to have explained Joseph's phenomena is itself an extraordinary statement, and one that falls apart upon examination. Writing in 1951, Thurston's common-sense proposition was that levitation "is a matter peculiarly suitable for investigation" because "the fact, if it be a fact, *requires no expert evidence to attest it*" [my emphasis]. He explains:

> Given sufficient day-light and fairly normal conditions the most uneducated witness is competent to declare whether a particular person was standing upon the ground or elevated in the air, the more so because, owing to the state of trance in which the subject of the inquiry is found, it is quite possible for the witness to approach and satisfy himself by the sense of touch that the spectacle presented to his eyes is no illusion (Thurston, 1952, pp. 2-3).[13]

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[11] As a Fortean, I use 'scepticism' to denote the Pyrrhic philosophy [see: Wiki: 'skeptikos'] implying "someone who is unsatisfied and still looking for truth." Contrast this with the assertion by the rationalist-reductionist 'skeptics' of CSI, that there is nothing further worth looking for. The Fortean response is an honest "I don't know" and our version of Occam's Razor is: "Cut away the false and let's see what's left."

[12] This contradicts the mantra of the skeptics – attributed to the Blessed Carl Sagan – that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence." This mantra is traditionally used to fend off 'pseudoscientific' claims, asserting that the more unlikely a claim is (ie. when compared to orthodox opinion), the greater the standard of proof is required of it. See also: tinyurl.com/2fpwueus

[13] I will leave the matter of the associated trances, raptures, and ecstasies to a later, more detailed discussion. For now, it is enough to note that Joseph's levitations nearly always occurred during an altered state of consciousness (ASC); but not every ASC resulted in an ascension.

ISSN: 2057-2301

In short, I would argue, with Thurston, that there are no 'degrees' of proof. Evidence either proves something or it is not evidence.

In both articles – and before he has formally begun his argument – Nickell rejects all that the vouchers would have us believe, arguing that Joseph's 'levitations' are simply hypothetical. At best, he declares, that *if* they happened at all, they are the product of pious fraud; or else the result of misperceptions and misunderstandings, or what the Bollandists call 'hagiographic exaggeration.'[14] Nickell chooses the worst case, that the phenomena in these accounts are down to fraud, deception, and dishonesty. I can agree that this might sometimes be possible, but not that it is *inevitable*, or that this is Joseph's motivation.

To properly show why Nickell's short shrift is simply wrong, I need to provide an overview of the key documentary sources; some biographical information on Joseph, and then step through Nickell's most serious misinterpretations and distortions.

The Key Biographical Sources

Of Joseph's few biographers, the earliest, was Fr. Roberto Nuti whose *Vita di Ven Giuseppe da Copertino* (1678), included many eyewitness accounts. A new edition by the Historical Society of Lecce in 2013 – titled *Fra Giuseppe Desa da Copertino, Processo Assisano di Beaificazione* (1666) – also contains Arcangelo Rosmi's invaluable diary.

The most important biography is by Domenico Bernini (son of the famous sculptor) of which Grosso recently commissioned a translation. Although Bernini's *Vita* was not published until 1722 – 59 years after Joseph's death – Bernini had collected testimony that had been recorded during Joseph's lifetime from 1628 onwards,[15] as well as documentation in support of Joseph's beatification. Bernini had taken a personal interest in Joseph's doings ever since, in his youth, he had been taken to see Joseph in his cell, where he witnessed Joseph in an ecstatic trance that lasted half an hour (Grosso, 2016, pp.146, 219-223; and Grosso, 2017, pp. 222-223).

The key historical archive in the Vatican library, houses the 13 volumes of Bernini's *Vita*; the legal briefs (*processi*) and minutes of the official Inquisitions for Joseph's beatification and canonisation; as well as collected letters, diaries and memoires of those who knew him in life (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, pp. 224-225). The closest most of us

[14] The Bollandist Society was founded by the Jesuits in the early seventeenth century to study and preserve the hagiographical literature on Christian saints. Their primary work – the *Acta Sanctorum* – currently extends to 68 volumes, arranged by a saint's feast date; Joseph's is 18 September. See: tinyurl.com/mrv789x5 and tinyurl.com/24fhx3ez

[15] Nickell does not acknowledge this earlier date for the collection of accounts when he refers to the eventual publication date of 1722.

ISSN: 2057-2301

can get to these primary narratives is in the various modern volumes published (in Italian) by the Historical Society of Lecce, compiled by the Fr. Parisciani and his colleagues.[16]

Besides Michael Grosso's two-part analysis of Joseph's life, I must add two other comprehensive commentaries on Joseph and his phenomena that I have found very helpful. The first is by the anthropologist and historian of the occult Dr Eric Dingwall (1890-1986), who compiled an invaluable bibliography on Joseph (Dingwall, 1947, pp. 9-37). Next, the Swiss-born French novelist Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961), who kept a literary diary during the second world war of his own extensive research into Joseph's levitations (Cendrars, 1992, pp. 25-148).

Joseph's Character

For his own discussion, Nickell selected a small number of incidents out of the very many (and often more instructive) narratives available. His choice is narrow and curious, appearing in retrospect to be selected because they could be reduced to a few telling phrases that are, by his method, easier to 'explain away.'

Nickell opens his case with the disingenuous statement that Joseph "laid claim to the power of levitation." Perhaps others made this claim about Joseph, but nowhere in the records of Joseph's (or Grosso's) words does Joseph make such a claim himself. If he had, it would have been quite out of character and contrary to Joseph's well-documented spiritual humility.

Like St Teresa of Avila and many other levitants, Joseph never sought the upliftings and prayed fervently for them to cease, especially when he was in public. The evidence supports Joseph's claim that the sudden onset of his raptures and their intensity, completely dominated any sense of self or will that he might have had. From childhood, his purpose in cutting all physical attachments to this world, was to "dissolve" himself into the God he adored. Those moments in which he felt subsumed into the Divine presence were utterly private. He would feel unable to have any ability to do or will anything by or for himself, oblivious to anything except his ecstasy. Sometimes, the only voice that could reach him was a call to return from his Superior to obey under his priestly vows. Everyday life in the friary became unpredictable, if not genuinely surreal, such as – as Cendrars delightfully puts it – when an entranced Joseph could unexpectedly launch "from his place in the refectory, brandishing a sea urchin!" (Cendrars, 1992, p. 41).

[16] Its full title – *San Giuseppe da Copertino* (1603-1663) *alla luce dei nuovi documenti* – proclaims Parisciano's discovery of new documents from all the locations where Joseph had stayed.

ISSN: 2057-2301

The return from these raptures – suddenly finding himself in an awkward position, surrounded by fussing and curious people – left Joseph completely confused. What was a deeply personal moment became a public spectacle that left him exposed and embarrassed. It also left him open to the accusation of 'showing off.' All clergy are warned against the 'sin' of presuming their own sanctity or claiming to have God's special attention. Indeed, when Joseph was later examined during several sessions with the Inquisition, he would have been scrutinised very carefully for such signs of 'self-importance.' Instead, Joseph was completely exonerated. Whatever was causing Joseph's aerial trajectories was not the kind of comic-book superhero 'power' that Nickell enjoys lampooning.

Nickell's misdirection, then, sets the tone for what follows, and its effect is to undermine Joseph's character and, by association, any 'ridiculous' suggestion that "levitation" might merit honest and serious investigation or discussion. There is no sensitivity in Nickell's caricature of Joseph as a slightly furtive priest, whose pretend humility hides an athletic skill with which he deceives his susceptible religious brothers by performing 'impossible' feats. Cendrars' portrait of Joseph, by contrast, is a joyful celebration of the phenomenal surreality of levitation. To counter Nickell's caricature of Joseph, it is necessary to provide some additional insight into Joseph's character and background.

From an early age, Joseph's humility was apparent. He was known for eschewing any personal possessions and privileges and throughout his life readily accepted the most menial and degrading of tasks. In his simple view, his ordination allowed him to fulfil priestly duties and so better serve his God. Inevitably, this intensified his raptures. However, in Nickell's sardonic interpretation, because Joseph's levitations began "only" after his ordination, they "therefore seem contrived." Then, Nickell implies that Joseph 'performed' his 'fake' levitations because they "*secured his evolving notoriety*" [my emphasis]. This seems to refer to a specific time in Joseph's life when he was exploited by a superior (which I will mention later). By taking it out of its context Nickell has made it seem incriminating.

Contrary to Nickell, the records consistently demonstrate Joseph's humility and deference to his superiors. During the decades that he was under 'official' observation, Joseph had to ask permission for most acts, including leaving his cell. His raptures isolated him from this world and it often proved very difficult for his colleagues to bring him back to 'normality.' Time and again, we read in the accounts that he seemed impervious to every effort to 'revive' him except one; he responded only to the command of his superiors who reminded him of his priestly vows to obey them. This 'obedience' was Joseph's only

ISSN: 2057-2301

remaining link to the everyday world except, as Joseph himself said, when the rapture was ended by God.

Finally, it seems that Nickell has fundamentally misunderstood the Catholic processes of beatification and canonisation when he asserts that the 'saint-making' process itself required "evidence of miracles." The legalistic *process* does not require miracles, considering them to be a non-essential supplement to the primary criterion; which is, simply, a demonstrable and heroic level of holiness. In the modern Church, 'miracles' are invariably seen as a distraction; their circumstances critically examined; and steps are taken to see that no unofficial cult status develops around them.[17]

A Saint is Born and Made

Joseph was born in Copertino (in the 'heel' of Italy) on the 17th of June, 1603. A sick child in a disadvantaged but pious household. His father was in hiding from debtors and his mother worn down by poverty and the deaths of several children. Of his very early years little is known except that for long periods Joseph was bedridden. Lying in the dark, isolated, emaciated, and weak, he became increasingly preoccupied with the inner world of prayer, sometimes kneeling for hours at the small family shrine. By the age of five, he was said to be "holy" and already practising fasting and even, some say, self-mortification.

Joseph's ecstasies began in his eighth year. His mother would carry him to daily Mass because his knees were infected from constant kneeling to pray. He would cut the swellings himself to relieve them, but that only made them worse. These ruined knees troubled Joseph for the rest of his life; yet Nickell has shone a spotlight on them to make them useful in his 'theories.' He suggests that the young Joseph's habit of praying on his knees "so often and so long" had, instead, strengthened Joseph's athletic abilities so that they would "later prove useful in his 'levitations.'"

A short period of schooling was curtailed because Joseph appeared to others to be "mentally retarded, dazed, detached" – a characterisation that goes back beyond Görres to the earlier records. This is still a common description of Joseph in many publications (even those approved by the Church), suggesting 'laziness' or 'stupidity.' Frequently, we see Joseph described as socially and mentally backward, unable to complete the simplest task. However, I agree with the modern opinion that it is far more likely that this impression is due to Joseph's persistent states of deep dissociation which were evident from

[17] The debate about whether 'miracles' are required for beatification and canonisation is a perennial one for Catholics. The modern Church, for example, is fairly aggressive in playing down their importance, according to a report on the arguments for and against, in the Washington Post (16 July 2013; online at tinyurl.com/948ndfd7).

ISSN: 2057-2301

childhood. His later life showed he could indeed function with some degree of social and mental normality.

Eventually, Joseph was briefly apprenticed to a shoemaker, then sent to tend a convent's donkey in Altamura. After that he was moved on to the Capuchin Friars, in Martina Franca, to be a lay brother. At each place he was branded as "ignorant, untutored, barely literate." His periods of dissociation were interpreted as 'wilful laziness,' for which he was frequently punished. Nevertheless, he never complained. In 1625, aged 22, he was accepted by the Friars Minor at La Grottella, on the outskirts of Copertino, where despite his supposed 'backwardness,' he was welcomed for his humility, "natural simplicity and detachment." Three years later, he was ordained as a priest. For the first time in his life, he felt happy and had a vocation.

Joseph's early 'raptures' emerged from his prolonged trance-like praying. Experienced several times a day, every day, they could be triggered by the slightest hint of wonder, beauty, innocence or holiness. The sight of a leaf, a clear blue sky, a lantern at night, a lamb (even a sea-urchin), a doll of baby Jesus, candles on an altar, Catholic phrases, names of saints, or singing – especially icons of the Madonna – would bring on intense ecstasy.

At Grottella, these ecstasies increased in frequency and duration as he spent more time 'adoring' a particular icon of the Virgin Mary and Child. His first levitation happened on 4th October 1630, when he was 27. According to Parisciani, it was during a public procession. Joseph "soared into the air and remained ecstatic and immovable before the eyes of the stupefied crowd."[18] This point illustrates our evidential difficulty well. It implies that Joseph was seen clearly, by large numbers of the public, in the open air, to rise off the ground and remain there for some time, not 'flying' or falling back down, but stationary in the air … but, alas, we have no more solid evidence of it. Within four years, Joseph was known throughout Apulia as a "new St Francis."

The records for this period show that Joseph spent most of his year fasting like St Francis (i.e. seven drastic fasts of 40 days each in a year). He hardly slept, and regularly mortified his body with a scourge and a celice.[19] These whippings were sometimes so severe that the walls of his cell were spattered with blood. His Superior had to order him to cease. That Joseph was able to function with any degree of normality in all this was itself a

[18] Abbot Rosmi suggests a different occasion; that Joseph first levitated at Assisi, while meditating upon an icon of Madonna and Child. It is possible that this icon was being paraded (Rosmi, cited by Grosso, 2017, p. 213).

[19] Celice – a device for self-mortification or penance, ranging in type from a coarse sackcloth shift to a spiked belt, chain, or garter, worn under clothing. Joseph is also said to have used two cords (one in each hand) studded with bent pins and "star-like wheels" (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p. 20).

ISSN: 2057-2301

kind of miracle; and yet Nickell fails to show us how his fantasy Joseph could be super fit and ready in an instant to perform feats that exceeded Olympic records.

One Trail, Three Trials

In 1636, Joseph's idyll at Grottella came to an end. A newly appointed Father Provincial – Fr. Antonio di San Mauro – wished to make an inaugural tour of 50 friaries around the Apulia region taking Joseph with him. He calculated that the prospect of seeing a levitation during a Mass would swell the congregations, thereby bolstering his own standing. Joseph was horrified by the prospect of public exposure, but was ordered to obey under his priestly vows. The year-long tour of the province certainly succeeded, but the prelate had underestimated the public interest in Joseph – rather than, as he had hoped, in himself.

Joseph's innate reluctance to 'stage' his Mass angered San Mauro and they had argued publicly to Joseph's dismay. The idea of deliberately invoking God's presence for a reason he considered both trivial and impious terrified Joseph. Nor could Joseph find any words to describe the overpowering intimacy of that sacred moment in which he elevated the Host and surrendered himself to Divine will. San Mauro would not accept that it was something over which Joseph had no conscious control.

The region of Apulia was known for being religiously conservative, having a residual dislike for characters such as Joseph, whose notoriety disrupted the *status quo*. Some of the rural clergy became disturbed by the excitable talk of 'miracles.' The tension climaxed in a town called Giovinazza, where officials ordered the prelate's party to return to the town so that they could scrutinise Joseph more closely. Inevitably, during his Mass, Joseph levitated, his scream frightening the congregation as he rose into the air. As Nickell was to do some six centuries later, the officials fell back upon the idea that it was a "theatrical campaign on the part of Joseph and his confreres to present him as some sort of messiah." But such an unlikely act would be completely reckless, if true. The peril was real; as Grosso notes of that time: "Recently, three men were burned alive because they said Mass in public without having been ordained" (Grosso, 2016, p. 25).

When he returned to Assisi, an angry San Mauro accused Joseph of "feigned sanctity," calling Joseph "downright crazy" for ruining his 'show.' Several years later, when Joseph faced the Inquisition in Rome, that accusation placed him in genuine peril. San Mauro was also summoned by those inquisitors and asked to explain his behaviour towards Joseph. The prelate dodged cleverly, replying: "I can say nothing except that he was a saint who went into ecstasy continually and was adored by everybody." Nickell, triumphantly, calls this, "hardly a ringing endorsement of one who purportedly flew like a bird."

ISSN: 2057-2301

The Expected Inquisition

Nickell writes that the Vatican sent Joseph "into a sort of exile" and that, for the rest of his life he was deliberately 'hidden' by the Church. The facts behind this complex situation are not quite the sinister cover-up by the Church that Nickell implies. Not only did Joseph want to avoid public exposure, he welcomed his isolation as an opportunity for proper 'humiliation.'[20] In 1638, a couple of years after the notorious chaos at Giovinazza, a disgruntled Vicar Apostolic of a vacant diocese – Monsignor Joseph Palamolla – sent a formal notice to the Inquisition at Naples drawing attention to the hermit of Grottella, accusing him of performing healings and miracles "as if he was another Messiah." It was the Inquisition's job, after all, to keep a watch for would-be messiahs, and head-off heretical threats to official dogma.

Joseph was ordered to report to the Inquisition in Naples. Unable to ride a horse, he walked there – some 300km from Grottella – with a companion minder. Charged with ostentation – not deception or heresy – he faced three separate Holy Office examinations over several months. His case was then forwarded to Rome, where Joseph was questioned further to determine his motivation and piety.

San Mauro was in as much jeopardy as Joseph. If Joseph was cleared, San Mauro risked being labelled a 'false accuser,' and if it was determined that Joseph's phenomena were of demonic origin, San Mauro risked being implicated as an accomplice. Evidently, San Mauro had not bargained on the third outcome: that Joseph was vindicated as guileless and that, by implication – if not by actual observation – his phenomena were genuine. While Nickell acknowledges that Joseph was finally declared blameless, like San Mauro he never processes precisely what that meant for the validation of Joseph's phenomena. Nickell continues as though Joseph had, instead, fooled the Inquisitors the whole time their unblinking attention was upon him.

In all, this period lasted nearly two years and plunged Joseph into a deep depression. The examination period took so long, in part because the Inquisition simply did not know what to do with him. At both Naples and Rome, Joseph had been ordered to conduct Masses under their full scrutiny before congregations of mainly clergy. During these Joseph was seen by all to levitate at the key moments. The Inquisitors decided, therefore, to keep him away from public attention completely – whether Joseph wanted it or not – lest heresy or a cultish following should spring up about him. For the remainder of his years, he was moved around in secret and monitored at each location.

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[20] Humiliation - ie. not shame, but the opportunity to be completely and humbly subservient to God.

ISSN: 2057-2301

Ironically, it gave Joseph the privacy for which he yearned. Instead of being sent back to Grottella, Joseph was ordered to stay at the monastery in Assisi. After five years there, in 1653, he was transferred to the Capuchins at Pietrarubbia for three months, and thence to Fossombrone, where he stayed for three years. Each relocation was prompted by an increase in local interest in Joseph. At Fossombrone, for instance, parts of the church were removed by the public to better see Joseph's Masses.

Eventually, Joseph arrived at Osimo, in 1657, where he died among his fellow Franciscans on the 18th of September 1663, aged sixty. Among the many clergy who came forward promptly to declare under oath their own observations of Joseph's flights, were three Cardinals (who, in all probability, had also attended his Inquisitions).

The Levitations of St Joseph: Explained?

Like many saints, Joseph's life was full of mysterious concomitant phenomena: bilocation, prophecy, telepathic diagnosis, healings, and so on; but we are concerned here solely with reports of his elevations. Joe Nickell's critique of Joseph's levitations begins with a visit to the friar's small cell by a boys' choir; their sublime singing sending Joseph into ecstasy and elevation. Nickell boldly promises to the reader that he will explain Joseph's levitations "as a probable trick," "assuming," he adds in a rather disingenuous and patronising manner, "that the account is not merely hearsay and embellishment." Presumably, these three – a trick, a rumour, or a confabulation – are the only explanations Nickell is willing to consider. Parisciani, summarising Bernini, describes what happened when the Choirmaster of the Assisi's Sacred Convent…

> …brought three young singers of outstanding talent to Joseph's room to perform. Upon hearing the boys sing, he immediately went into ecstasy, falling into a kneeling position, then rising and floating above the ground. To confirm what they were seeing, all three boys 'put their hands between Joseph's tunic and the ground (Nickell, citing Parisciani, 1963, p. 443).

Nickell quickly diverts our attention by declaring that these boys were "compliant, not aggressively skeptical." Certainly, they would have been cautioned to be on their best behaviour, and it is likely that they might feel some awe while singing for the famous ecstatic wonderworker. But Nickell does not mean *that* kind of compliance. He is setting the stage for the boys to be cast as poor witnesses. He feels certain that they would be so credulous that they saw what they were *conditioned* to see and not what they actually saw.

ISSN: 2057-2301

Nickell somehow knows that what they 'actually' saw was someone taking advantage of their 'compliance.'

But why should they have been "aggressively skeptical"? They were not there as CSI investigators, they were there to sing. Nickell quite rightly points out that, in this period, other cases of saintly levitation were well-known and publicly discussed; therefore, he deduces, the boys and any adults present were "credulous seventeenth-century peasants" who "would, in all good faith, unintentionally exaggerate what had actually happened."[21] Nickell is not yet done with patronising. "Note," he continues, with a knowing wink to his readers, "that the friar's feet are never mentioned."

> Recall my earlier suggestion…that Joseph could subtly move from kneeling to a pre-crouch position by placing the bottoms of his toes flat on the floor…then moves slowly into a crouch using his well-developed muscles (you see where this is going), the still-apparently kneeling friar is witnessed rising upward—or rather his knees are seen to rise, giving that illusion. The rest is child's play, literally. The boys are invited to place their hands between the tunic and the floor. It would probably not occur to them to reach far back and search for the actual placement of Father Joseph's feet (Nickell, 2018).

Deceptively simplistic, or simply deceptive? Had Nickell bothered to read further into Joseph's career, he could hardly have failed to notice the many accounts in which witnesses gather around an enraptured Joseph while he remains stationary in mid-air. Inevitably, some of them would press forward to touch his robe or even to kiss his elevated feet. Often, ingenious methods are mentioned – by reference to nearby objects – to estimate the distance of his feet from the floor. Sometimes they did much more; testing the extent of Joseph's ecstatic anaesthesia by burning, piercing, or even striking him (Nuti, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 116-117).[22]

Nickell underestimates the intelligence and ingenuity of the people of those days, even though a great many of the witnesses were not peasants or illiterate. Even the ordinary countryfolk were capable of natural curiosity, and the narratives include many an ingenious attempt to, for example, measure the distance between Joseph's feet and the ground.

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[21] As opposed, perhaps, to those who in bad faith, intentionally exaggerate what they imagined happened?

[22] Joseph's biographer, Fr Nuti recorded that often "to bring him back they would drag him on the ground, pinch him, twist his fingers, put candles in his mouth and the like."

ISSN: 2057-2301

A typical example is the following incident – summarised from documents by Thurston – deposed by Tobias, a "gentleman" who was waiting outside the room of St Bernardino Realino, in the region of Lecce, in 1616:

> As he sat with his eyes on the room door, he noticed that the door was not completely shut and that through the aperture a certain glow or radiance of light was streaming. The appearance puzzled him, and he began to wonder whether there could be a fire within. He drew near and pushed the door a little further in order to peep into the room. Thereupon he perceived Fr Bernardino in a kneeling attitude before his prie-dieu, his face turned towards heaven, his eyes closed and his whole body lifted a good two and a half feet above the floor, while rapt in ecstasy (Thurston, 1952, pp. 22-24).

Thurston notes that Tobias "gazed for a while" with feelings of "reverence mingled with fear" before silently creeping away. Later, in giving his testimony, Tobias was asked "to take good heed and bethink himself whether all of what he had described was not rather a hallucination or fancy of his brain and whether the radiance and light was not a reflexion of the sun's rays or an ocular deception of some other natural effect." Tobias replied:

> The thing was so clear…I noticed the light…not only once but twice, thrice and four times…and so I began to debate with myself how there could be any fire in the room, since the rays which issued from it could only have been made by a great fire [likened to a blacksmiths] and so I stood up and pushing the door saw with my own eyes Fr Bernardino raised from the ground as unmistakably as I now see your Lordship (Thurston, 1952).

Tobias was then "again admonished and bidden to be careful not to be led by any mistaken sense of devotion to exaggerate or to represent the facts otherwise," which he did. Thurston then adds, "in looking through the score or so of such printed processes, I have found very little trace on the part of witnesses or commissioners of a desire to manufacture evidence of marvels."

The Joy of Illiteracy

Nickell's next selection focuses upon the accounts of Joseph soaring through the air towards an altar and apparently hovering in the air above it before landing on it. One

ISSN: 2057-2301

Christmas, Joseph invited some shepherds to bring their music into the church. Entering the nave with them, he began to sing and dance, and the excitement grew. Bernini records what the shepherds believed they had observed:

> [Joseph] suddenly sighed and loudly screamed and flew up in the air like a bird, halfway to the ceiling, where he continued dancing *above the main altar*, and went to embrace the tabernacle that was a considerable distance *above* the main altar… for about fifteen minutes… (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 26., my emphasis).

Surely observing someone in the air for that length of time would be able to replace any reservation with some assurance. Being 'compliant' is now not enough; Nickell states with astonishing certainty that these shepherds "were probably illiterate."[23] "It is apparent from [Joseph's] movements," he writes confidently, "that [Joseph] *bounded in increments*, onto the altar" [my emphasis]. Bernini's account implies no such thing. Joseph's aerial dancing – *above* the altar, not on its top surface in any normal sense – becomes the suggestion that Joseph must have "rested" on brackets that held the candles and, by "embracing" them, supported himself in the appearance of 'mid-air.'[24]

"In other words," Nickell writes, "[Joseph] was never simply floating in air, as sources may seem to imply." The witnesses had deposed under oath, so that is precisely what they were implying. He doubts that witnesses who watched this aerial 'dance' for fifteen minutes could tell the difference between a man hanging on to something and one who was hovering in mid-air where there was nothing to hold on to.

Nickell has a response ready and waiting. Rather too triumphantly, he telegraphs, ahead of his 'reveal', that he has figured out Joseph's "rising and floating." The answer when it comes, seems anticlimactic, inadequate, and pure supposition:

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[23] What on this earth has literacy got to do with the ability to perceive? Nickell offers no evidence that literates perceive better than illiterates. His perception of these "peasants" reminds me of their French fellows who reported to the great French scientist Lavoisier, in 1772, that they had seen a meteorite crash to earth, only to be dismissed because, Lavoisier declared, "There are no stones in the sky!"

[24] Bernini's text does indeed say Joseph "embraced the tabernacle with both arms"; but, in the same paragraph says that "the tabernacle was a considerable distance above the main altar" the surface of which was "filled with flaming candles." The "marvellous" implication here is that Joseph did not disturb the candles but hovered above them, kneeling and stationary, for 15 minutes, surely enough time to visually confirm the matter?

ISSN: 2057-2301

> I would wager that [Joseph] mimed this by stretching himself upward until he artfully stood on tiptoe, then danced lightly in place so as to create the illusion of 'hovering' just above the ground.

The matter of how Joseph got up there in the first place, is quickly evaded or re-imagined. Nickell, dazzled by his own revelation, bounds onto the altar of his newfound theory. Where the narrative says Joseph "flew up" rather gracefully, Nickell would have us believe it was by energetic, incremental "bounding through the air to some elevated perch."

Yet there is some mystery surrounding Joseph's 'take-off' method. The narratives seem to imply that it was instantaneous, whether Joseph was kneeling or standing. Nickell suggests otherwise; Joseph must have simply moved from where he was standing or kneeling. That this movement was not noticed, he says, is because it happened quickly and is forgotten, by the distracting shout or when eyes begin to follow Joseph's astonishing aerobatics. Nickell is thinking conventionally, looking for some kind run-up, crouching to spring, or backing-up to make that "bounding" leap forwards. He cannot find the clue because it is not there in the sworn narratives.

Just to be clear, in the entire archive available there is no mention of anyone spotting Joseph – athlete or not – practicing or rehearsing such circus-type movements as "bounding through the air." Nickell could have asked instead, why *wasn't* Joseph spotted cheating?, but that would have undermined his own brilliant theory.

The Sound of Sandals Falling

Nickell, next, fusses over what he calls Joseph's "extreme defiances of gravity." The first of these "defiances" is when Joseph sometimes appears to hover in-place in mid-air (suggestive of a 'freeze-frame' in a video or still photograph), much as Rosmi describes happening during Joseph's very first levitation in 1630 in Assisi. At other times he would be, as witnesses describe, travelling through the air while unnaturally 'frozen' in a particular pose (eg. kneeling). The duration of Joseph's 'hovering' during flights towards, or above, the altar, varied between a few seconds to thirty minutes or more of "sustained floating" in position. Nickell emphatically disagrees:

ISSN: 2057-2301

> Our analysis revealed that Joseph did not hover in the air but, after rapidly ascending, he then rested on some support such as a tree limb or held onto some fixed object such as a statue.[25]

We understand that anomalous phenomena do pose a questionable challenge to scientific materialistic rationalism; and this is compounded by anomalies that contain other anomalies within them. Bernini provides an account of a paradox. On this occasion the whole congregation and choir (including two later Cardinals) saw Joseph soar "through shutters of the choir to stop suspended in the air before the tabernacle." His face was brightly radiant. Bernini describes this flight as moving "slowly" through the air (cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 145). As he stopped in that mid-air kneeling position, they saw an even more astonishing detail. Joseph's sandals fell to the floor (ibid.). In that moment, it appears, normal gravitation was restored, but only for the sandals, not for the levitant. How this datum would have delighted Charles Fort.

When Grosso suggested that these mysterious suspensions "seem to point to the reality of an unrecognized force of nature," and that their astonishing duration is "enough to render implausible the claim that they were tricks of perception" – Nickell, rather petulantly, accused him of "gushing."

The Backwards Boy

We are not yet done with the "defiances of gravity." Besides vertical and 'floating' elevations, there are other important variants which are extremely rare in the already rare annals of human flight. Although Grosso provides several instances of each, Nickell (probably wisely) makes no attempt to exorcise them.

As Leroy points out, the *Bull* of Joseph's canonisation, acknowledges that "No saint can be compared to Joseph in this respect" (Leroy, 1928, p. 89)**.** For example: in a choir, Joseph heard the phrase *Mater Divine Gratie*, and promptly flew *forward* up and "over three rows of friars" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 152).

Another is Joseph's eerie flights *backward*, which challenge reason as well as gravity, and certainly defy Nickell's comic hypotheses about 'kneeling' and 'bounding'

[25] Note how Nickell has turned his original speculation into an established explanation.

ISSN: 2057-2301

launches. While helping to clean a relic of St Francis, in Assisi, he shot up and *backwards* over the heads of the brothers behind him (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 144).

The most famous of these retro-flights occurred in 1650, when Prince Johan-Frederick of Brunswick visited Assisi to consult Joseph about his career. During the service, Joseph "gave a great scream and flew into the air *backward in a kneeling position*" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 82-85, my emphasis).

Equally well-observed, were the moments when Joseph carried another person into the air with him. It is difficult to believe that these flying companions were also athletes, complicit in the 'act'? I counted four of these double levitations in Bernini's *Vita*: an early incident in Copertino when he lifted up a friar he was hugging. Bernini describes Joseph's "spinning dance" on the floor which continued into the air as Joseph carried the man upward: "one out of his mind because he was afraid, the other out of his mind because he was a saint" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 70). In Assisi in 1642 he raised the Father Custos Raffaelle Palma (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 68-69). In another instance, he lifted a shepherd into the air and swung him around by holding only "one hand under the arm" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 80). The most famous of these incidents happened when he lifted a 'lunatic' into the air by his hair and hovered there for some time (Bernini, cited by Grosso, 2017, p.152; also cited in Leroy, 1928, p. 95).[26]

A Host of Troubles

Officiating at daily Mass presented a serious trial for Joseph. Most times, he would fall into deep rapture at several points of the service, but when he raised the Host, his body nearly always followed. Stranger still, this was a type of proto-levitation[27] in which he 'froze' just prior to the moment of 'take-off' – as recorded by Bernini and Parisciani (of an incident in 1647) – "his whole body" was observed in this strange suspension:

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[26] I give the case in full, later (below).

[27] Leroy distinguishes "levitation proper" from seemingly "cognate phenomena" including "performing feats" and was careful in his analysis to reminded us to be cautious about movements that can also be imitated by hysterics and athletes (1928, p. 161). Skeptics are fond of pointing to the extraordinary poses struck by hysterics as recorded by the French neurologist Prof. JM Charcot at the Salpêtrière Hospital, in the 1880s. But where the skeptics are attempting to downgrade the anomalous behaviour observed in cases of 'possession,' for example, both Leroy and Cendrars were keenly aware that borderline cases, such as these proto-levitations, could not be dismissed so easily and may reward further investigation.

ISSN: 2057-2301

> It was normal for his body to rise up in the air during [Mass]. He would rise with his feet barely touching the ground; only the tip of his big toe touching, a position not only unnatural but incredible…*and continued this way until the end of the sacrifice*." (Parisciani, ciarde in Grosso, 2016, p. 75, my emphasis).

We might keep an open mind on Joseph's tableau, but I would like to make a slight diversion of my own to say that this possibly anomalous variation of levitation is not unique to Joseph, having been clearly observed in three other mystics. One of them, Maria von Moerl (1812-1863) – the celebrated stigmatic of Kalten, in the Tyrol, who was studied by Görres – was often seen in a kneeling position, but leaning further forward than seemed natural. Although there are no reports of her levitating, an observer noted that it seemed as though she was floating over the bed without pressing on it. And, like Joseph, she too was 'frozen' in her pose for some time beyond the moment an observer might expect her to fall. One account describes her "almost daily" rapture:

> It is recorded that often she did no more than touch the surface of her bed with the tips of her toes. M.D. de Moy, professor of law at the faculty in Munich, wrote a letter to Monsieur Bore describing the position in which he himself had seen the ecstatic: 'Her hands were joined together, her head and eyes raised toward heaven, she was on her knees, her body leaning forward as if supported by the invisible angels who held her up, for the angle of her body was contrary to all the laws of balance, and her knees left hardly any impression on the coverlet of the bed' (Cendrars, 1992, pp. 118-119, *See Figure A*).[28]

[28] Also worth citing for its description of the observation, is the second case; that of St Douceline (1214-1274), a Beguine nun from Provence. Typical of her many ecstatic levitations was a rising up, leaving "only the tip of her big toe" touching the ground "and she has remained thus from the moment of taking communion until the evening, toward the hour of Compline." See also Leroy (1928), pp. 47-48, citing her biography. In these cases the centre of gravity of the body is beyond the 'pivot' (ie. the knees). In a normal case, the torque caused by body weight moving beyond the 'pivot' would have caused the person to fall forward. The third, Victoire Claire of Coux (d.1883) who, during ecstatic trances of between ten and 20 minutes, was seen rising above her chair "more than a thousand times during the first years of our friendship" according to a correspondent of Albert de Rochas (1837-1914) – another pioneering French investigator of levitation – "her right leg bent up, the other touching the earth but by a toe [..] it was impossible for anyone to keep up normally (Leroy, 1928, p.132).

ISSN: 2057-2301

Figure A. During her ecstatic visions, the young Austrian stigmatic – Maria von Moerl (1812-1863) – was frequently observed in an extremely unnatural position. Kneeling on her bed, she seemed to be leaning forward beyond the moment an observer might expect her to fall. Like Joseph, she would be 'frozen' in her pose for some time.

Once again, the difficulties we face in identifying genuine phenomena when there is so little evidential detail is highlighted. Where Nickell seems willing to toss the baby out with the bathwater, others, aware of the danger of being too premature, are willing to look deeper and further for significant details. In the case of Joseph, Maria and others, that significance is in the anomalous *duration* of the pose or movement beyond the moment we would expect any natural pose to collapse, plainly seen by her observers. Nickell, however, accepts none of this, suggesting that Joseph had mastered the art of misdirection:

> That he could stand on tiptoe and even seem to slightly rise and hover may only indicate wonderful strength, balance, and acting; *I suspect such acts were fundamentally stunts* that may have led *credulous seventeenth-century peasants* to believe it was accomplished by levitation [my emphasis].

ISSN: 2057-2301

The Mass, argues Grosso, is a solemn religious rite, a species of sacred performance. It is a pity Nickell cannot see past the word 'performance' without thinking someone is trying to fool him. For Joseph, the Mass was more than a symbolic performance; it was an intense participation with divinity itself. At its end, he would sink to the ground groaning, as he returned to the depressing weight of earthly flesh. In the presence of sin – as Joseph described it – the Host wafer sometimes became (for him) as rigid and heavy as iron, and he would fall to his knees weeping. He told his brothers that at these moments, he felt the withdrawal of the divine presence. Sadly, Nickell sees in Joseph's collapse *only* "a prerequisite" to "levitate backward."

The Trembling Branches

Nickell rages most of all at the seemingly trivial reports of Joseph springing high into the topmost branches of a tree only to remain there for some time. For example, just moments before one such incident, a priest walking alongside Joseph had mentioned the beautiful sky. Nickell continues (citing almost correctly):

> These words seemed like an invitation for Padre Giuseppe to fly up into the sky, and so he did, letting out a loud cry and bounding from the ground to fly up to the top of an olive tree [where he] stayed up there about a half hour (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 138).[29]

We know that Joseph did not need much encouragement to soar above this world, but Nickell's purpose here is to remind us of his pedestrian theory of Joseph's prowess at kneeling and leaping, which he now takes for a proven fact. Nickell establishes (via *Wiki*) that that olive trees are "short and squat" – as if that proves that Joseph's tree was likewise – and was therefore within the reach of "bounding."

He acknowledges the witness' observation that Joseph had "landed on his knees on a branch that kept shaking gently, as though a bird were perched on the branch" and yet has nothing further to say about the nature of the 'mundane' feat of leaping upward, say a

[29] With impressive antiphrasis, Nickell introduces the idea of 'springboards.' They "were available since the Middle Ages to propel acrobats," he says, adding with surprising caution, "although I do not suggest Joseph used one."

ISSN: 2057-2301

man's height, to land in a kneeling position (with ruined knees?) on a branch so slender that it "kept shaking," and, even more astonishingly, maintaining that balance and position for nearly 30 minutes. Instead, Nickell mocks the "prowess of the supposedly catlike friar" who, when he came out of his trance (after half an hour up there) and, realised his predicament, cried for help. Joseph's companion Antonio had to fetch a ladder to help him down.

In a similar incident, during his stay at Fossombrone, Joseph was in the garden with some brothers. They watched him "soaring through the air *on a level with the crowns of the trees* in the garden. He remained there, *kneeling in the air, for more than two hours*" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 138, my emphasis).

Numinous Screams

Perhaps the most disturbing feature of Joseph's elevations – as Nickell notes – were the great screams he made as a prelude to taking off. Without much reasoning, Nickell believes that this association – scream and 'leap' – demonstrates that Joseph's phenomena were *not* spontaneous; that he "was not *caused* to leap by some force but *chose* to" [my emphasis]. Nickell wonders whether these shouts "may have been to help him focus on and commit to the act and so dispel fear." I assume Nickell means Joseph's own fear, because there is no doubt the screams did frighten his witnesses. Nor is Nickell the first to consider whether these sudden bursts of intense sound might be "analogous to martial artists who yell when executing some technique." It is certainly an interesting association and can be explored further; but then Nickell's cynicism kicks in again, suggesting that:

> …it might also have served to turn all eyes on him, [so that] if he yelled, not when he first started moving, but only the instant before he left the ground, people would be more likely to think they saw him simply rise up.

Again, this sounds fair, except that it presupposes Joseph's duplicity, for which there is simply no evidence. It also directly ignores Joseph's own (very rare) comment on the screams, when he told his companions that they seem to relate to the sudden increase in

ISSN: 2057-2301

the intensity of his ecstatic state as he is instantly and completely overwhelmed by the Divine presence (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 137).

Nickell is certainly correct in recognising the disorientating effect of Joseph's scream upon those who heard it, but not convincing about Joseph using it to distract from his imminent 'bounding.' While Joseph himself did not seem particularly aware of its effect *on others*, those hearing it for the first time were profoundly shocked by its unexpected unearthliness. It was very loud and weirdly frightening and no one who heard it ever forgot it. As Bernini noted, some people bowed, some prayed, some cried, and some ran from the scene. A few examples would be appropriate here. When Joseph rose up towards the Cimabue ceiling painting in the basilica at Assisi, Bernini recorded: "It all happened so quickly that *those present were filled with sacred terror*,[30] marvelling to each other, and remaining in a stupor" (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, p. 62). Even a pope was not immune to that reaction. When Joseph was brought into the presence of Urban VIII, he bowed to kiss the papal feet and promptly rose into the air. Urban was said to have been "frozen with fear," but later vowed to depose his evidence (cited by Leroy, 1928, pp. 97-98).

Perhaps the most famous example of the reaction to the chaos caused by Joseph in full shriek and flight, was the visit in 1646 to see him by the Grand Admiral of Castile (who was also the Spanish ambassador) and his family, which left them – in Thurston's words – "dazed" and "stupefied." The reluctant Joseph was ordered to say Mass as usual. The visitors watched as he entered through a small door, and as soon as he saw a statue of Virgin Mary above the altar:

> [Joseph] screamed and flew a distance of twelve steps above the heads of the Admiral and the women, to embrace the statue…After remaining in that pose for some time, he gave another scream and, still flying through the air returned near the little door…leaving everyone dazed if not traumatized. The wife of the Admiral fainted, and [he] had to revive her splashing water in her face…The Admiral himself…did not faint but became weak-kneed and flustered (Bernini, cited in Grosso, 2017, pp. 80-81; also, Thurston, 1952, p. 98; see *Figure B*).

[30] We are reminded that Rudolf Otto coined the word 'numinous' to convey what Bernini has called "sacred terror." This is no ordinary fear but one that stimulates awe and reverence, much like the original meaning of 'panic' (Otto, 1950, 14ff).

ISSN: 2057-2301

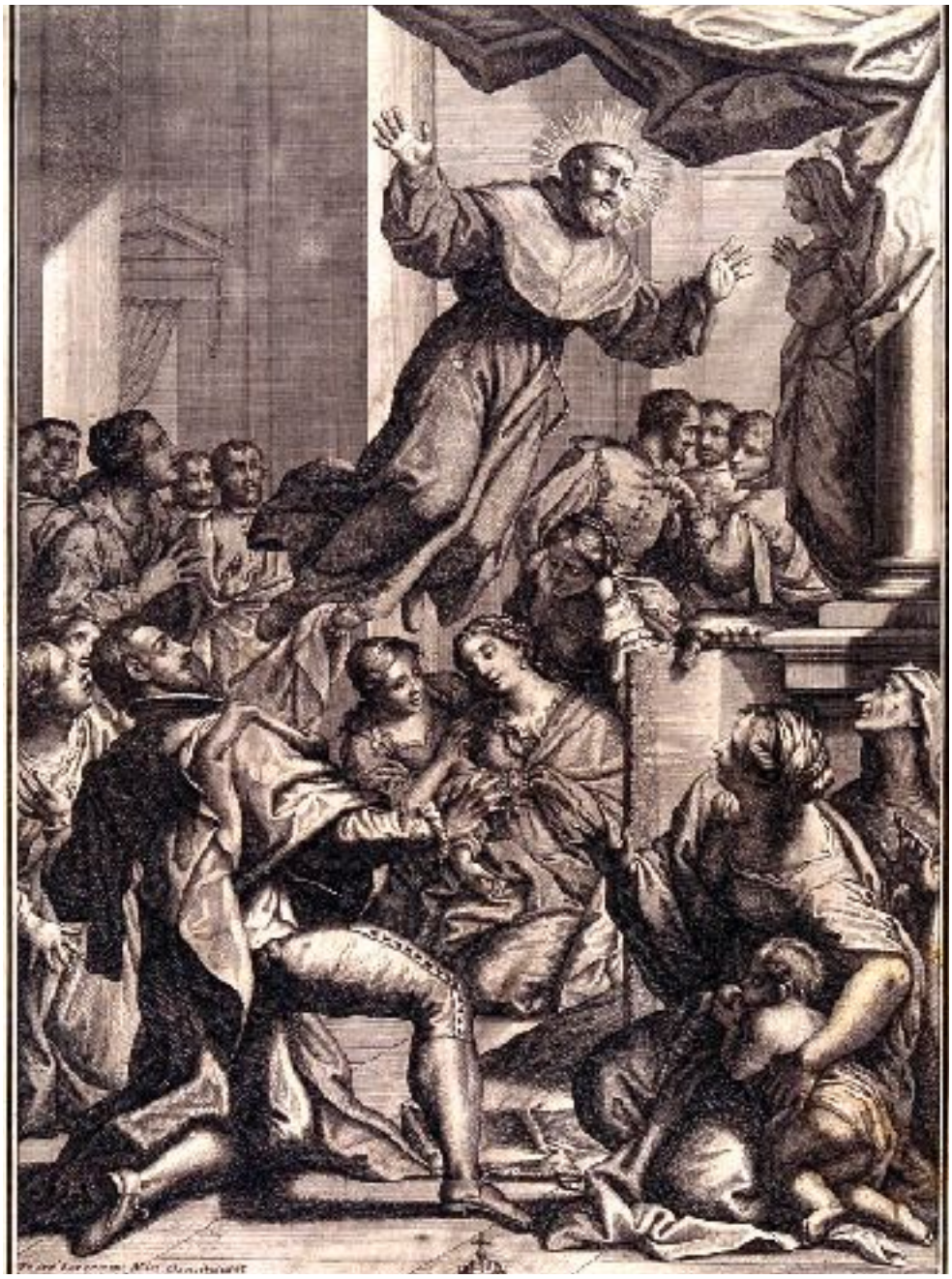

Figure B. This chaotic scene shows possibly the most famous of Joseph's levitations. During a visit, in 1646, to Assisi, in which the Grand Admiral of Castile and his family were deeply affected by Joseph's flight. Engraving by Gioan Antonio Lorenzini (1665-1740), a friar in the same order as Joseph (Franciscan Minor Conventuals).

A Cure for Dualism and Disbelief

Significantly absent from the testimony of most primary witnesses is any sense of *disbelief* about the levitation they had just seen; to the contrary, witnesses were struck with an

ISSN: 2057-2301

authentic recognition of 'otherness.' Their difficulty was not one of belief but of processing the implications of what they had witnessed.

No one ever shrugged and said "look, he's only bounding!," "I saw him take a run up," or "he's only hanging on to those candlesticks." For most witnesses, instead of *disbelief* in their own perceptions, the experience left an immediate and powerful feeling that they had perceived or been affected by a different kind of 'reality' from the one they were familiar with. Some witnesses (mainly Catholics) reported (as we might expect) with "their faces bathed in tears" that it confirmed their belief in miracles. Some even claimed that the super-reality of Joseph's levitations was "the cure" for Cartesian "dualism"**;** and others were immediately converted.[31]

The only significant account of such 'disbelief' that I have found (to date) is not straightforward either. It requires another diversion, but I believe it will illustrate the point. It happened during the aforementioned occasion in 1649, when Johan Frederick, the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg – then aged 25 and heir to the Holy Roman Empire – changed his faith from Lutheran to Catholic after a visit to see Joseph in Assisi. He was accompanied by two attendants and stayed for several days in which the party could closely observe Joseph in flight on multiple occasions. I take the following account from Fr Thurston's translation of the Latin original in the *Acta Sanctorum*:

> [The Duke] was led, with his two chamberlains, next morning to the door of the chapel where Joseph was saying Mass. From there the visitors could see Joseph, a little before Communion, with his loud cry, in kneeling posture, fly five paces from the altar and return there with the same cry in like manner. On the next morning the Duke wished again to assist at the Mass said by Joseph, and this time he could see him raised a palm off the floor and remain thus suspended about a quarter of an hour, elevating the Host. On seeing this, the Duke began weeping. [He] conversed with Joseph till midday; and returned to visit the saint in his cell after Vespers…and assisted at Compline, and following the procession [declared] himself ready to become a Catholic…He then returned to Brunswick to arrange his affairs, and the following year he came back to Assisi, where he abjured Lutheranism in the

[31] i.e. negating Descartes' split of our perceptual 'sensorium' into the seemingly separate realms of body and mind.

ISSN: 2057-2301

> presence of Joseph and [two] Cardinals (*Acta Sanctorum*, op.cit., 1024, 43-44; cited by Thurston, 1952, p. 98).[32]

Both of the 'chamberlains' were Counts; and the one we are concerned with was, like the Duke, a Lutheran. When the Duke seized every opportunity to witness Joseph's elevations over several days, the Lutheran Count, somewhat anti-Catholic, became thoroughly disturbed by the events. The record continues, describing how Joseph, sensing this disbelief reacted as he held the wafer:

> [Joseph] began to wail, gave a great scream, and then flew into the air backward in a kneeling position. [He] then returned to the altar where he remained in ecstasy for some time…Questioned afterwards by the superior, but still unaware that strangers were listening, he could only tell that he had fainted; that before the swoon he had been trying in vain to break the holy wafer…The Duke, startled by Joseph's "great scream," asked for an explanation. Joseph tried to explain his struggle with the wafer and sudden faint. He told of having such feelings before, when he felt the presence nearby of "some hard-hearted heretic." Unknown to him, among the witnesses was the Lutheran Count who had complained to the Duke's company that: "It was a cursed day that I came into Italy. At home I always enjoyed a quiet mind; but in this country, puzzles about faith and conscience keep pursuing me (*Acta Sanctorum* and Thurston, 1951, ibid).

This conversion is hardly mentioned in conventional political histories, and was, at the time, embargoed even by the Duke's family. But a rare history of Catholic conversions – footnoted by Thurston – tells us that this doubter was Henry Julius Blume, who barely

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[32] Freidrich's conversion Catholicism in 1651, and lacking a male heir, meant that he had to relinquish his Protestant titles to his brother Ernest-Augustus, father of George I, later Hanoverian king of England. The event fascinated Sir William Crookes, the English physicist and pioneering investigator of spiritualistic phenomena, who researched the documentation, noting that "despite the great distrust between Catholics and Lutherans at that time, the Duke was, nevertheless, quickly and diplomatically accommodated by Franciscans." *Quarterly Journal of Science*, (New Series), vol 5, (January 1875), pp. 31-61. Crookes continues: "[The conversion] seemed to show "great ignorance of the future. No conversion could seem more important to the interests of Catholicism; [yet] any other [available' candidate] would have had a more permanent influence. Ironically, many years later, the Duke became the employer of Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) one of the luminaries of the Enlightenment. For full details, see my article 'Leibniz and the Flying Monk', *Fortean Times* 403:48-51.

ISSN: 2057-2301

three years later, was himself converted to Catholicism (Räss, 1868, pp. 450-452, 558-571).

Figure C. "This altarpiece by Placido Costanzi (1702–1759), was painted in 1750 for the Colonna family to commemorate the spectacular levitation of Joseph, rising into the air with the demented young man.

The Lunatic Gets a Lift

Having criticised Nickell's choice of weak cases, I thought it only just to offer a few that I think are evidentially more impressive and which defy Nickell's theories. Joseph, as previously noted, is one of the very few saints who have publicly lifted other people along

ISSN: 2057-2301

with him into the air. This should be an impossibility – even for a specialist in "bounding" and "dancing" –unless it is alleged that Joseph prearranged it with an accomplice and had practised it to perfection; for which, there is not the slightest evidence. Of Joseph's handful of incidents, I choose the famous incident of him healing the 'lunatic.' Leroy's translation of the account given in Bernini's *Vita*, as recorded in the *Acta Sanctorum* reads:

> A lunatic had been brought to the monastery for Joseph to cure him. This lunatic was a noble citizen of Assisi named Balthasar Rossi. He was led to the saint bound to a chair, for he was dangerous and used to assault people, saying they were mad. Joseph ordered the man to be set free, made him kneel down in the oratory, and, laying his hand on his head. Said: "Do not fear, Chevalier Balthasar; commend yourself to God and his Holy Mother." With these words, he clutched the lunatic by the hair, uttered his usual cry, and was raised off the floor with Balthasar, whom he held for a time in mid-air to the amazement of the bystanders. Then, *after a quarter of an hour*, he sank to earth again and dismissed the nobleman with these words, "Now, cheer up, Chevalier! (Bernini, cited in Leroy, 1928, p. 95; Cendrars, 1992, p. 28; and Grosso, 2017, pp. 69-70, my emphasis, see *Figure C*).

The Operation

Secondly, in the following account, two doctors are attempting to treat a sore on one of Joseph's legs. The incident occurred shortly before his death and is important for being carefully observed at very close quarters, for fully fifteen minutes, not by "credulous peasants," but by the two medical professionals. Here is the deposition made by one of them, the surgeon, Francesco de Pierpaoli:

> At the time of Brother Joseph's last illness, I had to cauterize his leg, in compliance with the orders of Dr. Giacinto Carosi. Brother Joseph was sitting on a chair with his leg resting on my knees. I was already applying the iron to carry out the operation; I saw that Brother Joseph was in a state of bliss, unconscious and completely abstracted. His arms were extended, his eyes open and gazing toward heaven, his mouth was agape and his respiration seemed to have ceased completely.

ISSN: 2057-2301

> I observed that he was elevated about a span[33] above the chair, but otherwise in the same position as before the rapture commenced. I tried to lower his leg, but without success; it remained stretched out. A fly had settled on the pupil of his eye, and the more I tried to chase it away, the more obstinately it seemed to come back to the same place; in the end, I had to leave it there.
>
> In order to observe Brother Joseph more closely, I went down on my knees. [Dr. Carosi] was also examining him, and we both recognized the fact that Brother Joseph was very visibly transported, out of his senses and, furthermore, he was indeed suspended in the air as I have already said.
>
> This situation had been going on for a quarter of an hour when Father Silvestro Evangelista, who lived in the convent at Osimo, came in. After observing the phenomenon, he commanded Joseph, by his holy vows of obedience, to come back to himself, and he called him by name. Joseph smiled and came back to his senses (Bernini cited by Leroy, 1928, p.100; Grosso, 2017, p. 122).

Conclusion

Nickell's underlying argument – unreasoned and unreasonable – is that 'human bodily levitation' does not, cannot, exist; therefore, there is no scholastic or scientific value in studying it, regardless of the supporting depositions. When Nickell announces that there is "nothing to see here" it is because, when *he* looks, he sees only trickery and "compliant" illiterates or peasants.[34]

Nickell's explanations conceal one last rhetorical trick; a form of that special pleading that William of Occam called "multiplying the entities." For Nickell to be correct, he would have us believe there was widespread collusion at all levels of the Catholic Church and related political hierarchies. Is it conceivable that Joseph would be so bold and foolhardy to continue performing 'tricks' during inquisitions? If so, the slightest slip would have been the end of him and his burgeoning legend, and a great blow to Catholicism. For quite

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[33] Span - Approximately 6-9 inches, estimated against the spread of a human hand from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger. See: https://tinyurl.com/sep8ztdc

[34] Perhaps this is a species of invested interest, like an observer effect? Much as the Duck says: "when I find a thing it's generally a frog or a worm." Lewis Carroll, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland (1865), Ch.3. 'A Caucus-Race and a Long Tale.'

ISSN: 2057-2301

different reasons, the Church discretely concurred and drew the curtains (albeit ineptly) around Joseph. As Grosso puts it:

> To explain the whole mass of reports and claims as pie in the sky, we would have to assume that large numbers of people were having the same illusion, systematically misinterpreting the movements of one friar for thirty-five years, and that all grades of people were swearing in public that they saw things they only imagined. We would have to assume that numerous Church authorities were lying or exaggerating and for some unknown reason hiding and shunting around a completely innocent, non-meditating friar. One would have to posit an incredible amount of mendacity and stupidity on the part of Rosmi, Nuti, Bernini, Lambertini, and all the process deposers who recorded their observations (Grosso, 2016, p. 87).[35]

Most damning for Nickell's argument is that despite acknowledging in his opening sentence that Joseph's phenomena were "supported by records citing eyewitness testimony," throughout his critique he provides no justification for why any part of this voluminous body of sworn evidence should be so frivolously dismissed. Nor does he provide any explanation for why so many witnesses agreed upon what they had deposed they had seen.

Finally, Nickell follows the flawed methodology of many of his eminent forebears and colleagues by taking a phenomenon out of its context to criticise it with *a priori* assumptions. Whether Joseph actually levitated or not, the narratives of those who believe he had acquired some evidential value from their social, religious and folkloric context. The Church has openly declared that it has no interest in levitations as 'evidence' *only* for physical phenomena (as a scientist might). In their 1638 examination, the Inquisition, for example, paid more attention to Joseph's moral virtues – such as his indifference to poverty, his ready obedience and serenity – than to his strange screams or backward flight. Yet the legalistic hagiographic *processi* meticulously recorded the *whole* evidence

[35] Eric Dingwall agrees. In the appendix to his account of Joseph, Dingwall writes that he could not believe that all the Catholic officials who vouched for Joseph's elevations on record "were all lying or engaged in a system of deceit for the purpose of bolstering up the reputation of a fraudulent friar" (Dingwall, 1947, p. 162).

ISSN: 2057-2301

(including the physical phenomena). If there were no heretical or demonic associations, a levitation naturally became a testament to the Catholic faith and the catechism.[36]

Obviously, Nickell is writing for his followers; anyone else might not be so easily swayed. In his article's opening statement, he boasted that he "determined to look more deeply" into Joseph's "strange life." It is remarkable how quickly that determination evaporated, to be switched with the bait of his favourite suppositions. On one of the CSI websites, Nickell formally declares "that mysteries should neither be hyped nor dismissed, but instead carefully investigated with a view toward solving them." Regarding this work on Joseph, Nickell begins with apparent dismissals, did not appear to have investigated much (and that not carefully), and far from solving anything has only added misdirection and confusion. This is hardly the fair or rigorous treatment we might expect from the grand inquisitor of CSI.

The levitations of St Joseph, explained? I don't think so.

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[36] For a full treatment of the different attitudes of the Protestants and Catholics towards the interpretation and usages of miracles, see Professor Carlos Eire's recent book *They Flew* (Yale University Press, 2023). The subject is a puddle with a deceptive depth that Nickell, to his credit, carefully avoids stepping into.

ISSN: 2057-2301

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Pseudo-Skepticism: A Case Study

Michael Grosso
Independent Researcher

Mendacity of all kinds is a part of human experience, but the potential for propagating it has hugely increased, thanks to modern technology. There is talk of a crisis of truth, capped by the Trumpian meme of "fake news." Rampant in venues outside of politics, fake news spreads lies for political, economic, and ideological purposes.

There is a species of it that I call pseudo-skepticism - a form of fake news evident in Joe Nickell's case, who writes for the so-called *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine. "So-called," I say, because the term *skeptical* implies doubt and open-minded inquiry; it does not mean using every dirty trick of omission and distortion to arrive at a foregone conclusion.

Pseudo-skepticism is definitive in Nickell's "review" of my book, *The Man Who Could Fly: St. Joseph of Copertino and the Mystery of Levitation*, which appeared in the *Skeptical Inquirer,* Volume 42.4, July/August 2018, and is titled "Secrets of ''The Flying Friar': Did St. Joseph of Copertino Really Levitate?'

The author begins by defining without qualification Joseph's seventeenth century lifetime (1603-1663) as "superstitious" and mentions the European witch craze, as if that fact is going to explain everything about Joseph. Thus, in the next paragraph he writes: "The superstitious believed Joseph was able to divine the thoughts of others, to effect cures, to engage in combat with the devil (at least in a story he himself told), to have the supposed power of bilocation…" And that is it. With a sweeping *ad hominem* ("the superstitious believed") Nickell glides over all of the specific accounts in the book he is supposed to be reviewing that testify to, and discuss, these and other reported phenomena. The content of the book may be passed over because, after all, it was a superstitious century! Nickell's idea of "skepticism" boils down to this—*a priori* dismissal based on invoking the word "superstitious." This of course is dogmatism, not skepticism. His opening paragraphs are riddled with omissions and distortions. For starters, it is neither true nor would it be relevant if my chief source was Bernini's *Vita*. My chief source was in fact the many books by the twentieth century scholar, Gustavo Parisciani.

Consider Nickell's comment on Joseph's habit of prayer. He writes: "There he prayed on his knees so often and so long (a habit that would later prove useful in his

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"levitations") that his knees became infected." It is true that Joseph prayed until his knees got infected. But what is Nickell referring to in the parenthesis? What is "useful" about infected knees in—that is, according to Nickel—faking the levitations? Years of praying on his knees, we are supposed to believe, strengthened his leg muscles—a ridiculous claim. It would weaken them. This is Nickell's "secret" of Joseph's levitations. Thanks to the muscle-building effects of his prayer life, he deceived everybody in Italy and parts of Europe into believing he was an ecstatic mystic who levitated?

Joseph was reported to rise off the ground, suspended in space while saying Mass, just one of the least spectacular contexts in which he was observed to levitate. But Nickell thinks that Joseph used his "well-developed muscles" to create the illusion of levitation. "I suspect such acts were fundamentally stunts that may have led credulous seventeenth-century peasants to believe it was accomplished by levitation." Nickell believes that Joseph "feigned entrancement" to render his deceptions more convincing. Evidence? A shred would help, a thread—a molecule!

St. Joseph was a con artist who fooled the inquisitors in Naples and in Rome, according to the fanciful Mr. Nickell. And yet, Joseph was closely monitored for his entire thirty-five year career in the Church, and the inquisitors *never* questioned the authenticity of the friar's unusual aerial behaviours, which they and countless others had witnessed. There was never any question about the reality of the levitations. The Church had no use for phoney levitators, and with all the surveillance of Joseph, would have nabbed him in short order if there was the slightest hint of deception.

What the holy officers wanted to know was how he felt about himself as a result of possessing these (we say) "paranormal" abilities. Was he proud of displaying them? Were they the result of his own perhaps magical ministrations? Did he feel superior to his brothers? Did it feel good to levitate? And so on. Joseph replied that his levitations were a gift of God that caused him more trouble than joy. In fact, the friar acquitted himself before the Inquisitors by his words, behaviour, and tactful manner.

But according to Nickell, Joseph had to have been a liar and pretender for his entire career, and must have been amazingly clever to have deceived the Inquisitors; two cardinals; the Duke of Brunswick (employer of Leibniz); John Casimir Waza, a spiritual son of Joseph who became the king of Poland; the Infanta Maria, Princess of Savoy; Pope Urban VIII (d. 1644) who witnessed and deposed that Joseph levitated; and finally he must have deceived the humanist Prospero Lambertini (and friend of Voltaire) who became pope Benedict XIV.

In 1753, Benedict himself beatified Joseph, affirming the evidence for his numerous "prolonged flights," which were based on testimony collected by his first biographer, Roberto Nuti, and his diarist Arcangelo Rosmi, both contemporary witnesses who

ISSN: 2057-2301

personally knew the exceedingly humble and absent-minded friar. Rosmi quit collecting eyewitness reports of the levitations as unnecessary after he had amassed seventy cases. Nickell mentions none of this but keeps quoting as his chief authority an obscure, pseudo-skeptical book on "comparative miracles" published in 1970.

Nickell the pseudo-skeptic refuses to discuss the actual content of a book he is supposed to be reviewing. If his "explanation" were in fact true, we would also have to conclude that Joseph not only possessed enormous cunning and powers of deception but that he was perhaps one of the greatest gymnasts of all time. And he got that way by praying on his knees for unseemly hours until they were infected, for nobody ever saw him in running shorts or clenching his jaws pumping iron. There is nothing to support any of this dross except Nickell's inflexible will to disbelieve in levitation.

There is another consequence of the covert stunt-man explanation of Joseph's reported aerial anomalies. For Nickell to be right about Joseph, we have to assume the enormous, uninterrupted stupidity of everybody he dealt with for thirty-five years. Nickell seems to think that only "credulous" peasants witnessed the levitations, just as he seems to think the seventeenth century was notably "superstitious" when in fact it was also the century of the scientific revolution (Whitehead called it the "century of genius"), of great art (Caravaggio, Rembrandt), of great music (Bach, Monteverdi), and of great literature (Shakespeare, Cervantes). There were also geniuses of mysticism, Teresa of Avila and yes, Joseph of Copertino, whom Blaise Cendrars called the greatest ecstatic in history. As for peasants being credulous, I doubt if they were any worse than some PhDs or pseudo-skeptical journalists ensconced in their worldviews and constricted by their pet theories.

The fact is there are records of sworn testimony of about 150 persons concerning Joseph's levitations, persons of all classes: popes, surgeons, inquisitors, nuns, dukes, bishops, cardinals, clutches of pious women, shepherds, carpenters, Spanish envoys, and so on and so forth. In the course of his thirty-five year tenure as a badgered, surveilled, and virtually imprisoned victim of his own fame, he prayed to be free of his embarrassing raptures, as did Teresa of Avila, but his prayers were not answered. Teresa was luckier, and got more anchored to Earth. Not so Joseph, whose disposition to ecstatic levitation increased as he aged. Joseph's death in 1663 was closely monitored by his Franciscan brothers; he had a series of deathbed visions and one last ecstatic levitation two or three days before his death.

According to Nickell's "explanation," Joseph had to be quite an athlete to jump thirty-one meters into the air so he could embrace Cimabue's painting of the Madonna and Child. Nickell actually references Michael Jordan as possibly comparable to Joseph in super-agility. But Joseph levitated on his deathbed; not even Michael Jordan could do that. The truth is that Joseph was no athlete. In fact, he was a physical wreck. For five years of

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his boyhood he was bedridden with a gangrenous tumour, which unaccountably disappeared but weakened him.

Constant prayer, self-laceration, blood-letting, and fasting do not make you fit for the life of a successful stuntman. Joseph spent much of his time in dark cells (his "forest paradise," according to him) and ate and drank practically nothing. This is not the right diet for a world-class gymnast. None of this seems to have occurred to Nickell. It was observed by many that despite his winsome disposition, Joseph usually looked like a "cadaver." "Cadaver" is not a good descriptor of the mighty gymnast Nickell thinks Joseph had to be.

Before trying to trash somebody in print, a good idea is to know something about his character. All the evidence points to Joseph as an impossibly unworldly man with his mind relentlessly fixed on heaven rather than earthly matters. In short, every known fact about the character of the friar completely contradicts Nickell's vacuous fantasy.

If Nickell had the imagination to peer into the psychic reality of a human being like Joseph of Copertino, he would see that his interpretation would be out of court. Instead, he feeds readers with references to—of all things—*trampolines*! Our sleuth supposes that Joseph may have deployed something like a trampoline in his lifelong pretence of being a mystic levitator. Nickell gives us a Wikipedia reference to trampolines, pointing out that acrobats in the Middle Ages relied on springboards for their performance. Meanwhile his eyes wander back toward the book he was supposed to be reviewing and his mind glazes over the chapters he was determined not to read, since, as he knew, the whole century was superstitious.

He concludes his non-review by remarking on Michael Jordan's ability to appear suspended in the air, and adds, referring to Jordan's undoubted talents: "If we can be so impressed in the twenty-first century, imagine such effects in the superstition-ridden seventeenth, I think we can begin to understand the "levitations" of "The Flying Saint."

So, here we have the same *ad hominem* fallacy Nickell began with. Since everybody in the seventeenth century was "superstitious," anybody might be impressed by the amazing acrobat, Joseph of Copertino, and swear that he was a saint who could levitate.

It apparently never occurred to Nickell to read Chapter 3, 'The Case for Joseph's Levitations.' Or any of the chapters that describe the life and times of the friar, his mystical experience, the variety of his psychophysical phenomena, his interactions with other people, the possible physics of levitation, the implications for the mind-body problem, the new perspective on the origins of religion, and so on. Nickell did not review a book; his output consisted of one *ad hominem* grunt of disapproval.

Nickell's non-review is an icon of pseudo-skepticism. To be clear: the skeptical attitude is essential to reason, especially when confronting something so unusual as

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levitation. But the question always is, what is the evidence? What are the reasons that back up claims and that merit a fair hearing? But when, like Joe Nickell, you are a mouthpiece for an ideology that demands obedience at all costs, say goodbye to evidence and recuse yourself from the court of reason.

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CALL FOR PAPERS

'AI AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE'

The theme for the forthcoming special issue of the J*ournal for the Study of Religious Experience* is "AI and Religious Experience." Artificial Intelligence has been rapidly implemented within our increasingly technology-mediated world. The "digital turn" means making use of digital research methodologies and e-tech to propel the anthropology of religious experience forward. Hence, we invite and encourage contributors to showcase their work in these recent emerging fields which advocate, rather than denounce AI. Central are the intersections between digital technologies, ethnography and fieldwork, and data banks research, for example on how existing memory archives may shape and provide the lens for AI's application within the fields of religious and spiritual experiences. However, the theme may encompass a wider range of topics and ideas as well. Possible areas which may be considered include (but are not limited to):

- **Transcendental states**: Can AI "experience" transpersonal states of being?
- **AI and the Afterlife**: Is the Metaverse the (r)evolutionary next phase?
- **Religious engagement and digital media** (prayer apps, digital religious forums, online religious Zoom gatherings).
- **Conducting ethnographic and database research on religious experiences with AI.**
- **Philosophical implications of AI and (other) non-human intelligence**: Is AI a form of non-human intelligence?
- **Enculturation of religious experience and AI**.

The abstract submission deadline is 30th September 2024.

If you would like to discuss an idea for the issue, please don't hesitate to get in touch:

Dr. Jack Hunter - jack.hunter@uwtsd.ac.uk
Dr. Mara Steenhuisen - mara.steenhuisen@gmail.com

ISSN: 2057-2301

Contributor Biographies

Michael Grosso obtained his PhD. in philosophy from Columbia University and has taught philosophy and the humanities at New Jersey City University, City University of New York, and elsewhere. An artist and independent scholar, he divides his time between consciousness research, miracle hunting, and painting. Among his many books are *The Man Who Could Fly: St. Joseph of Copertino and the Mystery of Levitation*, *Experiencing the Next World Now*, and *Soulmaking*.

Jack Hunter, PhD., is an anthropologist exploring the borderlands of consciousness, religion, ecology and the paranormal. He is an Honorary Research Fellow with the Alister Hardy Religious Experience Research Centre, and a tutor with the Sophia Centre for the Study of Cosmology in Culture, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, where he is lead tutor on the MA in Ecology and Spirituality and teaches on the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology. He is also a lecturer on the Alef Trust's MSc in Consciousness, Spirituality and Transpersonal Psychology. He is a Research Fellow with the Parapsychology Foundation, and a Professional Member of the Parapsychological Association. In 2010 he founded *Paranthropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal*. He is the author of *Ecology and Spirituality: A Brief Introduction* (2023), *Spirits, Gods and Magic* (2020) and *Manifesting Spirits* (2020), and is the editor of *Sacred Geography: Conversations with Place* (2024), *Deep Weird* (2023), *Folklore, People and Place* (2023), *Mattering the Invisible* (2020), *Greening the Paranormal* (2019), *Damned Facts* (2016), *Strange Dimensions* (2015), and *Talking with the Spirits* (2014). He lives in the hills of Mid-Wales with his family.

Marianne Rankin is Director of Communications, Alister Hardy Trust. She has a BA in French and German (Leeds); MSt in the Study of Religion (Oxon); PhD (Warwick) and is the author of *An Introduction to Religious and Spiritual Experience* (Continuum/ Bloomsbury, 2008). mariannerankin@icloud.com

Bob Rickard is the founder and editor of the UK magazine *The Fortean Times*, which debuted in 1973 under its original title *The News*. The magazine's express purpose is to continue the documentary work of Charles Fort on the strange, anomalous and unexplained. In addition to his editorial role, Rickard has written several books and hundreds of articles on a wide range of Fortean topics. In 1981, he was a founding member of ASSAP and is also the founder of the Charles Fort Institute.

Sarah Porch-Lee has earned a degree in Cultural Anthropology and a Masters by Research in Religious Experience. Her specialisation is in feminist anthropology and women's experiences with religion. She is based in Florida in the US, where she works in archaeology, educational resources, and her independent research in religious anthropology. Her local research has included work on the Seminole Wars and Fort King in Florida. Her research in religious anthropology has included medieval archaeology in South Yorkshire, UK, and her dissertation on women's religious experience in mediumship.

Mara Steenhuisen, PhD., is an anthropologist who has a life long interest in (states of) consciousness, exploring mediumship, the paranormal and spiritual experiences with anomalous light phenomena in digital imaging. She specifically research both the cultural and the spiritual implications of orbs during there studies at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. She lives in the Netherlands.

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