

Jung and Kant could be such happy bedfellows; yet one will not find such "Romance" in Bishop's work. For better or worse, this is *not* the long-awaited *Kant-Jung Book*.

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Apparitions, Healings, and Weeping Madonnas: Christianity and the Paranormal by Lisa J. Schwebel. Paulist Press, 2004. 224 pp. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN 0-8091-4223-6.

The tabloid headline announced "Miracles Reported after Seeing Gibson's 'Passion'." The implication behind the headline is that the Divine has endorsed the movie by giving a sign of special favor to some moviegoers. But according to Lisa J. Schwebel in *Apparitions, Healings, and Weeping Madonnas*, far from being special acts of God, these kinds of 'signs' can be more accurately understood as manifestations of normal human parapsychological abilities that often occur in spatial or temporal clusters when there is a significant amount of emotional energy in the air. Drawing upon a century and a half of parapsychological research and several centuries of Catholic theological tradition (especially the work of Karl Rahner), Schwebel presents a compelling case for the normalcy of what is often considered to be the miraculous.

Schwebel considers manifestations of ghosts and apparitions, prophecies and visions, healings, and odd physical events like weeping statues and shows how each has traditionally been a part of religious mystical experience and yet is readily explainable as a manifestation of perfectly normal human psi abilities. "For every public claim of a miracle," she writes, "the same paranormal phenomena appear in nonreligious contexts across the general population." Often these secular appearances are "more spectacular than among their religious counterparts" (p. 27). As case studies, she analyzes thirteen different religious miracles, ranging from little-known, one-off events to the widely heralded miracle reports from Lourdes and Fatima.

Schwebel begins her analysis by considering the appearance of ghosts and apparitions. Such manifestations are practically the defining feature of mystical experiences and are usually considered special signs of Divine favor by the visionary (or visionaries) and their followers. However, she points out, 42% of adults say that they have seen a ghost or apparition, which means that these kinds of events are not really as special as religious claimants might suggest (p. 41). Even theological tradition, she says, recognizes that such events are

often not rare manifestations of the Divine, but are instead manifestations of various intra-psychoic processes (pp. 49–53, 122–129).

The bottom line for religion, Schwebel emphasizes here and throughout the book, is that the vision is not the thing. Visions (and other manifestations of psi) may occur to people who have no particular religious orientation as well as to people who ardently pursue a spiritual path. While deep spiritual development is commendable and may release psi abilities, what is important are not the various manifestations of psi. It is "the moral and spiritual transformation of the seer" (p. 64).

In the case of physical phenomena like weeping or bleeding religious statues, Schwebel notes that these "are no different from a kitchen table turning itself over" in poltergeist experiences (p. 68). Rather than being expressions of the Divine, such events are most often generated by nearby individuals, known in parapsychology as "focal agents," who unconsciously produce the effects through psychokinesis (PK) and then interpret the manifestations in light of previously held religious beliefs (p. 75). Reports of such events tend to draw crowds of curious or hopeful seekers, some of whom are "psi-sensitive" and unconsciously add their own psychic energies to the situation. The resultant manifestations, interpreted by most of the participants as self-revelations of the Divine, may help the focal agent(s) to heal by boosting their self-esteem or by transforming intra-psychoic pain into a kind of Divine suffering. The power of such events to heal comes in most cases when "the subject has no access to psychological help, is culturally unlikely to seek it out, or when the circumstances that cause the emotional turmoil are unlikely to change" (p. 82). Thus, PK events interpreted religiously can truly be curative, but not because they are Divine.

When it comes to prophecy, Schwebel once again draws heavily on the insights of Catholic tradition, pointing out that the word can refer to several different kinds of events. Prophecies derived from soothsaying and divination, being attempts to gain control over the future, are "fundamentally irreligious" (pp. 92–93), while anticipatory prophecies are best understood as projections into the future based on insights into the past and the present (pp. 94–97), and fabricated prophecies are merely ideas and judgments about the present or the past, dressed up "in the garb of prophecies" (pp. 93–94). All these kinds of events tend to be self-fulfilling, she asserts (p. 95). They are totally devoid of either Divine or parapsychological significance.

Precognitive prophecy, on the other hand, springs from the exercise of normal psi abilities in such a fashion that the normal barriers of time and distance are overcome (p. 97). But as a normal function of psi, it, too, is not in and of itself a manifestation of the Divine (p. 98). Indeed, prophecies based on precognitive knowledge tend to lack religious context and provide "no insight into God's purposes" (p. 99). Instead, they merely produce small and random snippets of information about the future.

The significance of precognition is this: Its very existence means that "it is not possible to say that a particular prediction is from God [because] ...

anything concrete that can be known about the historical future can, in principle, be known precognitively" (p. 117). This is not, however, to deny that there can be a significant connection between the religious and the precognitive. "To the extent that interest in prophecy reflects a belief that God communicates love for us and to us, and is not just a desire to take control of the future from God, then we can accept a [precognitive] revelation as genuine even if it does not exceed natural human abilities" (pp. 119–120).

Despite this sweeping assignment of virtually all modern-day prophecy to mundane causes, Schwebel does not discount the possible occurrence of genuine religious prophecy—that is, a Divine self-revelation. But, she asserts, this kind of prophecy (for which she references only the Bible) involves communication, interpretation, integration, and (once again) moral direction for the present rather than being a prescription for (or attempt to manipulate) the future. Indeed, because genuine prophecy is exhortatory, the future that it describes is entirely conditional (pp. 99–100).

The traditional Catholic standard of evidence for an authentically religious prophecy, notes Schwebel, is a confirmatory miracle, and the most frequently cited confirmatory miracles involve healing (p. 129). In fact, the power of the belief that healing is a direct expression of the Divine, Schwebel says, springs not just from the nature of the event itself, but from the general impression that healing is a confirmation or endorsement of something else—an impression that some movie-goers have obviously taken to heart and some tabloid headline writers have capitalized upon. In this kind of miracle, too, however, Schwebel sees thoroughly mundane rather than Divine forces at work.

Most spontaneous (a/k/a "miraculous") healings, Schwebel observes, seem to spring from one of two sources. First is the body's own incredible ability to heal itself. Noting that most believers in healing miracles hold to a dichotomous model of the mind and body, she cites insights from the field of psychoneuroimmunology that suggest that mind and body are actually intricately related (pp. 131–142). "If organs can grow new cells," she points out, "there is no reason to doubt that many 'unnatural' organ repair cases alleged at healing shrines were the result of new cell regeneration or some other still-undiscovered process" (p. 137). The second source of healing events is the existence of what she calls "bio-PK," the exercise of which enables some people to affect not only their own inherent bodily healing processes but those of others as well (pp. 145–159). The implications of the existence of this psi ability, she points out, are "enormous" (p. 149).

All this is not to discredit accounts of healing brought about by faith-based, non-medical means, she reassures. To uncover the psychophysical mechanics that lie behind faith healing does not make the "faith" part of the event any less important (p. 143). Indeed, in a non-dichotomous view of health, faith becomes highly important in the whole experience of disease and wellness. The reason we need to acknowledge the psychophysical mechanics behind healing, she points out, is because to do otherwise is to base our understanding of God on what we

understand to be possible in terms of health and healing at any given historical moment (p. 142). But what looks like a healing miracle today may be very explainable in mundane terms tomorrow. Taking this approach to healing events has far-reaching theological consequences, however. "If today's scientific impossibility is tomorrow's medical truism," Schwebel points out, "then any judgment of a miracle [having occurred] is entirely provisional" (p. 137). Healing events, while related to faith, are highly suspect as confirmations of visionary experiences.

Schwebel's point is that no event that can be classified as the proper subject of parapsychology should be understood as miraculous—that is, as a suspension of the laws of nature. And virtually all events that have traditionally been looked upon as religious miracles are in reality the manifestations of very normal human psi ability. But this, in Schwebel's view, does not mean that we are thereby deprived of the miraculous. Instead, it simply means that a miracle cannot be defined by what causes it—whether that cause is natural or preternatural. Instead, a miracle can be defined only by its psychological effects on those who participate in it. A miracle can be any event that points the visionary (and the visionary's followers) to God. "The characteristic that makes an event genuinely 'of God'," she writes, "is not that it contradicts nature, but rather, that it calls into question and radically transforms the meaning of a person's whole existence" (p. 166). As for the mechanics behind life-altering events, "Even if, in principle, God could intervene in the world, ... it is impossible in practice to establish what God did in any particular event" (pp. 170–171). Schwebel redeems the idea of "miracle" only by redefining it along lines that make it compatible with a rationalized, scientific worldview.

Schwebel's analysis of religious miracles will, of course, be considered nonsense by those who consider the field of parapsychology to be a pseudo-science that deals in fantasy rather than reality. And insofar as modern theologians subscribe to the authoritative pronouncements made by mainstream science about what is real and what is possible, her analysis may appear to be just as pointless to them. For the rest of us, however, her work opens up interesting possibilities and questions.

For parapsychologists, Schwebel opens up the long and continuing history of religiously mediated paranormal events to more intense empirical scrutiny. Given that many religious miracles are recurring, she points out, they provide an ideal opportunity for on-going research into psi phenomena in everyday (as opposed to experimental) manifestation (p. 40).

For religious leaders, Schwebel's analysis offers an opportunity to understand and use the comparatively new tools of parapsychology "as part of a comprehensive plan for discernment" in evaluating religious miracle claims—a task that is especially important "when a vision makes demands of the wider community" (pp. 21, 40). "Claims about special events," she observes, "ought to be treated with suspicion when they distract people from tending to

the issues of the day or when they offer simplistic solutions to complex social problems" (p. 169).

For the more theologically engaged reader, Schwebel's book may be alternately illuminating and dismaying. Despite her support of a non-dualistic theory of healing, the cosmology she seems to subscribe to is ultimately a dualistic one in which the chasm between matter and spirit is immense. Though she affirms that matter and spirit are "open to one another" and finds that, in itself, miraculous (p. 169), she provides the reader with no real sense of how or where this openness happens in actual fact, since all supposedly spiritual manifestations can be explained as the result of forces (such as psi) already naturally at work in the material realm. In the end, the God she describes is thoroughly transcendent, every avenue of Divine expression in this world being normalized via parapsychology.

This does not leave much for Christians who want to believe that the Divine does occasionally reveal itself directly in preternatural miracles (rather than just by using mundane forces and abilities). Schwebel's analysis of modern-day miracle claims in light of parapsychology opens up the question of how Biblical miracles might stand up to similar scrutiny. And this is dangerous for a faith built around one of the biggest miracle claims of all time—that the Divine was preternaturally manifested in Jesus Christ. If you can question whether God really acts preternaturally in the more "everyday" wondrous events that people report, why not question whether God really acted preternaturally in the Incarnation? Or, put another way, on what rational grounds could one *fail* to question it? And if the Incarnation can be understood in thoroughly mundane terms, just as the miracles of Fatima or Lourdes can, then the Christian understanding of salvation has to be re-examined, too. And on these two things—the Incarnation and the Resurrection—hang the whole Christian theological edifice.

On the other hand, if the reader takes to heart Schwebel's more non-dualistic statements about the mutual openness of matter and spirit, her book can be read as a mystical treatise in a scientific mode. In that Schwebel defines a "miracle" as any event that manifests openness to the spirit by virtue of the radical psychological and spiritual effects it has, human beings can be fairly said to be awash in (potential) everyday miracles. While this is a theology that has always found expression in the writings of religious mystics and certain Gnostic sects, it is not a theology that has been promulgated to the masses. How ironic, then, that it is the language of science—the *lingua franca* of the 21st century—that brings the mystical view of reality to our attention once more.

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