

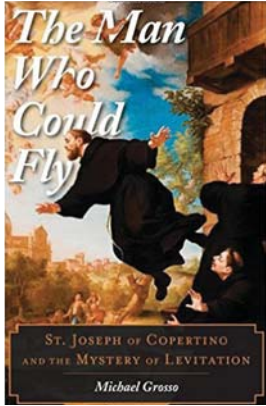
BOOK REVIEW

The Man Who Could Fly: St. Joseph of Copertino and the Mystery of Levitation by Michael Grosso. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. \$38 (hardcover). ISBN 978-1442256729.

The case of St. Joseph, the Flying Friar, is one of the most fascinating in the entire history of parapsychology. But until now, there was very little written in English about Joseph. Grosso's new book fills that void handily, and goes well beyond that by speculating in detail and great subtlety on a variety of surrounding issues, including the efficacy of prayer, the history of religion and religious miracles in general, and the psychology of the period in relation to the development of religious thought. Grosso's broad range of scholarly competence allows him to weave together these various threads into something much more than a mere recounting of astounding anecdotes about Joseph's phenomena. Indeed, there's more in this book than can be covered adequately in a review. So I'll focus primarily on what I imagine will be news anyway to most *JSE* readers—namely, the astounding phenomena and the reasons for taking this case seriously.

The case of St. Joseph provides the earliest outstanding evidence for human levitation and quite possibly the best from any era. But from a certain conventional viewpoint, the case has several strikes against it from the start. In many people it triggers deep-seated prejudices, about either historical evidence generally or the evidence for alleged religious miracles in particular. Even those willing to be open-minded about nineteenth-century evidence for paranormality may balk at taking seventeenth-century evidence equally seriously. And even those willing to be open-minded about seventeenth-century evidence may draw the line at evidence for religious miracles. Here, they would urge, the problem of biased observation and reporting are especially acute.

But the reason the case of Joseph is important is that it tends to be strong just where one would expect it to be weak. There is an abundance of impressive testimony; independent accounts tend to converge on striking and unexpected details; depositions were often provided by laypersons with no motive for lending support to the Church; and perhaps most important, the Church itself subjected the evidence to detailed scrutiny, partly as a general procedure to avoid subsequent embarrassment over endorsing hoaxes, but also because there were good reasons for thinking that the canonization of



Joseph might have been contrary to its interests.

The testimony in Joseph's case has many of the virtues characteristic of the best spontaneous cases in parapsychology. For example, depositions tend to display unexpected patterns of detail, witnesses were often apparently unbiased or at least had nothing to gain (and perhaps something to lose) from offering testimony, and the observations frequently occurred outdoors in daylight or under other favorable conditions. I should also emphasize that Joseph was regularly observed *in flight* or sometimes just suspended in air. He was not simply observed *at* the locations to which he had been ostensibly transported. Furthermore, on those occasions when he was merely hovering above the ground, witnesses frequently confirmed the fact by passing their hands beneath him.

In one particularly interesting case, during Joseph's final illness, the surgeon Francesco Pierpaoli was cauterizing Joseph's right leg when he noticed that Joseph was entranced and senseless. When the cauterization began, Joseph was seated with his right leg lying across the doctor's knees. His arms were spread wide, his eyes and mouth were open, and his face was turned heavenward. Then Pierpaoli noted that Joseph was hovering in that position several inches above his chair. He tried to lower Joseph's leg but was unable to do so. He also observed that a fly had settled on the pupil of one of Joseph's eyes and remained there despite his efforts to drive it away. Then Pierpaoli and a second physician knelt down to confirm that Joseph was indeed raised above his chair. Joseph remained in that state for about fifteen minutes, and when he returned to his senses he had no awareness that the cauterization had been performed.

Joseph's levitations would often be preceded by a cry, sob, or shriek, and when levitating inside a church he would not disturb the objects crowded around him on the altar. In fact, many reported, from many different occasions, that Joseph would not extinguish candles as he flew among them. Moreover, during some of Joseph's flights outdoors, he reportedly soared as much as thirty yards over the heads of onlookers to the branches of trees. Witnesses frequently commented that the branches would not ordinarily have been able to sustain his weight and that Joseph accordingly seemed to weigh no more than a bird. One curious and recurring observation is that during his flights outdoors, Joseph's clothing would not be disturbed by wind or by his movement through the air. His robes were also reported to have remained dry in the rain. These accounts would appear to connect with

reports that Joseph's flights indoors failed to extinguish nearby candles.

Evidently, all that was needed to provoke one of Joseph's levitations was something to arouse his religious awe, such as an image of the Virgin or an inspiring remark. On one occasion, while walking in the garden, another priest said to him, "What a beautiful heaven God has made!", in response to which Joseph shrieked and flew to the top of an olive tree where he remained in a kneeling position for thirty minutes. When he regained his senses, he had to be helped out of the tree with a ladder.

Grosso explains in detail how the testimony in Joseph's case was subjected to serious scrutiny by Church officials, and he offers a penetrating analysis of the nature of Joseph's ecstatic states. Indeed (as I noted earlier), Grosso's book is a great deal more than an account of the astonishing phenomena exhibited by the friar. It's also a detailed and sensitive exploration of Joseph the man, and Grosso devotes much of his text to exploring the details and peculiarities of Joseph's inner life and the connections between his internal dynamics and his externally expressed "miracles." For example, as part of his larger discussion of the varieties of mysticism and ecstatic states and their relationship to eroticism, Grosso has a very interesting discussion of the psychodynamics of Joseph's levitations, and the more general relation between tension and ecstasies. He notes how Joseph struggled to cut himself off from all earthly attachments, and that he once remarked "God wishes that I be detached from every affection other than his divine will." Grosso notes, "For Joseph, levitation meant escape from the unbearable tension of just being in the world" (p. 137). In particular, he suggests that "Joseph deployed his sexual energies to propel his ecstatic flights" (ibid). Summing up, he writes,

Joseph, I conjecture, drew upon repressed, powerful sexual energies to accelerate his extraordinary flights, though consciously he associated sexuality with diabolic temptation. This conflicted, hyperintense state seems to have served as a potent driver of the force that made the levitations possible. (p. 137)

Joseph's phenomena were not limited to instances of levitation. For example, many people reported miraculous healings attributed to Joseph. Here, I wish Grosso had considered more fully the connections with hypnotic phenomena. He does spend a paragraph early on mentioning hypnotic healing, but it could easily have been introduced again in Chapter 4. Grosso correctly notes that one's belief in the powers of the healer (or, say, healing water at Lourdes) may be causally efficacious, and he has another, and excellent, discussion late in the book about how various cognitive states can be either psi conducive or psi repressive. But hypnotic interventions suggest

that cases indicating the efficacy of belief may in fact form a subset of the broader class of dissociative phenomena. So I regret that Grosso didn't include a few words about (say) the relevance of hypnotically induced anesthesia, or of surgeries on hemophiliac patients without bleeding. But this is a very minor quibble.

I'm a bit more concerned about Grosso's discussions of the failing of some physical theories in connection with Joseph's levitations. For example, I'd challenge the story Grosso tells about how classical physics failed to do justice to the existence of consciousness. It's true, I'd say, that physicists' reliance on vertical or analytic explanation is a fatal error when applied to the domain of the mental.¹ But it's not quite true, or to the point, that a problem with classical physics (unlike current physics) is that it fails to provide "openings through which mind may influence, penetrate, and transform nature" (p. 175). I'd argue instead that mental phenomena have always been *outside* the domain of physics, and that the more serious problem instead is with the grand pretensions of physicists who naively think they must be able to account for everything (or at least everything that matters). I found Grosso's discussion of these topics much less sophisticated and subtle than his detailed reflections on the history of ideas and the history and psychology of religion.

However, these concerns are minor. The primary value of Grosso's book is its rich and careful account of Joseph's life and phenomena, and its accompanying and penetrating analysis of religious thought and miracles more generally. Make no mistake. This book is a major contribution both to parapsychology and the philosophy of religion.

Note

¹ See, for example, Braude 1997 and Braude 2014.

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