

REFERENCES

- Donnay, A. (2006). Correspondence. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 70, 251-253.
- Jawer, M. (2006). Environmental sensitivity: Inquiry into a possible link with apparitional experience. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 70, 25-47.
- Jawer, M. (2007). Correspondence. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 71, 52-53.
- Roe, C. A. (2007). Correspondence. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 71, 120-121.

—MICHAEL A. THALBOURNE

* * *

***The Psychology of Paranormal Belief. A Researcher's Handbook.* Harvey J. Irwin. (2009). Hatfield, Hertfordshire: University of Hertfordshire Press. 213 pages. ISBN 978-1-902806-93-8 (pb). £16.99.**

On Monday, October 12, 2009, I went for an interview for a job I very much wanted. However, I felt it went poorly, and I was consequently very anxious afterwards. Now the reader should know that for the previous year, following a trauma, I had been agnostic—almost “atheistic”—about the existence of psi. Thus it was uncharacteristic of me at the time to contemplate, on the way home from the interview, consulting the Chinese method of divination the *I Ching* to try and set my anxieties at rest as to the outcome of the interview, to be known in four days. An odd aspect to this incident was that, upon this contemplation, I had a mental image of the hexagram “Danger” (#29 out of 64 possibilities). As it happened, the hexagram that came up was in fact the one called “Danger” (a 1 in 64 chance of this occurring by chance), and seemed to bode poorly for getting the job. And, as it happened, I did *not* get the job.

It is to Harvey Irwin's credit that I believe his book gives a satisfactory explanation of all but one aspect of my behaviour as a paranormal believer (or better, re-convert). I will return to this success in a moment.

The mind-numbing ugliness of the cover of this monograph should not deter the researcher from appreciating this very comprehensive

coverage of the topic of the psychology of paranormal belief in all its various guises—perhaps the first time that that topic has appeared in book form under that title.

Caroline Watt and Richard Wiseman contribute a Foreword in which they emphasise the fact that paranormal belief is not a unitary phenomenon but encompasses a range of beliefs, such as superstitions, religious beliefs, beliefs in the phenomena traditionally studied by parapsychologists, and beliefs about astrology and UFOs. Consequently, different kinds of beliefs serve different functions, and there are varying amounts of scientific evidence pertaining to each sort, but in the long run we stand only to gain in our search for an understanding of the human outlook by studying them, especially given that they tend to be rather widespread.

These issues are addressed in depth in Chapter 1, as well as such questions as are paranormal beliefs a type of delusion, are paranormal beliefs irrational (rationally formed, maintained, or acted upon) and are paranormal beliefs scientifically unacceptable? But I found myself in disagreement with Irwin in one respect. He says:

The scientific establishment nevertheless [that is, despite observational theories of psi] continues to regard psi as an inherent impossibility. Be that as it may, the fact remains that some other paranormal beliefs do not implicate scientifically impossible processes. Many of the metaphysical beliefs of spiritism and religion are not a literal violation of scientific tenets. The existence of spirits and of heaven, for example, is not precluded by science. It is therefore not appropriate to define paranormal beliefs in terms of the contravention of scientific principles by paranormal phenomena. (p. 15)

One of Broad's basic limiting principles is that it is impossible for mind to act beyond the brain and nervous system, and therefore to exist as an independent spirit. Therefore, astral projection, spirits and heaven as an abode of spirits, including God as a spirit, are all ruled out according to scientific assumptions. In a strange passage that seems to contradict the broad approach to paranormal belief used in the book, Irwin in his final chapter says amongst other things that "it is strongly recommended that researchers and other academic commentators define paranormal belief more specifically in terms of belief in phenomena that putatively are scientifically *impossible* rather than merely scientifically *unaccepted*" (p. 109). That is, which contravene the scientific assumptions that are basic limiting principles. I agree.

Irwin nevertheless early adopts a *working* definition of "paranormal belief" which I think it would be good to quote in full:

. . . a proposition that has not been empirically attested to the satisfaction of the scientific establishment but is generated within the nonscientific community and eventually endorsed by people who might normally be expected by their society to be capable of rational thought and reality testing. For these people, the belief is phenomenologically a part of their sense of reality and truth rather than 'a proposition they endorse'. Like other types of belief, a paranormal belief will be either intuitive or reflective; will have cognitive, affective and (sometimes) behavioural components; will be distinct from a value or simple statement of preference; will be relatively stable and thus somewhat resistant to the influence of counterargument; and will be dimensional, that is, marked by various degrees of endorsement between the poles of extreme scepticism and extreme gullibility. (p. 17)

Armed with this definition, Irwin proceeds in Chapter 2 to examine such sociocultural influences on paranormal belief as parents, peers, conjugal partner, culture and educational institutions. I found the sections on social movements and the media to be particularly interesting.

Chapter 3—the psychometrics of paranormal belief—was informative even to me as a seasoned researcher in the area, particularly on the topic of superstition. However, I was somewhat disappointed with the coverage given to my Australian Sheep-Goat Scale (the ASGS). While the development of other scales was described, no mention was given that the ASGS started out as a 10-item scale (covering ESP and life after death), was expanded to a 13-item scale, and then was expanded again to an 18-item scale (covering psychokinesis as well) which (a) has been presented in a visual analogue and a forced-choice format, and (b) has been factor-analysed giving three independent factors, suggesting the multidimensionality of even parapsychological claims, much less the broader aspects of the paranormal, and superseding the earlier factor analysis which is in fact reported by Irwin. Likewise (c) Irwin describes approvingly the Rasch measurement model, and while mentioning its availability for Tobacyk's Revised Paranormal Belief Scale does not mention that it is also available for the ASGS. Finally, (d) the visual analogue ASGS has been assessed for convergent validity on multiple occasions (e.g., Thalbourne & Delin, 1993). Clearly, Irwin is more at home with the Tobacyk scale, which he has used almost exclusively to measure paranormal belief. Nevertheless, this chapter is a useful one for persons attempting to measure paranormal belief, and I for one will do things a little differently having read Irwin's advice.

Then follow four chapters on theoretical perspectives or hypotheses about paranormal belief. Chapter 4 is on the social marginality hypothesis, which is the hypothesis that the privation, loss of control over life and alienation associated with marginal social status encourage such people to appeal to paranormal beliefs, presumably because these beliefs bring some emotional compensation to their lives. Chapter 5 is on the worldview hypothesis, which interprets paranormal belief as a product of a broad subjective stance, a common human approach to “making sense of the world”. Chapter 6 is on the cognitive deficits hypothesis, under which view the believer in the paranormal is held variously to be illogical, irrational, credulous, uncritical and foolish. Finally, Chapter 7 considers the empirical evidence for the psychodynamic functions hypothesis, the view that paranormal beliefs serve psychological needs.

The last chapter, 8, is entitled “Theoretical integration: A causal model of belief in scientifically unaccepted phenomena.” Up to this point the monograph reads like an expanded and updated version of Irwin’s classic 1993 paper on the same topic, where he also posited a model of paranormal belief. The reader is thus in for a surprise in this book in this chapter, which shows the accumulated mature thinking of the seasoned researcher. In some respects I would call the model brilliant. It has a number of components, but I will take my opening *I Ching* example in an attempt to show how Irwin might explain it. First he would say that, in the believer, there occurs some contextual stress, one that induces a sense of vulnerability and perceived loss of personal control and a concomitant emotional state of some degree of anxiety or helplessness (e.g., my stress following the job interview). This stress activates paranormal *beliefs* (in this case precognising the hexagram, in a way perceived by me to be valid due to the work of the editor, Dr. Storm [Storm, 2008]) as well as paranormal *behaviour* (using the *I Ching* after a two-year hiatus), all of this in a specific context (see Irwin for details) which here includes availability of a copy of the *I Ching*, suspension of disbelief that it might work, and most especially a need for mastery of the environment given the powerlessness of my situation and the urgency of my ignorance about the outcome of the interview. Once the initial anxiety had diminished I re-channelled this need and engaged in alternative job plans, and, surprise surprise, did *not* consult the *I Ching* a second time. Irwin might additionally posit that in me there exists “early experience with diminished control”, as in childhood trauma, but I am reasonably sure that this does not apply to me. Nevertheless, I am persuaded that, in general, Irwin’s model might well be a valid one for many instances of paranormal belief.

In closing, I will remark that one factor that does *not* find its place in Irwin’s model is the actual occurrence of real psi processes—was my experience of precognition of the hexagram merely an experience in

consciousness with no ontological validity? In other words, one factor in inducing paranormal belief might be real psi, as suggested by the sheep-goat effect, which Irwin mentions (pp. 39-40) but does not explore the implications of. Of course this as a component of the model would not appeal at all to researchers of a sceptical bent, and so Irwin is probably wise to omit it as just a future possibility at this stage.

In short, I found this monograph to have paradigmatic status. It is admirably comprehensive (and thus a vital sourcebook for researchers) both in terms of empirical and theoretical work, with just the right amount of background in conventional psychology. It is full of suggestions and hypotheses for further research, and should serve as a wonderful stimulus to work in this area for many years to come.

REFERENCES

- Irwin, H. J. (1993). Belief in the paranormal: A review of the empirical literature. *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, 87, 1-39.
- Storm, L. (2008). Investigations of the *I Ching*: I. Relationships between psi, time perspective, paranormal belief and meaningfulness. *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, 8, 103-127.
- Thalbourne, M. A., & Delin, P. S. (1993). A new instrument for measuring the sheep-goat variable: Its psychometric properties and factor structure. *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, 59, 172-186.

—MICHAEL A. THALBOURNE

* * *

***Spirit Sisters*. Karina Machado. (2009). Sydney, Australia: Hachette Australia. 282 pages. ISBN 978-0-7336-2346-2 (pb). AUD\$32.99.**

This book by Sydney journalist, Karina Machado is not a scientific work nor does it claim to be but comes instead directly from the psychic experiences of over two hundred Australian women. Machado comprehensively covers a very broad range of women's parapsychological and life changing events. This broad spectrum includes the common apparitions of deceased loved ones including pets, haunted houses and