

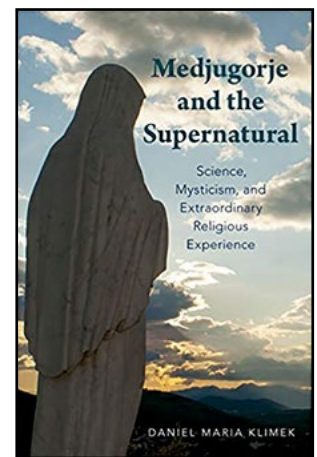
In Defense of the Sacred¹

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A Review of *Medjugorje and the Supernatural: Science, Mysticism, and Extraordinary Religious Experience*, by Daniel Maria Klimek. Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 375. \$102.99. ISBN (Hardcover) ISBN 978-0-19-067-920-0

This book could have been more aptly titled *In Defense of the Sacred: Why Ann Taves Attribution Theory of Religion is Wrong*. The author, Daniel Maria Klimek, is a Third Order Regular (TOR) Franciscan, teaching at the Franciscan University of Steubenville [FUS] in Ohio, which has as its mission statement “Academically Excellent. Passionately Catholic.”² The book originated as a Ph. D. dissertation from the Catholic University of America and displays its origins. Unsurprisingly, *Medjugorje and the Supernatural* presents a robust defense of Roman Catholic teachings and argues strongly for the genuinely supernatural character of the Medjugorje visions and the sacred and transformative content of the messages passed from Our Lady to the visionaries, and through them to her devotees. The book is well researched and clearly presented, although it could have been half the length as there is a great deal of repetition, both of the general arguments and, in places, of specific details as well. As a theological text, the book may well please its readers, particularly those well disposed towards Marian apparitions. For a more rounded social scientific or historical perspective, or for an account of Medjugorje that places the visionary phenomenon in the context of other paranormal phenomena (other than a discussion of mysticism), this is not the place to come.



Klimek sets out his stall in the Introduction, describing Medjugorje, the small town in the Mostar diocese of Bosnia-Herzegovina where the Virgin Mary has been appearing to a small group of children — now adults — since 1981, in the following terms:

It is a village of visionaries, apparitions, weeping statues, dancing suns, rosaries mysteriously turned gold; a village, in a time when secularism permeates much of the Western world, where religious and priestly vocations flourish; a village where lives are transformed, where healings and miracles are said to happen, where millions of pilgrims have traveled from all

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² The Franciscan University at Steubenville is a center for the propagation of the Medjugorje message. Professor Mark Miravalle, Professor of Theology and Mariology at FUS, also wrote his doctoral thesis on Medjugorje. Both men testified that they found the experience of visiting Medjugorje powerfully transformative.

corners of the earth, hoping to encounter a touch of the divine in a place where, it is said, heaven meets earth (p. 1).

Although this is factually the case, it is one particular vision of Medjugorje, promoted with great enthusiasm and dedication by the Franciscan clergy of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Franciscan Order more widely, including the Franciscan University of Steubenville. What Klimek does not say is that the apparitions took place at a moment in history when the centuries-old Franciscan hegemony in the region was under severe threat from the secular diocesan bishop and clergy, and the Yugoslavian communist civil authorities. Nor does he describe the build-up to the apparitions. In 1979 a Franciscan priest, Father Branko, who had served in Medjugorje parish for many years, attended a meeting of Catholic Charismatic Renewal in Italy. During this meeting Branko received two prophetic messages from leaders of the movement. In one, he was seen “in the midst of a fast-growing multitude” from which “flowed streams of living water.” In the second prophecy, he was told not to worry about the situation in the diocese of Mostar, as “I shall send you My Mother and everyone shall listen to her” (Bax, 1990, p. 65). Branko was told to return to his parish and make preparations for the fulfillment of these prophecies.

By the time the apparitions started, the population had spent two years praying, fasting, and reciting the rosary as they awaited the fulfillment of the prophecies. Mothers were told that God was preparing special graces for the children, and two children recovered from illness after intense prayers, and a special devotion to the Virgin of Medjugorje was established. When six children found old and valuable rosaries, this was interpreted as a sign of God’s coming grace (Bax, 1990, p. 66). By the time the first apparition took place on June 23rd 1981, expectations were running very high. This is not to disparage the extraordinary nature of the events that took place, but if we can move away from a binary true/false dichotomy and seek to understand such phenomena in a more holistic manner, this psychological and spiritual background preparation may well turn out to be highly significant. We still know very little about the nature of consciousness and the ways in which visible and invisible matter interact.

We do know that the Madonna seen by the visionaries resembled the statue of Mary in the parish church. In a Roman Catholic context, interpretations of paranormal phenomena take on a Marian flavor and are shaped by existing beliefs and expectations. In the Andes, when Jesus appeared to a local Indian shepherd boy on the slopes of Mount Ausankati (a powerful mountain deity of the region), he merged into the mountain. The pilgrimage of Our Lord of the Snow Star combines Hispanic Christianity and a pre-Christian rock fertility cult (Sallnow, 1991). The interaction between (possible) supernatural intervention and collective expectation is hard to unravel. In the Philip parapsychology experiment that took place in Toronto in the 1970s, a group of researchers invented and then attempted to communicate with a fictional character they created named Philip Aylesford. The group recreated a “traditional” séance environment and were able to achieve knocks and raps, a moving and levitating table, and answers to questions concerning Philip’s fictional life. Whether the phenomena produced were the result of the collective energy and imagination of the group alone or involved some mischievous spirit or spirits who decided to join them, it is impossible to tell. What was clear is that paranormal phenomena could be produced and created by the power of collective imagination and thought, and also banished in a similar manner (Owen, with Sparrow, 1976; Wehrstein, 2018). The power of two thousand years of church history and the devotion of millions of believers in the miraculous powers of the Virgin Mary presumably have a role to play in Marian apparitions.

There are two discussions in *Medjugorje and the Supernatural*. One is an account of the events that occurred in Medjugorje, with descriptions of the visionaries and (very briefly) the orthodox Catholic content of their messages, and the pastoral fruits resulting from the apparitions. Although he does not go into the politics of the situation, Klimek acknowledges that the Catholic Church's final decision as to the authenticity of the apparitions and messages will be ecclesial (i.e., political), not scientific. Despite having taken the pontifical name Francis, the current (Jesuit) pope has made it clear that, unlike his predecessor John Paul II, he is unimpressed by a Madonna who sends messages every day at a pre-arranged time. He does acknowledge the pastoral benefits of pilgrimages to Medjugorje (Murzaku, 2019). Part of the Medjugorje narrative is the discussion in Chapter 5 of the battery of tests the visionaries were subjected to, although tests of orthodoxy and conformity seem to have been the main component of these examinations. Klimek quotes Mary Craig's (1988) comment that "For the first time in all the history of apparitions, science has had an opportunity to investigate extraordinary phenomena while they were actually happening" (p. 171). A case is made for the uniqueness of Medjugorje within the history of both Marian apparitions and Christian mysticism. A star witness for Klimek is Marco Margnelli, described as "an Italian neurophysiologist and an ardent atheist" who made it his business to disprove claims of mystical phenomena. He carried out tests on the visionaries in 1988 and concluded that during their apparitions, the visionaries were in a genuine ecstatic state. What apparently impressed Dr. Marginelli most was that during the time the visionaries were on their knees in ecstasy, ostensibly conversing with the Virgin Mary, the birds outside the room in which they met were silent. A few months later, Marginelli became a practicing Catholic (p. 7). The story of Marginelli's conversion is repeated several times in different chapters.

The second narrative is a rehearsal of perennialist versus constructivist views of religion. William James is recruited for the perennialist cause, although Klimek disapproves of his extension of the supernatural to embrace mediumship and other parapsychological phenomena. Klimek is highly critical (with some justification) of the tendency for many scholars of religion to rule out the possibility of a supernaturalist origin for Marian apparitions. He is particularly critical of the historian of religion Ann Taves (1990), and the underlying materialism of her 'naturalistic' approach to the study of religion. In asking scholars to set aside supernatural explanations and to focus instead on unconscious processing in interpreting religion, Klimek argues that Taves makes the unconscious the ontological root of experience, and the key to explaining the source of a phenomenon. When this happens, "we are no longer dealing with naturalistic, meaning purely empirical, claims but, rather, those that are rooted in philosophical presupposition" (pp. 225–226).

Robert Orsi and his call for historians to embrace an "abundant history" are more favorably mentioned. Orsi takes on board subaltern historian Dipesh Chakrabaty's critique of two main assumptions in modern historiography, namely, that humans exist in a single frame of historical time and that gods and spirits are ultimately social facts, and that the social exists prior to them. In other words, there is a tendency to remove the possibility of the supernatural from the frame (Orsi, 2008, p. 13). Orsi, who has studied Lourdes as well as other Marian locales in some detail, talks about the excess found at such ritual sites, the international networks that they give rise to, and above all, the promise of relationship. At Marian shrines, devotees are already in a relationship with Mary. Apparitions are a particular "excess of presence," but not unexpected or external to a pre-existing reality. This is clearly the case with Med-

jugorje, where, when the apparitions started, Mary was already anticipated. Orsi argues that within the devotional relationship, time and place become fluid, and people experience radical presence or realness (Orsi, 2008, p. 14). Abundant events are not exhausted by social history or psychology. The face-to-face experience of presence can be transformative for the historian as much for the pilgrim or devotee. Klimek's concerns are more theological (or apologetic) than historical, but Orsi has important insights into Marian apparitions that could certainly be used to support and extend Klimek's analysis. As a Franciscan at the heart of the dissemination of the Medjugorje cult (and I use the term anthropologically and not pejoratively), Klimek is in an excellent position to write a historically and socially informed study of Medjugorje, placing Marian apparitions within phenomenological as well as theological theories of religion. This is not what we have here but perhaps something we can look forward to in the future.

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