

THE MAN WHO COULD FLY: ST. JOSEPH OF COPERTINO AND THE MYSTERY OF LEVITATION by Michael Grosso. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016. Pp. xi + 251. \$38.00 (hardback). ISBN 978-1-4422-5672-9.

In this effort, Michael Grosso has written an engaging, entertaining, and interesting book about not only the life story of one of the most fascinating Catholic saints, St. Joseph of Copertino, but about how we might account for the alleged levitations for which he is best known as genuine physical phenomena. Grosso, for his part, opens the text claiming that “[t]his book is about the possibility of transcendence” (p. 1), but, despite his dedication of the book to Pope Francis, he eschews religious interpretations in favor of a range of familiar paranormal hypotheses. The book is about wonderment and belief, to be certain, most explicitly that of Joseph and his contemporaries, but also about the author’s own perspective on the phenomena and their possibility.

I want to begin my review by stating unequivocally that I enjoyed reading this book, which I see divided into two distinct sets of material. On one hand, the book relates the life story of Joseph in a manner that is both highly informative and engaging. It is in this area that the book achieves its greatest success and would be a valuable resource for any reader interested in an accessible hagiography of this most intriguing of saints. The other material Grosso presents can be summarized as an attempt to defend the purported levitational phenomena as genuine and then to offer a potential explanation for how these miracles might be explained. Unfortunately, the arguments presented therein are altogether weak, relying more on a sense of wonderment than on a logic compelling enough to convince the skeptic.

The book itself is divided into three parts: Part I: The Man and His Marvels; Part II: Steps Toward Understanding; and Part III: Concluding Reflections. It is in the first part that the life story of Joseph largely appears, most of it contained within the first chapter. It is important to note that Grosso returns to details of the story of Joseph's life and miracles throughout the book, such that one interested only in the hagiographic elements will still benefit from reading the book in its entirety. Grosso does an excellent job of summarizing the details of Joseph's life, at times both wondrous and ugly, in a very readable style that encourages interest. Religious experts and readers who have no prior knowledge of St. Joseph of Copertino will be equally entertained by the presentation here.

Most impressive is Grosso's use of original sources in constructing the story. For this project, Grosso, with funding from Cedar Creek Institute and the Esalen Center, commissioned a translation of Domenico Bernini's 18th-Century hagiography, *Vita Fr. Giuseppe da Copertino*, representing the first English translation of the text yet to be made. One hopes that Grosso will make the entire translation available in the future. It is this text that provides the bulk of the accounts from first-hand witnesses. But Grosso does not stop there, as he also includes material from a number of other texts about the levitating saint, all of which are detailed in a useful Appendix that allows interested readers to seek out the material for more in-depth reading on their own. Of particular value in Grosso's endeavor are the number of reports from various trials from that time, which are included in several of these old Italian sources, as they often include further witness testimony of Joseph's miracles.

The rest of this first section moves into a defense of Joseph's levitation as a real possibility, one which would seemingly contravene materialistic science and its laws. As such, Grosso moves to show the shaky ground underlying a strictly materialistic view of the universe. Beyond this early point, I became increasingly unconvinced by his argument, and in the rest of my review I offer a critique less of the merits of the book as a whole than of particular core aspects of the argument presented therein.

To begin, Grosso spends an entire chapter (Chapter 2: A New Force) preparing what is essentially a kind of slippery-slope argument whereby he offers a number of "mind-body interactions" in which context Joseph's levitations, "at first so incredible, might begin to appear more intelligible" (p. 37). On offer are a series of strange phenomena that build in their capacity to amaze from relatively common flying dreams and the placebo effect to ever-increasingly amazing claims, including mediumistic materializations and examples of levitations from other religious traditions. The suggestion is that if one were to accept one strange phenomenon as real, why not the next more strange, and the next, until we arrive at levitation itself? Accepting strangeness in stages is no way to arrive at comfort with the possibility of levitation.

In fact, Grosso betrays an early comfort with the possibility of levitation even as he explains an instance of what he calls "quasi-levitation" as a "partial answer" to why he became interested in the phenomena in the first place. Grosso describes an instance of the relatively common finger-lift trick, sometimes called "light-as-a-feather, stiff-as-a-board," in which a group of five female students picked up a male classmate using nothing but their fingers. Although the physics of this party trick are fairly simple, and examples of how to do it can easily be found on YouTube, Grosso admits to an astonishment that he would never forget, concluding: "If a group of students could manage this little marvel, think what a seasoned religious community, under intense psychic pressure, might be able to accomplish" (p. 42). Grosso's reaction to this event may well speak to religious wonder, but it is also an example of how belief not only can leave one open to certain possibilities, but potentially close one off to otherwise obvious normal explanations.

Another problem with Grosso's overall argument is apparent in this chapter, as his list of astonishing mind-body phenomena moves all too fluidly between examples of a mind's interacting with its own body and a mind's interacting outside of its body. The placebo effect certainly illustrates a great power of the mind to influence one's own bodily health through belief, but that is an entirely different thing than the mind's being able to reach out into the world beyond. Grosso's mistake is a simple one that occurs early in his effort. While describing the psychokinesis (PK) that would seemingly be required for levitation, he offers an example of what he considers "a very normal type of PK [...] which occurs whenever our minds affect our own bodies" (p. 39). He suggests that when I mentally will my hand to write, I thereby exert psychic influence on my hand to cause it to write, which he then equates to "the more unusual mind-body

effects,” such as “man flying” (p. 40). His equation moves through the fact that materialists take issue with the mind in the first place, but ends up at a point that only muddies the water, since Grosso ignores the fact that my mind is never thought to directly affect the movement of my hand but rather, at best, my mind influences my brain, which in turn activates my hand to carry out my will. Materialists certainly take issue with the mind, but only insofar as it exists to affect the brain. If the nerves from my brain to my hand were severed, then we would not normally expect to be able to mentally will the hand to write. The problem that materialists have with the mind is not one of how I make my hand move but rather how I make my brain make my hand move. That Grosso grounds much of his argument on this unjustified leap seriously weakens any further attempt to discuss levitation effectively.

In his third chapter, *The Case for Joseph’s Levitations*, Grosso seeks to address the skeptical response to the mere possibility of levitation by, essentially, asserting the strength of the eye-witness testimony involved in the saint’s life story. Again, the story itself is fascinating, and the dozens of testimonies given over many years, and by those both positively and negatively inclined towards Joseph, are intriguing. But since Grosso asserts that we ought to trust in fantastic claims of the miraculous on witness testimony alone, then he must also defend not only sightings of such things as Bigfoot or the Jersey Devil, but all claims that appear in any of the religions of the world, from the veracity of the assertions of St. Paul to the reality of Joseph Smith’s golden plates, and thereby the religions based thereupon. Grosso asserts that the number of witness accounts is important, but where is the objective threshold beyond which we ought to accept a thing as definitively real? He says “one or two scenes that so-and-so mentioned” (p. 86) might be insufficient. What about the 11 first-hand written testimonies to the Book of Mormon? Of course, Grosso is inclined to some skepticism of first-hand reports, as, for instance, when comparing Joseph with the Buddhist monk, Milarepa, who was described as flying while walking, meditating, and even sleeping; here Grosso reaches his limit, stating, without further argument, “Sleeping in a levitated state sounds like a tall tale” (p. 59). In the end, the evidence in support of St. Joseph’s levitations remains a collection of centuries-old witness testimonies of a phenomenon that, when reported in other cultures, even Grosso maintains some skepticism toward.

Still, Grosso offers, throughout Part II, an explanation for how Joseph’s levitations might have occurred. It is entirely reasonable to offer speculation on how a phenomenon might occur if it occurs, so this theorizing has a useful place even if one disregards the evidence for St. Joseph’s levitation. Here I find an altogether different problem, and one again of perspective and preconceived belief. “To make sense of Joseph the mystic and thaumaturge,” Grosso insists, “we need to expand the prevailing concept of mind” (p. 131). “The first step,” he says, “toward coming to grips with Joseph’s wild talents, then, is to question the dominant concept of mind. Otherwise, his story will strike you as beyond belief. We must stipulate an expanded concept of mind” (p. 150). Grosso clearly endorses an expanded-mind conception, and presents it as the best, in fact only, means of explaining the phenomena under consideration. Why we must focus on the powers of the mind, specifically, Grosso does not explain.

As a possibility for an alternate explanation, Grosso takes up materialism throughout the book, but never does he argue against a supernaturalist explanation for the phenomena. In fact, Grosso dismisses the supernatural explanation by asserting early on that it is “unhelpful,” questioning why something that is unexplained should ever be considered supernatural rather than a thing not yet understood (pp. 7–8). If God is involved, though, thus making the occurrence supernatural, then it is, by definition, outside the bounds of normal understanding and so requires no further explanation. Given Joseph’s status as a saint, established in large part on the acceptance of his phenomena as miraculous, a great many people have already come to believe in their genuineness without an “expanded concept of mind,” but rather by a belief that, crudely put, God made him fly. Accepting this possibility would seem to remove the need for any of the rest of Grosso’s argument, which delves into quantum indeterminism in a search for a “physics of levitation” (Chapter 8).

In the end, Grosso has succeeded in writing an entertaining and informative book based on some sources that have not previously been made available to an English readership. Grosso thus does a great service in bringing to light more details of the life of St. Joseph. I believe that the hagiographic detail provided is expressed in a lively and engaging manner that would be of interest to many readers, general and academic. Although Grosso’s arguments rest on the shaky grounds of an overreliance on eye-witness

testimony and unnecessary leaps of faith and reason, collectively their presentation makes the book useful for an examination of biases, which would be of value in courses in critical thinking and to those interested in the role of wonder in belief and experience. Grosso's arguments in favor of Joseph's levitation and any possible explanations for them ultimately rest more on belief and might find favor among those readers similarly inclined.

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