
Psychical and Spiritual was written to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the Churches’ Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies. Its author, Canon Michael Perry, former Archdeacon of Durham, is the Fellowship’s current president and has edited its quarterly, *The Christian Parapsychologist*, for the past 25 years. What makes this book unique is its Christian perspective on parapsychology. Perry uses a broad brush to introduce the reader to the vast field of anomalous psychology while omitting exhaustive data on any specific topic. About 1 percent of the book is dedicated to near-death experiences; research into mysticism and deathbed visions fares slightly better. However, two delightful chapters are dedicated to sampling parapsychological events in the Bible, which I will highlight in some detail later. Perry’s theology appears moderate in every aspect except for his devotion to the paranormal. He chides liberal Christians for their “pick and choose” approach to theology, and he criticizes conservative Christians not only for their skepticism of the paranormal but especially for their rejection of parishioners who have psychic abilities or who have had psychic experiences.

The first chapter covers the author’s parapsychological pilgrimage from childhood through his discovery and participation in the Churches’ Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies. He makes clear that the members and office-holders in this organization belong

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to mainstream churches and acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour.

The next chapter, entitled “What A Piece of Work Is Man,” outlines the parapsychological and Biblical idea that man is spirit as well as flesh and blood. Perry traces the history of this concept to Socrates, the Wisdom of Solomon (in what Protestants call the “Apocrypha” of the Old Testament), and Er’s near-death experience in Plato’s Republic. His emphasis on the spiritual nature of humanity includes references from ancient sources such as St. Paul and the Venerable Bede, as well as modern ones such as James Dunn and Alister Hardy. Perry believes that all parapsychological events are gifts from God, and he briefly discusses a variety of paranormal abilities, including precognition, premonition, auras, hauntings, dowsing, the gift of healing, psychokinesis, and after-death communications. Despite his admission that mediumship is beset with fraud and that the majority of mediumistic communications are suspect, he feels that some mediums have a genuine gift and are worthy of support.

Chapter 3, “The Bible Tells Me So,” is my favorite part of the book. In it, Perry declares: “If we were to expunge all accounts of the apparently paranormal from the pages of the Bible, we would be left with an intolerably emasculated volume” (p. 48). In my own experience, Christians who are very comfortable hearing about “miracles” in familiar Biblical language often find it startling to hear the same events described in the terminology of parapsychology. However, the Bible is a treasure-trove of mystical and paranormal experiences, and Perry is not the first to point this out. Other authors such as Boyce M. Bennett in his Anatomy of Revelation (1990) and Phillip Wiebe in his Visions of Jesus (1997) also classified Biblical experiences using the language of anomalous psychology. The following are some examples selected by Perry: extrasensory awareness, when Jesus told the woman at the well that she had had five husbands and that she was not married to her present partner (John 4:18); precognition, when Jesus predicted that Jerusalem would be sacked by invading armies (Matthew 24); psychokinesis, in the parting of the Red Sea (Exodus 14:21); teleportation, when Philip was caught up in the desert and deposited in Azotus (Acts 8:39–40); auras, in the Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–13); divination, for which purpose Joseph had a cup (Genesis 44:5, 15); mediumship, by the witch at Endor (I Samuel 28); visions, when Moses and Elijah appeared at Jesus’ Transfiguration (Matthew 17:3); voices, when Jesus prayed and a voice from Heaven answered him (John 12:27–33); xenoglossy, in the feast of Pentecost.
(Acts 2:6); trance states, when Balaam saw a vision of the Almighty (Numbers 24:3–4); healings, when Jesus cured the fever of a sick woman (Mark 1:30–31); exorcism, when Jesus transferred a legion of demons into a herd of pigs (Luke 8:26–33); and near-death experiences, when Paul was stoned at Lystra and left for dead (Acts 14:19).

Personally, I think better examples of near-death experiences in the Bible are Elijah, Elisha, and Jesus raising people from the dead (I Kings 17:20–24; II Kings 4:32–37; Matthew 9:18–26; Luke 7:11–16; John 11:1–44); however, in these accounts we do not have the individual's description of what happened during their near-death experience.

Perry points out that Biblical authors had enough savvy to unmask trickery, an example of which is the story in the Apocrypha of Bel and the Dragon. He agrees that many of the attacks on the Bible are, in fact, scientism, a word coined by Charles Tart meaning “a ‘perversion of genuine science’ and ... ‘a dogmatic commitment to materialist philosophy that “explains away” the spiritual rather than actually examining it carefully and trying to understand it’” (p. 60). Like all researchers of the paranormal, Perry sees paranormal events occurring today as similar to those in Biblical accounts. He claims that parapsychology is currently under assault not only from hard-core Humanists, but also from religious conservatives like those who show up regularly at his lectures to vilify mediumship as an “abomination of the Lord” (Deuteronomy 18:9–14). He sees this as a case of “the pot calling the kettle black” and counters with examples such as the magic tricks of Moses and Aaron (Exodus 7:8–12), the amazing psychic gifts of Elisha and Elijah, and the dream interpretation skills of Daniel.

In Chapter 4, “From the Realms of Glory,” Perry continues to analyze paranormal accounts in the Bible, noting that from the earliest times, men and women have claimed to see events, things, and beings not visible to people in general. He also cautions that people who have psychic abilities may be subject to evil spirits, and documents this belief with Biblical references. He affirms the need for exorcisms, but emphasizes that they should be performed only by an authorized minister. His warnings on the use of Ouija boards is similar to what I've told students for years: playing with them invites malicious psychic entities that may prey on unsuspecting humans and, even if there were no such things as “evil spirits,” it can trigger dormant psychopathology.

In Chapter 5, “Post-Mortem Prospects,” Perry discusses life after death. He devotes several pages to reincarnation, including the
excellent work of Ian Stevenson, but has problems with it from a Biblical standpoint. He claims that "there are a few texts [in the Bible] which may be interpreted this way, but only by reading the doctrine into them than out of them" (p. 105). The abundant evidence for life after death is highlighted briefly, including post-death visions, crisis apparitions, deathbed visions, near-death experiences, mediums, and automatic writing.

In the final chapter, "Christian Parapsychology," Perry discusses with loving-kindness his own ministry and the ministry of others to people who are "psychic sensitive." He reveals that those who have gifts of psychic abilities do not always perceive them as pleasant, and that too often psychics have been driven from the church and into spiritualist societies that are ME-centered rather than GOD-centered. He sees the mission of the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies as one of aiding and assisting psychics, educating other ministers about this phenomenon, making psychics welcome in the church, and helping them deal with their skills. This program is similar to the ongoing educational efforts of members of the International Association for Near-Death Studies (IANDS) to educate physicians, ministers, and the public at large about the near-death experience. The simple fact is that psychics, like near-death experiencers, stay in their own churches if they feel accepted there, whereas those whose paranormal experiences are rejected are compelled to seek spiritual comfort elsewhere.

In conclusion, this book is an introduction to Christian parapsychology. It will be informative to those looking for a Christian interpretation of the paranormal and a Christian approach to helping and learning from those whom Perry affirms are blessed with God-given gifts, the "psychic sensitives."

References