

However, it seems to me that fewer topics, covered in more detail, would have allowed the author to more ably demonstrate his contentions about psychic research.

All of the concerns above are relatively minor when compared to the not-so-hidden agenda of the author: to show that all religion is unnecessary. People have been discussing religion for centuries. The materialism versus religion arguments have been made over and over again. The fact that they are still being made would seem to indicate neither side has an overwhelmingly convincing case. To paraphrase Stenger: because the standard model does not require a spiritual existence, and there is no material indication of anything spiritual, Occam's Razor forces us to conclude that there is no God. He then proceeds to link all psychic proponents with all types of religion and to claim that there is no material evidence for any of them and hence they should be jettisoned as unneeded human relics of a less objective era.

In a time when it is difficult to get students interested in science, such arguments are clearly counterproductive. To say that science and religion are inherent antagonists seems a bit of an overstatement. And to group everyone who believes in God as members of one grand category who we could better do without is just wrong. I have known too many fine people who were both deeply religious and superior physicists to have any real sympathy for this argument. (I have also known quite a few materialists who were just plain jerks.)

If Stenger's intentions were to favorably present the case against psychic phenomena and to promote the materialist view of nature, he would have been more effective leaving out the religious polemic and allowing the readers to reach their own conclusions.

*Steven Hoffmaster is a professor of physics at Gonzaga University, Spokane, Washington.*

## Exploring, and Solving, Supernatural Mysteries

*Secrets of the Supernatural.* By Joe Nickell with John F. Fischer. Prometheus Books, Buffalo, N.Y., 1988. 200 pp. Cloth, \$19.95.

ROBERT A. BAKER

Readers unfamiliar with the work of Joe Nickell, a CSICOP Fellow and one of the nation's premier skeptical investigators, can quickly overcome this deficiency by reading *Secrets of the Supernatural*, a collection of ten occult mysteries Nickell has

investigated and solved over the past decade.

Best known perhaps for his *Inquest on the Shroud of Turin* and his accurate prediction of the shroud's age, Nickell also turned his considerable Sherlockian skills to the reputed ghost in

Toronto's MacKenzie house, the riddle of the Crystal Skull, so-called spirit pictures produced by "spirit guides," the mysterious disappearance of Oliver Larch (or Lerch) who supposedly "walked off the face of the earth," a fascinating case of identical twins known as "the two Will Wests," a group of psychic prospectors "witching" for hidden gold, and the case of some mysteriously moving coffins in a vault on the island of Barbados. In collaboration with John F. Fischer, a forensic analyst in Orlando, Florida, Nickell also looked into an alleged "bleeding door" in an eastern Kentucky farmhouse, the miraculous image of the Virgin Mary in a church at Guadalupe, and a number of cases of "spontaneous human combustion."

Each of the ten cases in *Secrets* reads like a well-crafted detective story, and the reader derives the same sort of satisfaction here that comes from any mystery's resolution. Although the ten cases represent only a small sample of the literally hundreds of supernatural claims, they are clearly representative enough to show what happens when such paranormal conundrums are subjected to careful scientific scrutiny. Without exception, they surrender their mystery to the probings of the investigators and turn out to have simple, natural explanations after all.

In both his Introduction and an Afterword, Nickell provides some useful words of advice for all would-be explorers of the occult jungle. First he cautions against excessive credulity: "While we should be open to 'new' ideas, we should not wish to become quite as open as, say, a refuse can." Nor, conversely, should we be so closed-minded that we reject, out-of-hand and beforehand, the phenomena we purport to study. This is the attitude of the "debunker" and one that Nickell—a former private inves-

tigator and professional magician—goes to extreme lengths to avoid. The true investigator, in his view, is as bias-free as possible and functions between the two extremes. In his words, "To him, or her, mysterious phenomena are not to be uncritically heralded as proof of transcendent realms, neither are they annoyances to be dismissed or debunked at all costs. Instead, to the investigator, mysteries are to be *solved*."

This sort of objectivity is the hallmark of all scholarly and scientific inquiry, and Nickell's work should be studied closely and carefully by all students and researchers planning investigations of their own. Finally, Nickell is wise enough to warn readers against "extrapolating too much from the few examples herein. They do not represent proof against all 'supernatural' occurrences. . . . The unique nature of some of the solutions urges that we investigate mysteries on a case-by-case basis." Like all first-rate investigators, Nickell in these various cases employs a wide range of methods and techniques: microchemical analyses, witness interviews, controlled experiments, site inspections, historical research, physical measures, folklorist and iconographic studies, instrumental analyses, specialists and experts—whatever is necessary or required to get the job done.

Many alleged scientists feel the investigation of unusual or preternatural phenomena like those reported in this book is unworthy of their concern. If we are to win the battle for the public mind, however, such an attitude must be rejected. As Nickell notes, "So profound are the implications of these popularly perceived experiences, that the question is not *whether* such phenomena will be investigated but *how*." With researchers like Nickell and Fischer on the prowl

the proponents of paranormal marvels are, admittedly, nervous. Poor supernatural has fewer secrets to protect. But don't despair, ordinary Nature has an endless supply!

Robert A. Baker is professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, and the author of *What Is Hypnosis?* recently published by Prometheus Books.

## Therapists' Dubious Roles With 'Abductees'

*Encounters: A Psychologist Reveals Case Studies of Abductions by Extraterrestrials.* By Edith Fiore, Ph.D. Doubleday, New York, 1989, 342 pp. Cloth, \$17.95.

J. R. COREY

You may have been abducted by aliens and not know it! According to California clinical psychologist Edith Fiore, some of the ten most common signs of alien abduction include: "inability to account for periods of time," "waking up with unusual body sensations," and "appearance of mysterious marks on the body." Sounds like common occurrences for Uncle Ferd, who was frequently abducted by Jack Daniels or Jim Beam.

This author appears to be serious, however. Since discovering under hypnosis that she had once beamed up to a UFO, Fiore has found that many of her patients have had similar experiences, sometimes with traumatic results. *Encounters* gives the case histories of 13 of these people. The therapeutic technique Fiore uses with them is called "hypnotic age-regression," which she says "gets to the cause of symptoms and problems of all sorts and results in immediate and lasting cures" (p. xvi). This statement rests on two dubious assumptions: first, that "hypnotic age-regression" enhances memory for

events "buried in the subconscious mind" and, second, the Freudian dogma that discovering causes of some psychological or behavioral disorder ensures a cure for it.

The "subconscious mind" is not a scientifically valuable or falsifiable concept. There is no proof that you or I have—or don't have—a "subconscious." All we know is that some memories are difficult to recall. There is no evidence, beyond anecdotal, that retrieving certain memories relating to the causes of our problems relieves those problems. There is no evidence that "hypnosis," let alone "hypnotic age-regression," can facilitate memory. The forensic use of hypnosis in enhancing eyewitness testimony has been severely criticized (Wagstaff 1989), and laboratory studies have found that "hypnotized" witnesses may make more errors than control subjects. Sanders and Simmons (1983) reported showing a videotape portraying a crime to 100 college students. One week later the subjects were asked to identify the criminal in a videotaped police lineup. Half of the