Politicizing the Virgin Mary: The Instance of the Madonna of Medjugorje

Apparantly individual experiences of the paranormal can, on some occasions, be shown to arise largely out of the broadest social forces, including even those that result in cross-national warfare.

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We live in days of all too obvious tension and occasional outright slaughter between specific Christian nations and cenein Muslim ones. With this in mind, we can point to an instructive example of how a similar conflict that has occurred on a somewhat smaller geographical scale can be used to demonstrate that paranormal beliefs sometimes arise from a symbolic conflict between differing religious and ethnic groups. We can further demonstrate how such paranormal beliefs frequently both derive from and add to tensions associated with outright warfare and attempts at ethnic cleansings. To substantiate these claims I examine the case of the widely claimed apparitional appearances of the Virgin Mary in the former Yugoslavia.
Sources of Pseudoscientific Belief

The literature on paranormal belief is dominated by the view that such beliefs typically arise for highly idiosyncratic reasons, or at least from mistaken or bizarre thought processes. For example, Singer and Benassi (1981) have suggested that paranormal and pseudoscientific beliefs arise from common errors in human reasoning (such as those studied by learning psychologists examining errors of perception that seem to have their origins hardwired into the human brain). Singer and Benassi further identify sources of pseudoscientific belief as arising from poor or erroneous science education (see Eve and Dunn 1988; Gray 1987; etc.) or from erroneous or sensationalistic media coverage of science (Harrold and Eve 1987).

However, Singer and Benassi do, admittedly, suggest a fourth category: socio-cultural factors. It is this category that I wish to emphasize here. Pseudoscience arising out of socio-cultural forces is unique in that rather than representing bizarre or deviant thought processes, it is actually reflective of cognitive and heuristic conformity to the mode for one's reference groups. It seems likely that most research into sources of paranormal beliefs have examined individuals or small groups (such as cults). I do not mean to suggest that there has not been a small proportion of studies that have examined the etiology of beliefs at a more "macro" level. For example, a number of studies have shown definitively that belief in creationism is significantly correlated with factors such as denominational affiliation, regionality within the U.S., gender, and other sociological factors. However, even these studies have for the most part been confined to examining major social trends within but a single country at a time.

Apparently individual experiences of the paranormal can, on at least some occasions, be shown to arise largely out of the broadest social forces, including even those that result in cross-national warfare. We are all children of our own times, and as such our conscious and rational mental processes tend to reflect the dominant cognitive and social paradigms of our times and our home nations. So too, even our apparently idiosyncratic hopes, fears, and subconscious compulsions tend to have their roots in the overall social fabric of everyday life. The phenomenon of the "Madonna of Medjugorje" is a good example.

Medjugorje is a village located in the former Yugoslavia. It first came to my attention in 1985 while I was standing in a tube station in the Bloomsbury district of London looking at a huge paper advertisement on the wall. The advertisement asked the reader to "Dial Mary" and came complete with a toll-based long distance number. Callers could receive the benefit of daily communications as imparted by the Virgin Mary, who apparently channeled her invocations through several children in Medjugorje. Since 1981, the six young visionaries (Ivana, Ivo, Jakov, Marija, Mirjana, and Vicka) had been experiencing nearly daily episodes of apparitions and communication with "Our Lady."

The overall result has been that since the 1980s, Medjugorje has attracted pilgrims from all over the world. It is not an exaggeration to state that tens of millions of the Catholic faithful and other seekers have made Medjugorje a Catholic shrine that exists nearly on an equal footing with the Vatican. The good news is that the Madonna's messages as received through the children almost always encourage peace and love in the world. The bad news is that a number of much darker and less noble currents circulate just under the surface.

My purpose here is to examine some of these undercurrents, and try to draw some overall conclusions for a skeptical analysis of the origins of paranormal belief systems.

The Historical Context of Medjugorje

The events of recent decades in Medjugorje both follow and lead in a tradition of similar appearances of the Virgin. In Portugal in 1917 a series of apparitions by the Blessed Virgin occurred in the rural village of Fatima. Like the case of Medjugorje, the appearances were in a rural area and experienced by children, and the initial appearances were to become intensely politicized in the months that followed. An earlier
and possibly less well-known instance of the phenomenon had occurred in Lourdes, France. In 1858, a thirteen-year-old girl named Bernadette Soubirous entered what is commonly described as a grotto in the nearby Massabielle rocks just outside of Lourdes. Bernadette at first felt that she saw "a white light" shining from a grotto, but upon closer inspection she said that she found the light to be presented to her in the form of the Virgin. Thereafter the appearances were to become known as the Miracle of Lourdes, the Apparition, and to be immortalized in the classic movie Song of Bernadette. The visions at Lourdes carried substantial political overtones. A good analysis of the political aspects of the apparitions has been presented by Harris (1999). Harris suggests that the true subtext of Lourdes is "a story about France, about the struggles of Catholics in the aftermath of revolutionary turmoil, the capacity of the Second Empire to adjust to, and even profit from, religious movements, and the inability of the Third Republic to suppress them." As at Medjugorje, the appearances of the Virgin were frequently accompanied by claims of miraculous healings (Boissarie 1933; West 1957).

As I mentioned, similar appearances of the Virgin took place in Fatima, Portugal, in 1917. Portugal was on the verge of totalitarianism after the revolution there in 1910. One result of the revolution had been the decree of a sharp separation of church and state. While the intelligentsia and political center ridiculed and suppressed religion, strong, but threatened, religious faith persisted in the peasants of the rural countryside. It is within this context that over a six-month period a series of apparitions by the Blessed Virgin occurred to three small children from the rural village of Fatima. The visions had begun in May of 1917, and throughout the early years of World War I the children were later to claim that they been repeatedly visited by a male "Angel of Peace." Matters were brought to a head in the fall of 1914 when Pope Benedict XV pleaded with the leaders of Europe to stop the bloodshed. The Pope went so far as to issue a policy statement that the invocation known as "Queen of Peace, pray for us" should be permanently included in the Church's litany of prayer to Mary. It was in the context of having frequently heard this invocation upon the occasions of their church attendance that the children of Fatima had their first encounter with a vision of Mary. Mary thereafter appeared to the children on the thirteenth day of each month for six months. However, these apparitions had political implications: the mayor of Fatima, just before the scheduled August apparition, had the children arrested and tossed into jail, where they were interrogated and threatened with execution. One result of this precipitous action was described by numerous of the local believers as various solar abnormalities that occurred as an apparent sign of divine displeasure (Pelletier 1983). Just as at Lourdes earlier, and other locations such as Medjugorje later, the sun was said to "dance" in the sky, and also to vary alarmingly in its hues.

At one level the Fatima appearances obviously reinforced the threatened faith of the rural believers, helped along in no small part by the actions of the mayor whose tactics reified the old Marxist dictum that "external threat creates internal cohesion." One of revelations of Mary at Fatima specifically denounced Russia and predicted worldwide disaster unless all people turned to the Catholic faith (Haffert 1950).

The Events in Medjugorje

Turning our attention back to the more recent phenomenon of Medjugorje, the visions there also took place in a specific historical context. The occupation of the nation by Nazi Germany in 1941 established a Croatian (i.e., largely Roman Catholic) fascist state that was strongly resisted by several groups. Especially suffering at the hands of the fascist regime were their Serbian (primarily Eastern Orthodox) neighbors. This oppression was in retaliation for 400 years of Turkish rule during which the Roman Catholics felt they had suffered a heavy hand upon them. In any event, hundreds had died in pogroms of the period.

Eventually the dissident group headed by Marshal Tito took full control after the German expulsion of 1945 and established a communist government. Even though Tito broke with Stalin and the Cominform in 1948 to develop his own brand of communism, Yugoslavia remained a communist regime, and religion was suppressed as a result. Religion, for example, had been entirely banned from the school classroom. In June of 1981 Ivanka Ivankovic, a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl, was the first to experience an apparition of the Virgin Mary. (I note that Ivanka's mother had just died and Ivanka was to immediately refer to the Virgin as "Our Mother.") The apparition of the Virgin immediately gave Ivanka various messages of hope and peace to convey to the villagers (as she would almost daily do thereafter; why the Virgin chose not to speak directly with the villagers is unclear). The other two schoolgirls who were with her on the occasion of the first appearance later said that they too had seen the Virgin. Within days, hundreds of
visitors began to arrive in the village to hear the messages and hopeful of seeing the apparition themselves.

The miracles in Medjugorje, while pleasing to the local Catholic peasants, set off dire concern among the party functionaries in the urban centers. Far from viewing the claimed appearances as fortuitous, the party leaders clearly feared that the apparitions might provide the focal point for a revitalization movement among the Catholics of the nation. The term revitalization movement is commonplace in modern anthropology. It refers to the largely spontaneous uprising of members of a formerly dominant (but then subordinated) group who attempt through militant action to recapture their former dominance, including the cultural and religious symbolism they favor. However, the uprising takes a singularly peculiar form. A revitalization movement typically begins in a less bloody one. Creationism was the belief system of the dominant class a century ago in America. Little wonder that rural, older Protestants resent the politics and values of modern cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism. It is possible to see the creationism movement as less about the age of the Earth than as a revitalization movement intended to restore a formerly dominant worldview and lifestyle to its previous position of cultural and political dominance.

In any event, the Communist government of the former Yugoslavia greatly feared that the alleged appearances of the Virgin Mary might be a thinly disguised device by which a Catholic Nationalist revitalization movement might attempt to reassert its claim to the nation.

On the eighth day of the children's visions, the police attempted to break up the crowd and take the visionary children in custody. A Franciscan priest, upon seeing this, took the children to sanctuary in his local church. The priest later said that a divine voice had told him to protect the children. Some more cynical observers suggested it was the first step in the appropriation of the miracle by the organized Church. Apparently the Virgin was prepared to accommodate the new indoor arrangements, and thereafter began to appear to the children daily inside the church. Apparently, also, the Virgin was becoming increasingly interested in politics. The children were receiving ten messages each per day now, and many of these consisted of statements such as, “The Russians will become Christians” and “The West has lost its faith.”

Now the miracles came fast and frequent. Accounts of miraculous healings began to occur with frequency (for examples, see Nickell 1998). A cross on a nearby hill was said to sometimes turn into “a pillar of light,” and as at Fatima, the sun was said to “dance” in the sky—although only some of those present on these occasions saw the transmutation of the cross or the dancing of the sun.

Things also began to take a somewhat ugly turn within the religious community. There had been for a hundred years a competitive relationship between the lay clergy and the Franciscan priests of the area. The lay clergy, also called diocesan priests, report directly to their bishop. They are trained in seminars that are not associated with a particular order. Priests in the orders, e.g., Jesuits, Franciscans, Dominicans, Maryknoll, and so on, are always subject to the authority of the local bishop, but their main allegiance is to their order and its mission.

The lay clergy had for some time accused the Franciscan Brotherhood of being arrogant and manipulative. Now the lay clergymen began to accuse the Franciscans of having knowingly appropriated the appearances of the Virgin to legitimate their order at the expense of the influence of the lay clergy.

**Conclusion**

As I noted at the outset paranormal beliefs often can be generated by small group dynamics. Markovskv and Thye (2000), for example, have recently documented this dynamic in some convincing laboratory studies. However, it is clear that it is also possible for many paranormal beliefs to find their most primary initiation within the most macro-level of socio-cultural forces. I acknowledge that the children's initial encounters with the Virgin may well have been caused by personal factors. For example, Ivanka, who was the first to perceive a visitation, had just lost her natural mother. The perception of apparitional experiences spread rapidly among her intimate peer group. Markovskv and Thye's work may well help us to understand this spread of belief. The region's tension and anxiety likely exacerbated this contagion process and the need to believe among the youthful protagonists. The seeds of hatred and ethnically-religious tensions must have been easy to feel. The breakup of the former Yugoslavia was imminent, and with that breakup Medjugorje would soon find itself located in Bosnia, with all that implies. Such tensions that would lead to the horrors of the 1990s in Bosnia must have been easy for children...
to intuit but not to understand. Little wonder that a nurturing maternal figure offering a message of peace and love would be of substantial comfort to the young people of the village. Ivanka herself said on film in the 1980s, “We have so much anxiety within ourselves—Our Lady has given us peace, especially the young people.” She goes on to say that the appearances and pilgrimages (which brought great prosperity to the formerly poverty-stricken village) have “...given a sense of pride to a people whose lives have been mostly struggle.”

On another level it is quite likely that the initial experiences of the young visionaries are partly due to the personal situation of the young teens. In all the European cases of appearances of the Virgin cited here, those who are the central initial witnesses are children or young teenagers; recall that in many historical witch trials the original witnesses were of the same young age. Some observers have suggested that in the case of the witch trials the experience of being so important a witness must have been very satisfying to young members of society who ordinarily lack any real power or influence over the lives of the adults around them.

Very quickly the personal experiences of the young people were appropriated by adults and authorities for their own purposes and their own needs. Clearly many Croats felt it good to promote the legitimacy of the miracles in Medjugorje for purposes intended to put the Serbs and Muslims of the region at a disadvantage, as well as offering a potential rallying point for opposition to a secular central government. There is in one sense a most tragic irony in our observations. Most witnesses felt, and even now continue to feel, that the Virgin’s appearances heralded an improved chance for peace and human kindness in the world. However, from another perspective it is possible to see claims associated with the appearances as symbolic weapons of mass destruction. In other words, the appearances may also have had the effect of both consciously and subconsciously heightening tensions in the region, tensions that would eventually lead to deaths of thousands. If this is indeed even in part what actually happened in the region we can only wonder at the terrible irony and grieve at the terrible results.

On a final note, a major implication of our case study here of a small town in the Balkans is that in some ways the political and ethnic tensions seen there in the 1980s may have moved beyond the Balkans. The phenomena of Medjugorje was fed to a large degree by tensions between Christians and Muslims. It is all too obvious that since September 11, 2001, we might now expect a rash of other pseudoscience beliefs that can be used as symbolic weapons—weapons of belief that have their roots partially or entirely in tensions that arise out of the conflict between the world’s two most enthusiastically proselytizing religions. It’s not just jetliners and anthrax powder that are capable of wreaking havoc; we have seen here that paranormal beliefs can sometimes carry a serious payload of their own.

Note

I’d like to mention a personal experience of my own arising out of the study of Medjugorje. I was asked by a large newspaper a few years ago for my opinion of why millions were traveling to Medjugorje. I spent nearly an hour on the phone with the reporter explaining the political and historical contexts that undoubtedly played a huge role in the popularity and meaningfulness assigned by various groups and individuals to the apparitions. When the article appeared in print there was not a single word about the ethnic-nationalistic implications of the appearances, nor was there any mention of how the event symbolized intercultural struggles within the Catholic hierarchy itself. When I phoned the reporter and asked why all this had been omitted, I was told because it was too abstract and therefore would have gotten in the way of a good “story.” The lessons to be learned in how the press covers paranormal claims are obvious.

References and Readings of Interest