

Religion and Investigating

by

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As with most other topics, clear understanding of religion requires much more education than is normally brought to bear on the subject. Many writers on the paranormal cover certain religious issues, but few take the trouble to look into how our religious traditions were formulated, how religion is related to philosophy or conventional knowledge, or what implications religious beliefs hold for paranormal study. Some paranormal investigators have strongly held religious beliefs, as do I. You should not consider any discussion of religion without some knowledge of the author's cherished prejudices. Often these prejudices are obvious, but sometimes they are not. In my opinion for example, the TV show *Paranormal State* is merely an infomercial for the Catholic Church.

David Hume, the greatest skeptic of The Enlightenment, thought that the Christian tradition can claim at least one *bona fide* miracle for certain--that anyone with a high school education can accept and believe in Christian dogma. Jeremy Bentham, the great utilitarian philosopher, referred to the idea of natural rights--that is, rights granted by an omniscient God--as "nonsense on stilts." German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach, understood that it was not God who created man in His own image, but man who created God in his own image. I must agree with Hume, Bentham, and Feuerbach; these are my cherished prejudices.

Religion in its purest form has two main functions: First, it should explain the unexplainable. What are those lights in the sky? Where did I come from? What happens when I die? What is the purpose of my life? etc., etc. Second, religion should offer a recipe for living--a set of rules and guidelines needed to help us all get along with each other and make the choices needed to live a good life. But only philosophers and anthropologists speak of religion in this sense. When most people use the word *religion*, they are normally referring to a *religious tradition*, commonly their own. There are four primary religious traditions in the Western world: Paganism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The mythology associated with a religious tradition serves not only to provide us answers to difficult questions, but to help us to identify *my people*. I know *my people* because they believe in the same myths and worship the same gods as I do. We share a common, conventional knowledge about the world that we all experience. "Those people" share a different mythology and a different convention.

The term *religious tradition* is understood as a body of belief, ideology, doctrine, and dogma that has been organized into a social institution. *Church* refers to the bureaucratic and ideological structure of an organization that espouses a religious tradition, and also to the place one goes to meet God. *Theology* is the intellectual study and critical inquiry used to create, to examine, and to justify church doctrines and beliefs. *Faith*, or what some people might call *spirituality*, is the personal disposition and set of beliefs each person has about the unexplained and about how life should be lived, which may or may not be tied to a religious tradition. Most people accept conventional religious thought without question. However, just because someone resides in a religious tradition does not mean that all elements of that tradition are embraced, or that some of the person's beliefs do not fall outside the tradition.

When considering the circumstances surrounding an investigation, it is equally as important for the investigators to understand--*really understand*--their own religious beliefs as well as the client's beliefs. Though I do not have space to go into it here, roughly ninety percent of paranormal theories begin with assumptions common to a religious tradition--most commonly Christianity. Change the assumptions, and the theory does not explain anything. It is not as important to know what is true (we can't anyway) as it is to know what people *think* is true.

Most people are so imbued with their own beliefs, that they cannot see alternatives (this is often called *paradigm paralysis*). Therefore, investigators must be more inclusive in their outlook, and be able to frame the investigation and the findings within the client's perspective. Personally, I try to deemphasize religious implications of the investigation as much as possible, and treat the whole thing as if investigating a plumbing problem. This approach falls more within the Paganistic tradition.

The number one industry in Dubuque, Iowa, where BMGHA is located, is Catholicism. Gerry Murphy, our founder, who is Catholic, used to ask scoffers to cross themselves and use the old language--Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Eh?!..Eh?!..Ghost! In addition to Holy Ghost Parish, we have a Holy Ghost Credit Union in Dubuque. It does not change any minds, but it's fun to do, and it makes a point.