

BOOK REVIEW

Medjugorje and the Supernatural: Science, Mysticism, and Extraordinary Religious Experience by Daniel Maria Klimek. Oxford University Press, 2018. 392 pp. with bibliography and index. \$82.80 (hardcover), \$78.39 (Kindle). ISBN 978-0-19-067920-0.

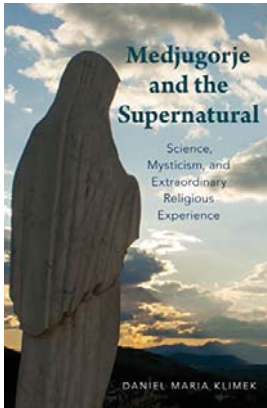
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The author of this well-considered and finely argued book is a Franciscan friar and an assistant professor of theology. This book is a much later and revised draft of his postgraduate thesis. With nearly a hundred pages of notes, references, and index, it has been written by an academic for others in his field. I am neither a philosopher nor a theologian, so my, of necessity brief, review is that of a lay person for other lay people.

Klimek, according to the blurb, is an authority on the phenomena experienced at Medjugorje, Croatia, where several young people claimed to have had visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary (BVM) in the early 1980s. More than thirty years later, some of them are still claiming to have daily visions, so this is a long-running phenomenon. BVM visions have occurred at several places in Europe, most notably Lourdes, all of them to people who follow the Roman Catholic religion.

In a Marian vision, the experiencers claim that they are seeing the BVM and that she is conversing with them. Only the visionaries see her. Usually these are people in their late teens or early twenties. Others who attend do not have the same trance ecstasy experience and rely on the reporting of the visionaries. Klimek relates some of the conversations the Medjugorje visionaries have had with the BVM, all consistent with Catholic doctrine.

As far as I understand it, Klimek is arguing that these visions are not the result of cultural associations, hallucinations, imaginations, etc., but are divinely inspired and part of what he calls the perennial tradition. This tradition considers that visionary experiences are worldwide and have a universal basis independent of the culture in which they appear. The other stream of opinion he calls the constructivist, where people argue that we construct our visionary experiences out of our cultural associations, imagination, etc. As far as I know Marian visions have only been experienced in countries where there are Roman Catholics, so he is having to argue pretty hard to align these visionaries with the perennial rather than the constructivist opinions. He uses the words epistemology and hermeneutics repeatedly, often several times within the same page. I am not familiar with these words, and though



I think I understand them, and I most certainly recognize that they are necessary for his fellow theological academics, for myself as a lay person they didn't help me understand his argument, and made for very slow and careful reading.

Klimek devotes one chapter to two studies by physicians and other scientists in the 1980s, and he refers back to these studies repeatedly, contending that the evidence of science is that the visionaries were in genuine trance and therefore experiencing something that was not a cultural hallucination. I was not convinced. Either Klimek does not understand the limits of EEG studies, or I didn't understand what he reported had been found, but the EEG data did not seem to make sense, and what he claimed from it did not seem to me to be accurate. I have not looked up the original studies to ascertain the actual data. Brain studies were at a very early stage in the 1980s. Since then the technology has moved on enormously and far more can be ascertained with the modern techniques, so it feels insubstantial to rely so heavily on "scientific" studies that are so out-of-date. As some of the original visionaries are still having visions, more than 30 years later, I would heartily recommend a new investigation using modern equipment, which may well tell us something about the brain states of the visionaries while in their trance ecstasy. This would be very interesting indeed. As for not responding to loud noises, bright lights, and punches, this is an acknowledged universal aspect of a trance state of any description, from dreaming through to mediumistic trances. But as to actually seeing and conversing with a divine being without being affected by any cultural overlay, that argument was insufficient for this lay person.

Most of the book is concerned with theological and philosophical arguments concerning religious visionary experiences. I shall not go into the details of these arguments as I am not a philosopher. I did, however, find it very interesting and see parallels with arguments that go on in parapsychology, anthropology, psychology, consciousness studies, sociology, etc., between what Klimek calls William James' something "more" and mainstream academic establishment opinion that reduces everything to materialistic brain functioning. I am sympathetic with the James approach and hence with Klimek's argument. I am just unconvinced that these visionaries are unaffected by their Catholic upbringing.

I would heartily recommend this book to readers of a philosophical bent who are interested in religious and visionary experiences. I am not sure, though, of how wide its appeal is to others.

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