

Commentary

July 30, 1999

Farce-of-the-Week via Fox-TV

I received a storm of email and phone calls following the Fox television network special "Signs from God; Science Tests Faith" that was shown on July 28. Though I'm sure that I could almost write a book based upon the material that appeared in this incredibly inept presentation, I will limit my comments here to just the highlights.

A string of academics appeared on screen to make their pronouncements about the phenomena that were oohed and aahed over by co-host Michael Willesee (who was also the executive producer of the show), but no conjuror was called in, as if there were no possibility of any fraud taking place. That would have been the least that Fox could have done. The overall gushing acceptance of each and every claim made, left the viewer with a fear of imminent tooth decay.

Strangely enough, the only rational opinions expressed concerning the wonders that were trotted out on stage, came from a Catholic priest, who cautiously warned the hosts that perhaps they were not witnessing miracles. Unfortunately, he also mentioned the possibility that some of these phenomena were not the result of divine intervention, or of fraud, but of the Devils work.

When one of the scientists discovered that one of the wonder workers named Katya Rivas exhibited "Delta state" signals on an EEG readout, he suggested that it might be the result of a residual epileptic condition, but this expert opinion was promptly ignored in favor of an unexplainable miracle, obviously in an effort to not overly tax the audiences intellect. In fact, every time that a likely explanation was offered by the very experts that the producers had called in to declare their opinions, the hosts hastened to rationalize away any suggestion that a miracle had not been demonstrated.

In one particularly glaring example of this tendency, Willesee demonstrated his skill at obfuscation when a forensic scientist testified that blood found upon a plaster religious figure was from a female human, which rather damaged the contention that this was the blood of Jesus Christ. Since the owner of this statue was a female human, a suspicion arose in the minds of perhaps a tiny percentage of the viewing audience, that the blood might be hers, rather than being of a divine origin. Willesee proudly opined that since Christ had no father (?), his blood might very well be female. I leave you to your individual opinions on this opinion.

When rose petals placed upon a church altar were then enclosed between the pages of a Bible, it was found that various religious figures were showing up clearly on the petals and could be seen when held up to the light. A botanist soon brought that theory crashing down when he demonstrated that a medallion pressed firmly against a petal produced exactly the same effect, though not exactly the same figures were shown to have been obtained by this means. A simple question: would it not have been clever to shop around the streets of Cochabamba, Bolivia, where the wonder worker lived, and purchase religious medallions that would produce EXACTLY the same images? These medallions are turned out by the millions, and I feel quite certain that duplicates could easily have been obtained, and we would have definitively "laid the ghost" of this spurious miracle, very easily. As it is, the faithful can always claim that since the duplication of the effect was not "exact," the case against the rose petals being of divine origins, remains unproven.

But the big feature of this ninety-minute fiasco, was the production of "stigmata" on the hands and feet of Señora Rivas, as she lay abed for three and one-half hours, after announcing that she would exhibit the wounds of Christ -- a common claim among saintly folks. While Willesee ran on about how closely they were watching the woman, which was obviously a hollow claim, since she tossed and turned and was embraced and tended to by family all the way through the process, we were shown intermittent glimpses of her face, as well as her hands and feet. At one point, a small cross shaped mark appeared at one of the critical points, looking very much like the results of shallow incisions. These could of course have easily been inflicted by the woman herself. When these tiny wounds began to produce blood, Willesee piously dabbed up minute samples using Q-tips. These were subsequently presented to their forensic expert, and to the great disappointment of the hosts, were identified as being of human female origin. The forensic expert was rather cut off in mid-opinion, just as very interesting things might have been pronounced about the samples. Please note: a doctor was not called in, nor was any present. The family and several priests were there, along with Michael Willesee, as if that were sufficient expertise for them to employ in this unremarkable demonstration.

It is interesting to note that at one point, they got carried away in a zeal of scientific exuberance, and actually had their representative in Bolivia place a few rose petals, live on camera, into the pages of a Bible. This was to discover whether or not a mysterious representation of a divine figure would show up when the petals were later examined. We never found out whether magical forces had performed this feat, because they never went back to it. Gee! I wonder if it worked?

Much was made of the fact that several religious statuettes in the Rivas household were dripping tears and blood, presumably originating from Jesus Christ. Well, the blood tests proved negative in that respect, but still the mystery remained about how the liquids got there in the first place. Now, I don't think you have to be an intellectual giant to come up with a solution to this problem. Of course, the Fox TV people opted to send one of the figures to a prestigious laboratory and have it CAT-scanned. As usual, the emphasis was placed upon super-technology, and not upon simple expert examination. The CAT-scan, not to my surprise, revealed no "mechanism" whatsoever that could have produced the two liquids. But when I was visited here at the JREF offices in Florida by a video crew who were preparing an item for local television, I was able to cause a statue -- one that they purchased and brought with them -- to weep uncontrollably at will. I simply squirted the figure surreptitiously, and the liquid ran down the face and arms quite convincingly. At that same session, I caused "holy oil" (actually Mazola) to appear between the glass of a picture frame and the picture inside. It was done by simple trickery, and looked just as good as any of the miracles shown on the Fox TV presentation. No, better.

I can only brand this shameful farce as the most obvious hoax since the "Alien Autopsy" was given to us, and please note that this, too, was the product of Fox TV. It appears that the American public never tires of nonsense, and so long as that hunger persists, Fox Television will be there to supply it.

Finally, I direct your attention to the examination of Señora Rivas's "stigmata" the day after she had been "afflicted with the wounds of Christ." Here, as if we needed it, was the definitive evidence that the Señora was perpetrating a blatant hoax on us. The extreme close-up video shots we were offered clearly showed a series of tiny incisions, not any sort of a puncture wound that we might expect if we were viewing a genuine phenomenon. This woman was showing us self-inflicted cuts and any medically informed person could have testified to that fact. But we were not offered the privilege of such expert assistance because that would have evaporated this miracle, as it would have done to all the other farces that we were shown.


Are we losing this battle? With the millions of dollars involved in such a production, we must abandon all hopes of outperforming the schlock artists they simply have the financial advantage over us. We can hope to influence a new generation, perhaps, but I have long ago abandoned the task of converting the older generation to a more rational attitude; they simply need and certainly embrace their own versions of the irrational and they cherish their foolishness devotedly. I wish that I could afford a more generous attitude. The solutions to these purported miracles are so simple, so basic, so easily obtained, that those who accept them should bear some of the shame, as well. These are kids' tricks, not highly sophisticated illusions. They are obvious scams, and should be seen as such.

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Back in 1987, for his skeptical approach to such subjects as dowsing and acupuncture -- and psychic claims in general -- Michael Willesee received the 1987 Responsibility in Journalism Award from the Committee for Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP). His present naive attitude, as shown in this TV program, might be best explained by the fact that last year he was involved in an airplane accident, and reported that as the plane was going down, he re-embraced his Roman Catholic faith in an instant conversion, asked God to spare his life, and lived through the event. He explained his conversion, saying that it would hardly have been proper to ask God to spare him, and then walk away as if he no longer needed the deity.

Michael, to be frank with you, I wouldn't have asked in the first place.

And, in response to the next, inevitable question, yes, I have faced what appeared to be imminent death, twice, and in both situations I spent the few seconds I had doing the best I could to save my own life, not making a deal with a deity.

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "James Randi". The signature is stylized with a large, looping initial "J" and a long, sweeping underline.