



Miracles can be faked...

And myths! (says Dr Kenneth Atchity)

A short article by Joe Nickel

The word *miracle* is much used—and abused. It comes from the Latin *miraculum*, meaning "wonder." It is usually defined as an event that is inexplicable by natural laws, and is therefore attributed to the supernatural, usually to divine intervention. But the definition depends on negative rather than positive evidence, and represents a logical fallacy called arguing from ignorance (that is, from a lack of knowledge).

Here are examples of this fallacy: "We don't know why this statue is weeping; therefore, it is a sign from God." Or, "Her doctor can't explain why her condition suddenly improved, so it is surely a miracle." Or yet again, "The stigmata of this person are inexplicable and can only represent a true miracle."

Thorough investigation of such cases, however, does usually reveal a naturalistic explanation—or at least a probable one. When mystery remains, it is usually because of a lack of evidence (the event may have happened long ago) or lack of access to it (permission to examine or test an object may be withheld).

Now in my fifth decade of investigating and explaining miracle claims, I attempt to avoid the approach of either "believers" or "debunkers" who typically start with the desired or expected answer and work backward to the

evidence. Instead, I employ my skills as a former stage magician, private detective, and science writer as well as a scholar with doctoral studies in literary investigation and folklore. The character played by Hilary Swank in the 2007 movie *The Reaping* was based partially on my work as a miracle detective. (Warner Brothers even invited me onto the movie set to watch some of the filming and to meet the engaging actress.)

I use some basic principles. One is the old maxim that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof"—that is, that the evidence must be proportional to the claim. Another principle is that the burden of proof lies with a claimant--not on someone else who must attempt to prove a negative. Still another principle is known as Occam's razor (named for fourteenth-century philosopher William of Ockham). It holds that the simplest tenable explanation—the one with the fewest assumptions--is to be preferred.

I apply these principles in my new book, *The Science of Miracles: Investigating the Incredible*. While "miracles" are often attributable to illusion, confusion, or even delusion, some are deliberately faked, like the historical sampling presented here in photos and text.

Unfortunately, while a few are now merely curiosities of the past, others continue to deceive, promoted by pseudoscience and zealotry. They obscure the otherwise overwhelming evidence that we live in a real, natural world.



Image credit: www.sanfranciscosentinel.com

The Shroud of Turin

Although there have been some forty "true" shrouds of Jesus, the Shroud of Turin, a 14-foot length of linen, bears the front and back images and bloodlike stains of an apparently crucified man. (It reposes in a cathedral in Turin, Italy—see photo.) When the shroud was first photographed in 1898, the glass plate negatives showed a more lifelike quasi-positive image (though certainly not indicating that the image of the cloth was a "perfect photographic negative" as often claimed). The cloth was the subject of a secret study that

began in 1969, a further examination (by mostly religious believers) in 1978, and radiocarbon testing in 1988, which yielded an age span of 1260-1390 CE. Shroud proponents questioned the devastating tests, pointed to what they believed were realistic anatomical elements and bloodstains, and insisted that the faint image could not have been painted by an artist. Instead, many have argued, it must have been created by a miraculous burst of radiant energy at the moment of Christ's resurrection.

Actually, the radiocarbon date is consistent with the time the shroud first appeared in Lirey, France, in the middle of the fourteenth century. A later bishop reported to Pope Clement VII in 1389 that the shroud was being used as part of a faith-healing scam and that it was the work of a confessed artist. World-famous micro-analyst Walter McCrone discovered that on the image—but not the background—were significant amounts of red ocher pigment and that the “blood” consisted of red ocher and vermilion tempera paint. (This explains why the “blood” is suspiciously still red and “picture-like” and why it failed batteries of sophisticated forensic tests.) Shroud proponents offer contrary claims, but it is clear that “Shroud science”—like “creation science” and other pseudosciences in the service of dogma—begins with the desired answer and works backwards to the evidence, picking and choosing.

End.