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Book Review

Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other Curiosities in Religion and Culture, by Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and Joseph O. Baker

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There is much discussion in popular culture and the media about more Americans being “spiritual but not religious.” Our entertainment industry is rife with *X-Files*-like fiction. There are “reality shows” about haunted houses, ghost hunters, and the like. Even the History Channel has moved in this direction, with shows on UFOs and Sasquatch. Regardless of whether Americans actually believe in these phenomena or are just entertained by them, there is a clear interest in the paranormal in contemporary U.S. society. Thus, *Paranormal America: Ghost Encounters, UFO Sightings, Bigfoot Hunts, and Other*

Curiosities in Religion and Culture by Christopher Bader, Carson Mencken, and Joseph Baker is a timely examination of Americans’ views of the paranormal.

The book employs a mixed-methods approach to explore Americans’ belief in the paranormal, their activities related to the paranormal, and connections between belief in the paranormal and more mainstream religious perspectives and demographic characteristics. If you want to know how many Americans believe in ghosts, how people describe encounters with aliens, and what people who hunt Bigfoot are like, then this book is for you.

Several chapters focus on quantitative analyses of data from the Baylor Religion Survey (one of the authors is the Principal Investigator on that project). These analyses provide information on the prevalence of paranormal beliefs and activities in the United States as well as the correlates of paranormal beliefs and activities. Most of the quantitative analyses are univariate or bivariate in nature, ignoring potential covariates. The more detailed analyses are largely relegated to the appendix. This presentation method may make the book accessible to a wider audience, but it leaves the professional sociologist wondering about the validity of many of the associations discussed in the book. The univariate statistics (e.g., percent of Americans who believe in astrology or communicating with the dead) are more fascinating and convincing than the bivariate statistical associations. Nonetheless, given the dearth of information on the prevalence of paranormal beliefs, the quantitative analyses are certainly informative.

A key theme throughout the book, largely based on the quantitative analyses, is the conventionality of paranormal beliefs. The authors repeatedly emphasize that belief in the paranormal is not out of the ordinary. They go out of their way to normalize Bigfoot hunters, psychics, and people who claim to have been abducted by UFOs by showing that many Americans hold paranormal beliefs. Yet, the authors use a very broad definition of the paranormal. For instance, one of the indicators of paranormal phenomena is the belief that "we are approaching a radical new age." The quantitative evidence for widespread belief in the paranormal is heavily reliant on the relatively high proportion of respondents who report that they had "consulted" their horoscope, something done while waiting in a checkout line in the grocery store because of boredom. At another point, the authors discuss Americans' support of alternative medical treatments as evidence of paranormal perspectives. In general, the authors appear to want the paranormal to

be more normal than it likely is. Related to their normalization of the paranormal, the authors repeatedly claim that belief in the paranormal is on the rise in the United States. But, as they sometimes acknowledge, they have almost no evidence of changes over time. The overemphasis on the commonality of paranormal beliefs and the unsupported claims of growing interest in the paranormal detract from an otherwise interesting book.

The mixed-methods approach is what makes this book worth reading. The narrative really shines when the authors relate their experiences attending psychic fairs, interacting with Bigfoot hunters, and talking to people who claim to have been abducted by UFOs. The qualitative data provide the most theoretically stimulating information. For instance, interactions with people who believe in the paranormal led the authors to propose that there are two distinct domains of believers: those who seek personal enlightenment through paranormal activities and those who seek to be part of a major discovery that will change the world as a whole. The distaste a Bigfoot hunter expressed for other paranormal beliefs was fascinating, particularly when juxtaposed to "paranormal generalists" who hold a wide range of paranormal beliefs. The historical examples and case studies are also quite interesting, and do more to normalize Americans who believe in the paranormal than do the statistics on how many people believe in various phenomenon.

On the whole, *Paranormal America* is a fun read and it provides much useful information on Americans' paranormal perspectives and activities. Although the quantitative analyses may leave the professional, quantitative sociologist wanting more, they are probably appropriate for the reader without an advanced degree in the social sciences, which may be the authors' target audience. The qualitative and historical data are rich, informative, and entertaining. I would not hesitate to recommend this book to family and friends or to assign it in an undergraduate course.