

Science meets superstition in ghost-chaser story

Ted Haggard once said he knew angels visited New Life Church because congregants drew similar-looking angel pictures. Before those of you who are not religious sneer in smug secular superiority, consider the Independent's recent cover story on "ghost hunting." The critical thinking shortage knows no boundaries. Normally skeptical journalists can buy a load of hoovey like believers at a Benny Hinn crusade.

The Independent's story, "Ghoul, interrupted," told of a specter haunting their building and the scientific-looking "ghost hunters" who were called in. I read the piece very carefully. It's an embarrassment.

Ghost hunting ranks right up there with dowsing, Bigfoot and the "mystery" of the Shroud of Turin as one of the worst examples of pseudoscience ever foisted on the American public. At its best, it's mindless entertainment. At its worst, it's fraudulent, dangerous and harmful. But it is not truth. It is not news. And it is most certainly not science.

Pseudoscience seeks to achieve the credibility of science without any of the actual work. Knowing that people value knowledge obtained "scientifically," it uses the products of science without any of its methods. It is an institutionalized form of lying.

Pseudoscientists love gadgets, because they add scientific credibility. The article showed ghost hunters walking around with cool stuff like electromagnetic field detectors and temperature sensors, so they must be scientists, right?

Not exactly. EMF detectors react to all sorts of ordinary phenomena you'll find in a house, such as faulty wiring. Temperature sensors are designed to detect (guess what?) changes in temperature, not ghosts. They react to drafts and normal temperature variations you can find anywhere.

If you want to do real science (as opposed to, say, Voodoo) walk through a house that isn't "haunted" and measure temperature drops and EMF readings. That's called a "control." It helps eliminate alternative explanations. Better still, have somebody else do it without telling them what it's for. That's called "blinding." It removes self-deception from the equation.

Of course, all this requires a lot of boring, tedious stuff called "work." It also requires facing the possibility you might be wrong, which ghost hunters aren't interested in. Spirits don't bother ghost hunters, but facts



OPINION
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scare their pants off.

Good scientists invite others to replicate their work. If ghost hunters have evidence of supernatural phenomena, why don't they publish it? In the age of the Internet and YouTube, it only takes a couple of mouse clicks. Real scientists put their results and their reputations on the line every day. Fake ones just say stuff.

Pseudoscience draws its conclusions from alleged eyewitness descriptions and people telling similar stories. After all, if a bunch of people say the same thing, there must

be some truth to it, right?

Actually, no. By that reasoning, alien abductions are real and angels visit New Life Church. No point in thinking about those questions any more, we can all go home. In fact, eyewitness accounts are lousy at getting the facts right where strong emotions come into play. Common stories mean common brain wiring. That's all.

Sense impressions from our brains are absolutely essential for understanding the world, but they are not enough. People are easily fooled, as any magician, psychologist or con artist will tell you.

Our brains get things wrong from time to time because they evolved in an environment very different from the one we live in now. We see things that aren't there. We make up stuff out of hunches and false impressions, constantly trying to make sense of a world that doesn't always behave the way we expect. That's precisely why humanity developed science: Our brains discovered they needed help.

Skeptics don't require 100 percent "proof" that ghosts exist. That's absurd. We just require credible evidence, evidence that isn't explainable by natural phenomena, self-deception or fantasy-prone personalities. So far, there is no evidence that passes that test. None.

Ghost hunters simply gather data and say it's interesting. They may also offer crude therapy to people who need their beliefs validated. That's all fine and dandy, but let's call it what it is. Call it entertainment. Call it New Age. Call it Ghost Believer Validation Therapy. Just don't call it science, and don't call it news. That's almost as depressing as an office full of journalists haunted by the specter of unprofessional credulity.

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