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Monsters, Ghosts and Gods: Why We Believe

News
By Robert Roy Britt
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Monsters are everywhere these days, and belief in them is as strong as ever. What's harder to believe is why so many people buy into hazy evidence, shady schemes and downright false reports that perpetuate myths that often have just one ultimate truth: They put money in the pockets of their purveyors.

The bottom line, according to several interviews with people who study these things: People want to believe, and most simply can't help it.

"Many people quite simply just want to believe," said Brian Cronk, a professor of psychology at Missouri Western State University. "The human brain is always trying to determine why things happen, and when the reason is not clear, we tend to make up some pretty bizarre explanations."

A related question: Does belief in the paranormal have anything to do with religious belief?

The answer to that question is decidedly nuanced, but studies point to an interesting conclusion: People who practice religion are typically encouraged not to believe in the paranormal, but rather to put their faith in one deity, whereas those who aren't particularly active in religion are more free to believe in Bigfoot or consult a psychic.

"Christians and New Agers, paranormalists, etc. all have one thing in common: a spiritual orientation to the world," said sociology Professor Carson Mencken of Baylor University.

Tall tales

A tale last week by three men who said they have remains of Bigfoot in a freezer was reported by many Web sites as anywhere from final proof of the creature to at least a very compelling case to keep the fantasy ball rolling and cash registers ringing for Bigfoot trinkets and tourism (all three men involved make money off the belief in this creature). Even mainstream media treated a Friday press conference about the "finding" as news.

Reactions by the public ranged from skeptical curiosity to blind faith.

"I believe they do exist but I'm not sure about this," said one reader reacting to a story on *LiveScience* that cast doubt the claim. "I guess we will find out … if this is on the up and up," wrote another. "However, that said, I know they exist."

A subsequent test on the supposed Bigfoot found nothing but the DNA of humans and an opossum, a small, cat-like creature.

Also last week, in Texas there was yet another sensational yet debunkable sighting of chupacabra, a beast of Latin-American folklore. The name means "goat sucker." In this case, law enforcement bought into the hooey with an apparent wink and nod.

Ellie Carter, a patrol trainee with the DeWitt County sheriff's office, saw the beast and was, of course, widely quoted. "It was this — thing, looking right at us," she said. "I think that's a chupacabra!" After watching a video of the beast taken by a sheriff's deputy, biologist Scott Henke of Texas A&M University said, "It's a dog for sure," according to a story on *Scientific American*'s Web site.

Meanwhile, the sheriff did nothing to tamp down rampant speculation, expressing delight that he might have a monster on his hands. "I love this for DeWitt County," said Sheriff Jode Zavesky, who would presumably be just as thrilled to let Dracula or a werewolf run free.

With that kind of endorsement and the human propensity to believe in just about anything, it's clear that Bigfoot and chupacabra are just two members in a cast of mythical characters and dubious legends and ideas will likely never go away.

In a 2006 study, researchers found a surprising number of college students believe in psychics, witches, telepathy, channeling and a host of other questionable ideas. A full 40 percent said they believe houses can be haunted.

Why are people so eager to accept flimsy and fabricated evidence in support of unlikely and even outlandish creatures and ideas? Why is the paranormal realm, from psychic predictions to UFO sightings, so alluring to so many?

The gods must be crazy

Since people have been people, experts figure, they have believed in the supernatural, from gods to ghosts and now every sort of monster in between.

"While it is difficult to know for certain, the tendency to believe in the paranormal appears to be there from the beginning," explained Christopher Bader, a Baylor sociologist and colleague of Mencken. "What changes is the content of the paranormal. For example, very few people believe in faeries and elves these days. But as belief in faeries faded, other beliefs, such as belief in UFOs, emerged to take their place."

Figuring out why people are this way is a little trickier.

"It is an artifact of our brain's desire to find cause and effect," Cronk, the psychology professor, said in an email interview. "That ability to predict the future is what makes humans 'smart' but it also has side effects like superstitions [and] belief in the paranormal."

"Humans first started believing in the supernatural because they were trying to understand things they couldn't explain," says Benjamin Radford, a book author, paranormal investigator and managing editor of *Skeptical Inquirer* magazine. "It's basically the same process as mythology: At one point people didn't understand why the sun rose and set each day, so they suggested that a chariot pulled the sun across the heavens."

Before modern scientific explanations of germ theory, explained Radford, who writes the "Bad Science" column for *LiveScience*, people didn't understand how diseases could travel from one person to another. "They didn't understand why a child was stillborn, or why a drought occurred, so they came to believe that such events had supernatural causes," he said.

"All societies have invoked the supernatural to explain things beyond their control and understanding, especially good and bad events," Radford said. "In many places — even today — people believe that disasters or bad luck is caused by witches or curses."

Which raises the bigger question: With science having answered so many questions in the past couple centuries, why do paranormal beliefs remain so strong?

Related to religion?

Sometimes the belief in curses crosses paths with religion, as was the case in 2005 when televangelist John Hagee (whose endorsement was solicited and received by presidential hopeful John McCain) blamed Hurricane Katrina on God's wrath for a gay parade that had been scheduled for the Monday of the storm's arrival.

"I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are — were recipients of the judgment of God for that," Hagee said at the time, reiterating the belief in 2006.

That might lead one to assume religion and paranormal beliefs are intertwined.

But in a 2004 survey, at the researchers at Baylor found just the opposite.

"Paranormal beliefs are very strongly *negatively* related to religious belief," study team member Rod Stark said this week.

Another study, of 391 U.S. college students done in 2000, found that participants who did not believe in Protestant doctrine were most likely to believe in reincarnation, contact with the dead, UFOs, telepathy, prophecy, psychokinesis, or healing. Believers were the least likely to buy into the paranormal. "This may partly reflect opinions of Christians in the samples who take biblical sanctions against many 'paranormal' activities seriously," the Wheaton College researchers wrote.

Cronk, the psychologist, did a small survey of 80 college students and found no connection between religiosity and paranormal belief.

But a 2002 study in Canada did find a correlation between religious beliefs and paranormal beliefs, Cronk notes. He figures that among other explanations, Canadians may not have the same belief systems as U.S. residents.

"My guess is that religiosity has a lot to do with how you were raised, and less to do with genetics," Cronk said. "Those people who may have a high genetic susceptibility to 'faith-based knowledge' may end up being highly religious or may end up having belief in the paranormal depending on how they were raised. Those people less susceptible to that method of forming beliefs may still end up being highly religious if they were raised in a religious family."

Religion vs. paranormal

Mencken, the Baylor sociologist, says sacrifice and stigma (for holding ideas outside the group norm) keep the paranormal at bay among the highly religious. He has two papers forthcoming that are based on a national survey of 1,700 people.

The first, to be published in the journal *Sociology of Religion* in 2009, reveals this:

"Among Christians, those who attend church very often (and are exposed to stigma and sacrifice within their congregations) are least likely to believe in the paranormal," Mencken told *LiveScience*. "Conversely, those Christians who do not attend church very often (maybe once or twice a year) are the most likely to hold paranormal beliefs."

A third group, which he calls naturalists, do not hold supernatural views, Christian or paranormal.

Another study to published in December in the *Review of Religious Research*, shows that those who go to church "are much less

likely to consult horoscopes, visit psychics, purchase New Age items," and so on, Mencken said. "However, among those Christians who do not attend church, there is a much higher level of participation in these phenomena."

Educated to believe

Profiling the typical Bigfoot believer turns out to be as challenging as determining the scientific methodology of a psychic, however.

"Perhaps amazingly, [paranormal beliefs] are not related at all to education," Stark said. "Ph.D.s are as likely as high school dropouts to believe in Bigfoot, Loch Ness Monster, ghosts, etc."

The 2006 study of college students, done by Bryan Farha at Oklahoma City University and Gary Steward Jr. of the University of Central Oklahoma, reached a similar conclusion. Belief in the paranormal — from astrology to communicating with the dead — increases during college, rising from 23 percent among freshmen to 31 percent in seniors and 34 percent among graduate students.

Bader, the sociologist at Baylor, and his colleagues teamed up with the Gallup organization to conduct a national survey of 1,721 people in 2005 and found nearly 30 percent think it is possible to influence the physical world through the mind alone (another 30 percent were undecided on that point). More than 20 percent figure it's possible to communicate with the dead. Nearly 40 percent believe in haunted houses.

Asked if "creatures such as Bigfoot and the Loch Ness Monster will one day be discovered by science," 18.8 percent agreed while 25.9 percent were undecided.

In a remote Himalayan village, on the other hand, belief in Bigfoot's cousin, the yeti, is seen by some as a sign of ignorance.

Media madness

Today's ubiquitous and often one-sided, promotional coverage of the paranormal, both on the Internet and TV, perpetuate myths and folklore as well or better than any ancient storyteller. Fiction and belief masquerade as fact and news, feeding the 24/7 appetite of the easily swayed.

Scientists are left with an impossible task: proving something does not exist. You can prove a rock is there. You can't prove that Bigfoot or a ghost or the god of thunder is not there. Bigfoot paraphernalia purveyors and cash-cow psychics know this well.

"Many paranormalists claim that their powers only work sometimes, or that they don't work if there is a 'non-believer' in the room," Cronk points out.

Or, in the case of the unsupportive DNA testing on Bigfoot last week, the top proponent, Tom Biscardi (who recently produced a film about Bigfoot and might be said to have an interest in garnering press coverage), simply dodged the mythbusting bullet by claiming the DNA samples might have been contaminated.

Money motivates even the law to look the other way.

Regarding the chupacabra "sighting" last week in Cuero, Texas: "It's amazing," said Zavesky, DeWitt County sheriff. "We still don't know what it is."

Of course his county, specifically the town of Cuero, has been dubbed the Chupacabra Capital of the World and benefits by monster tourism.

So while a sheriff might well be concerned if he thinks there's a goat-sucking, menace in town, Zavesky is in no hurry to catch the beast and debunk the myth. "It has brought a lot of attention to us," he said. "We're not near ready to put this one to bed yet."

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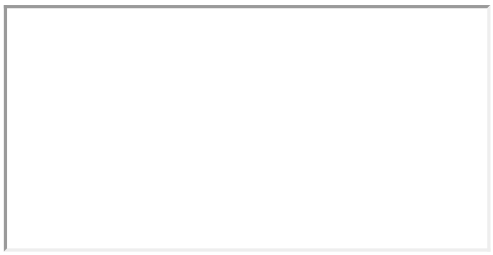

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