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Chapter 1

Belief and Disbelief

IS BELIEF IN THE SUPERNATURAL DECLINING?

It is common nowadays to think that belief in the operation of supernatural forces is declining in the developed world. Historians and psychologists have hastened to assure us that “for the most part, the dead have little status or power in modern society” (Blauner 1966, 390), that “the social function of belief in ghosts is obviously much diminished and so is their extent” (Thomas 1971, 605), and that “ever since [the] age of enlightenment, percipients in . . . much of Western Europe, have attributed to the dead an ever-diminishing social role” (Finucane 1982, 222). Such statements betray a concept of history in which civilization is a process of movement (as they see it, “upward” movement) from a supernatural world view to a materialist one (or as they would term it, from superstition to rationality). There is no real evidence, however, for evolutionary assumptions as applied to society and culture, and there is certainly no evidence that rationalism and materialism are the evolutionary end point of civilization. So such statements may be based on no more than the prejudices of the authors and an assumption that the progression of society will *of course* lead towards abandoning belief in ghosts. One would like to see some evidence before accepting this point of view.

It must also be remembered that many or most writers have relied on written accounts for their portrait of supernatural beliefs. These may be literature, the classics, or local histories. Folklorists (also on the whole locked into the rationalist intellectual tradition) have compounded the impression by printing collections of readable but unbelievable legends and calling them the “folklore”

of the supernatural. If researchers rely solely on accounts like these, they get a very mixed bag of unlikely manifestations which defy belief. If they then ask people whether they believe in such things, of course they get negative answers. But that could simply mean that the researchers' own prejudices, or misinformation, has led them to ask the wrong questions. To find out what our contemporaries really believe, one must leave the books on one side and go out and try to access the informal oral traditions.

It would be wrong, however, to create the impression that this never happens. There have been several studies, though rather scattered and disparate. In 1926 a British national newspaper, the *Daily News*, invited readers to send in their personal experience accounts of ghosts. The result filled four volumes (one of which is still available in the Folklore Society library in London, see Giraud 1927). In the 1950s, British sociologist Geoffrey Gorer conducted a survey through a national newspaper for his *Exploring English Character*, which included questions about palm-reading, horoscopes and ghosts (1955). In 1968 and 1974 the Institute of Psychophysical Research appealed for firsthand reports of apparitions; approximately three hundred people responded to the first appeal, and fifteen hundred to the second (Green and McCreery 1975). More recently, the Department of Sociology at Leeds University conducted a study into what they call "common" religion (folklorists would call it "folk" religion, or perhaps "vernacular" religion—see Primiano, 1995). They asked questions, among other things, about life after death, ghosts, telepathy, clairvoyance, fortune-telling, and horoscopes (Towler et al. 1981–84). More recently, extensive survey work has been undertaken by anthropologist and theologian Douglas Davies into popular attitudes towards all aspects of death and burial. Two of his surveys in particular have provided very useful information about popular attitudes to supernatural traditions. These are the Rural Churches Project, the report of which was published in 1990 (Davies, Watkins, and Winter 1991), and a very much larger survey of 1,603 individuals (Davies and Shaw 1995). In Switzerland, in 1954–55, the popular fortnightly *Schweizer Beobachter* initiated an enquiry into prophetic dreams, coincidences, premonitions, and apparitions, and received fifteen hundred accounts (Jaffé 1979).

In the U.S., Louis C. Jones surveyed young Americans and included an account of their responses in his very readable *Things That Go Bump in the Night* (1959). In the 1970s a couple of questions about psychic experiences were included in a survey of basic belief systems commissioned by the Henry Luce Foundation, and 1,460 replies were obtained (Greeley 1975). Two researchers at the School of Public Health, UCLA, interviewed 434 people from four ethnic groups in greater Los Angeles asking them had they “ever experienced or felt the presence of anyone after he had died?” (Kalish and Reynolds 1973). Also in the 1970s, two very important collections of local ghostlore were published, William Lynwood Montell’s *Ghosts along the Cumberland: Deathlore in the Kentucky Foothills* ([1975] 1987) and Ray B. Browne’s “*A Night with the Hants*” and *Other Alabama Folk Experiences* (1976). In the fall of 1986, *The Skeptical Inquirer* printed a survey of “pseudoscientific beliefs about the past” among college students (see Harrold and Eve 1986, table 1, p. 67). A study of “Paranormal Experiences in the General Population” in the psychiatric *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* surveyed a random sample of 502 people in Winnipeg, Canada (Ross and Joshi 1992).

One consistent conclusion from all this research is that popular belief in supernatural cause and effect is higher than one would have thought possible in predominantly rationalist cultures and that it has been consistently underestimated. In the U.S., Richard Kalish and David Reynolds obtained an average of 44 percent positive answers to their “presence” question (1973); Francis Harrold and Raymond Eve found that 35 percent of people thought “ghosts exist,” 59 percent believed some people could “predict the future by psychic power,” 38 percent thought “communication with the dead is possible,” and 67 percent believed “heaven exists” (1986, table 1, p. 67); and Colin Ross and Shaun Joshi found that 15.6 percent of their respondents claimed experiences of telepathy and 5.8 percent of precognition; 5.2 percent had had contact with ghosts, 2.2 percent with poltergeists and 4.4 percent with other spirits (1992 [the results were attributed to dissociative disorders]; and see David Hufford’s reply [1992]). Andrew Greeley found that the “majority” of his American sample had had some sort of psychic experience, and a “respectable

proportion” had had them frequently. Twenty-seven percent of his sample reported they had had contact with the dead, 3 percent saying this was a frequent occurrence (1975). In the U.K., Geoffrey Gorer found that 30 percent of his respondents believed in palm reading, 20 percent in astrology, and 17 percent in ghosts (1955); Celia Green and Charles McCreery found that “about a third” of their respondents reported having seen an apparition (1975, viii); and the Leeds team found that 14 percent of their respondents believed in astrology, 35 percent in fortune-telling, 36 percent in ghosts, 54 percent in clairvoyance, and 61 percent in telepathy (Krarup 1982). Davies’s survey for the Rural Churches Project not only found a range of beliefs in an afterlife, but discovered that 19 percent of Anglicans and 29 percent of other denominations believed in ghosts (1997, 156). The survey also uncovered substantial evidence that a significant proportion of the population (just under half of the people surveyed) believed they “had gained some sort of experience which they believed involved an encounter or communication with a dead person.” Commenting on this, Davies added: “By and large they involve a sense of presence . . . but for a significant minority the visitation is visual . . . on some rare occasions a voice is heard or some sort of communication is felt to take place.” “Far from being secular,” one British scholar of religion has noted, “our culture wobbles between a partially absorbed Christianity biased towards comfort and the need for confidence, and beliefs in fate, luck and moral governance incongruously joined together” (Martin 1967, 76).

My own study conducted in Manchester (U.K.) confirms these findings. The information was collected from women who attended my father’s podiatrist clinic in the 1980s. Over the five-month period I worked there, I interviewed a total of 132 people—13 men, 3 women between eighteen and twenty-five years old, 20 women from age forty to sixty, and 96 women over sixty. From these I selected a study group of 87 whom I knew, or judged, to be over sixty years old. I was not able to find out the age and domestic circumstances of 6 of these women. Of the other 81, 29 were between ages sixty and seventy (of whom 6 were single, 14 married, and 9 widowed); 44 were between ages seventy and eighty (of whom 9 were single, 10 were married and 25 were widowed); 8 were age eighty

and over (of whom one was single, 2 were married, and 5 were widowed); the eldest lady was ninety-six. Forty-three of them lived alone, the rest lived with family or friends. Most of the respondents said they were church-goers or professed some sort of religious conviction/adherence. A small minority were Jewish; the majority were Christians, with Methodists predominating and a handful each of Anglicans, Presbyterians and Roman Catholics; only one professed to be an atheist. Unless otherwise stated, all illustrative material is drawn from interviews with these 87 women. Readers will find a little basic biographical information about each one in appendix 3.

As a guide to the way I wanted conversation to develop, I compiled a checklist of topics around which to focus questions and discussion. Originally it had been my intention to encourage talk only about the possibility of interaction between the dead and the living, but in practice I found that this was far too intimidating, so I widened the scope of my research to include less alarming and delicate matters—extrasensory perception, omens, premonitions, fortune-telling and horoscopes, and the possibility of life after death. In practice, I usually began with questions about horoscopes or life after death and worked round to the more difficult matters as and when I could. I even asked questions about life on other planets if I felt that the respondent needed a long run-in to the topic. Conversely, I found that questions about telepathy made a convenient exit point when the patient's treatment was drawing to a close. Though it had not been my original intention to do any research in these areas, in the end I was very glad that I had done so, because I came to believe that all these subjects form a sort of background or context to more serious beliefs. It also gave me responses on a wide range of topics that are likely to come up in discourse with others and gave me a point of comparison with previous studies.

The women's scores on all the "deeper" and more delicate topics were very high, even higher than previous studies suggested. Almost two-thirds of the 87 women said they believed that some sort of contact with the dead was possible; nearly half with conviction and several others with only slightly less certainty. They were less likely, however, to believe in poltergeists and haunting ghosts, though even here the figure was higher than might have been

expected (some expressing convinced belief, others thinking the phenomenon possibly really occurs, yet others speaking in this context about “happy” or “unhappy” houses).¹ In addition, a large proportion of them said they thought it was possible to be forewarned that “something’s going to happen”; nearly half of them were *certain* of it and believed themselves to be “a little bit psychic.” Even more believed in omens of death—mysterious noises, the scent of flowers, broken mirrors, dreams,² visions, and so on—and half of them could cite personal examples. Slightly fewer were convinced telepathy was possible, though many of them had experienced it themselves. Several others thought it was at least likely, and only a minority thought it did not and could not occur. The results are given in graphic form below on pages 19–23.

It must be stressed that these women were not ignorant or ill-educated; nor were they socially or geographically isolated. They were dignified, sensible, experienced women, living in a middle-class suburb in a large city. Neither were they in any way eccentric; on the contrary, they were pillars of their church and local community, essentially “respectable” in even the narrowest sense of that unpleasant term. Figures such as these do not at all give the impression that belief in supernatural cause and effect is declining. It would seem that the world view of quite a substantial proportion of the population is probably decidedly less materialistic than scientists and historians imagine.

TELLING IT SLANT

One of the many problems of any research into supernatural beliefs is the slipperiness of language and the fact that people often want to express themselves with face-saving ambiguity. In Emily Dickinson’s phrase, they “tell the truth but tell it slant.” Under these circumstances, it is easy for researchers to misunderstand or misrepresent the views of their respondents.

The first sort of unwitting error is to ask a question in such a way as to get a misleading result. In my own fieldwork, for example, I found that the choice of terminology was crucial. I quickly found out that I had to adapt the wording of my questions and prompts to fit in with the phraseology the women themselves used.

For example, terms like “supernatural” had to be abandoned altogether; for my informants, it was not the neutral nor factual term it is for me—its connotations were wholly evil and taboo. As long as I said I was doing research on “the supernatural,” I had only negative reactions, ranging from denial to hostility and even real fear. As soon as I took to speaking in vague fashion about “the mysterious side of life,” people relented; they began to show decided interest and were eager to talk. Similarly, when I started out, I had simply followed the practice of sociologist Geoffrey Gorer (1955) and blankly asked, “Do you believe in ghosts?” And everybody had promptly said, “No.” Luckily, I was soon put on the right track by a woman who said she didn’t believe in ghosts, but she knew that a house could be “spirited” and in fact she had once lived in a house that “wasn’t right.” On the same day, an old lady said she didn’t believe in ghosts, but “funnily enough, whenever someone’s going to be ill in my family, my mother comes TO me.” Following these linguistic clues, from then on I talked about “things in houses” and experiences where dead parents and husbands “come to” the living. Douglas Davies and his colleagues similarly had to adapt their terminology for the Rural Churches Project. Discussing their attempts to frame a meaningful question about reincarnation, Davies remarks: “It may be that those using the word do so by placing their own meaning upon it Accordingly, we decided that the expression ‘coming back as something or someone else’ would be more meaningful” (1997, 150). Formal surveys and written questionnaires do not allow this sort of negotiation and so are fertile ground for misrepresentation. This may be one of the reasons why the strength of the belief tradition is consistently underestimated.

A second sort of misrepresentation may occur when writers wedded to the rationalist culture discuss their findings. Here, I believe Davies errs in the way he presents his evidence. Chapter 10 of his *Death, Ritual and Belief* (1997) deals with “Souls and the Presence of the Dead” in an eminently readable and enlightening way, but plainly from within the rationalist tradition, as his choice of words reveals. For example, he constantly uses phrases like “when people *reckon to have* seen the dead” (my emphasis). Approximately 35 percent of his Rural Churches sample, he says, had had “some

sense of the presence of the dead.” This experience he divides into visitations, “physical and auditory awareness,” dreams, “the dead in living memory,” and “talking to the dead.” Many of the people he quotes also speak of experiences which they say were “almost real.” As far as one can tell, all these are included in the 35 percent who have at some time been aware of the presence of the dead, but the effect of dealing with “dreams” and “talking to the dead” separately from “visitations” and “physical and auditory awareness” is nevertheless misleading because these experiences may actually be very similar. It could very well be only the respondents’ choice of words or the writer’s decision about what “really” happened that differentiate them, not the nature of the experience. A personal story may be in order here. After the death of my father-in-law, his second wife whom he married late in life told me that one night she came downstairs and “dreamt” she saw him standing by the dining room sideboard, and that she put her hand on his heart and felt it beating. When she repeated the story to my mother, however, she told it as a real experience, not as a dream. The factor that altered the story was the audience to whom it was told; nothing else had changed. A similar phenomenon has been noted by Edgar Slotkin in his study of “Legend Genre as a Function of Audience” (1988).

The women in the Manchester study group routinely used a range of expressions to discuss their experiences. References to “dreams” and “dreaming,” phrases such as “it was as if . . .,” “I felt as if . . .,” and “it was almost as if . . .” were used alongside phrases that apparently record quite different experiences, but were in fact used more or less interchangeably—“I saw him quite plainly,” and so on. Sometimes a speaker would switch from one to the other in the same narrative. In the story which introduces chapter 3, for example, the narrator switches from “I was fully awake” and “he stood in front of me” to “I don’t know whether I was dreaming or not,” and back to “and he was there” within the course of a single narrative. There are many explanations for these switches—familiarity with both rationalist and supernaturalist interpretational frameworks, greater or lesser awareness of audience, and so on—but the point is that the language of “dreams” and “as if” should not be taken too literally. In most cases, a safer guide can be found in linguistic clues picked up in recordings and interviews. Sometimes these are quite

subtle. For example, partial belief is often indicated by a phrase such as “not REALLY, but . . .” and a partially skeptical attitude by “I don’t think so, REALLY.” These expressions seem remarkably similar until you take word order, tempo, and intonation into account. When expressing some measure of belief, for example, a speaker will usually pause after the word “really,” but when she is slightly skeptical she pauses before it. Her intonation is slightly different too: when she almost believes, the word “really” will be spoken with a slightly rising intonation, but when she almost disbelieves her voice will tend to fall. There are linguistic and paralinguistic clues, too, for outright skepticism and outright belief. These are discussed in more detail in appendix 4. (To interpret transcription techniques, refer to the conventions discussed in appendix 2.)

PATTERNS OF BELIEF

When discussing the effect of language, it is interesting in this connection to note that only evil manifestations were called “ghosts” by the Manchester women, and that they seldom used the word “spirit” except in the context of “evil spirits.” Terms commonly used in academic discourse for neutral or beneficent encounters—“apparition,” “revenant”—were hardly ever used, which gives the researcher a terminological problem. In the bar graphs below, and in the remainder of this book, therefore, I have chosen to resolve this dilemma by referring to these sorts of encounter as “visitations.” The terms “ghost” and “haunting” will be reserved for threatening encounters.

The graphs show that the Manchester women were highly likely to accept traditional beliefs about visitations from the dead, premonitions, omens, and telepathy. Rather fewer of them (though still a significant proportion) also believed in “ghosts” and “hauntings.” When fortune-telling and astrology were discussed, however, the picture changed. Here, the skeptics were numerically stronger. It is certainly curious that many who were happy to profess belief in omens, premonitions, and the return of the dead were reluctant to give credit to beliefs that one might have thought were more acceptable and less extreme manifestations of a supernaturalist world view.

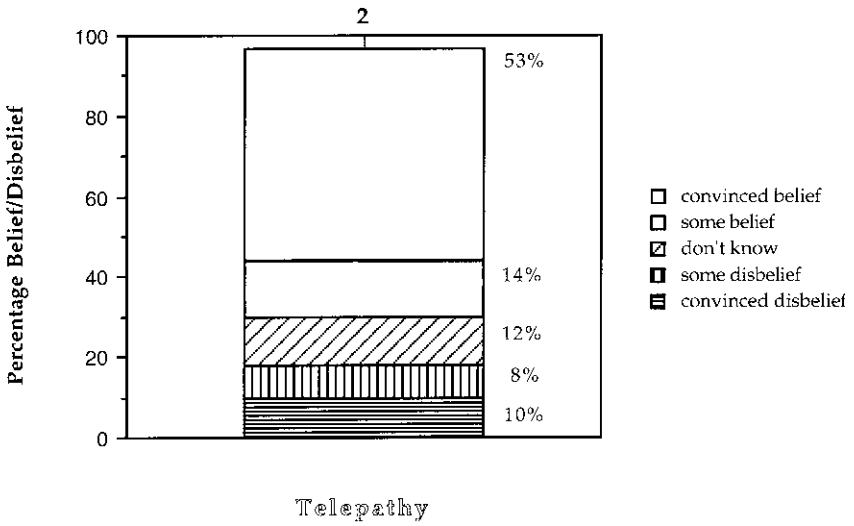
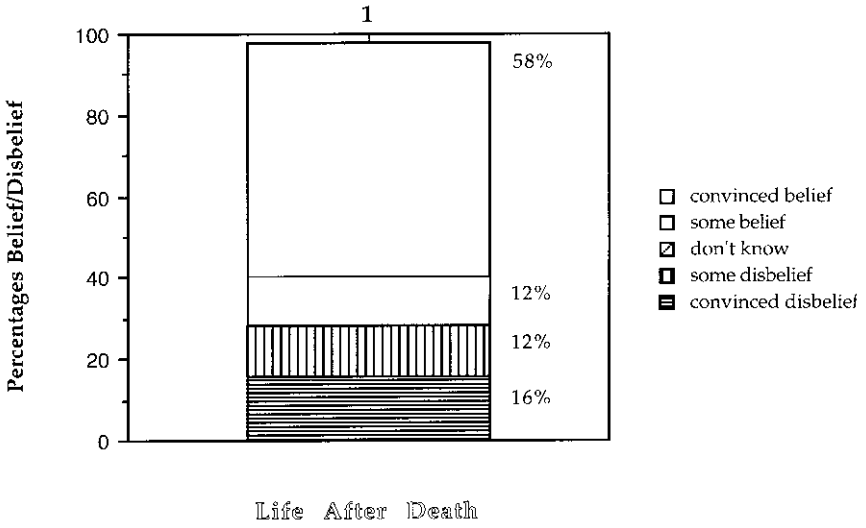
I have discussed the women's beliefs about premonitions and fortune-telling in my chapter in Barbara Walker's *Out of the Ordinary* (Bennett 1995) and intend to focus in this book solely on beliefs relating to contact with the dead, but something has to be said here about this curious turnabout. Discussing afterlife beliefs, Davies writes:

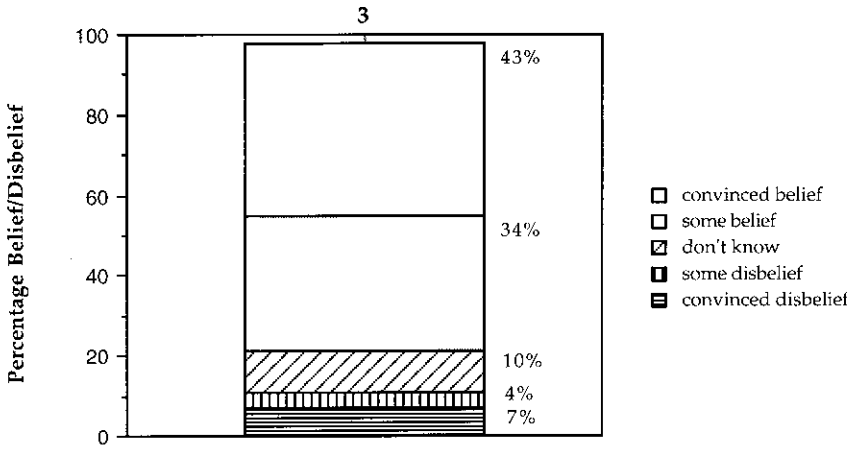
Beliefs can be held, and probably usually are held, in cluster-form rather than in a systematic scheme . . . various beliefs which may have no immediate logical or theological connection with each other are brought together to give the individual a working basis for life. Such beliefs, held in bundles together, may even appear contradictory if spelled out and analysed logically. (1997, 151)

There is some truth in that, of course, and to an extent that appears to be happening in this case. However, I believe there is a logic to this apparently contradictory position.

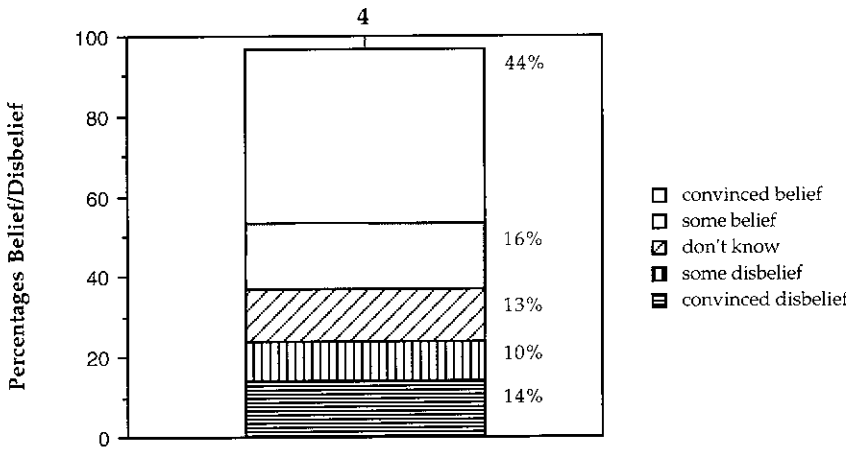
By listening to all the conversation recorded on the interview tapes, it is possible to pick up a very good general picture of the mental furniture the women carry round with them, and this is most instructive when trying to understand the whys and wherefores of belief. Judging from this background information, it seems that philosophical considerations and social factors are influential in determining *whether* women accept supernatural traditions (see below), but it is moral factors that are most significant in distinguishing between *which* traditions they accept and which they do not. The Manchester study group members were elderly, conventional, churchgoing, and very much geared to traditional roles and pursuits. Their beliefs and attitudes were bound to be influenced by considerations of morality, and their morality by received ideals of the relationships of women to men, individuals to society, and mankind to God. Like it or not, these women were taught by the society they grew up in that the ideal member of their sex is an intuitive, gentle, unassertive person, geared to a caring and supportive role rather than to direct action, independent thought, or concern with self. Whether a particular traditional belief was

Percentage of belief and disbelief in eight topics
(rounded to nearest whole percent)
as expressed by the Manchester women

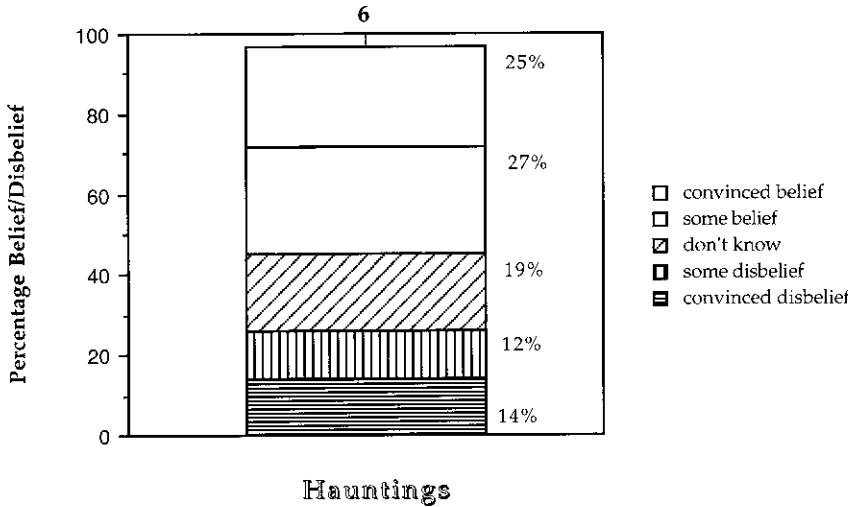
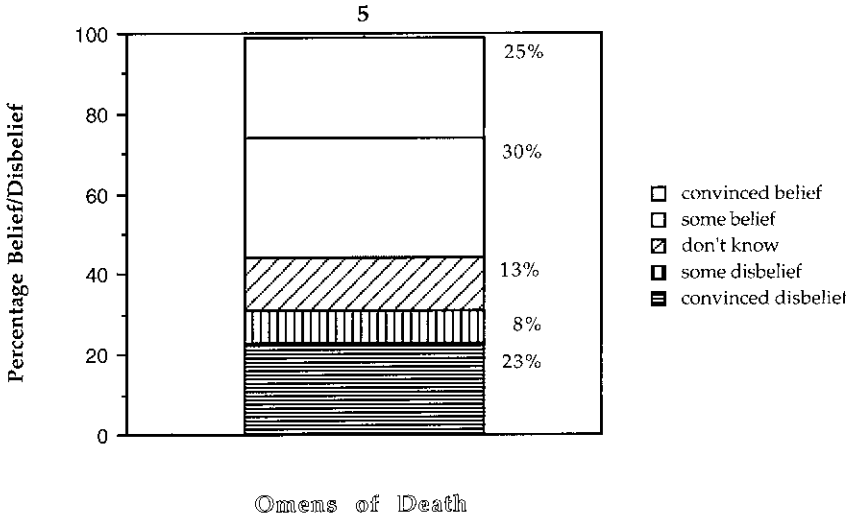


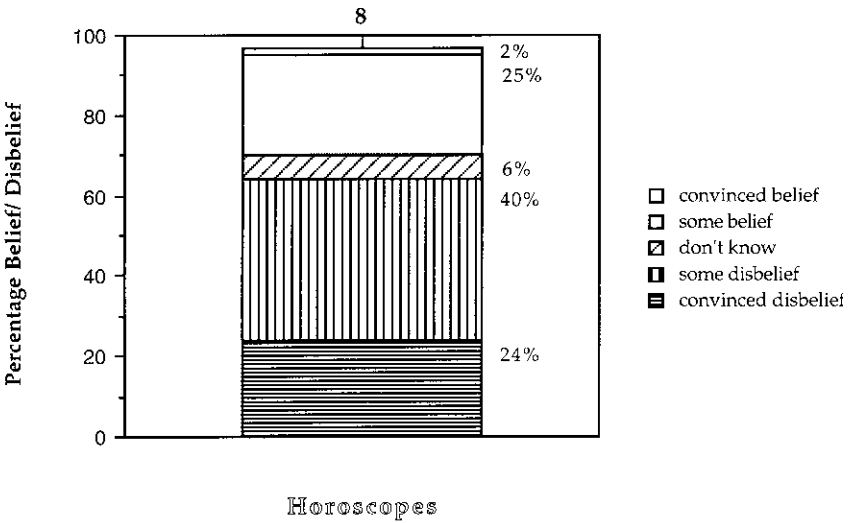
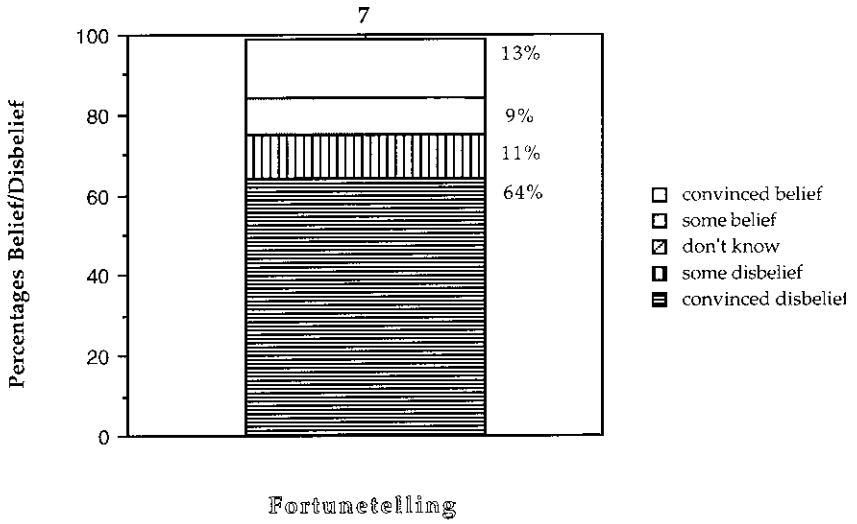


Premonitions



Visitations





acceptable to them seemed to be to a large extent dependent on these basic assumptions.

It is very possible that premonitions and telepathy scored so highly on their belief scale because, par excellence, they are seen as intuitions which come unsought, not as the result of the active pursuit of knowledge. They turn outwards from the self to the immediate circle of family and friends. They are love of others made manifest, defeated by neither time nor distance, and felt in the deep recesses of the heart where none may challenge their authority. In contrast, fortune-telling and astrology are intellectual pursuits—a learned ability to interpret purely material signs, deliberately sought experiences which effectively devalue intuition. In addition, they are self-centered, not other-person-oriented. It is a woman's own fortune that is told, and her own fate that is read in the stars; other people are thrust into the role of supporting cast and she steps center-stage.

Similarly, the women were much more likely to say that they believed in visitations than in ghosts. As they described it, they were made aware of the dead more often through sensing their presence than by seeing them in physical form. When a dead mother "comes to" her distressed daughter, she comes unbidden and her presence is evidence of mutual caring, proof that other-person-centeredness works even from beyond the grave. In contrast, a person who hears mysterious footsteps in the attic, or witnesses doors opening of their own accord, or sees apparitions of unknown people passing up the stairs is surrounded by a world of *strangers*, where intruders creep even into the heart of the family and invade the circle round the hearth.

These are patterns which appeared over and over again as the women described their beliefs and experiences. To a very large extent, the degree of belief that was in general accorded to any supernatural concept could be predicted by its position on four continua from intuitive to objective, from unsought to sought, from interpersonal to selfish, and from safe to dangerous. So, whereas nearly two-thirds of the women believed in visitations from the good dead, and still more believed in premonitions and telepathy (all intuitive, unsought, interpersonal happenings that encourage a feeling that the world is safe), scarcely more than a quarter had much belief in astrology and fortune-telling (acquired skills or delib-

erately sought, self-centered experiences that introduce an element of the unknown into ordinary living). It seems, then, that the acceptability of a supernatural construct depends to a large extent on its morality in the women's eyes and, in turn, that this morality is dependent on their perception of a woman's "proper" role and social persona and their need to see the world as an orderly, harmonious sphere for God's goodness and human affection.

ORDER IN CHAOS

One of the primary values the Manchester women shared was the concept of order. I think it may be the different way she seeks to find order in the chaos of life that determines whether a particular woman favors a materialistic or supernaturalistic world view.

One way of responding to the unpredictability of life events and the oddities of human experience is to adopt a view of the world as governed by unrevealed laws. If this is a woman's preferred strategy, she will say:

- The world's a great study and a great puzzle. (Elisabeth)
- There are more things in heaven and earth than we dream of. (Rose)
- The world's so wonderful, isn't it? And we just don't know what there is. (Violet)
- There is far more to know than we are ready for yet. (Kathleen)
- It's such a beautiful, wonderful universe, anything is possible. (Margot)

This philosophy may take a religious form, in which case the world is seen as driven by divine providence and therefore not random, however incapable it is of being understood. Alternatively, it may take a mystical form, in which case the world is seen as full of magic and wonders. Many of the women claimed to be "a little bit

psychic” and several said that they had been offered the chance to train as mediums (a chance all had turned down, so they said). The dominant impression was that the psychic powers they claimed were correlations of, or substitutes for, conventional religion. Both religion and mysticism gain for their adherents a relaxed acceptance of life’s oddities and the chaos of the material world, allowing them to control disorder by reinterpreting it as unrevealed order.

Alternatively, it is possible to impose order on life by ignoring or denying disorder. The religious form of this strategy may take the form of presupposing an immutable divine plan—life is a machine which God has set in motion and which, once running, cannot be stopped or altered:

- You see, I’m a practising Christian and that makes me believe that “What is to be, will be.” (Dora)
- When God wants you, you’ll go. He’ll take you and that’s it. (Norah)

This may take a secular form as a sort of grim fatalism, according to which one’s feet have been set on one’s lifetime path at birth and there can be no turning aside:

- My father used to say that from the moment you’re born to the moment you die, your life is mapped out for you. He says NOTHING will alter it. (Evelyn)
- I think what will be, will be. That’s my opinion. (Polly)
- I think that what happens to you, just happens, you know. I think that if fate means you to have it, well it just happens. (Constance)
- I think your days are planned for you. No point in trying to find out. (Iris)

Others may adopt an “ignorance is strength” philosophy—refusing to think about chance and disorder at all. They describe

themselves as “not fanciful,” or “a day-to-day person,” or rather reproachfully say that they “don’t GO IN for” fortune-telling and horoscopes, or they “don’t BELIEVE in it,” in the sense of not *approving* of it, or they “don’t want to KNOW about it.” Obviously, this attitude owes a lot to the Eden myth, but underneath the piety there might also be a bit of superstition—as if knowledge itself had malicious power to harm.

In other answers, we can get a glimpse of the sort of anxiety which may perhaps be an underlying factor in the rejection of the supernatural:

- It wouldn’t do for me to think too deeply because I’d get too upset. You think, “Oh no! I must keep out of that!” (Thora)
- I’m a day-to-day person, and if it comes, it comes. But I mean, if somebody says to me they thought something was going to happen, I would be so worried, so ill. I’m better not knowing. (Dolly)
- There was a time when I got really hooked, until I realized the state I’d got into with it and I just had to try and stop myself reading it [daily horoscope]. I was looking for the bad things to happen. (Marjorie)

Significantly, too, many skeptics are inclined to feel that, though they disbelieve (and need to disbelieve), they could be persuadable, given the right conditions:

- I think I’m skeptical really. Until probably if anything happened to ME. Then it might be a different THING. (Doreen)
- I don’t know, but if there WAS a ghost in a house, I wouldn’t go and live in it! (Cora)

So when the topic of discussion turns to “deep” matters, these two philosophies guide their adherents either to the supernaturalist

or the rationalist tradition. Only a few of the Manchester women crossed sides and gave “rational” answers to some of these sorts of questions and “supernaturalist” to others, and only seventeen of them reversed their position. On the whole, a woman who believed that contact with the dead is possible also believed in most forms of divination and precognition. Similarly, women who disbelieved in contact with the dead also discounted extrasensory perception and related matters.

FAMILY LOVE

There is another thing that seems to significantly contribute to whether a woman will believe or disbelieve that visitations from the dead are possible—that is the social situation of the individual person—but it does not work in quite the way one would expect. One would imagine that factors such as ageing, widowhood, and solitude would be of paramount significance, or that fear of death would lead the elderly to a search for immortality. However, though these suppositions seem obvious, they were not borne out in the Manchester study. I found that readiness to believe did not increase with age in any fixed progression and was not more observable in widows and those who lived alone than among married people. It seems to be sociability itself—interest in others, and especially love of family—that most often predisposes women towards belief.

One simple way of showing this is by comparing the incidence of belief among women to whom kinship and friendship were obviously important with that among women with apparently much less family feeling or interest in others. When listening to the tapes I recorded, about half the women stood out as being “family women.” All their talk, whatever its ostensible subject, was sprinkled with references to dead and living members of the clan—aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews, parents and grandparents. Others, whom I thought of as “social women,” talked a good deal about friends, though not about family; and others were simply voluble and discursive (I thought of them as “talkers”). Altogether, there were 42 “family women,” 5 “social women,” 11 “talkers,” and 29 who could not be described in any of these ways. What is interesting—and I think significant—is that the inci-

dence of belief in supernatural traditions seems to decline proportionally with these social factors, especially as the “family” factor is diluted. Among “family women” it stood at 83 percent; among “family women” and “social women” taken together it was 78 percent; among “family women,” “social women,” and “talkers” taken as a single group, it further declined to 66 percent. Among women who fitted none of these categories—and might be assumed to be either more isolated or less socially aware—it was lowest of all. Only 27.5 percent of such women expressed any belief, and 58.6 percent strenuously denied it. It appears, therefore, that social factors may be important in predisposing some people to belief in the continued presence and influence of the dead, and that perhaps the single most significant aspect of these social parameters may be devotion to family and family life. There is evidence that women who put a high value on personal relationships will be reluctant to give them up even when death intervenes, and that they see the relationships of mutual love—parent and child, husband and wife—continuing even when one of the partners is dead.

The same would seem to have held true for several centuries. Fr. Noel Taillepied, for example, writing in 1588 said that a ghost “will naturally, if it is possible, appear to the person whom he has most loved whilst on earth, since this person will be readiest to carry out any behest or fulfil any wish then communicated by the departed” (n.d., 95). Arguments for the importance of settled family life in the establishment of ghost traditions may also be found in Keith Thomas’s great work, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971, 602), and it has long been assumed that ghost belief flourishes best in settled communities (though these are often assumed to be rural communities). British sociologist Joan Rockwell noted in her work on Danish folklorist Evald Tang Kristensen:

I would venture a speculation that belief in ghosts can only be a significant part of a culture where long-continued intensive agriculture makes a continuity both of habitation and of human family generations possible. It is to the established family hearth that the ancestors return to give advice and warning. (1981, 43)

The major relevance is not location, I believe, but love for the dead person and respect for family life.

Robert Blauner, in an often quoted article in the journal *Psychiatry*, wherein he attempts to account for what he sees as the demise of ghost belief today, discusses this question. Comparing modern societies to “traditional” ones, he argues that “when people die who are engaged in vital functions of society . . . their importance cannot be easily reduced Ghosts are reifications of this unfinished business, and belief in their existence may permit some continuation of relationships broken off before their natural terminus” (1966, 381). He demonstrates, from anthropological research, how in many areas of the world the early death of important members of the family results in ghost traditions. Then he goes on to argue that

the relative absence of ghosts in modern society is not simply a result of the routing of superstition by science and rational thought, but also reflects the disengaged social situation of the majority of the deceased. In a society where the young and middle-aged have largely liberated themselves from the authority of and emotional dependence upon old people by the time of the latter’s death, there is little social-psychological need for a vivid community of the dead. (1966, 382)

Here, of course, he not only reveals his prejudices through his choice of words—“superstition,” “rational thought,” “liberated”—but also displays the weakness of his argument as it applies to modern society. It is a distortion to speak of the young and middle-aged as having “liberated” themselves from dependence on the old. People need their families for emotional support whatever age they are or whatever country they live in; and to say that today the elderly have no authority is a cliché for which there is no real evidence. Elderly males still dominate the political scene in many developed countries. Mothers still retain a good deal of influence over their grown-up children, especially their daughters. The memorates the Manchester women told me show time and again that the importance of families, especially mothers and husbands, “cannot be

easily reduced,” and that this is (justly) interpreted as love, not slavery. Close family members cannot be replaced and the dead are still needed (that’s the nature of bereavement, as we shall see in chapter 3). Blauner’s analysis of the reasons for the prevalence of ghosts in traditional societies holds equally well for advanced societies, I believe, and is the context for many of the experiences discussed in this book.

COMPETING CULTURES

Contemporary Western culture offers two contrasting sets of expectations and explanations to choose from—rationalist “traditions of disbelief”; and a supernaturalist culture, the “traditions of belief” that are the subtitle of this book. Here, for example, is Vanessa,³ an eighty-year-old widow, struggling to find an answer to a question about the power of the dead to return to this world:⁴

- Well, I have SEEN my mother sometimes— occasionally. But whether that’s occasions that she’s been on my mind or something—
[G. B.: How did you come to see your mother? Did she—?]
It was in the night. Whether I was dreaming about her I don’t know. I saw her quite plainly. It only happened once to me. But whether she was on my mind or not I don’t know, and I can’t remember whether perhaps I was a bit low.
[G. B.: How long ago was this, Vanessa?]
Oh, I can’t say how long.
[G. B.: When you were younger?]
No, the last few years. And it just came over me whether it was a warning that I WAS going to meet her or something. I never said anything to anybody about it.

Vanessa plainly cannot entirely decide, or will not say, whether what she saw was objective or subjective. Two traditions are available to her as explanatory mechanisms, and she hovers between the two. On the one hand, she uses the language of supernatural belief (“I

have SEEN my mother,” “I saw her quite plainly”) and relies on some of the traditional assumptions about the reasons why the dead may contact the living which we will meet in chapter 2 (“And it just came over me whether it was a warning that I WAS going to meet her”). On the other hand, she uses explanatory concepts drawn from the rationalist tradition; she wonders whether she was dreaming or whether it happened because “she’s been on my mind or something” or because she was feeling “a bit low.”

In the following, and final, sections of this chapter I want to look at these competing cultures, both in general and as they are reflected in the replies that the Manchester women gave to my enquiries.

Traditions of Disbelief

The term “traditions of disbelief” was first used by David Hufford in an important article of 1982, but just less than a hundred years previously that other great “psycho-folklorist,”⁵ Andrew Lang, summed up the arguments used by rationalists in remarkably similar terms:

On every side we find in all ages, climates, races and stages of civilization, consentient testimony to a set of extraordinary phenomena, but we are bullied by common-sense into accepting feeble rationalizations. . . . When we ask for more than “all stuff and nonsense,” we speedily receive a very mixed theory in which rats, indigestion, dreams, and, of late, hypnotism, are mingled much at random. (Lang 1894, 173)

To this list, Hufford adds psychological desires, the need to control children, mind-altering drugs, alcohol, delirium, stress, and psychosis. At the last ditch, rationalists fall back on the argument that, even if none of their arguments will fit the case now, given time and the advance of scientific knowledge, a “rational” cause *will eventually be found* (Hufford 1982b).

How far all this reasoning is traditional may be illustrated by the fact that very much the same sort of arguments may be

found in old texts. For example, in *Of Ghosts and Spirits Walking by Night* the Swiss Protestant, Lewes (Ludowig) Lavater, writing in the second half of the sixteenth century, proposed to demonstrate that “Melancholike persons and madde men, imagine things which in very deed are not,” “Fearfull menne, imagine that they see and heare straunge things,” and “Men which are dull of seeing and hearing imagine many things which in very deede are not so.” He also discusses tricks used to scare children into obedience, jokes and pranks played by young men, and legends and tales. He proposes that some supernatural encounters are deliberate deceptions, and argues that “Manye naturall things are taken to bee ghosts” (Lavater [1572] 1929, contents list). It is customary to see only believers as adhering to established traditional patterns of thought and having a “folklore,” but it seems that the rationalists’ “explanations” are just as traditional. Rationalists, too, have folklore.

The rationalist folklore was very observable among some of the Manchester women. At its most extreme, the culture of disbelief was maintained by making derogatory assertions about people who have reported supernatural experiences. They were said to be confused, emotional, muddled, or manipulative. They:

- . . . have put the wrong interpretation on it. (Colette)
- . . . are probably very highly strung and imaginative. (Dorothy)
- . . . are doing that just for the publicity. (Stella)
- . . . are doing it just to get a new house. (Doris)
- . . . are people whose emotions are very charged. (Doreen)

Also,

- when people are very bad with their nerves, they think all sorts of things! (Enid)

Elsewhere, they attempt, as it were, to reason with the supernaturalist tradition:

- No! Because nobody's come back to tell you. (Constance)
- Well, I've never had any experience of anything like that. (Zena)
- Well it's never been known up to now, has it? (Cora).
- Nobody's come back, have they? (Evelyn)
- No, because you must go back thousands of years, mustn't you? Well, I mean, if people are going to come back from all those years, well I can't see how it can be! (Gwen)
- They never come back at a seance and tell you anything worthwhile. (Hilda)
- I have a theory that you're put on this earth for so long and that's your span of life. It's like a flower. A flower dies—another one doesn't grow in its place, you've got to plant something else, haven't you? (Paula)
- No, as far as I'm concerned, once you're dead you're dead. Look at the animals for that. (Rita)
- I think with the body's death—I don't think about the soul because nobody knows whether we've got a soul—I think our bodies die like the plants and flowers do. (Phyllis)

Where they have to face popular opinion at first hand and respond to acquaintances who report subjective experiences such as the “feeling of presence” that will be discussed in chapter 3, the occurrences are often attributed to the power of dreams and desire, or to the influence of past associations:

- My mother still thinks of him so much (of her son so much) that she sometimes does come down in the morning and say he was in the room with her, but, you know, whether that's half dreaming or not, it's hard to say. (Doreen)
- I think that is rather involved in one's teaching from childhood and when there is distress or any other crisis we probably revert to what we've been taught and go over it again. That's how I think I'd explain that. (Bessie)
- I think one might feel that one has been helped by thinking about them, but whether any actual spirit comes to help you I should rather doubt. I think it's more INSIDE YOU. You get the comfort and strength from contact with whoever it is that you're thinking of rather than that they come specially to help you, in the spirit or any other way. (Rina)
- Well, I think you live through your parents a lot during your life. Personally I think an awful lot of the way you were brought up and the things they say as regards religion and everything does stay with you and you tend to talk about it at times. (Doris)

Similar arguments structure their discourse about other issues that were discussed in the interviews, such as fortune-telling, omens, and premonitions. As far as fortune-telling is concerned, these take the form of arguing that any correspondence between prediction and outcome is coincidence, or that recourse to a clairvoyant is merely superstitious, or irrelevant because the future is "in the Maker's hands," or, most commonly, a neat argument that the skill of the clairvoyant lies more in her ability to "react to your reactions" than to any genuine psychic powers. When the women move on to discuss omens and premonitions, the ready-made counterarguments are more numerous. Apart from having obvious objections such as that these beliefs are

superstitious, open to religious objections, and deceptive, skeptical women assert that such notions are “fanciful,” or “sheer imagination,” or use other such generalized rebuttals. In addition, they employ sophisticated arguments which counter belief in detail as well as substance. Such strange feelings and mood changes are “really” due to a variety of natural causes—unconscious anxiety, low spirits, poor health, atmospheric conditions. Precognitive dreams are explained as chance reshaping of the previous day’s events (and thus in no *need* of explanation, supernatural or otherwise).

Traditions of Belief

Countering this rationalist folklore are the traditional supernaturalist arguments (which I call “traditions of belief”). These are commonly based on human testimony, on evidence drawn from personal experience, and the stories of friends and relatives (whose veracity, rationality, and sobriety are earnestly vouched for). Discussants also point out that both religion and tradition are firmly in favor of the continued existence of the souls of the dead, and that there is empirical testimony that they do interact with living people.

Again, this is wholly traditional reasoning. In a report of a famous seventeenth-century poltergeist case which occurred at the home of a certain Mr. Mompesson, for example, the author summed up his case as follows:

Mr Mompesson is a Gentleman, of whose truth in this account I have not the least suspicion, he being neither vain nor credulous, but a discreet, sagacious and manly person. Now the credit of matters of Fact depends much upon the relators who, if they cannot be deceived themselves, nor supposed anyways interested to impose upon others, ought to be credited. For upon these circumstances, all Human faith is grounded, and matter of Fact is not capable of any proof beside but immediate sensible [that is, “sensory”] evidence. (Glanvil 1681, 83)

Unlike the skeptics whose case is ultimately based on the assumption that people not only are frequently misled themselves

but also do indeed sometimes want to mislead others, believers have faith in human perception and trust other people to see accurately and interpret correctly what happens in the world around them. It is the interaction of tradition, “news,” rumors, and written accounts with personal experience that forms the basis of their case.

The arguments are never slick, though, the respondents customarily expressing sincere puzzlement:

- YOU DO read that in the paper, don't you? Well, I think it MUST happen to THEM. Well, they couldn't imagine it, surely? I mean, when they say things move and all THAT. They do, don't they?
[G. B.: Well, I don't know, it's never happened to me.]
No, nor to me either. If they get a minister to come and exorcise it—? When I read about it, I've believed it. I don't think you can imagine things like that. I know people are queer, but— (Meg)
- Well! I don't know what to think! There must be something in it. Something must have happened. They can't possibly have imagined it, all the tremors and things, can they? I shouldn't think so, anyway. (Lettie)

Because eventually their “proofs” stand or fall by whether these sources can be relied upon, believers are intensely aware of their opponents' case. So they insist that their informants are of the *highest* probity, the perception seen or remembered with *the most distinct* clarity, and, moreover, that such cases are both numerous and well-documented and *do not depend on the evidence of a single person*, however reliable.

- The people who've reported these things are people that you can rely on their word about it. I mean— you get ministers of the Church of England, who SWEAR that they've heard this sort of thing. (Dora).
- It wasn't that she'd been drinking. She was very SOBER! (Alma)

- This man was in the 8th Army. He wasn't FRIGHTENED or anything. (Winifred)

I would suggest that the sharing of experience—and, subsequently, the defence of the chosen interpretation—creates and maintains a “grammar of discourse” on the unofficial level. The supernatural is a topic that is debated frequently and seriously in informal situations, so that individuals are pressurized into taking sides, and they adopt the discourse by learning from those on their side in the philosophical tug-of-war. Traditions of belief and disbelief are learned through folkloric processes such as face-to-face communication, the sharing of information, and the telling of stories; and the rhetoric and arguments of both traditions are familiar and available to all. In my own fieldwork I found that primarily “rationalist” people were able to recite the arguments for the opposing supernaturalist tradition perfectly well. They could counter them in their own discourse, and did, on occasion, even use these arguments themselves. The same applied to those with primarily “supernaturalist” orientations.

It is my own belief that rationalism and supernaturalism are cultural options, competing discourses; and that neither is “better” or less “superstitious” than the other.

Though this book will recognize both traditions, its primary focus will be on the “traditions of belief,” because they are so generally neglected in elite, popular, and folkloric discourses. The next chapter, in particular, will focus on believers’ opinions and stories as they struggle to find interpretations of their experiences.