

*Parapsychology Foundation*  
*P.O. Box 1562*  
*New York*  
*NY 10021, U.S.A.*

CARLOS S. ALVARADO

carlos@theazire.org

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To the Editor,

#### **A possible—but not very convincing—non-paranormal explanation**

Robert A. Charman has seriously considered (correspondence, October 2014) how he could give a non-paranormal explanation of the unusual features of a photograph described in my article (Mayer, 2014). In essence, he did not provide a new explanation which has to be added to the five ones I listed in my paper but he considered the plausibility of a detail, namely the formal limiting conditions for producing the ‘extra’ that appears in that photograph, and this led him to a new assessment of the likelihood of such conditions. Furthermore, he made some speculations about the context as well as the subsequent story. While I can accept his point (likelihood of the formal condition) to a certain degree, I want to emphasize that one of my main arguments, namely the question concerning the *motivation* of such strange behaviour, remains unaffected.

But I should like to direct attention on two other points. The subsequent story suggested by Charman is based on pure speculation—as is the assumed behaviour of the supposed unknown person who might have wanted to frighten the girls but then preferred to remain concealed. A nice story which is (maybe) based on the limited information I was able to provide to him, and (maybe) also based on the assumptions about the behaviour of PK agents (focus persons), who on occasion are said to lie and cheat when psychical researchers enter the field, and suddenly the real PK phenomena fail to appear. However, my own assessment is based on a synopsis of a lot of more information, comprising different grades of evidence (cognitive as well as emotional and intuitive), which was received with the help of various interviews, e-mails, telephone calls, and series of pictures. As William James put it: “weak sticks make strong faggots” (quoted by Beloff, 2013, p.261), or, to use another metaphor: it is not the single fibre which has to be strong to build a solid rope but the dense, interwoven structure of the fibres.

A further point: Charman only considers two possibilities for how the picture could have been ‘produced’, namely ‘ghost/spirit’ versus ‘material (human) being’, and ignores the possibility of an anomaly which is not caused by a spirit but by (unintentional) PK that might create the image as part of the image data file—roughly comparable, for example, to the pictures produced by Ted Serios (albeit intentionally; Eisenbud, 1989). Furthermore, he displays presuppositions concerning how spirits have to ‘manifest’ themselves on photographs, namely as “momentary glimpse of a light-reflecting spirit face” (p.253) without “eyes with internal red blood vessels” (p.254). If spirits actually do exist, who would exactly know how, and in how many possible varieties, they would appear? Charman follows the celebrated quote by the German poet Christian Morgenstern: “for, he reasons pointedly, that which must not, can not be” (in *The impossible fact*, Morgenstern, 1964, p.35, translated by Max Knight). This may be a fairly comfortable rule for everyday situations at times but with regard to anomalies, a more open attitude seems to be a better choice for me. It is highly questionable to use the common (everyday) rules for the estimation of the plausibility of a given anomaly because we don’t know enough about the causes and nature of such anomalies. Otherwise, there is a high risk of circular reasoning similar to that which I discovered at a conference of ufologists a few years ago. They talked about alien abductions, and discussed the problem of differentiating ‘real’ cases from faked ones. For them, the main distinguishing criterion was how good a fit a given case was with earlier collections of reports with regard to the structure as well as the reported elements, which would inevitably give a false sense of uniformity since deviations from that were rejected. Charman goes in a similar direction when he assesses as highly implausible the explanation that the ‘extra’ on the photo was produced by a spirit because of the red-eye-effect. It is true that differences can be seen which do not fit into the typical ‘ghostly’ patterns. The unusually clear ‘extra’ in the picture contrasts with most of the well-known, rather faint ghostly photographs. But exactly this point makes the case very interesting. Of course, I’d recommend a cautious attitude as far as drawing conclusions is concerned, but this cannot be a criterion for omission.

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*Correspondence*

*Institut für Grenzgebiete der Psychologie  
und Psychohygiene e.V.  
Wilhelmstraße 3a  
79098 Freiburg, GERMANY*

GERHARD MAYER

mayer@igpp.de

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