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SUPERSTITION AND THE OCCULT: BLACK, WHITE OR GREY?
- PROBLEMS OF DEFINITIONS AND BOUNDARIES

Mr. Leslie Price's Lecture given at the recent V.I. Symposium on SUPERSTITION AND THE OCCULT (see this VOLUME p.76), here reproduced in substance, deals with borderline areas of superstition and with the need to encourage Christians who are gifted psychically.

One of the most significant landmarks in Christian history was Paul's sermon at Athens (Acts 17:22). He began by telling the Athenians, in the words of the King James Version "I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious." The RSV has "I perceive that in every way you are very religious". The NEB, however, introduces another term, "I see that in everything that concerns religion you are uncommonly scrupulous". The Good News Bible prefers "very religious".

The problems facing the translator confront, also, the Christian in his assessment of superstition. Most of us do not mind being thought religious, despite the attacks on religion by Jesus Christ and reformers down to Karl Barth. Better to be thought scrupulous than unscrupulous, though the former may be a problem for the psychiatrist or pastoral counsellor. But superstition is condemned; we may define it as unreasonable belief or practice. Yet what is unreasonable to one group is reasonable to another. It may even be thought to be ordained by God. Upon superstition may depend life or death: physical death if it hinders life-saving medical treatment, spiritual death if it leads to idolatry. The message of the prophets from Moses to Jesus makes it clear that being religious does not free us from sin, superstition included.

Dr. Barker's paper explains why superstition is popular, and Canon Stafford Wright's (this VOLUME p.146) gives us biblical criteria for identifying and repudiating superstition. Clearly it is also possible to use Scripture in superstitious ways as in certain credulous cults, and in exposition that does not take

account of the context. Some of the most determined opponents of Jesus Christ were those who quoted the Old Testament against Him.

What is commonly known as the occult embraces hidden knowledge, real or supposed, and it includes much that most of us would think superstitious and idolatrous. Christians are bound to repudiate the claim that there is any path to salvation except through Jesus Christ. This salvation is offered to all men, not to those who know secret words (like those of the Gnostics) or special theoretical teachings, or possess extraordinary powers like those of the magicians. Word and sacrament must be in the vernacular. Yet we must recognise that sometimes even the Christian gospel has been made to appear unnecessarily occult.

Many minor occult teachings deal with divination. I should imagine that we all deprecate divination, though there is no avoiding the fact that some approved Old Testament characters practised it. Daniel is even called "chief of the fortune-tellers" (Dan. 4:9. Good News Bible). In the New Testament, lots are drawn to select Matthias as an apostle, though this is before the Holy Spirit was sent. I think most of us would argue that as Christians have the Spirit, they have no need to use divination, and we would probably reject all attempts to know the future. This should include the attempts by some writers to discuss the future by using Scripture as a kind of device for divining. It is unfortunate that some of their books (by Hal Lindsey for example) are assured of places in religious bookshops, simply because they have much to say about Satan and his works, and are liberally sprinkled with biblical references. Such works are a perennial Christian deviation — many were produced in the early seventeenth century in England. One is not sure if it represents progress or not that the Pope has now been replaced as leading candidate for the role of Antichrist by the Russian leader of the day.

How do we assess individual groups of teachings that might be occult? John Richards has a useful paper on "Christians and yoga" in *Renewal* (Ap. 1977). "Truth" he says, "is never found by comparing the worst of one side with the best of the other, although this arises frequently in conversation. Nor is God's world quite as black-and-white as we would sometimes have wished he made it. There is a lot of grey, enlightened by white and punctuated by darkness, and we view it wrongly to see only the extremes, although it makes decisions easier to oversimplify in this way".

One of John Richards' suggestions, "Never move into any area unnecessarily which certain Christians feel to be dangerous;

one's motive is likely to be to prove them wrong (which is not a very good start) and they may be right!" Ironically, this would rule out the kind of activities described in *Renewal* which is the magazine of *The Fountain Trust*, the main body in the non-Roman charismatic renewal in Britain. Charismatic practices have been condemned as occult by such writers as Kurt Koch and W. Graham Scroggie, and charismatic leaders themselves recognise the danger of a new Gnosticism in their teachings.

The urge to condemn is very close to the surface in many religious people — they had a field day when faced with Jesus Christ on earth — and though we have to speak out against evil and false teachings, we must choose our criticisms carefully and express them fairly. The Talmud says that Jesus was a sorcerer. "You have a demon in you" is the charge made in John 7:20. "He has Beelzebub in him. It is the chief of demons who gives him the power to drive them out" was what the scribes said (Mark 3:22) to explain the deliverance ministry of Jesus. Jesus says that he who says evil things against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven. This should give us pause. The Holy Spirit works at times through channels that the religious condemn. The channels may not be entirely pure. Authentic revival, for example, may occur in a mixed denomination which readers of the *Evangelical Times* would expect the Spirit to be too scrupulous to try to revive!

In dealing with occult groups, fairness starts with getting the names right. Not without reason, there have been many criticisms of a body called *The Churches' Fellowship for Psychological and Spiritual Studies* — it is unfortunate that over 50% of these get the name wrong. It is desirable also to distinguish between different types of the same genus. The book *Christian Deviations* went through many reprints before its author Horton Davies acknowledged the problem of "Christian Spiritualism" as a species of Spiritualism distinct from the more obviously anti-Christian varieties. Dr. Kenneth Greet, in his book *When the Spirit moves* disposes of Theosophy in one page. Such treatments of complex movements are more convincing to their authors than to adherents whom one would wish to win to Christian commitment.

Special problems arise in the area of healing. Let us suppose that a man has a wish to heal the sick, and one or two unusual incidents with sick persons recovering after contact with him embolden him to open the question with his minister. If his minister is an Evangelical he may belong to a group who believe that the healing miracles of the New Testament were ended by God at about 100 AD. The man may not receive much encouragement to exercise or even explore any possible gift of healing, and it may even be hinted that what he has is not of God. There are,

in contrast, many cults and sects that do find a place for particular healing ministries, and they will welcome a man who seems to be gifted in that line. If our man links with those, he may well be a channel for cures, though connected with teaching which will probably be heretical. There will not be lacking Christians to tell him that his cures are evil in origin. And indeed some of the heretical groups draw inspiration from polluted streams. The real problem however is that the Church lost part of the gospel for centuries. Many Christians are now engaged in reviving the ministry of healing in the Church, and this will prevent some persons drawn to that work, from drifting into outside groups, as well as leading others to return. Some Evangelicals influenced by charismatic renewal are now enthusiastic about the healing ministry, but to safeguard their own position, their attitude to healers who are in cultic groups is unsympathetic. Evangelicals may say, in effect, "You can only join us if you are prepared to denounce your friends in forthright terms".

These comments are not intended to encourage cults that practice healing, but rather to urge a careful response to them. J. Cameron Peddie in his book *The Forgotten Talent* (Fontana) shows a more excellent way. His wife was cured by a Spiritualist healer, one of a number of cases that came to Peddie's attention. He was "afire with jealousy for the honour of my Lord". He offered himself to God in the healing ministry and in due course was accepted. If we find an occult group appealing to needs that can legitimately be met within the Church, but which are not being met, our first task is to correct the deficiencies in the teaching and practice of the Church. There will always be those who choose to go outside, but it should not be because the food for the sheep is in some way deficient.

Unusual experiences — of healing, of extrasensory perception, precognition — occur frequently in the lives of a small minority in the population, and, rarely, to most of us. Most people who have such experiences reserve them for family and friends. Some, seeking understanding, are pushed into occult groups. A friend of mine, a medium respected by parapsychologists in Britain and America, used to be taken as a child to Mattins by his mother who was a Sunday school-teacher. He would see shadowy shapes in church which he called angels. He asked the minister about them, and was told he was imagining things. He went on enquiring over the years, and followed a well-beaten path into amateur mediumship, and then professional work. At first he would work only in "Christian Spiritualist" churches, but later he found such discrimination against the non-Christian "National Spiritualists" unjustified. This man is also engaged in a healing ministry.

You may not feel there is any place for his sensitivity in the church, but perhaps you would agree that there has to be a way of dealing with psychic people, especially children, which helps them to come to terms with their experiences without driving them from the Church. I would suggest that after the charismatic renewal has evolved for a further decade, and has come generally to the balanced view of psychic and religious experience already found in such writers as Simon Tugwell (*Did you receive the Spirit?*) and Morton Kelsey (*Encounter with God*), it may be able to provide such an environment. At the moment the personal and collective insecurities of the charismatics often prevent this.

Psychic experience has no necessary connection with superstition or the occult. Like left-handedness it is noticeable in less than 10% of the population. It resembles sexual emotion in deriving from the non-intellectual side of our nature, and alarms religious people accordingly. It can be dangerous, or subversive of authority. It is fallible, but may come with such resonance as to suggest otherwise. There is a psychic element in many religious experiences and Dr. Martin Israel has even suggested that evangelical conversion is in fact a psychic experience. The Christian attitude to psychics must therefore be a mixed one, as it is to sexual experience. It is harder for Christians to do justice to the psychic person because whereas even the most scholarly theologian may experience sexual emotion, his intellectual training may have closed off any tendency towards psychic awareness. There is a natural tension between the masculinity of the analytical mind and the feminine exercise of psychic gifts. Over 4000 "witches" died in Scotland after the coming of the Reformed faith. They were mainly women, but their clerical opponents were of course men. In the male-dominated World of Evangelical Christianity (cf. the virtually all-male cast at the National Evangelical Anglican Congress 1977!) it will be a long time before justice is done to the intuitively gifted.

The scientific study of psychic experience is called psychical research or (as the Americans and Continentals prefer) parapsychology. Properly it is the preserve of scientists. The main British groups of parapsychologists are in the Psychology departments of The University of Edinburgh and of Surrey; there are about a dozen postgraduate parapsychologists, some being in departments of engineering, sociology and philosophy, because this is an interdisciplinary area of study. Christians cannot give carte-blanche to parapsychologists to do what they like any more than we can do so with atomic physicists or genetic biologists. The implications of controlled psychic power — in war, commerce and politics — are too great for the subject to be ignored until the psychic equivalent of Sputnik goes into orbit. Among ethical

problems that arise are, the use of children in psychic experiments; the propriety of experimental attempts to contact the dead (though this is much less popular today); the inflicting of tests for ESP on animals; and whether one should or should not permit Eastern European parapsychologists to know of the progress of work in the West. Parapsychology is not a central issue in a discussion of superstition and the occult, though it should be noted that parapsychologists can be superstitious in some of their beliefs; that some of their experimental subjects will have connections with occult groups; and that the parapsychologists themselves may lack the armour of Christian faith which would permit them to distinguish the true from the false in these matters.

We have noted four topics - superstition, the occult, psychic experience and parapsychology, which overlap frequently, though it is helpful to keep them separated in our minds. Many of the adherents of occult groups, many of the victims of superstition, many psychic persons, could be brought to Christ, and indeed there are testimonies on record of this being done, though sometimes one set of rigidities is exchanged for another. There is a vast ignorance of the Christian faith among occult adherents, and a need to intensify missionary work in this area. Let us remember, however, that our first priority is to seek God's help to correct those blemishes in the Church that drive some to seek service elsewhere; and that we must do justice to the positive points in the practices we reject if we are to rescue from them their finest adherents.