

CHRISTIAN OCCULTISM (Part 1)

John Ferrer, January 15, 2005

"What's wrong?"

"I can't let go of it, man."

"Let go of what?"

"The occult, man. It won't let go of me."

The conversation went from dark to black. My friend was talking with me on the phone about his struggle with the occult. Soon after, I found myself driving over to his house to pray with him and throw out every bit of occult literature and paraphernalia he had in his possession. It was a somber cleansing time.

The lure of the occult is strong. And it is subtle in its strength. My friend took a big step that day to get away from this destructive phenomenon that is the occult. But what may be most scary about that incident was how much of that occult literature that we had to throw out, that literature that had dug its talons into his life and bloodied him with occult thinking. Much of that literature was by Christian authors and Christian publishers. When we understand what the occult really is, we can see its shades spackled across most every theological backdrop. But this is not an attempt at alarmism because the answer is not frenzied hysteria or a retreat to a Christian bomb-shelter. Rather, knowing the pervasive and subtle nature of the occult gives us all the more motivation to heighten our field training. Should we be alarmed? Perhaps. But more importantly, we should be discerning because one of the most confounding thing about occultism is that one can be a practitioner and not even know it. Sadly, many Christians, while still Christian, are unknowingly dabbling in occultism. They may not be taking astrology classes or playing with voodoo dolls, but they are nonetheless sliding into occultism by assuming certain beliefs and practices which the culture of Christendom permits.¹ In short, the sharp clear dividers between Christianity and the occult have, in their minds, been dulled. And what they think is the occult, are only the most blatant forms of it while what they think is Christianity is a far cry from the real thing. In this article I will attempt to explain some of the main problematic beliefs that bridge between Christianity and occultism. In a subsequent article I will do the same but with special consideration for the practices stemming from those beliefs.

Understanding Occultism

Understanding occultism hinges on the fact that it is not like "cult" or "new religion" or "world religion." In fact the phrase "the occult" is itself misleading. It is misleading because by saying "*the* occult" one gives the indication that occultism is a singular entity, a monolithic category that is easily distinguished in reality from "the cults" or "World Religions." In fact, "occult" is better understood as an adjective rather than a noun.² That is, "occult" is descriptive, be it of Satanism or Christianity, or anything in between. "Occult" comes from the Latin term *occultus* meaning "secret" or "hidden." It refers to the presence of secret or otherwise hidden knowledge and powers. These secrets can be further divided into three broad categories of

occultism: divination (fortune-telling), sorcery (magic), and spiritism (communication with spirits).³ While these categories are proudly displayed in many recognized occult groups such as Wicca, Satanism, and among New Age practitioners, they are also to be found in trace elements in many world religions, Christianity included.⁴ It may seem odd that occultism can be found crossing lines between new religions, cults, and world religions leading right into the living room of Christian households. But, entering the occult is not like joining a political party, or choosing to be a vegetarian. Those are clearly definable categories, without blurry edges. Entering the occult, for many Christians, is more like drifting in the ocean without realizing you have drifted. Take any living example of Christian-turned-occultist and we may ask, "At what point did they slip into occultism?" Certain occult practices may be identified, but the point of slipping will more likely be at the toleration of an occult worldview, perhaps even with skepticism, but toleration nonetheless till its affect has grown so pervasive that occult practice was inevitable.

What is clear, is that to be a Christian is no safeguard against the dangers of occultism. The occult is not something neatly and safely sidelined from mainstream Christianity. It is no respecter of boundaries. And it is very dangerous. In Deuteronomy 18:10-12 we see,

10 There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses *divination*, one who practices *witchcraft*, or one who *interprets omens*, or a *sorcerer*, 11 or one who *casts a spell*, or a *medium*, or a *spiritist*, or one who *calls up the dead*. 12 For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord; and because of these detestable things the Lord your God will drive them out before you.
[Italics mine]

Scripture strictly prohibits occult practice promising God's oppressive force against those who even dabble in it. This command can also be found in Exodus 22:18; and in Leviticus 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27. This directive is maintained in the New Testament as well. In Acts every example of occultism, be it sorcery, divination, or spiritism, sets that person at odds with Christianity so that they either have to stay a non-Christian or forsake their witchcraft to convert to the true faith (Acts 8:9-14; 13:6-12; 16:16-18; 19:13-17). In Galatians 5:19-21 Paul characterizes sorcery as being self-evidently evil calling it a "deed of the flesh" in contrast to the deeds of the spirit. In Revelation 21:8 sorcery is shown to be a road to damnation and in 22:14-15 sorcerers are described as being outside of the fellowship of God. Scripture clearly teaches that true belief permits no room for occultism.

Yet, if Christianity does not theologically permit occultism, and if occultism is no respecter of such boundaries what are we to make of the possibility of occultism in the church? To broach this answer let us first consider *how* occultism may seep into the church. There are at least three subtle shifts in perspective which may not be "occult" in any formal sense but are anti-Christian tracks upon which occultism easily enters the otherwise guarded Christian life.

Occult Beliefs

Magickal Thinking

If you have ever interpreted unrelated events or things as having some supernormal connection then you are guilty of magickal thinking. Aleister Crowley, notorious forefather of the modern Satanist movement explains that "Magic is the Art and Science of causing changes to occur in conformity with will."⁵ Anton LaVey, founder of the Satanic Church in San Francisco, California would second that motion saying that magic is "the change in situation or events in

accordance with one's will," but he adds "which would, using normally accepted methods, be unchangable."⁶ The underlying belief that supports this willful manipulation of nature is the idea that everything is intrinsically related being ultimately reducible to a single principle, force, or element. Therefore no two things would ever be unrelated. For the active magician this would mean that otherwise unrelated spells and rituals and activities may actually be able effective for manipulating changes in the world. But for the passive magician, that is, the fortuneteller, this means that nature's interrelatedness can be interpreted to communicate any number of messages that would not naturally be evident.⁷ To be fair, classical Christianity can rightly view the whole of creation as being related through a common creator. And in that sense, everything is connected. But these things are not necessarily related otherwise. A constellation shift does not mean that you are about to find true love. A black crow on your doorframe does not mean death is eminent. And walking under a ladder has nothing to do with your good or bad fortune. Within Christendom charms, spell casting, and divination are often translated into icons, prayer, and prophecy (respectively). While I am no fan of the use of icons, I am willing to accept that the traditional catholic use of icons is not occult **but problematic nonetheless**. But, many many people today employ icons in a magickal way as if the article itself can ward against dangers or bring good luck. Likewise for prayer and prophecy. These elements have their place in Christian belief and application, but the repetition of rote phrases with the hope of manipulating unseen forces by their intrinsic power is not prayer, that is spell casting. And when unrelated events, in and of themselves, are interpreted subjectively as spelling out past, present, or future realities, that is not prophecy. That is divination.

Many more chilling examples of magickal thinking have been committed under the guise of "throwing out a fleece." This gross misapplication is built upon Judges 6:36-40 wherein Gideon in doubt questions God's prior revelation by asking for two additional, and supernatural, proofs of God's guaranteed success in battle, namely the dampening and drying of a fleece which he laid out in a field. This idea of "throwing out a fleece" was problematic back then and it is errant now. **First of all, this account is descriptive and not prescriptive. Gideon's practice does not translate directly into modern day scenarios, just as any narrative (IE: descriptive) passage would not directly translate today. To apply this practice in modern day terms one must first identify what Biblical principle Gideon was applying. Doubt? Fear? Forgetfulness? These could hardly be called "Biblical" principles. God had already promised victory (Judges 6:14). Second, Gideon has already shown fear and doubt having questioned God earlier (Judges 6:19-21) and having operated in fear with his first instructions (Judges 6:27). Third, considering the whole story of Gideon, the lesson seems to be more about God's power and patience amidst Gideon's ineptitude and weakness rather than about anything particularly laudable in Gideon. That Gideon threw out a fleece means Gideon doubted God's revealed word. For Christians today, to test God's revealed word by asking for unrelated signs or prophetic confirmations is an insult to God and His Word.**

Self-Deification

Another worldview element that easily transports occultism is self-deification and self-worship. These concepts are nothing new for they dates back to the lie of Satan in Genesis 3, and the humanism at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 12. Simply stated, the occult thrives on man's self-preoccupation. For the occultist this usually stems from the belief that mankind is innate deity. New Age philosophy almost universally espouses either pantheism or panentheism, that is, the theological belief that everything *is* divine or *is in* the divine (respectively).⁸ Norman Geisler

and Yutaka Amano say that "self-deification is the gospel of the New Age."⁹ Likewise, witchcraft largely operates under the basic premise that man and nature are together divine.¹⁰ As could be expected, self-worship naturally follows when each person is seen as divine. **But even when man is not considered to be deity, self-worship may still result by being pre-occupied with self. And thus, self-deification takes place.** Satanism for example, while it may or may not espouse pantheism or panentheism depending on what form of Satanism is being considered, encourages its participants to be hedonistic, that is, self-indulgent. LaVey, of the Church of Satan said "Life is the great indulgence—death, the great abstinence. Therefore, make the most of life—HERE AND NOW!"¹¹

The appeal of self-worship is no mystery, since mankind is by nature selfish and self-centered (Isa. 53:6). Self-worship can crop up in the form of pantheism or panentheism where one's worship may be deliberate and religious. It may trickle out of humanism where one exalts mankind as the highest achievement of nature. But, perhaps the most common case, is when man seeking to fulfill his natural, and even Godly, desire for both pleasure and love chooses the ungodly shortcut of self-worship rather than exercising the patience and faith to find ultimate pleasure and love in God-worship (Jer. 2:13).

What does self-worship look like? Whenever a person believes their comfort is more important than God's glory—that is self-worship. Whenever a person believes that God wills their happiness over their holiness—that is self-worship.¹² Whenever a person acts like God is their servant boy—that is self-worship. This error may come in the form of self-centered prayers. It may come in the form of "name-it and claim-it" theology. It may come through the "health and wealth" prosperity gospel. Whenever Christianity is seen as man-centered rather than God-centered, self-worship is looming. He is truly inverted who bows down to himself.

Depersonalized God

Along with magickal thinking and self-deification comes the depersonalization of God. The connection is simple: if man is deity and nature is magickally interconnected, then man has no need to appeal to a personal God. One can supernaturally manipulate and interpret nature without need for a personal communicative deity. In coping with reality and finding answers to man's existential plight the occultist looks deeper inside himself for an impersonal operative force rather than looking above for a deeply personal and caring God. One may still hold to some diminished sort of god, but this god is seen rather as a principle or a force, something depersonalized. This ultimate reality in the occult is variously interpreted as "the collective unconscious" (Carl Jung), "Mother Nature" (Wicca, Witchcraft, and Paganism), "the Universe" (New Age), "the life force" or "Chi" (eastern philosophy), "prana" (Hinduism), "bioenergy" (LaVey's Satanism), "the right brain" (pop psychology, and "the force" (Star Wars). In every case, the place of God is filled with something impersonal.¹³ This depersonalization may not seem immediately dangerous. But it is absolutely devastating to Christianity, even though its aroma can be found in many segments of Christendom.

First, if God is less than personal then worship is absurd. One may adhere to the laws and forces of nature. But worship is an interpersonal act, a relationship of reverence that is a class beyond mere "adherence." Second, if God is less than personal than He cannot love. To love requires emotion and will, both of which are facets of personhood. If God has not loved the world, then the Gospel is destroyed by a cold unfeeling wave of disinterest and God is all-the-less glorious. Third, if God is less than personal then Christian living reduces to robotic duty. In essence, the relationship with God reduces to something mechanistic where God is seen not as

our beloved but as a vending machine to be manipulated for desired effects. In contrast, the life of the believer should be profoundly relational. But if God is impersonal then man's religion is but adherence to principles. In the Christianity faith, it is a personal relationship that provides the context wherein all of Christianity finds its meaning. The Ten Commandments for example, are given only after God reminds Israel of His active personal involvement in their escape from Egypt (Exodus 20:1-2). His relationship with them provides the context for the Law. The Psalms portray worship through prayer and song all directed to God even while inviting other people to join in worship. Ecclesiastes is perhaps even more explicit elaborating how relating with God provides the only hope of meaning in life. God's relationship with man provides the context for the poetic books. The prophets such as Hosea further demonstrate that God's demand for obedience is a call to relational fidelity, albeit spiritual. God's relationship with man provides the context for the Prophets. All of Scripture testifies to the relational nature of the faith, and thus to the personality of God.

To depersonalize God is a supreme insult to Christianity. However Christians do this all the time whenever our prayers reduce to grocery lists, our tithing to an investment in the "ten-fold return," or when we "put faith in faith" (IE: Word Faith movement) rather than putting faith in God. God is not a vending machine. But rather than deal with a personal God who is liable to have a will of His own and is likely to disagree with us, we prefer to treat him like a controllable machine. To depersonalize God is one way to put God in a box. He might be easier to control and understand that way, but He can hardly be called God.

The aforementioned beliefs of magickal thinking, self-deification, and a depersonalized view of God, are just a representative handful of beliefs that can bridge between occultism and Christianity. These do not necessarily mean that a Christian guilty of these things is involved in the occult. Much less do they suggest anything about losing salvation. But these are dangerous and schismatic beliefs that inevitably undermine the quality of one's Christian faith even as they threaten to disqualify, incapacitate, or otherwise ruin his or her ability as a Christian minister. Moreover, these beliefs make specifically occult belief and practice all the more easy.

Conclusion

My friend who had struggled with the occult has found out firsthand just how subtle and attractive occultism can be. And like many other believers who have dabbled in the occult, that struggle may continue for many years. To effectively fortify ourselves against the influence of occultism we Christians need to recognize occult thinking such as those examples mentioned above. But sometimes the mode of thinking comes only after we are first introduced to the practices. For that reason, look in the coming journal issue for part two of this article dealing with occult practices in the church. Some of this information may surprise you but hopefully it will do more than that inspiring you to heighten your discernment and strengthen your resolve as a Biblical Christian.

ENDNOTES

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1. Christendom, because it is the socio-cultural manifestation of Christianity in a particular era, may represent any number of schismatic and otherwise problematic elements which culture and society permit though Biblical mandate does not. For example, can a Christian practice homosexuality? According to Biblical Christianity they could only do so hypocritically and at their own peril (Rom. 1:26-32; 1 Tim. 1:10-11; Jude 1:7; 1 Cor. 6:9). But pockets can be found within Christendom which see no conflict between Christian faith and homosexual practice.
 2. I owe this simple observation to Dr. Richard Howe, formerly of Southern Evangelical Seminary and currently a writer for Christian Research Institute.
 3. See also, Marcia Montenegro, "Occult" *Christian Answers for the New Age* [Website] (Arlington, VA: Christian Answers for the New Age, January 26, 2003) http://cana.userworld.com/cana_occult.html accessed January 15, 2005.
 4. Much occultism slinks in under the cloak of what anthropologists and philosophers term "folk religion" wherein the normative and otherwise classical standards of a given religion are adapted by laity to suit the personal, cultural, and otherwise subjective elements of that territory. Catholic Christianity, for example, in some South American cultures is syncretized with native religions so that icons become charms and idols while pagan festivals such as the Day of the Dead are openly celebrated within Christendom. Lest we scoff, the North American would do well to consider just what place Halloween serves in Christian faith and practice. For more on folk religion see Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1998), 37-38.
 5. Quoted in Amber K. *True Magick: A Beginner's Guide* [9th printing] (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1999), 4. For a short biography Crowley's life see his respective chapter in Colin Wilson, *The Occult: A History* (New York: Vintage, 1973).
 6. Anton S. LaVey, *The Satanic Bible* (New York: Avon, 1969), 110.
 7. This nomenclature of "active" and "passive" magician is not standard (as far as I know), and is used here as a convenient distinction between the person who, because of their magickal thinking, physically practices magick (sorcery) versus the person who is merely interpreting things according to their magickal thinking (divination)
 8. See J. Yutaka Amano and Norman Geisler, *The Infiltration of the New Age* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1989), 15-29, 51-62 and for a critique of both pantheism and panentheism see Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 576-83.

9. Amano and Geisler, 51.

10. Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and other Pagans in America Today*, rev. and exp. ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), ix, 24-38, 166-67, 173, 202. referenced in Craig S. Hawkins, *Witchcraft: Exploring the World of Wicca* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 34.

11. LaVey, 33.

12. Happiness is not to be mistaken for joy. Happiness, as used here, refers to temporal pleasure rather than the sublime peacefulness of joy that is found only in a holy relationship with God (Isa. 61:7; Matt. 25:21).

13. Richard G. Howe, "A Christian Perspective on the Occult" [Teaching Outline] (Unpublished, 2005).