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Covert power:

Unmasking the world of witchcraft

by Jonathan Burnside

It is true ... that the English in general, and indeed most of the men of learning in Europe, have given up all accounts of witches and apparitions as mere old wives' fables... I willingly take this opportunity of entering my solemn protest against this violent compliment which so many that believe the Bible pay to those who do not believe it... [T]he giving up of witchcraft is in effect giving up the Bible.
John Wesley¹

Summary

Is witchcraft real? What do witches think they are doing when they engage in witchcraft? Why does the Bible have so much to say about witchcraft, and how does it apply to the typical Western materialist who doesn't believe in witchcraft anyway? Witchcraft is often present in society because it expresses something deep-seated in our broken humanity, namely, our desire to carve out a space where we can make things happen apart from God. The seriousness of witchcraft tends to be overlooked both in materialist societies, such as the UK, that pretend spiritual activity doesn't exist and in societies that actively collude with supernatural powers, such as South Africa. The Bible presents a challenge to both sorts of worldview because it recognises there is a spiritual world – but one which is subject to Jesus Christ's authority.

Introduction

'Witchcraft' is a broad term, and commonly refers to 'the use of magic', whilst magic itself can be defined as 'the manipulation and coercion of hidden powers in order to act on specific events... or individuals, manipulating hidden powers in order to benefit or heal people or to cause them harm.'² Central to witchcraft, then, is the projection of hidden, or covert, power. Although some practitioners find the terms 'witchcraft' and 'witch' derogatory, equally, there are those who embrace these terms. Either way, the terminology is so well-established it is impossible to avoid. I use the generic term 'witchcraft' loosely in this paper to refer to *engagement with the spirit world in ways that, in practice, ignore God's reality.*

The world of witchcraft is a complex one. For example, during the summer, a straw pentagram was left at a crossroads in Kent, near a Christian retreat centre where I was staying. No doubt the person who created and positioned the pentagram saw this as a meaningful practice. However, the typical Western materialist would struggle to make sense of this occurrence and would therefore be inclined to ignore it. Yet to an African visitor from South Africa, where at least 80 per cent of Africans consult *sangomas*³ periodically, and where there are an estimated 350,000 such 'healers',⁴ the incident would probably make sense and might even seem unremarkable. In contrast, some Christians might display a healthy wariness, whilst organisations such as Amnesty International and UNICEF would reject any suspicion of witchcraft because, in their view, witchcraft does not exist.

This vignette illustrates that witchcraft is a slippery subject. The reason is because there are so many competing worldviews at stake. This paper tries to provide a roadmap through the issues in a way that is both balanced and biblical. The subject is important because the unseen spiritual realm is more powerful than we can imagine, or deal with. And whilst we need to raise the subject, to understand it correctly, we must remember that rebellious spiritual powers are dangerous. We should steer well clear of them.

1 John Wesley, *Journal*, 1768.

2 Ann Jeffers, *Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996, p.1.

3 Traditional 'medicine-men' who 'heal' by virtue of their relationship with ancestral spirits. In Central Africa, they are commonly known as *ngangas*.

4 Select Committee on Social Services, *Report of the Select Committee on Social Services on Traditional Healers*, No. 144, Cape Town: Parliament of the Republic of South Africa, 4 Aug 1998.

The world of shadows

A common reaction from educated Christians, on learning I was writing this paper, was: 'How is witchcraft relevant in the modern world?' They were quite unaware of the 'violent compliment', to use Wesley's term, they were paying to a materialist worldview. In fact, witchcraft is common the world over, contrary to secularising theories of the 1960s and 1970s which predicted that, as societies 'modernised', witchcraft would disappear. Its prevalence can most easily be seen in Africa, Asia,⁵ and the Caribbean. In such countries, witchcraft practices might include wearing a snake-belt to ward off death; consulting dead ancestors to succeed in a project; or manipulating certain objects to inflict harm or death remotely upon another person.

In parts of Africa, engaging with the spirit world pervades the minutiae of daily life. Give a cup of water to someone, for example, and you might find they are careful to leave a little water in the cup, which is then poured on the ground, to be shared with ancestor spirits. The worldview of witchcraft can shape every small thing people do, from what they eat to how they go to bed at night. Little practical distinction is here made between ancestral spirits and evil spirits – all belong to the 'spiritual world', which is unknown, and hence should not be antagonised. As a result, it is well said that 'no one can understand life in Africa without understanding witchcraft and the related aspects of insecurity.'⁶

In some African countries, such as South Africa, witchcraft is cloaked in silence because its victims do not want to advertise that they are, or have been, accursed. They are also afraid that speaking out will provide their perpetrators with intelligence of the steps they have taken to counteract the occult assault, thereby inviting a fresh onslaught, possibly by different means.⁷ Likewise, in Dominica, public discussion of witchcraft is exceptionally rare. This arises from the belief that 'public utterance of information arising about the occult give[s] occult forces their power',⁸ therefore, the best way of protecting oneself (and society) is not to mention it. On the other hand, in parts of Central Africa, witchcraft discourse is said to have entered the public domain by means of the mass media ('People talk about it all the time').⁹ Yet, whether spoken or silent, witchcraft occupies a central place in people's imaginations. The relational damage caused by the practice of witchcraft is incalculable because, in such societies, 'life must be lived in terms of a presumption of malice.'¹⁰ Other people's motives are continually questioned, creating a climate of fear and suspicion, in which trust and civil society is virtually impossible.¹¹ Every year, thousands of women and children, and sometimes men, are killed as a result of witchcraft accusations, around the world.

In Europe, there continues to be, as there has always been, indigenous practices of witchcraft. The Witchcraft Act 1735 tried to eradicate belief in witchcraft. Upon enactment, it was no longer possible to be prosecuted as a witch in an English or Scottish court; instead, prosecution was only possible for *pretending* to be one. Yet Owen Davies' account of witchcraft in England and Wales following the Act describes how the majority of people continued to fear witches and put their faith in magic.¹² Indeed, his research

shows the degree to which witchcraft, magic, and fortune-telling influenced people's thoughts and actions, even during a period when the forces of 'progress' were often thought to have eradicated such beliefs. The religious traditions of Celtic, Scandinavian and Germanic tribes, which tended to exist 'beneath the surface' in northern Europe, have become more manifest in Britain in recent years, attracting increasing numbers of adherents, whilst the 1960s counterculture has led to the proliferation of New Age practices. Such trends are reflected in tarot, crystal and palmistry shops in town centres across the UK. Druidry is said to be flourishing more now than at any time since the arrival of Christianity and, earlier this year, became the first pagan practice to be given official recognition as a religion.

Unlike in South Africa, we don't know how many people visit, say, 'alternative healers' in the United Kingdom. The fact we lack precise or detailed information is itself notable, suggesting there is no framework for making sense of witchcraft phenomena. Nevertheless, overt witchcraft is practised in modern Britain. Doreen Irvine memorably describes the events leading to her being crowned Queen of Witches at a ceremony on Dartmoor, prior to her Christian conversion.¹³ Often ministers, and other relevantly gifted Christians, are only too aware of various manifestations of witchery because of having to deal with them in people. Every Anglican diocese has a dedicated exorcist. Peter Bolt in *Living With the Underworld* describes some of the ways in which, partly due to the Internet, witchcraft is becoming more mainstream in the West.¹⁴ 'Ghost-hunters, ghost-whisperers, mediums, spiritists, magicians ("black" and "white"), rocks and crystals, secret names, protective charms and talismans, guiding spirits, past lives, ancestral presences, crossings over, and the list goes on and on.... The underworld beings are undergoing a revival; they increasingly take their place below us, above us, amongst us, and all around us.'¹⁵ As we will see, the Bible takes seriously the existence of a spirit world the engagement of which, apart from God, is dangerous and destructive. So there is no attempt whatsoever in this paper to demythologise witchcraft. Witchcraft is real – and the UK is only a whisker away from a neopagan resurgence.

Witchcraft and worldviews

Witchcraft raises distinct problems for the typical Western materialist. The first is: Is it real? What is the nature of the spirit world? What do witches think they are doing when they engage in witchcraft? For example, earlier this year in South Africa, witchdoctors were summoned by the country's soccer authorities to 'cleanse' Johannesburg's new national stadium for the World Cup.¹⁶ Western materialists struggle to understand this. We can call this *the ontological problem* because it concerns our assumptions about the nature of being, and what can be said to exist. The ontological problem points towards the question of competing worldviews. On the one hand, there is the worldview of the South African witchdoctors which holds that the spirit world exists and, on the other, the materialist worldview which claims the spirit world does not exist.

The second problem is: What do witches actually want? What are the human motivations and attitudes that drive witchcraft? For example, in Ghana, kidnapped 16-year-old Akwesi Buabeng was rescued by police before his captors could kill him and sell his body parts for witchcraft. In 2001 the severed torso of a young boy was found floating down the river Thames, near Tower Bridge; the resulting enquiry saw Scotland Yard join forces with the South African Occult Crimes Unit. Such cases of 'ritual killing' are also problematic for Western materialists because, although we might

5 For examples in south-east Asia see, generally, C. W. Watson, *Understanding Witchcraft and Sorcery in Southeast Asia*, USA: University of Hawaii Press, 1993.

6 Adam Ashforth, *Witchcraft, Violence and Democracy in South Africa*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p.xiii.

7 Adam Ashforth, *AIDS, Witchcraft, and the Problem of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa*, unpublished paper, Occasional Papers of the School of Social Science, Paper No. 10, Institute for Advanced Study, 2001, p.12. www.sss.ias.edu/files/papers/paperten.pdf, accessed 5 Nov. 2010.

8 Jeffrey W. Mantz, 'Enchanting Panic and Obeah Anxieties: Concealing and Disclosing Eastern Caribbean Witchcraft', *Anthropology and Humanism*, 2007, 32:18–29, 24.

9 Aleksandra Cimpric, *Children Accused of Witchcraft: An anthropological study of contemporary practices in Africa*, Dakar: UNICEF WCARO, 2010, p.6. www.unicef.org/wcaro/wcaro_children-accused-of-witchcraft-in-Africa.pdf, accessed 5 Nov. 2010.

10 Ashforth, *op. cit.*, p.17.

11 *Ibid.*

12 Owen Davies, *Witchcraft, Magic and Culture, 1736–1951*, Manchester University Press, 1999.

13 Doreen Irvine, *From Witchcraft to Christ: A true story*, Eastbourne: Kingsway, 1994.

14 Peter Bolt, *Living With The Underworld*, Kingsford, Aus.: Matthias Media, 2007.

15 *Ibid.*, 53–54.

16 Rian Malan, 'Give us magic, give us goals', *The Daily Telegraph*, 19 June 2010.

understand why someone might want to kill, we don't understand why someone would kill just to acquire a human head. We can call this *the moral problem*. The moral problem also points towards the question of worldview. From the worldview of witchcraft there can be all kind of motivations for engaging with the spirit world. On a visit to the Livingstone Museum in Zambia last year, I saw a range of artefacts confiscated by Zambia's Witchfinder-General and used in traditional (pre-Christian) African religion. This exhibition, which was assembled by Africans, claimed that such religious practices were essentially motivated by: (1) a desire for knowledge; (2) a desire to control and manipulate and (3) a fear of death. Such themes are common to manifestations of witchcraft, in different societies throughout time. Acquiring body parts makes sense within this worldview, because they are a means of controlling and manipulating the spiritual and the physical world, perhaps through some form of sympathetic magic. By contrast, within a materialist worldview, ritual killing is nonsensical. Materialists do not believe the spirit world exists, and so they do not share the worldview that would enable them to make sense of the behaviour.

From a biblical perspective, the spiritist and the materialist worldviews are the two basic mistakes which can be made in relation to the subject of witchcraft.

The first mistake is the spiritist worldview, found among witchcraft practitioners. This presupposes a view of creation in which there is a spirit world that interacts in powerful ways with the material world. It believes that human beings are able to access this spirit world, by various means, and, through it, to control people and events in the material world. It presupposes the existence of God but, in practice, denies his reality. There is some strength in this position: mediums and spiritists are indeed capable of accessing the spiritual world. The problem is that it ignores the fact that Jesus exercises authority over this spiritual world.

The second mistake is found, at the other extreme, in the materialist worldview, which does not accept the existence of a spirit world. From this perspective, common but not exclusive to the West, 'witchcraft' is a sociological construct. It is not seen as 'real'; it exists only insofar as it represents 'other people's' 'social and cultural reality'.¹⁷ Thus, a 2010 UNICEF report on the problem of children accused of witchcraft blandly remarks that 'the issue of whether witchcraft actually exists has long since been abandoned in anthropological research, and... will not be discussed....'¹⁸ For that author, witchcraft is 'the perceptive categories of a particular group that clashes with *the common sense of the researcher*' (italics added).¹⁹ Materialism is simply assumed to be the default explanation of reality: the potential reality of the spiritual world is dismissed. There is some strength in this position as well. Hard-headed scepticism is sometimes necessary. Some claims to spiritual activity do need to be treated as nonsense: witness the 'satanic abuse' scares in the UK in the 1980s in Nottingham, Rochdale and the Orkneys.²⁰ The problem with the materialist worldview is that it throws out the baby with the bathwater, by rejecting claims to spiritual reality which are valid.

We shall see that the Bible presents a challenge to both sorts of worldview. Unlike the materialists, it affirms there is a spiritual dimension. But that does not mean we are being irrational and should prostrate ourselves to spirits. For unlike practitioners of witchcraft, the Bible holds out a Christ-centred vision of reality: one in which Jesus is in charge of the spirit (and the material)

world. Both materialists and spiritists need to find the basis of reality in Christ.

Nevertheless, although the spiritist and materialist worldviews are rejected by Scripture as mistaken, there are also Christian versions of these mistakes.

First, there are Christian versions of the spiritist worldview. This is seen in the way some parts of the church recognise the reality of the spiritual world but engage with it in ways that are not biblical. Thus we find, for example, a 'witch hunt' industry encouraged by some Pentecostal churches, fuelled by a hyper-charismatic demonology. In some parts of the world, there are even financial incentives for labelling persons as 'witches': 'deliverance' ministries are then provided – for a fee.²¹ Another mistake is found, for example, in African syncretism. Witchcraft is prevalent among many Christians in Africa, who have been characterised as 'holding the Bible by day, seeking oracles by night'.²² To the extent that the church takes on a spiritist worldview, it fails to address witchcraft, because it does not witness to Christ's authority effectively.

Second, there are Christian versions of the materialist worldview. When the church becomes materialist in its worldview, it 'despiritualises' the Christian life: Satan disappears, angels disappear – even the active engagement of God in human affairs is underplayed, perhaps for fear of being thought 'premodern'. To the extent that the church takes on a materialist worldview, it also fails to address the problem of witchcraft.²³ Concern has been expressed by scholars at the Catholic University of Eastern Africa (CUEA) that, by dismissing witchcraft as superstition, the church has not been pastorally effective in responding to those caught up in witchcraft practices, driving them further into the arms of witchdoctors. When the church takes on a materialist worldview it cannot offer redemption through healing prayer, or exorcisms, where these are pastorally appropriate, nor can it provide security against witchcraft realities. It is significant that the fastest-growing churches in Africa are said to be those that address people's fears and show how they can counteract harmful spiritual powers. By contrast, mainline Anglican and Baptist churches, which tend not to address witchcraft and the spiritual world, are said to experience slower growth.

Against these mistakes, and Christian versions of these mistakes, what is a biblical worldview of witchcraft?

To Christ, Satan must bow

The Bible, in common with the ancient world, recognises there is 'a transcendent dimension populated with a variety of immanent spiritual beings'.²⁴ Yet its understanding of this transcendent dimension, and how we should communicate with it, is unique because it locates all spiritual authority in YHWH, the God of Israel – and treats all supernatural power and knowledge obtained from any source other than YHWH as prohibited. Its approach to spiritual knowledge is exclusive, in contrast to the inclusive approach found in other contemporaneous societies.

In the New Testament, this exclusivity is reflected in Paul's claim that God created all things 'visible and invisible' through Christ and for him (Colossians 1:16). This includes the spiritual world of angels (which itself includes different kinds of heavenly beings, such as the cherubim, the seraphim and the 'living creatures' around God's throne; e.g. Ezekiel 1:5–14; Revelation 4:6–8).²⁵ Christ is also sovereign over evil angels ('demons'), who

17 Cimpric, *op. cit.*, p.6.

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 A Joint Enquiry Team set up in relation to the Nottingham allegations concluded that the entire case showed 'how "evidence" can, for want of a better term, be "created". That is to say you start with nothing except your own beliefs and end up with the story that you expected and wanted to hear before you started.' Nottinghamshire County Council. Cited in Richard Webster, *The Secret of Bryn Estyn: The making of a modern witch hunt*, Oxford: The Orwell Press, 2005, p.90. At the same time, how can one ever prove to a materialist that spiritual activity is at work?

21 E.g. Cimpric, *op. cit.*, pp.33–37.

22 Joseph K'Amolo, 'Holding the Bible by day, seeking oracles by night', AANA Bulletin, No. 39/03, 2003. <http://allafrica.com/stories/200310070720.html>, accessed 5 Nov. 2010.

23 'Witchcraft is destroying the Church in Africa, experts say', www.cisanefrica.org/news.php?id=2003, accessed 5 Nov. 2010.

24 Glen A. Taylor, *Supernatural Power Ritual and Divination in Ancient Israelite Society*, unpublished doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Gloucestershire, 2005, p.308.

25 See generally Wayne Grudem, 'Angels', in *Systematic Theology*, Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 1994, pp.397–411. All Bible quotations taken from RSV.

are in rebellion against God, and who exert evil influence in the world, led by Satan, the head of demons.²⁶ Jesus recognised that evil spiritual powers were real and exorcising demons was a significant part of Jesus' ministry (e.g. Luke 8:2).²⁷ Christians are in conflict with hostile spiritual powers, wrestling '[not] against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places' (Ephesians 6:12). Yet all spiritual creatures are created beings and, though powerful, are all subject to Christ's authority, as witnessed in Jesus' earthly ministry (Mark 5:1–20) and in Jesus' continuing ministry through the church, by his Spirit (Acts 16:16–18). As Paul writes in Philippians 2:9–11:

God has highly exalted him [Jesus] and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

To Christ, Satan must bow.

As a result of this exclusivity, witchcraft practices, common in the Ancient Near East, are prohibited to biblical Israel (e.g. Leviticus 19:26; Deuteronomy 18:10–11). For example, Ezekiel's condemnation of the 'soul-hunters' (Ezekiel 13:17–19) is thought to have some parallels with the activities of Babylonian witches. Hunting for a 'soul' (*nefesh*) may have meant prowling around the streets with a view to secretly obtaining personal items belonging to a particular person (e.g. 'hair... pieces of old clothing, or even dust on which the person had stepped'²⁸). This could later be embodied in a manufactured image of the victim, which is then manipulated.²⁹ The upshot, according to Ezekiel, is that people are put to death 'who should not die' whilst others are kept alive 'who should not live' (verse 19), which may refer to the sort of 'counterfeit resurrection' associated with modern voodoo practitioners.

But the Bible's prohibitions on witchcraft are not arbitrary. God's good intention is for us to relate both to the 'unseen real' and the 'seen real' from the security of being in relationship with God, knowing him and trusting him for our lives and for the future. Accordingly, witchcraft is prohibited because it seeks to engage the spiritual world apart from God. As such, it pursues unrelational ways of trying to integrate the material and the spiritual realms. Witchcraft seeks to control and manipulate the spiritual and physical world; even if the purpose of the ritual is said to be benevolent. Control and manipulation spell death to any relationship and so witchcraft is the opposite of spiritual intimacy. As with any co-operation with the powers of darkness, we are robbed of our relational capacities. The subtleties of human character and personality are eroded. We become insensitive to others and lose the ability to read interpersonal signals and see our sin with clarity. Control and manipulation might look like cleverness but ultimately it isolates and dehumanises. Even so, giving up control, and the exercise of covert power, is hard.

The contrast between the biblical worldview and the world of witchcraft is well expressed in Psalm 91, which can be read as a celebration of the protective power of God over against demonic threats:

For he will deliver you ... from the deadly pestilence; he will cover you with his pinions, and under his wings you will find refuge; his faithfulness is a shield and buckler. (Psalm 91:3–4)

On this reading, the word translated 'shield' or 'buckler'

(*soherah*, verse 4) refers to the encircling protection of God, inverting the idea of maleficent magic 'surrounding' a person. But this supernatural defence is all in the context of God's 'faithfulness' (verse 4), of intimacy with God ('Because he cleaves to me in love, I will deliver him; I will protect him, because he knows my name'; verse 14) and being at home with him (verse 1). We do not need to know the future, or control events, or fear death, because we have intimacy with God, who is the end of all things.

Witchcraft, then, is a relational issue. It expresses our failure to enter into a relationship with God, to make discoveries about the spiritual and the material worlds in partnership with him, and to fully trust him with our lives and futures. Witchcraft robs us of spiritual reality. With a crooked finger, it points away from the speaking God who wants to be known, who always does everything that is necessary for us to enjoy a relationship with him – and who is not far from each one of us.

Creative *versus* destructive spirituality

This contrast between 'spiritual intimacy' and 'witchcraft' is expressly found in biblical law. Deuteronomy 18:9–19 makes a stark opposition between 'witchcraft' and 'prophecy', summarised in verses 14–15 (Moses speaking):

For these nations, which you are about to dispossess, give heed to soothsayers and to diviners; but as for you, the LORD your God has not allowed you so to do. The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brethren – him you shall heed.

This verse is to be understood against the historical background of the Exodus from Egypt, which is, in part, a liberation from the spirit of witchcraft associated with Egypt (cf. Isaiah 19:3). The contrast is between the manipulation of the witch and the intimacy of the prophet, of whom God says: 'I will put my words in his mouth' (Deuteronomy 18:18). There is no middle ground. It is the soothsayer *or* the LORD. Likewise, the magician who performs false 'signs and wonders' is characterised as one who encourages Israel to "... go after other gods", *which you have not known* (Deuteronomy 13:2). This contrasts with the intimacy of 'cleaving' to God (verse 4, and using the same verb used of the newly-married husband who 'cleaves' to his wife, in Genesis 2:24).

This contrast plays out in the broader setting of Deuteronomy 18:9–19, which follows directly from the laws relating to the priesthood (Deuteronomy 18:1–8). This indicates that witchcraft is structurally opposed to the priesthood and the sacrificial rituals that would later be fulfilled in Christ. Witchcraft is the opposite of Israel's priestly vocation to know God intimately (Exodus 19:6), to hear from him and to communicate with him (e.g. Amos 3:2). Yet witchcraft is parasitic upon true priesthood; aping its forms with counterfeit spirituality, rituals and practitioners.³⁰ The contrast is between what we could call 'creative spirituality' and 'destructive spirituality'. 'Creative spirituality' is characterised by truth, intimacy, life and adventure, whilst 'destructive spirituality' is characterised by deception, control, death and fear.

This contrast reminds us that the Bible does not 'shut down' our spiritual nature – instead, it liberates it. God, who is Spirit (John 4:24), has made us in his image (Genesis 1:26) as spiritual beings. He wants us to enjoy and express our spiritual lives in ways that are creative and which enhance our humanity. The 'prophet-like-Moses' – who receives ultimate expression in Jesus – is raised up precisely because God *wants* to be known by his people. All the main categories of legitimate spiritual practitioners

26 See generally Wayne Grudem, 'Satan and Demons', *op. cit.*, pp.412–436.

27 Roy Clements, 'Demons and the Mind', *Cambridge Papers*, 1996, Vol.5, No.3.

28 H. W. F. Saggs, "'External souls' in the Old Testament", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 1974, 19:1–12, 5.

29 *Ibid.*

30 Jonathan Burnside (forthcoming), 'The Medium and the Message: Necromancy and the Literary Context of Leviticus 20.' In Leigh M. Trevaskis and Francis Landy (eds.), *Leviticus in its Contexts: Method, Rhetoric and Theology*, London: Continuum. Pre-publication version downloadable from <http://seekjustice.co.uk/god-justice-society/gjs-teaching-resources/>, accessed 5 Nov. 2010.

in biblical Israel (including the ‘prophet’, ‘the man of God’ and the ‘seer’) express their spirituality in the context of a relationship with God characterised by intimacy, trust and adventure. Our God is ‘not God of the dead, but of the living’ (Matthew 22:32). He gives us, not a spirituality of death, but a spirituality of life. So instead of closing down avenues of knowledge and spirituality, the Bible opens them up in ways that are safe, so that they can be explored fully. The danger is that, as we lose the protective covering of Christianity, so we lose the protection of what it means to practise ‘safe spirituality’ – and we will find ourselves vulnerable to destructive forms of spirituality.

Darkness and deception: Saul and the Witch of En-Dor³¹

Saul’s visit to the witch, or ‘spirit-mistress’, of En-Dor is a case study in destructive spirituality. Saul wants a necromantic divination (1 Samuel 28:8) and asks the woman to ‘Bring up Samuel...’ (verse 11). It was common for kings in the Ancient Near East to seek oracular consultations ahead of major battles. Texts from Ugarit show that people believed it was possible to summon up a particular person.³² They also describe the spirits of the dead as ‘shades’, implying some human form appears.³³ The medium sees an ‘*elohim* coming up out of the earth’ (verse 13), *viz.* ‘a being which is not of a human character’,³⁴ what we would call a spirit or a ghost. The necromantic consultation is effective. The spirit of Samuel communicates with Saul and provides him with information (verses 16–19), including new information regarding David (verse 17).³⁵ There is no denial in Scripture of the possibility of accessing the spirit world.

In Saul’s day, the legitimate modes for inquiry, by a king, were ‘by dreams, or by Urim, or by prophets’ (verse 6). However, Saul’s behaviour has closed these channels down. As far as we can tell, he has not had a prophet since Samuel’s departure in chapter 15; no dreams (*post* chapter 25); no priestly assistance (*post* the slaughter and flight of the sons of Eli in chapter 22) and no oracular devices to consult (*post* the ephod being carried to David in chapter 23).³⁶ It is because Saul has no intimacy with God that he turns to necromancy. In fact, 1 Chronicles 10:13–14 explicitly characterises Saul’s turning to necromancy as ‘breaking faith’ with God. He puts on ‘other garments’ (1 Samuel 28:8), where the Hebrew word for ‘garments’ has the same root as the word for ‘treachery’.³⁷ Saul is spiritually dead – so only the dead can speak to him.

Yet Saul is unable to manipulate Samuel for his own ends.³⁸ Even here, in a witch’s kitchen, God is presented as being in charge. Samuel condemns the ritual (verses 15–16) and comes with his own message from YHWH.³⁹ Samuel brings the name of God (YHWH) into his speech seven times (though Saul does not call God by his name once; verse 15b).⁴⁰ Samuel also reorders Saul’s priorities: ‘the issue of greatest importance is Saul’s loss of God’s support, and Samuel addresses it first, not last.’⁴¹ His words are the culmination of his denunciation of Saul in 1 Samuel

13:13–14 and 15:22–29. The text shows how communicating with the spirit world outside God’s authority is dangerous and destructive. God becomes Saul’s ‘enemy’ (1 Samuel 28:16) and even the witch herself identifies the exercise with the words ‘trap’, ‘snare’ and ‘death’ (verse 9).⁴² Saul’s motivation is the fear of death (verse 5; and cf. the Zambian witchcraft exhibition noted above); yet the practice of witchcraft provides no succour, and no deliverance.

The Wicked Witch(ery) of the West

We’ve seen that the biblical worldview presents a challenge to the typical Western materialist, who assumes that the spirit world does not exist. And since the flipside of living in a technological world is that some Western materialists do in fact have a genuine interest in encountering the supernatural, the Bible also presents a challenge and a warning, especially for the next generation who will have to deal with a resurgence of witchcraft practices.

But there is a deeper level of application. Even if we have understood the biblical worldview, and even if we are rightly ordered in relation to the spiritual world, we still need to dig further because the Bible’s teaching on witchcraft as an exercise in covert power applies also at the level of the human heart.

We take our cue from the Sermon on the Mount. Here, Jesus takes aspects of biblical law which his hearers can be confident they have kept, such as ‘Do not murder’, and traces the requirement of *Torah* back to the heart, in this case, not to harbour anger against another person (Matthew 5:22). Jesus showed that those who believed they were innocent of murder could nevertheless share the same underlying attitudes of a murderer (Matthew 5:21–22). The same reasoning can apply in relation to witchcraft. This, too, is an area where some of us might feel we have obeyed God’s commandment not to practise witchcraft, but where we in fact share the same attitudes as a witch. After all, we have seen that witchcraft expresses our desire to carve out a space where we can make things happen apart from God,⁴³ and that ultimately, the manipulation of spiritual powers for our own ends is a form of human pride, which seeks to replace God with ourselves.⁴⁴ Are we not all vulnerable to this?

We may not buy a ‘curse tablet’ on the Internet, to use against a rival. However, we are each guilty, at some level, of trying to manipulate people and events to bring about what we want, without trusting fully in God. We can all live in a way that gives us a sense of power and control, whilst denying God’s control and power over the minutiae of everyday life.

Applying the Sermon on the Mount to witchcraft might produce the following: ‘You have heard that it was said: “There shall not be found among you any one who... [is] a sorcerer” (Deuteronomy 18:10). But when you use *subliminal advertising*, you are in danger of God’s judgement.’ Or: ‘You have heard that it was said: “There shall not be found among you any one who... [is] a wizard” (Deuteronomy 18:11). But when you become *an expert spin-doctor*, you will be known as the Prince of Darkness.’

There are many forms of ‘hidden persuasion’ in society: witness the assumptions underlying soap storylines, which become psychological ‘scripts’ for everyday action, without viewers being aware of it. Or consider the application of modern psychological techniques, particularly in ‘people management’, which, to put it crudely, can boil down to finding out what motivates people so you know which buttons to press. As for the extreme behaviour of the Babylonian ‘soul-hunters’, we might think of modern ‘identity theft’. Instead of searching through possessions for hair, or laying curses through a name, we search

31 1 Sam. 28.

32 Jeffers, *op. cit.*, p.177.

33 *Ibid.*, 173.

34 Arvid S. Kapelrud, ‘Shamanistic features in the Old Testament.’ In Carl-Martin Edsman (ed.), *Studies in Shamanism*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967, p.94.

35 Barbara Green, *How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in Samuel*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 365, London: Continuum, 2003, p.431.

36 *Ibid.*, p.426.

37 Pamela Tamarkin Reis, ‘Eating the Blood: Saul and the Witch of Endor’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 1997, 73:3–23,6–7.

38 Christophe L. Nihan, ‘1 Samuel 28 and the Condemnation of Necromancy in Persian Yehud’. In Todd Klutz (ed.) *Magic in the Biblical World: From the Rod of Aaron to the Ring of Solomon*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 23, London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp.23–54, 50–51.

39 W. A. M. Beuken, ‘The prophet as “Hammer of witches”’, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 1978, 6:3–17, 5.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Reis, *op. cit.*, pp.10–11.

42 Green, *op. cit.*, p.428.

43 E.g. Craig M. Gay, *The Way of the (Modern) World: Or, Why It’s Tempting to Live As If God Doesn’t Exist*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998, esp. pp.79–129.

44 This is why witchcraft is explicitly presented in the Bible as a form of idolatry; and cf. Lev. 20:6, where spiritism is presented in the context of Molech-worship (vv.3–5).

bin-bags for discarded bank statements, and go ‘phishing’ for passwords.

I am not, of course, saying that subliminal advertising, for example, *is* witchcraft. What I am saying is that in our modern secular society we give in to the same attitudes that are manifest in witchcraft. In this way, there may be all sorts of ways in which we behave that have the same dynamic equivalent as witchcraft. There is nothing inherently wrong with advertising, or television, or technology. Nor should we find a demon behind every MBA. But we do need to be alert to how some of the ways in which our society is organised lends itself, potentially, to parallels to witchcraft. It may be that the reason why typical Western materialists think they can afford to deny the reality of witchcraft, or the relevance of the Bible’s teaching to our lives, is because we have alternative means of satisfying the desire that witchcraft otherwise would. In this sense, the Western world is steeped in witchcraft.⁴⁵

It may even be the case that the most overt forms of witchcraft are not in fact the most evil. The parallels to witchcraft may be the most controlling. Precisely because they aren’t recognised, these parallels may be working more powerfully than people realise through the context of everyday life, whether in the West or in Africa.

There may be many things we do which, although they are not overt witchcraft, nevertheless are parallels to witchcraft because they do not respect other people’s agency, or seek to relate to them in ways that are transparent. Some people pride themselves on their skills of manipulation (‘I know how to get things from people, and if I don’t get it from one person, I can get it from another’). In a genuine relationship you can know people and you can have intimacy, whereas in witchcraft, and in parallels to witchcraft, knowledge and control is a substitute for intimacy. The essence of a perverted relationship is getting information about someone else, and then working out what I want to do, so I get what I want. We get things done in hidden, subversive and manipulative ways, without trusting God or fully respecting the humanness of others. They are parallels to witchcraft because they share the same attitude. They are part of the same paradigm, which is concerned with the exercise of covert power. In the mundane things of life, *Screwtape* is there.⁴⁶ The goal is to be able to say, with Paul, that we have ‘renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness...’ (2 Corinthians 4:2; KJV), because our ways of relating to people are transparent.

Conclusions

The biblical worldview presents a challenge both to societies which believe it is possible to access and manipulate supernatural

powers, and those that don’t, because the biblical worldview occupies the ‘middle ground’ between spiritism and materialism. In parts of Africa, for example, it means being much more open regarding the prevalence of witchcraft in society, including among African churches, whilst in the British context, for example, it means realising that, as we lose the protection of Christianity, we are in danger of re-entering an age of overt witchcraft. Because witchcraft is real, we need to beware of increasing witchery in our society, and to watch out for unconscious indirect involvement, such as attempts to ‘soften’ people towards such manifestations; as well as reaching out to those who have become involved, either through curiosity, or by genuinely seeking after spiritual things. Unmasking witchcraft means exposing the spiritual insecurity that lies behind the attempts to create fear, the petty forms of control and the shallow manipulations. Against the life of the people of God, witchcraft cannot hold a black candle: Moses’ luminous skin, Elijah’s fiery chariot, Peter’s miraculous healings, the visions of St. John the Divine and, far above all else, the resurrection of Christ Jesus from the dead, in the power of an endless life – a gloriously unique event in the history of the present age, but the destiny of every Christian. We turn, unmasked, from fear, death and shadows to intimacy, life, and light.

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45 And, of course, the biblical worldview reminds us that nothing is purely materialistic. Spiritual reality exists. Who knows but that our modern means and mechanisms of manipulation *are* in fact tapping into evil powers and principalities?

46 See, generally, C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*. London: Geoffrey Bles, 1942.

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