

Seances, Spirits and the Occult

A Catholic View.

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This pamphlet deals with practical matters and clearly presents the teaching of the Catholic church. It could be read in conjunction with pamphlet no. 1717 which examines "Reincarnation". - the Editor.

Walk through any bookshop, open the popular magazines, follow the programmes of television and radio and it soon becomes obvious that we are living in the midst of a revival of interest in "the occult". The word means "something hidden", suggesting mystic knowledge, hidden powers and secret wisdom. The practitioners of the occult are consulted, sought after, treated with awe and often rewarded richly. They are the mystic seers from distant lands, the swamis and gurus, the astrologers, the mediums, mystics, healers, workers of miracles, witches and wizards, fortune tellers and fortune hunters. Some come to them to gaze in wonder, to satisfy curiosity. Others desperately seek healings, or contact with the dead or assurance of life beyond the grave.

What should be the attitude of Catholics to this massive revival of occultism and spiritism? Is it all nonsense or is it a serious religious revival? Can we take part in it? Should we approach it with scorn, respect, scepticism or even fear?

Getting Terms Straight

The Church has had centuries of experience in these matters, indeed the whole of Christian history is marked by contact with many forms of occultism and a consistent policy towards this complex area of human experience. Before explaining the policy of the Church on these matters, I would choose to define our terms, to help untangle an area of life which the noted Christian author C. S. Lewis once compared to a swampy jungle.

The word "supernatural" does not appear in the title of this booklet. This is the most common word people use to sum up uncanny events. However, in strict Christian usage it is not correct to use the word "supernatural" to describe occultism or uncanny events. The term "supernatural" refers directly to God. In this world we may use it to describe his saving action and real presence in the sacraments, which raise us to the supernatural life of Grace. Therefore we must never cheapen the word "supernatural" by applying it to a controversial area of human experience, which may not be the work of God at all.

There are two other words which refer more correctly and precisely to uncanny human experiences.

1. "Paranormal" is a mild term, appropriate for unusual matters beyond human understanding, but perhaps one day to be explained by science. Telepathy, and telekinesis (moving an object by the power of the mind) are paranormal powers. 2. "Praeternatural" (or Preternatural) is a stronger term,

more appropriate for uncanny events and phenomena, "spooky" events which seem to involve intelligences or spirits, good, neutral or evil. This is the area where "supernatural" is commonly and mistakenly used.

In this study I am not concerned with paranormal matters. Most of us recognize the possibility of paranormal powers in the human mind. There has been much interesting scientific research into the paranormal. One day we may understand how a man can raise a sheet of note paper simply by concentrating on it. In this study my serious concern is with the more uncanny and dangerous area of human experience, the praeternatural.

Some people may object because I am lumping together occultism (which may involve merely weird wisdom) with seances, spirits and even demons - for we must consider even the darkest area. But the Catholic attitude to human involvement in the praeternatural demands that all these matters be brought together. They are linked. They are not explained best by being separated and sliced-up for analysis. They are a common group, and if this claim is found offensive by those who dabble in the praeternatural, I make no apologies. The truth may not be pleasant. Our topic is not pleasant.

The Seance

Unless you get too curious or have nightmares, it is harmless to read about the praeternatural. Involvement is not harmless. The seance is the most common involvement today and we must consider it first.

"Seance" is a nice French word for a nasty and dangerous exercise. The usual technique is for people to sit in the dark around a table, perhaps led by a medium, a person claiming to be able to contact the dead. A glass may be used to get messages from the letters of the alphabet, perhaps printed on a "Ouija board". The techniques vary, either in groups or by a personal consultation at a "sitting" with a known medium or psychic.

We must strip away these relatively modern techniques. We must look at what is really happening. Putting it simply, these people are trying to call up the dead. We are confronting something very ancient, primitive and crude - the conjuring-up of the dead. The correct term for this is "necromancy". Those who practise it are necromancers.

The Bible stands firmly against necromancy. Guided by this Divine Revelation, Christians and Jews do not believe that it is right to attempt to contact the dead. The practice is regarded as pagan.

The Bible Against Occultism

The biblical witness against seances, necromancy, is quite clear. Speaking against cruel pagan cults, the Lord God is clearly forbidding seances, as we read in Deuteronomy 18: 10-14:

"There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, any one who practises divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer. For whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord..."

We notice how seances are included amongst many other different occultist activities. In 2 Kings 17:17 and Ezekiel 21:21 we have similar disapproval of pagan occultism. One of the worst Kings of Judah was Manasseh, denounced in 2 Kings 21:6 because of his paganism, including the fact that he "practised soothsaying and augury (telling the future by examining the entrails of sacrificed animals), and dealt with mediums and with wizards."

The first King of God's chosen people became entangled in occultism and necromancy. King Saul was desperate. The Philistine armies were massing for an assault on Israel, but Saul's faithful guide, the prophet Samuel, was dead. Saul decided to try and make contact with Samuel through a medium, to get the prophet's advice, for he received no divine guidance. He said to his servants, "Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, that I may go to her and inquire of her." And his servants said to him, "Behold, there is a medium at Endor." (1 Samuel 28:7).

Saul went to the "wise" woman of Endor, in disguise, and heard her make comments against him, for until this time he had persecuted people practising occultism and witchcraft. Still concealing his identity, he asked her to summon up Samuel the prophet, by the usual means of her "familiar spirit" - what the modern seance brigade call the "spirit guide". But here the seance went wrong. Instead of the familiar spirit appearing there was a direct divine intervention and Samuel appeared angry and denouncing Saul. At once the terrified witch recognized the King of Israel. Samuel told Saul that the Philistines would defeat him, as came to pass, for after a fierce battle Saul committed suicide on Mount Gilboa. The terrors of this impending event first took hold of him when he presumed to defy God and consult a medium.

In 1 Chronicles 10:13 we read that Saul perished not only because he was unfaithful to God but also because he "consulted a medium, seeking guidance, and did not seek guidance from the Lord." A further veto on seances as such is found in Leviticus 19:31.

The reader of the account of the witch of Endor may object saying that Samuel's spirit did appear. The seance worked! But did it? We should note the terror of the witch when her "familiar spirit" did not appear on time, that the seance did not go according to plan, that God disrupted it. It is necessary to point out these facts in order to contradict those who distort this event to argue in favour of seances.

When we turn to the New Testament there is a similar case against necromancy. If we take Our Lord's parable of Dives and Lazarus, Luke 16: 19-31, we read of the rich man in Hell begging Abraham to send the spirit of the poor man Lazarus back to earth to warn his five brothers of the agonies of Hell. Abraham rejects this possibility. "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." The rich man argues with him. "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead they will repent." Abraham remains firm, and tells the rich man, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." God does not intend sending dead men back to warn the living, although the passage here cited does hint at an event more wonderful and unique than any spirit appearance, the event of Easter.

In 1 Timothy 4:1, St Paul warns of the coming age, "Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by giving heed to deceitful spirits and doctrines of demons..." He goes on to warn us that this will happen "through the pretensions of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and enjoin abstinence from foods..." In his own day this was the problem of certain strange cults. Today we see similar cults around us. If we look closely, we can make the same link Paul made, seeing that conjuring spirits and demons may be lumped in with cults like Hare Krishna and other perverse disciplines.

Fakes and Folly

Based on the Bible, the Church policy has always been an extension of the Jewish veto on occultism and necromancy. Certainly there have been deviation groups of Christians and Jews who have formed small sects, even produced mystical literature later used by magicians. But these are

deviations from a strict rule of conduct. Why is there such a strong stand against these curious and intriguing practices?

The Church insists that there is no real difference between nice people sitting around a suburban table and touching a glass and a smelly old hag peering into a pool of boiling filth. It is like abortion, which is essentially the same gross crime whether performed in a modern antiseptic clinic with the latest killing devices or with domestic implements in a dirty kitchen. You can change the trimmings, adjust the clinical or theatrical touches, but it is still abortion. So the seance remains plain old necromancy, conjuring up the dead, and there is no real difference between Mildred calling up the late uncle Charlie with the help of Madame Zarah and frightened folk in an obscure area of Haiti making contact with the dead ones with all the ugly mumbo-jumbo of Voodoo. But the guilt involved in seances varies.

Sometimes people get involved innocently in the web of seances. Some children may be playing a game indoors on a rainy day; some teenagers may get curious to "see what will happen"; some ladies may put down their tea cups and set up a circle to "see if there's anything in it." Sometimes the results are weak, perhaps a glass moves slightly. Sometimes they seem better and the curiosity slides into a habit, a regular gathering, even an obsession.

It is easy to fake one of these domestic seances. If it is not "working", Jack the prankster can give that glass a little push, exclaiming as he does, "It moved!", at which everyone replies, "Oooh! Aaah!" From here on Jack the faker can direct his glass at will, because everyone wants to see that glass move. Having established his finger firmly on the glass, Jack can guide the seance, because the co-operative and gullible folk at the table will rest their fingers lightly on the glass. I knew a young student who played this trick on his friends, leading them on with all kinds of strange "messages from beyond" until he made the "spirit" out to be a demon, which brought the silly little seance to a sudden and frightening end.

Innocence and fraud go hand in hand. A commercial medium can easily fake a seance, as Houdini discovered during his frantic quest for evidence of life beyond death. One famous Nineteenth Century American medium was richly rewarded by his many wealthy clients. He put on a good show. His Spirit "manifestations" were viewed with awe in many a fashionable drawing room, but most of them were later exposed as clever conjuring and fraud. We may laugh at the stupidity of people taken in by such cunning, although we may pity them when they are desperately trying to make contact with loved ones "on the other side".

We may laugh when such contact is to assure a dear old lady that Fifi the pet dog is happily wagging her little tail in heaven, not that I have anything against pets, or even the possibility of some happiness for them. But it is hard to laugh when a kind and gentle woman, whose care I remember as a child, is lured into the web of seances, giving up much time, effort and money, to contact her dead brother. As far as I could see, she found little peace in such a quest and much anxiety.

Another aspect of the sad folly of seances is the stupidity of much of the "information" allegedly received from beyond the grave. We may wonder at a lady who claims to compose symphonies guided by the spirits of dead composers. But the general span of information gained through mediums is a conglomeration of trivia. Pious moral advice, what seems to be much guess-work is mingled with some peculiar and ridiculous descriptions of the "after-life". In one spiritist book, written to attract Christians, I read a seance account of heaven, describing it as if it were a large

palm-court restaurant! Obviously this was the mental projection of a nice person who enjoyed sitting on a terrace and listening to light music.

When we set the stupidity of seances over against the strict Christian and Jewish opposition to necromancy, we may wonder why the Church reacts so sharply to something so foolish. But amidst the folly is something far more serious. After setting out the Church discipline, I am bound to explain that discipline with a set of serious logical possibilities. The seance may be folly, but it is dangerous folly.

Church Discipline

On April 26th, 1917, Pope Benedict XV confirmed a ruling of the Holy Office (now known as the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith). A question had been submitted to the Holy Office for judgement. Could Catholics take part in seances, even only as witnesses? The answer was a complete negative. Applying this to the original question, the official ruling of the Catholic Church is as follows:

"It is not lawful to assist at any spiritualistic meetings, conversations with spirits, or manifestations of spirits. It matters not whether a medium be present or not, nor whether the meeting seems to be above board and apparently conducted from religious motives. A Catholic may not be present at such meetings, even as an onlooker, let alone asking questions of departed spirits and listening to their supposed replies."

The words "it is not lawful" must be interpreted carefully. In this area of human behaviour the words do not mean "it is illegal" or "it is against a Church law". They mean that it is against the Law of God.

This strict interpretation rests on the hard fact that whenever Catholic moral theologians write against seances they usually include seances among sins which break the First Commandment, "You shall not have strange gods before Me."

Therefore it is a mortal sin, deliberately and knowing this law, to take part in a seance. Having read this page, you now know of this sin.

Seances are merely a modern technique of necromancy, the calling-up of the dead, a technique we can trace back to the Seventeenth Century mediums. Necromancy is a pagan practice, condemned in the Bible, condemned with the authority of Divine Revelation. Those who dabble in this pagan practice are turning their backs on the one True God, disobeying his Law, committing a serious sin, risking their immortal souls.

Perhaps you have taken part in a seance without knowing what you were doing. Perhaps you took part out of curiosity, or "just for fun". It would be best to mention it next time you go to confession. Make sure you do not get involved in this dangerous nonsense in the future. Avoid people who play around with seances. They can lead you into serious sin.

When we read that official ruling of the Church, we notice that "it matters not ... whether the meeting seems to be above board and apparently conducted from religious motives." These clauses refer to the seance movement, posing as a religion, known as Spiritualism or even "The Spiritualist Church". Because there is nothing truly "spiritual" about such sects and cults, we prefer to refer to the seance movement as Spiritism. In the original Latin wording of the Church ruling this is the term used, even as in English the more familiar word "spiritualist" is better understood.

Late last Century [the 19th] and at the time of the First World War there was a great interest in Spiritism. This helps explain why the Church ruling was made in 1917. Today, many years later, there has been a revival of interest in Spiritism, tied up with the revival of interest in the occult, witchcraft, ghosts etc., the whole praeternatural experience. This is why we need to be aware of the Church discipline, which remains unchanged since the clear decision of 1917.

Why So Strict?

If the seance movement, Spiritism, is so foolish and open to fraud, why is the Catholic Church so strictly against it? There are three main reasons: 1. If seances are faked or merely the use of the human mind, then you make a fool of yourself if you take part. 2. If seances are pagan attempts to prove there is life beyond death, then you show a lack of Christian Faith by taking part in them. 3. If seances can be evil ways to bring up evil spirits, you risk your sanity and your soul even by being present. Let us take each of these logical possibilities, for each is true and important.

We have already noted the fraud and folly involved in some seances. Even the most devout Spiritualist "churches" strive to weed out the frauds. But the fraud may happen in two ways, deliberately or innocently. The crooked medium can use all kinds of electronic devices to lift tables, make lights appear or allow voices to echo from "the beyond". This would be a deliberate fraud. On the other hand, a medium may have paranormal powers of the mind, and be able to "read the minds" of the people at a seance, hence tell them personal matters which they alone know, for example names of people and places. What is supposed to be a message from Uncle Charlie may only be what the medium has picked up from your memories of Uncle Charlie. The medium could do this deliberately, or innocently, perhaps in a state of trance. Whether it is deliberate fraud or self-delusion, strange paranormal powers are at work, but nothing from "beyond the grave". No spirits are involved at all. If you accept this interpretation of seances, at least some seances, then you would never degrade yourself or make a fool of yourself by submitting to such games.

Lack of Faith

The second reason for the Church prohibition is more serious. In any seance there is an effort to contact the souls of the dead. When I read Spiritist literature, I cannot help noticing one terrible motive behind this effort. People are looking for evidence of "survival" after death. They want proof of the "after-life".

We are all naturally curious about such matters. We read with interest of the unusual experiences of people who have moved over the threshold of clinical death and have been revived. We may take interest in accounts of hauntings or unsolicited spirit appearances, or events in the lives of saints. These strange phenomena may strengthen our Faith, or they may be irrelevant to our Faith. But it is different if we go seeking out some direct personal experience, conjuring up spirits, in order to prove there is life after death. We are like St Thomas in John 20:25, but we say, "Unless we can hear the spirits or see the spirits or even touch the ectoplasm (spirit "flesh") - we will not believe!"

This shows a complete failure in Christian Faith. Our Lord Jesus Christ was angry when people in his own time demanded signs and wonders as proof for faith. He called them a "faithless generation". He told them that only the "sign of Jonah" would be given to them - and to us. He explained this true sign, "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40). [Not complete days and nights; but part of three days and three nights, taken according to the way that the Hebrews counted their days and nights, namely, from evening to evening.]

Jesus Christ pointed to his own Resurrection from the dead, a total and complete proof of life beyond death. We need nothing else.

The Resurrection is the central fact of our Faith. It was the event which made the first Christians. It continues to make people Christians today.

The Resurrection also tells us what life beyond death will be like. We look at Our Lord after his Resurrection and we listen to his promises of eternal life. In his glorious risen Body he shows us what we will be like, if we are faithful. Before he died and rose again, he happily promised us "a place" beyond death. "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?" (John 14: 1-2).

For the Catholic Christian, believing in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, confidently accepting his infallible promises, it is almost blasphemy to speak of life beyond death as "the after-life" or to talk about "survival" after death. If you use the words "after-life", you suggest that this life is all that really matters, for what happens beyond death is something "after" the real life. If you use the term "survival", and hunt around for "proofs of survival", you suggest that death is some terrible calamity out of which part of us manages to "survive". For Christians this spiritist language, often associated with seances, is shallow and offensive, just as we find terms like "passing away" or "passing over" or "the other side" rather loose and pallid.

Jesus Christ, truly risen in our flesh, has destroyed death. Our faith bursts with living hope, for he is the only proof we need of the glory that is ahead. It is sheer paganism to go seeking "proof, or comfort from the babblings and rattlings of the seance. Against such pagan lack of faith, Isaiah the prophet speaks wisely: "And when they say to you, 'Consult the mediums and the wizards who chirp and mutter,' should not a people consult their God? Should they consult the dead on behalf of the living?" (Isaiah 8:19).

Evil Spirits and Seances

The third reason for Catholic opposition to seances is very serious. It is the reason which upsets Spiritists, because some of them feel uncomfortable about it. From her long pastoral experience in struggling against evil praeternatural powers, the Catholic Church must forbid any deliberate or accidental contact with such powers.

We may believe that the real fraud in the seance comes not so much from dishonest human beings as from the Father of Lies, Satan himself. The theory presented in this interpretation of seances is compatible with the other theories. Some seances may be frauds. Other seances may be self-delusion, or the use of paranormal powers, telepathy etc. All seances may show a lack of faith in God, in revealed truth. But some seances, even many seances, may be horrible exercises in lying and deception worked by evil spirits. Indeed, it is from dealing with pastoral problems associated with seances that the Church confidently reaffirms belief in Satan, in demons or evil spirits.

Let us say that some women start to play with the glass on the kitchen table. They find that "it works". Messages "come through." A "dead person" makes contact, and starts to describe his earthly life, even his sins, even his accidental death. The women become fascinated with this poor spirit. Again and again they seek contact. Eventually they are almost obsessed with the glass and the table, addicted to the seance as if on a drug. As this process gains momentum, so their personal lives break

apart. Misery, depression, bursts of temper and a strange weariness move them strangely further into the sickly gloom of the seance obsession.

Children are too frightened to enter their house, because they "see something." Unusual events plague them, destroying sleep, disrupting the house, and as this gets worse and worse, the spirit gets demanding, tells lies, contradicts itself, becomes abusive and lustful. Just when the situation is becoming unbearable, when praeternatural "things" are obvious and one woman is at the point of mental collapse, they respond to advice from friends and seek the direct help of the Church.

I started this account with "Let us say...", but the account is fact. The events lightly sketched for reasons of confidentiality were real events of the modern age. The blessing of the Church ended the misery of seance addiction.

But who was the "spirit"? "He" was a liar, filthy, deceitful, merciless and cruel, and a coward. This was no poor soul. This was something evil, something filled with deliberate hate, determined not only to destroy a friendship and make trouble, but to possess a human being.

Again and again, seances have brought misery to people. A teenage Australian girl is plagued with terrors, and sees "lights" above her bed at night, after attending a seance. Two people experience a nasty presence in their flat, after experimenting with seances. To these minor cases may be added the instances of people going insane through the seance addiction.

You may be sceptical and doubt that evil spirits are involved. But accept the results, and admit that whatever the real causes, people are left in states of insecurity, misery, tension, or even sheer madness and terror after playing with the seance. This is why the pastoral charity of the Church demands a strict stand against this activity. Even the most permissive mother would not allow her children to play with matches in a dynamite factory. If we concede some real praeternatural powers at work in seances, the evil caused shows us that we are tinkering with massive powers beyond our control when we try the ancient manipulation of necromancy.

The Divine Revelation of the Bible is consistently against summoning-up the dead. We normally cannot summon them up, for, "...the souls of the righteous are in the hands of God, and no torment will ever touch them." (Wisdom 3: 1). Therefore, if a "spirit" manifests itself at a seance it will not be a good soul, or a peaceful soul, for these are in the merciful process of purgatory or in the eternal bliss of heaven. It must either be a bad or disturbed soul or something else. If it contradicts itself, upsets people, acts with folly, venom or filth, we can accept the frightening possibility that it comes from hell. It is "something else", a demon.

This is why the Catholic can link seances with occultism, witchcraft, black and white magic, and ultimately with Satanism. If you are tinkering with the powers of hell, building a psychic highway for the devil, giving him access to human minds, then your seances are as abominable as devil worship. The wisdom of the Old Testament perceived this evil network. In her wisdom, the Church forbids Spiritism, for even the "nice" seances are riddled with lies, self-contradiction and a most uncanny evasiveness when the "spirit" is pinned down and asked to identify itself properly. Nasty displays of temper or spite may also be evident when certain questions are asked, and this also shows us the work of Satan.

Our Lord described Satan. "He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies." (John 8:44). When the lies and contradictions of seance spirits show

them to be impostors, posing as the dear departed, who or what are we to suppose these seance spirits to be? Our Lord shows us who their master is, their evil origin and nature. Those who claim to be genuine mediums will admit that seances can "go wrong", that something bad can happen, that even they can be attacked or tortured when attempting spirit contact. Would that they could admit that, by throwing open their minds in a totally passive way, they are admitting powers beyond their control, powers which can disrupt, destroy or even possess a human being.

Just as there is a suicide of the body, so there is a sinful suicide of the soul. If I allow myself to go into a totally passive state, I deny control over my soul. I surrender free-will. I am "open" to anything. To do this so that spirits can take over is to risk sanity of mind and eternal salvation. Let us never forget that some of the worst cases of that rare tragedy demonic possession have been associated with Spiritism, seances and similar highways which gullible and foolish people open up for our ancient enemy, Satan, "the father of lies."

Occult "Religions"

The Church rejects seances because of their folly, fraud, lack of faith and mortal danger. The Christian has another reason for rejecting not only Spiritism, but many associated or similar occult movements. I mentioned the religion associated with Spiritism, the "Spiritualist Church". Some of these "Spiritualists" claim to be orthodox Christians. They may recite the Lord's Prayer, even use the Cross or an image of Our Lord, just as they use the word "church", but do not be deluded, they are not Christians. Obviously there may be misguided Christians in their ranks, but the spiritist religion is not Christian, and we have a reliable technique which proves this to be so.

Orthodox Christian doctrine sets forth the truth that Jesus Christ is God and Man, that he is "Our Lord", to whom we owe obedient love, that he is the Second Person of the Trinity born in human flesh, taking our nature of Mary the Virgin. If you deny this basic faith you are not a Christian however moral and kind you may be, however much you admire Jesus Christ and speak well of him. Spiritists may say nice things about Jesus Christ. They may read the New Testament at their meetings. But they describe Our Lord in heretical and perverse ways, as "the greatest medium in history", or a psychic miracle worker, or a guru who studied occult mysteries in the East.

St John warned us of pseudo-Christians and the spirits they claim as their guides. He wrote, "Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God; every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of anti-christ, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already." (1 John 4:1-3).

When St John says "test the spirits" he does not mean that we should go to seances and challenge the spirits. All we need to test is belief in Christ as held by those who dabble in seances. We have noted their lack of faith in the Resurrection, their craving for novel "proofs", signs and wonders. To this lack of faith we can add defective notions of the divinity and humanity of Our Lord, part of a Spiritist religion which prefers necromancy to the sacraments and spirit messages to authentic Revelation.

Other Cults

Moving away from Spiritism, we may consider associated or similar cults, which attract people who seek occult knowledge or power. Linked to the seance movement is the "religion" of Theosophy,

directed by the Theosophical Association. This eccentric blend of Eastern mysticism, Spiritism and various strange philosophies was concocted by Madame Blavatsky and Colonel Olcott in New York in 1875. They were later joined by the occultist Annie Besant. Theosophy could be a blanket term for all kinds of magic, and for contact with spiritual powers which Christians would regard with alarm and hostility.

An offshoot of Theosophy is the Liberal Catholic Church, founded by Rev. Charles Leadbeater in 1915. Ordained a bishop by the Dutch Old Catholics, Leadbeater broke away from this group to form his own theosophical kind of "Catholic" church. Today this small denomination provides elaborate ritualism, mystical sacramentalism and an amazing vagueness and flexibility of doctrine. Unfortunately, the links with Theosophy are still evident to anyone reading the Liberal Catholic literature, although there is a healthy controversy as to the wisdom of trying to blend Theosophy with Christianity. Until it resolves its identity, this small denomination will hold the dubious reputation of being the only portion of sacramental Christianity which encourages its adherents to be involved in occultism.

The Rosicrucians and the Scientologists are non-Christian groups which provide a different form of occultism. Their hidden mysteries are more closely tied up with "inner powers" of the human mind, the paranormal rather than the praeternatural. The Rosicrucians advertise in various magazines, inviting readers to write to "Scribe AMORC" to start learning of their mystical secrets. The "AMORC" stands for "Ancient Mystical Order of the Rosy Cross". Although it claims to pass on secret wisdom from pagan religions of the past, the order cannot be that "ancient", for it began just over fifty years ago, in California, where so many new religions bud forth.

The Scientologists attracted some publicity in Australia when their ventures into psychology were curtailed by the Victorian Government, after a Royal Commission. They achieved federal protection which allowed them to continue operating, as the "Church of Scientology", even in the State of Victoria. Functioning technically as a religious denomination they continue to operate quietly, promising to bring out the inner powers, to cleanse and elevate people, by their own psychological techniques.

The Gnostic Connection

We have moved from the seance and Spiritism to religions and cults which attract people with promises of knowledge, power, peace, or that "something" that other people do not know and cannot possess. Early Christians had to contend with such cults, which are generally grouped under the term Gnosticism. The Gnostics were the "people-in-the-know", the people initiated into strange cults which gave them the key to immortal life. Some Christians tried to blend Gnosticism with the Faith, as the Liberal Catholics often attempt a blending of Theosophy with Christianity today. But the early Church reacted sharply against this tendency, and there is evidence in the New Testament of this struggle against the pagan mysticism of the Gnostics, before the blending with Christianity was complete. Our Lord warned that "false Christs and false prophets" would appear and lead even believers astray, with extreme asceticism or mystical secrets (Matthew 24: 23-26).

A leading opponent of Gnosticism in the Second Century was St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons. His book *Against Heresies* describes some of the Gnostic cults. These blends of pagan superstition and Christianity bear a remarkable resemblance to much of the occult nonsense drifting around today. The Second Century was a boom season for Gnosticism and for new and exotic varieties of paganism. People were bored with the formal state religion of imperial Rome, and looked to the

East for religious thrills and excitement. Into Rome they came, a new wave of soothsayers, sorcerers, wizards, witches, crooks and crackpots, peddling theatrical cults spiced with witchcraft and perversion. This trend came to a climax in 219 AD, when a Syrian teenager became Emperor, Varius Avitus, taking the name Elagabalus, after the Syrian sun-god, which he worshipped under the form of a meteorite. Into Rome the boy priest minced, dressed up in rich robes, his face covered with cosmetics, beginning a tragic reign of perversion, murder, corruption and superstition, terminated in 222, when his own soldiers stabbed him to death in a lavatory. Thus the superstitious weakness of Republican Rome eventually led to the decadent obsession of Imperial Rome.

In spite of the new cults, in spite of persecutions, Christianity quietly grew stronger. People sought security as the Empire declined and fell apart. Some sought the cults and the false prophets. Others found the Faith of the Church, a Faith set against the superstitions of the age.

Under Constantine, Catholic Christianity became the official religion of Europe. The Church took control of society, forced into a position of control amidst the chaos of the fall of the Empire. But the superstitious alternatives to Christianity lingered on, emerging in the form of heresies.

Some heresies are the exaggeration or distortion of Christian truth. Other heresies are formed by adding pagan beliefs to Christian truth. Gnosticism was of this second variety and it continued to plague the Church in the form of several heresies. The Albigensian heretics in the early years of the Thirteenth Century were determined to bring down the whole Catholic social system. To meet this serious and violent threat the Church set up the first Inquisition and raised a crusade. In *The Great Heresies* Hilaire Belloc explained this heresy as a Gnostic revival, fanatical and violent, and certainly not a group of innocent victims of Church repression. The Albigensian in Southern France wished to abolish marriage because of their peculiar belief that sexual love in marriage was "carnal" and evil. They wished to impose their views on everyone, by force if necessary. They threatened the basic family fabric of society and were justly put down. We may notice some similarity between their views and the extreme sexual discipline of the Hare Krishna sect today.

The Witchcraft Network

If Gnosticism lingered on in underground movements, so older and darker forms of Western and Eastern paganism survived. This is one historical explanation for what we call "witchcraft", understood not as a diversion invented by cunning or deranged people, but as the continuing life of ancient pagan cults, evil cults.

St Paul saw pagan cults in his own day as the worship of demons (1 Corinthians 10: 14-22). His view that the worship of pagan gods is the worship of demons may well apply to some superstitious forms of paganism today, for example the seances which form part of Chinese temple worship. But as "witchcraft" in Europe today we may recognize much of the "old religions", in various forms such as Druidism or animism (the worship of spirits in trees, rocks, rivers etc.). In its underground life as witchcraft, the old paganism drew into itself much mystical knowledge from the East, together with Neo-Platonist theories, elements of Christianity and the various interests of medieval magicians, astrologers and alchemists.

The Medieval Church controlled this underground power, and never allowed it to gain influence again, although some dabbling in astrology and alchemy was tolerated because these activities were imagined to be sciences. But whenever dabbling went beyond certain limits, or whenever there was evidence of Gnosticism or attempts to contact the dead or cast spells, then the Church acted swiftly and sharply. Witches were apprehended, tried and burnt. Heretics went the same way. Because we

cannot appreciate the complete unity between Church and society, we fail to understand that those reviving the old paganism were the mortal enemies of society. They were regarded with the same horror we reserve for heroin pushers.

The Protestant Reformation changed the whole of Europe, breaking apart that underlying Catholic social unity. This seems to have been the opportunity for a revival of the old paganism. The Catholic Church had been able to control and put down witchcraft. The true supernatural weapons were the sacraments and exorcism. These powerful controls were virtually lost when any area of Europe went over to the Reformation, because the Protestants abolished the Catholic priesthood.

In a situation of religious division, confusion and change, there was a revival of witchcraft. For various reasons this triggered off a panic reaction, leading to the great persecution of witches, which brought death by burning to thousands of women and some men. Many of these people were the innocent victims of unjust suspicion. In the late Sixteenth and in the Seventeenth Century, waves of witch hunting and witch burning swept through Scotland and England, where Anglicans and Presbyterians were gripped with a kind of hysteria. Puritans in America have left an unsavoury reputation for themselves with the Salem witch hunt. In Europe the Catholics matched separated brethren in a frenzy of burnings and witch trials. Some Jesuits and other enlightened men denounced the persecution, recognizing that it had gone beyond the bounds of sanity.

The violent repression of the old paganism in its magical form did not succeed in eradicating the evil. Maintained by family connections, passed on in a secret way, witchcraft continued to be practised, either in its allegedly harmless "white" form, or as "black magic", part of Satanism, the worship of the devil. The seance movement and revival of occultism in the Nineteenth Century encouraged witchcraft. Interest in the dark arts was also promoted by the taste for novels or stories about the "supernatural", the "gothic" literature, which continues to be of interest to many readers today.

In the Twentieth Century witchcraft has come out into the open in the various instances of eccentric individuals who claim to be witches or warlocks. In some cases these people are deluded dabblers, possibly seeking to make a reputation for themselves or their books. Other individuals, such as the notorious Aleister Crowley promoted their paganism with admissions of perversion and drug taking.

The Lure of Occultism

In witchcraft we are confronted with a form of nasty occultism. Why should people be attracted to something so horrible? In the case of unbalanced occultists we are led to psychology for the analysis of morbid personality. These people are mentally sick, and often dangerous. But there are other cases of occultists who are apparently normal. The Christian is led to the doctrine of original sin for an explanation of why normal men and women should hunger for something sick, distorted, evil. But not all occultism is obviously evil. Many Spiritists imagine they are good people doing good, offering a consoling service to others, contact with the dear departed. Looking at the whole of occultism, from the simplest seance to a witchcraft orgy, we need broader social explanations for the occult revival.

Has mainline Christianity lost its appeal today? Is occultism a substitute for lost Christianity? There is ample evidence for the breakdown of family religion, especially in the Protestant Churches. The parents went to church. They send their children to Sunday School, and stop going to church. The children marry in church, never attend, except for social rituals, and do not bother about baptism for their offspring. This generation in its turn finds it more comfortable and natural to celebrate social

rituals up on the mountain or under the trees, guided by the civil celebrant, who binds in legal marriage and bestows a name on the baby. People cease to be religious, even in a formal outward sense. They believe no longer.

G. K. Chesterton pointed out that the last stage of this process of loss of faith is not what we Christians imagine.

When people cease to believe in God, they do not believe in nothing. They believe in anything.

Here we are, at the point of belief in anything, harvest time for occultism, Eastern cults, weird heresies. The religious instinct is natural to man. He desperately seeks a meaning to life, purpose, value, self-esteem, a spiritual security in a world which denies him security. Suffering and distress may bring about a spiritual awakening, but it may be captured and used by the nearest crazed and dangerous cult.

A Hunger for Experience

In the cases of young people who get involved in occultism or the cults, curiosity promises a release from listless boredom. Curiosity and boredom may lead to drugs, sex and crime. This combination may also lead to exotic religions, anything from playing with the seance to digging potatoes on a cult commune. Resting on a religious ignorance, the young may put their trust in the stars or submit slavishly to the smug nodding of a plump little Eastern guru. Those who were "into macrobiotic food" last year, may be "into Yoga" this year, and they may be "into spoon-bending, levitation and spiritualism" next year, and into a mental home the year after next.

The God or gods of their parents may have been scorned and rejected along with the Marxist gods of revolution and political dissent of the Sixties. The mood of aggressive resentment has changed into a boredom, a drifting apathy. It hungers for religious thrills, for experience. It demands a form of religious satisfaction. It remains materialist and soft, but wants something more, but by way of experience. Occultism promises experience, not what a Christian would call a real religious experience, indeed sometimes an experience which is better forgotten, for the sake of sanity and salvation.

People also seek identity by belonging to secret groups, inner circles, covens or cults. An insecure or inadequate personality is pumped up by the knowledge that "I know something special ... I am an important person, because I know secrets..." Not only identity and pride as an individual is encouraged by membership in occult circles. There is also a group mentality, which is seen in more obvious form in the cults, when people who may claim to have freed themselves from authorities such as parents, Church or state, submit to grotesque authoritarianism. It led to the suicide and murder of nine hundred people in the Jones' commune in Guyana in November 1978. These people had found identity, pride, cult solidarity but they also found death.

The Quest for Power

Personality problems and social trends do not explain the real cause of the lure of occultism, why people go to seances or dabble in magic. The real cause is at the very roots of the whole story of our human race. We step back to Eden to find it. It is pride. It is the hungry quest for power.

The old serpent slithers around the tree and whispers to Eve, "You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

(Genesis 3: 4-5). Eve eats the forbidden fruit. Adam raises his fist against God. Mankind falls, and so continues to fall, into pride, into rebellion, into a quest for power.

This tendency is not simply a desire to be better than God. It is usually compounded with a desire to dominate other people, to have power over them, by force, deceit, manipulation. This is what occultism ultimately promises, not merely strange esoteric wisdom but the ability to control others. I do not refer only to cases where people try to use witchcraft to kill someone or force them to love or to hate. There are other cases where people use the dark arts, especially necromancy, to get information which leads to power, to discover, hence manipulate, the future, to gain advantages and learn secrets. Behind all this seeking of knowledge is the same quest for power which is more obvious when a medium or wizard tries to dominate other people.

I mentioned inadequate personalities, attracted to cults and to occultism because they may find identity and security. These people often hunger for something greater than the satisfaction of knowing special secrets or belonging to a spooky club. The inadequate personality often craves control of others. "I may not be clever, beautiful or strong, but I will dominate!" Occultism promises them a short-cut to this goal. Instant mysticism, sudden illumination, visions and revelations, how easy and delightful it seems, in contrast to all the care and effort needed to succeed in business, at a university, in family life, at sport or in the fields of art and culture. We should take note of this alluring feature of Spiritism, of theosophical nonsense and the cults, namely the rich promise of the age of instant information, instant copies and instant coffee - that I can have powerful wisdom - now!

Christians reject this anti-intellectual arrogance, this insult to the human mind as created by God. Christians reject this pride which leads to attempts to dominate others, this denial of the new commandment, "Love one another, as I have loved you." Christians reject this choice for evil, which sets people against one another in hatred, which sows division, cruelty and domination, for a harvest of damnation.

The Great Struggle

In the light of this analysis of the causes of an occultist revival today, I will put forward a theory, which is accepted by many thoughtful Christians, Catholics and members of separated Churches. The basic theory is in reality more than theory. It is the underlying principle of human history - the struggle between good and evil. When we look at the details of this struggle, in terms of the praeternatural, we are looking at plausible theories, matters which have been of interest to Christian thinkers for centuries, but never defined by the Church. But we must always remember that it is Catholic dogma that Satan exists, along with evil spirits and demons, and that there is a Hell, to which state of separation from God human beings may be consigned. This is consistent Catholic doctrine, no matter what a few theologians may have alleged in recent years. Pope Paul VI insisted on these terrible realities. [as does the Catechism of the Catholic Church.]

The theory concerning the current occultist revival, which we traced back to the last century, is that this is a deliberate tactic of our eternal enemy in his struggle against the process of salvation in history. The Church view that every form of activity from the "harmless" seance to a black "mass" is evil is a consistent appreciation that all these tinkering with praeternatural forces can unleash evil, harm people, cause grave sin, and hence advance the cause of Satan. The various cults, whether they claim occult powers or whether they concentrate on meditation techniques or deviation forms of Christianity, are also associated with this vast network of evil. We would delude

ourselves if we imagined that it has not already gained practical political power in this world. The Third Reich, according to this plausible theory, was a high-point in the struggle of the powers of darkness. Thanks to the Nazi empire, twenty million people perished, in this cool, modern and sophisticated Twentieth Century. Was it merely politics which killed them?

Totalitarianism and the Occult

Before the Second World War, many journalists came to describe Hitler as a witch (the term may apply to both sexes). His power to control masses of people was seen as "magical". Other observers noted the use of pagan symbols and myths in the Nazi movement, and the religious implications of the blood and race notions. After the War, much evidence was produced which based the beginnings of the Nazi movement in occultist circles, some of the first members of the Party being members of the Thule group, a society of occultists who believed in the mythology of the super-race and dark powers which would build a new world order for that race, a pattern of domination over others.

Circumstantial evidence concerning Hitler's life-style also indicates occultist connections; a mediocre, inadequate personality, suddenly transformed, as if possessed by some greater power, the ascetical vegetarian teetotaler, convinced of his role in destiny, the recluse who withdrew into himself, the ranting fanatic obsessed with diabolical schemes.

Hitler and his aides really believed in the mysteries of astrology. It has been claimed that dark magical rites were practised by the elite of the S.S., a power complex notably pagan in its symbols and its capacity for murder.

There was much "crackpot" thought in Nazism, for example the ridiculous doctrine of "eternal ice" as an explanation of the universe, the weird pseudo-science of one Hans Horbiger. Much of this pseudo-science was mingled with occultist notions, especially the blood and race mythology, and the mystical dream of the superiority and triumph of the Aryan race. For twelve terrible years, occultism gained political power, in the heart of Twentieth Century Europe. We may dismiss it as "crackpot", but it devoured millions of human beings. From Hitler's table talk, recorded in the last years of his war, we know that his neo-pagan totalitarian system, having exterminated all Jews, would turn next to destroy the Catholic Church.

Totalitarianism means the total state control over every element in human life. In itself this is diabolical, that is, demonic, or of the devil. In Communism we see demonic power at work, ruthlessly destroying millions of people in the name of the Marxist mythology of class war. Some authors have detected Satanism in the writings and thought of Karl Marx. But Marx was an atheist. How could he be a Satanist? Just because a man claims to be an atheist does not rule out his believing in hidden powers, which may be manipulated and used to advantage. These powers may be described as "para-normal". It is interesting how Soviet scientists take such an interest in psychic research into para-normal matters. Having discarded God, the materialist is free to believe in anything, and "anything" may well present itself, set against God.

The deliberate Marxist rejection of God strangely shows itself in the form of crude blasphemies. We often see this in the circles of political dissent today. Violent emotional outpourings against Jesus Christ and his Church are a feature of demonic powers, especially during genuine exorcism. We should note with care the blasphemies of the Marxists, and wonder why such cool scientific materialists get roused to such a frenzy.

Totalitarianism is one congenial environment for the work of evil in the great struggle against good, against Jesus Christ.

The choice for political dictatorships may well be a choice for hidden darker powers.

What Can We Do?

The Christian is faced with the threat of Occultism and Spiritism and wonders what can be done. Many of us have friends or even relatives who are dabbling in areas which we know to be dangerous even diabolical. This booklet has not taken the occultist complex to its ultimate depth, Satanism. There are matters best left in the shadows. But it is obvious that the first step a Christian should take is to be aware of the capacity for evil and harm within these movements and practices.

To be aware of something, to understand it, regard it for what it is, may be a healthy position to take. On the other hand, it is unhealthy to become preoccupied with occultism, or to read various odd books on it, or to speak too freely with people involved in it. If we become preoccupied with the menace of the occult, we may fail to recognize normal sins and evils in the world, which are more widespread than this particular problem. Not every Christian is called to struggle against occultist people or organizations, but we are all called by Christ to resist evil and promote good.

Taking a healthy view of occultism would be to see it as something squalid, second-rate, a power already vanquished by Jesus Christ, even as it rises up from time to time to challenge his Church. Unhealthy interest in praeternatural matters may lead a Christian to the dualist error. According to Dualism, good and evil, God and Satan, are in an equal contest. We do not know who will win. It is best to put money on each side, just to be sure. In Satanism we may detect the ancient error of Dualism, used as a clever argument by those promoting the worship of the devil, or some concession to immoral behaviour. But some Christians, over-awed by the powers of evil may begin to imagine that it is an even contest.

On the Cross, and by rising from the dead, Jesus Christ conquered evil. Satan has been vanquished. All history becomes not the story of an even contest but the process of "mopping up" after the great battle. This view of the true struggle between good and evil is healthy and sane. It frees us from fear of evil powers, which cannot harm those who are baptized into the victorious death and resurrection of the Lord. He is "the Lord". He reigns. He conquers. He commands.

If we are unfortunate enough to be confronted by praeternatural forms of evil, we should immediately seek the help of the Church. The matters must be discussed with a priest, so that further action may be taken, under due authority. But there always remains the need for personal spiritual strength by way of regular sacraments, regular prayer, regular study of the Word of God. That word "regular" is most important. Discipline builds up the life of Grace. Even if the evil influences do not affect us directly, but may be misleading a friend, we are in no position to give advice and spiritual comfort to others unless we are practising the Faith well. By practising the Faith our own inner Faith becomes stronger. We have the confidence and freedom of Jesus Christ, the assurance that nothing can harm us or separate us from his love, no matter how squalid, spooky or uncanny it may seem.

This confidence in Jesus Christ frees us from unhealthy curiosity concerning praeternatural matters. It also gives us the strength of the Holy Spirit to speak out wisely and boldly when ignorant or perverse people raise these topics in conversation. We should not hesitate to speak firmly against

occultism and superstition, but we should be careful not merely to seem to be disbelievers in the possibility of hidden powers, like those smart people who dismiss hauntings with a laugh or a sneer.

The question of credibility always rises when people discuss praeternatural phenomena. It must be admitted that in the Catholic Church two famous priests took differing views in this field, and they were both well-informed in these matters. Mgr. Robert Hugh Benson tended to be credulous, rather uncritical in accepting praeternatural phenomena as real, when they may often have been delusions. Fr. Herbert Thurston S.J. took a scientific and sceptical view, and would not concede any possibility of the reality of alleged praeternatural happenings until all the evidence was sifted. We are free to come to our own conclusions, but it is perhaps best never to give the shallow impression that we do not take occultism seriously. Even if we believe most of it is conjuring and trickery, we must recognize the harm it causes.

Harm is the issue. Does it do harm to people? Are people being hurt by it? Is it silly games for grown-ups? I suggest, with good reason, that it is doing great harm, and for this reason, those who take it lightly or those who use it for entertainment or journalism are acting irresponsibly. For these people, and for all the deluded victims of the revived paganism, we should pray sincerely and regularly. As St Peter assures us, "...you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." (1 Peter 2:9). To this same Peter, Our Lord made that sublime promise for us, his People, his Church, that the powers of hell will never prevail.

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