

Reasons for the Modern Occult Revival—Part Two

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[This month we continue our look at the factors that explain our current occult revival. Last time we mentioned 1) The failure of rationalism, secular humanism, and materialism as comprehensive world views; and 2) A spiritual vacuum resulting from the abandonment of orthodox Christianity.]

3. *The explosive growth of the new religions.* The influx of Eastern gurus, and the emergence of hundreds of alternate religions and New Age seminars (e.g., Silva Mind Control, est/The Forum, Lifespring, MSIA, Actualizations, Mind Psibiotics, etc.) have provided another socially legitimate outlet for psychic participation. Indeed, literally scores of the most popular religious sects in this country—religions that influence tens of millions—either accept or promote occult activity.¹

Most Eastern religions are excellent breeding grounds for occult experimentation and development. Yoga practice, for example, characteristically develops psychic powers. In studying more than 20 modern gurus, we found that almost all promoted the occult and, further, described themselves (including their spiritual practices and behavior) in terminology that fits well with a hypothesis of their own spirit possession.²

Finally, many of the new religions are fundamentally spiritistic in origin or practice. Our own findings after studying almost one hundred of the “new” religions are consistent with those of other researchers. For example, Brooks Alexander and Mark Albrecht of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) in Berkeley, California, state: “Our research into [scores of] cults both large and small has revealed that the lowest common denominator is often that of direct spirit influence.”³

Dr. Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., professor of religion at the University of Southern California, discusses over 40 of the new religions in *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America*. He observes that they all have “striking parallels” to shamanism, a primitive form of spiritism. “The cult phenomena could almost be called a modern resurgence of shamanism,” he says.⁴ In that the new religions are fundamentally spiritistic, their promotion of the occult is not surprising.

4. *Liberal Theology.* Many people attend church hoping to find genuine spiritual reality and teaching. But thousands of churches in this country are theologically liberal. As such, they reject the divine inspiration of the Bible, deny salvation through Christ, and ridicule the existence of the miraculous. Thus indirectly, liberal theology is also one of the principal factors for promoting the occult.

When people find spiritual reality ridiculed in church, it is not surprising they might turn to other sources for spiritual nourishment, whether in the cults or the occult. Unfortunately, since liberal theology rejects the authority of the Bible, such people have no guidelines for evaluating or testing the validity of the spiritual experiences they encounter.

5. *A new parapsychological/New Age view of human potential and the reclassification of occult powers.* To classify occult practice as something entirely normal and/or as the proper means to contact God is to legitimize it in the minds of millions of people. Thus, various disciplines today are forging a new occult view of man which assumes that psychic devel-

opment is inherently natural to the human condition and a process that leads to personal knowledge of God.

For example, a mystical approach to the “new physics,” transpersonal psychology, parapsychology, the study of higher consciousness, holistic health practices, and the New Age Movement all directly or indirectly promote the legitimacy of personal psychic development as an innate unfolding of psychological potential. The humanistic and transpersonal approach to psychology is a problem here since psychology as a discipline has little practical concept of evil to begin with. As noted psychiatrist M. Scott Peck points out in *The People of the Lie*, “The concept of evil has been central to religious thought for millennia. Yet it is virtually absent from our science of psychology—which one might think would be vitally concerned with the matter.”⁵ Thus, when segments of modern psychology begin to adopt occult philosophy and practice in purely psychological terms, it not only “naturalizes” occult powers, it *a priori* assumes their benevolence.

While parapsychology has placed a scientific credibility on developing psychic abilities, the New Age Movement in general has helped legitimize them as divine forms of spiritual expression. In fact, for dozens of religions, new and old, these new powers of the mind are seen as a means to divine health, wealth, power, and happiness.

Unfortunately, attitudes which legitimize psychic practices as “scientific,” exhibiting “human potential,” or “divine” mask the sinister reality of the occult as something neutral, benevolent, and/or benignly spiritual.

Most gurus, psychics, spiritists, mediums, and occultists stress their powers come “from God.” In a similar manner, the various “Christian” parapsychological societies reinterpret psychic abilities as the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and the New Age Movement reclassifies mediumism itself as a “channeling” of higher aspects of the divine mind.

Again, to claim your powers originate in God gives them divine authority and legitimacy. In times past, psychic powers were at least acknowledged as originating from the spirit world. But while the motives or character of mercurial “spirits” can easily be questioned, that which involves the activity of God cannot be doubted.

6. *The reality of the supernatural.* Ultimately, what explains our modern explosion of occult activity is the stark reality of the supernatural world. It does exist. Indeed, there are now literally millions of personal testimonies of people contacting this world directly.

But unfortunately, the pervasiveness of the occult in our society is underestimated by many rationalistic secularists who view it as “nonsense” or “a passing fad.” Even those who claim to be open-minded tend to debunk it. Thus, they fail to understand why converts to the occult continue to include all segments of society, including the intelligentsia: There really is something there.

A relevant example is Colin Wilson, an initial skeptic, whose seminal *The Outsider* and other works have had wide impact. Wilson went on to pen *The Occult: A History* (1973), *Mysteries* (1978), *Dark Dimensions: Celebration of the Occult* (1977), and other books on the occult which, worthy treatments to be sure, nevertheless have helped to legitimize it socially.

But with broader social legitimization, its absorption or redefinition by the secular culture makes its influence more subtle. As Robert Burrows argues, “Since the sixties, occult mysticism has widened its base. As it is filtered through the secularism of Western culture, it is increasingly difficult to detect. Mysticism in its secularized forms has gained the great-

est ground, making its influence felt in every major facet of contemporary life.”⁶

7. *Freedom from conventional morality.* Modern America has largely rejected moral absolutes. Indeed, national polls reveal that 70 percent of adults do not think there is such a thing as a moral absolute. If so, it would seem that around a hundred million people are now predisposed against absolute concepts of right and wrong. This might explain why many of them turn to the occult. Occult teachings offer a *spiritual* justification for freedom from morality. Thus, occult participation represents a rejection of God’s benevolent desires for man as expressed in His law, and man’s own inclination to seek his own form of spirituality—a form which typically exalts moral independence. This allows man to live however he pleases (1 Samuel 15:23; Isaiah 5:12-30; 30:8-11; Jeremiah 5:30,31; 2 Timothy 4:3,4). As the notorious occultist Aleister Crowley emphasized, “The whole of the law is ‘Do what thou wilt.’” Several teenage “Satanists” have told us, “I’ve read *The Satanic Bible* and it says I can do anything I want. That’s why I like Satanism.” Neopagan feminist Margo Adler observes that witchcraft and neopaganism are “incredibly anarchistic movements” with hardly any dogmas, hence their popularity.⁷ In her book on the revival of neopaganism (*Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today*), she observes: “Many people said that they had become pagans because they could be themselves and act as they chose, without what they felt were medieval notions of sin and guilt.”⁸

But “medieval notions” of sin and guilt reflect universal human experience. Occult philosophy will indeed free one from moral constraints—but at what cost?

Notes:

¹ See John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1996).

² John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Hinduism in America* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1991), and note 21.

³ *SCP Newsletter*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 1.

⁴ Robert S. Ellwood, Jr., *Religious and Spiritual Groups in Modern America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973), p. 12.

⁵ M. Scott Peck, *The People of the Lie; The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983), pp. 39-40.

⁶ Robbert Burrows, “New Age Movement: Self-Deification in a Secular Culture,” *SCP Newsletter*, Vol. 10, No. 5, Winter, 1984-85, p. 4.

⁷ In Larry Kahaner, *Cults That Kill: Probing the Underworld of Occult Crime* (New York: Warner, 1988), p. 102.

⁸ Margot Adler, *Drawing Down the Moon: Witches, Druids, Goddess-Worshippers, and Other Pagans in America Today* (New York: The Viking Press, 1979), p. 23.