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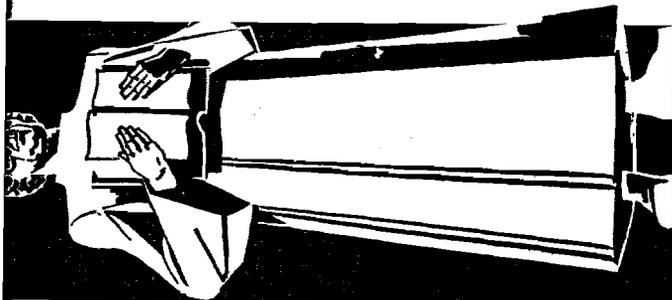
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The New Quest For The Sacred: The Witchcraft Craze And The Lure Of The Occult

RALPH L. MOELLERUNG

*Visiting Professor at the University of
Frankfurt, Germany*

WHAT HAS HAPPENED to the alleged triumph of secularity in American life? Only a few years ago religion was presumably in eclipse. In a scientific era what was once attributed to supernatural causes could be readily explained as "natural." Mature, self-sufficient men and women, we were told, had thrown away their crutches of prayer and faith, and were making their own decisions independent of any projected deity. Rebellious youth, it was said, had repudiated the church. "Irrelevant piety" was renounced by avant-garde seminaries and the public press heralded the "death of God."

At the beginning of the Seventies, however, religion seems to have made a surprising comeback. Or could it be that journalists and other commentators were misreading the signs of the times? Undeniably the "recovery of transcendence" is now a major theme. "God talk" is fashionable again. Evidence multiplies that there is a new quest for the sacred.

Perhaps nothing illustrates more clearly how drastic this reversal in thinking has become than the shift of emphasis in the writings of the popular theologian Harvey Cox. In 1965 Cox went into verbal ecstasies over the marvels of technology and celebrated the joys of *The Secular City*. Religion was dismissed as a passing episode in the upbringing of humanity. Man's profane and pragmatic attempt to build a better urban life in this present world was the all-absorbing and totally valid concern. In a remarkable about-face Cox has dropped his optimistic appraisal of the whole secularization process and his glorification of modernity to propose a "theology of juxtaposition" which reflects on the tension dimensions in the collisions and contradictions of past, present, and future. What was once peripheral in his evaluation has now become festive delight. In his latest book, *The Feast of Fools*, Cox deplores the loss of Western man's earlier capacity for jubilation and fantasy. What is needed, he argues, is a rejuvenation of the faded faculty for mystical experience and imaginative expression.

On every hand there are abundant indications that man is incurably susceptible to religious feelings and motivations. The recovery of the category of transcendence among the intelligentsia is only the "high-brow" aspect of a new mood which is most acutely discernible in anti-intellectual gropings among alienated youth. Jacob Needleman, professor of philosophy at San Francisco State College, has felt compelled to explore the wide spectrum of Oriental

religions which have appealed to so many young rebels on the West Coast. Repudiating the "tough minded" analytical appraisal of the external world as utterly devoid of purpose, these enthusiasts for change, Needleman finds, embrace all sorts of Indian gurus and Eastern sages. In multifaceted ways strange to the Western mind these imported faiths seem to captivate the imagination of people who have never understood or appreciated their own Judeo-Christian heritage. The "lovers" of Meher Baba, for instance, cultivate a sense of self-surrender to intuitive feelings in order to experience internal harmony. Practitioners of Subud join in a remarkable spiritual exercise known as the *latihan* with the intention of subduing one's "lower nature"—patiently seeking a state of receptivity for divine illumination. The adherents of Krishnamurti propose instantaneous self-observation to acquire a new and more profound comprehension of individual freedom. Even Tibetan Buddhism has made some inroads in America, and the Zen Buddhism once associated with the beatniks of the 1950s has displayed an amazing vitality in continuing to gain converts.

Amid all of the unrest and ferment of our troubled era, with our moral bankruptcy and spiritual emptiness, it should not perhaps be too surprising that ancient religions are moving in to fill the deserted spaces. What is deplorable is that so much of this animated quest for sacred meaning bypasses Biblical truth and ignores or scorns reconciliation through an encounter with the Crucified and Resurrected Christ. Whenever people are tempted to love or trust in some human construct or resource more than in the Covenant God of Abraham and the Father of Jesus of Nazareth, they become immediately prone to violating the First Commandment, "Thou shalt have no other gods before Me." In accord with its own subjective yearnings the human mind has always been profusely productive in fabricating false ideologies and half-truths. Sometimes, in a desperate attempt to evade a reckoning with the God of judgement and grace revealed in Holy Scripture, it will become susceptible to the most irrational absurdities and far-fetched superstitions.

As an integral part of the current revival of interest in the sacred, we witness not only a return to metaphysical speculation and a resurgence of Islam and Buddhism, but also an absorption in transmundane mystery or anything which contradicts the presuppositions of our arrogant technological age. An example may be found in the way some college students have been enchanted by the *I Ching* or *Book of Changes*, a common source for both Confucianist and Taoist philosophy. In this approach, so incompatible with the rationalizations of Americans and Europeans, ethical values are attached to oracular pronouncements. Zealots give credence to such methods of attaining wisdom because they know that long-accepted axioms of causality have been shaken to their foundations by the theories of modern physics, and they are now inclined to dismiss what we have hitherto termed "natural laws" as mere statistical truths and not ultimate knowledge. With such a disavowal of "scientific evidence" it seems plausible to turn to the ancient Chinese preoccupation with

the fortuitous character of everything which happens. What has been called "synchronicity" assumes a peculiar interdependence of objective events even among themselves as well as with the psychic states of the observer or observers. Contingency, not predestination or divine governance, determines our fate. Thus something like the *I Ching* version of reality has an intense appeal for our unstable youth who are out of step with the emphases of our own society.

The most bizarre and inexplicable elements in the contemporary urge to fathom the supernatural are to be found in devil worship, the witchcraft craze, and the lure of the occult. Most popular, and presumably quite "respectable," are the flirtations with astrology and moderate forms of spiritualism. Wide publicity was given to the tragic (some would say pathetic) developments in the erratic career of Bishop James Pike (especially the suicide of his son) which induced him to seek consolation and contact with the departed through the ministrations of professional spiritualists. Even more astounding are news reports of worried American parents who have crossed the Mexican border to confer with wizards and charlatans concerning the fate of servicemen in Vietnam.

Anyone sensitive to the vibrations moving through our youth sub-culture might have predicted this surge of interest in superstition and the Satanic arts. The language of the hippies in San Francisco has been loaded with magic phrases, and Ouija boards have sold briskly in Manhattan's Greenwich Village. The musical play "Hair" celebrated the dawn of the Age of Aquarius. "Rosemary's Baby," a novel and movie about witchcraft in a "quality" neighborhood of New York, enjoyed considerable box office success only a few years ago. Most publicized and most disturbing has been the trial of Charles Manson, where ritual murder, drug usage, sexual orgies, and all sorts of mumbo jumbo have combined to form an incredible phantasmagoria which jolts all normal sensibilities.

Early in 1971 underground newspapers reported that seeress Sybil Leek was making sensational predictions about public figures ("Richard Nixon [will be] involved in a major scandal that will eliminate him from the 1972 presidential race . . . Jackie Onassis will make eyebrows arch with flamboyant behavior . . ."). Recently the Berkeley Repertory Theatre featured John Whiting's play, "The Devils," an episodic dramatization of alleged demon possession involving Ursuline nuns in France in the 1630s.

With all of this contemporary furor over Satanism, it is not surprising that church historians have been stimulated to search for precedents and sources in the past record of Western Christendom. In the March, 1971 issue of *Church History*, Donald Nugent, associate professor of history at the University of Kentucky, purports to perceive striking similarities between outcroppings of superstition during the Renaissance and the psychic aberrations which have become almost characteristic of our emerging sub-culture. In both periods, Nugent reminds us, there is an abrupt break with the existing value system and a profound sense of discontinuity. Violence, apocalypticism, and severe *Angst* permeated the age of the Renaissance just as they agitate our world today. Side by side in both

situations one finds the coarsest hedonism and the most ethereal mysticism. In extreme instances, both then and now, irrational propensities have spawned manifestations of the occult.

As Nugent elaborates on his thesis he amasses evidence which indicates that certain common denominators are found almost universally in witchcraft—medieval or modern. Usually the practice of various types of diabolism involves a fusion of sexuality and power. Anton LaVey, the notorious leader of a devil-worshipping “church” in San Francisco, reflects a common perspective when he writes that “no one ever pursued occult studies . . . without ego gratification and personal power as a goal.” Self-acclaimed witches have generally relished the opportunity to manipulate and dominate their devotees. Concurrently, sexual licentiousness and excessive sensuality have often accompanied the celebration of the Black Mass or other nocturnal rites conducted during clandestine gatherings in secluded caves. In the demonolatry of LaVey, a naked woman is placed on the altar as an object of veneration. Blasphemy, egomania, and lasciviousness seem to be molded together as an internal totality which hurls defiance at everything which has been treated as inviolable or considered holy in Christian usage.

Some observers are convinced that witchcraft is more prevalent in the 1970s than it has been at any time since the Middle Ages. Nugent offers estimates of 60,000 sorcerers in France, 30,000 witches in England, and 20,000 Satanists in the United States as unreliable but possible figures. The new wave of witches cuts across all of the strata of society. Not only gullible illiterates, but also the sophisticated wealthy, and occasionally the educated elite, are entranced by encounters with demonic supernaturalism. There are intimations that extremists in the women’s liberation movement find diabolical symbolism apropos for their assault on male chauvinism (e.g., W.I.T.C.H., Women’s International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell, and S.C.U.M., Society for Cutting Up Men). Facetiously perhaps, yet significantly, members of W.I.T.C.H. appeared on Halloween, 1968, to lead hexes against the Stock Exchange with the declaration: “You have a fiend at Chase Manhattan.”

Another aspect of the current revival of the occult is the way in which it is interwoven with the conspiracy theories emanating from religious and political factions on the Far Right. The John Birch Society professes to detect sinister Communists lurking in the background as devil-extolling cults are organized. Rock music, hallucinogenic formulas, and all kinds of weird perversions are associated with Red-inspired plots which are presumably designed to demoralize America. *American Opinions* for September, 1970 includes extensive commentary on diabolism with a photograph of “Satanist organizer Aleister Crowley, a sadist and homosexual, [who] corresponded with key Communist Leon Trotsky to whom he offered his services.” From New Haven, Connecticut comes *The Yale Standard* for the spring of 1971 with an excerpt from the book, *The Bible, the Supernatural and the Jews* by McCandlish Phillips. According to this exposé of the occult underworld, invisible forces are presently at work seeking to undermine our morale and cause degen-

erative changes in our society. Jews, in particular, are warned against experimentation with demonic spirits which can beguile them into chaotic misperceptions.

For evangelical Christians who have never ceased to believe in the deadly potency of Lucifer there may be less astonishment at the present obsession with magic and the black arts than among "emancipated" moderns who long ago relegated such absurdities to the ash heap of discarded anachronisms. The dimension of the demonic remains a grim reality because sin and decadence abound. Sadly enough we are prone to the most abhorrent practices imaginable when Christian faith is undercut and a vacuum of despair and disillusionment ensue. People in rebellion against God are susceptible to the blandishments of the Old Evil Foe. The Biblical imagery which portrays the devil as a "roaring lion" stalking across the earth in search of vulnerable prey is still all too appropriate.

Even the Old Testament castigations of conjuration and thaumaturgy take on renewed and incisive meaning in a twentieth century setting where authentic faith in a God of redemptive love has often been repudiated or disregarded, and pseudo-religions have once again arisen which appeal to the urge to penetrate esoteric secrets and appease carnal ambitions. "Do not turn to mediums or wizards" is the admonition from the statutes of Leviticus, "do not seek them out to be defiled by them." With a stern caveat the Deuteronomic Code forbids the "abominable practices" which the Lord God punished among the pagan nations. Fidelity to the covenant requires that "there shall not be found among [the Israelites] anyone who . . . practices divination, a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or a charmer, or a medium, or a wizard, or a necromancer." The proscribed list of vices which dishonor the name of the Sovereign God is exhaustive. No compromise with the machinations of the Prince of Darkness is to be tolerated. In our reputedly enlightened, but nevertheless benighted, "scientific" area such exhortations against "spiritual wickedness" need to be repeated and re-emphasized.

For a positive antidote to the "wiles of the devil" — subtle maneuvers and overt temptations—we can turn to the apostolic counsel addressed to the Ephesians and "put on the whole armor of God." Equipped with defensive and offensive weapons (the breastplate of righteousness, the Gospel of peace, the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit), we can cope effectively with every exigency, including the lure of the occult which has deceived the unwary in so many recent happenings. Above all, the person who confides in Jesus Christ knows that the final victory against the power of hell has already been won. Christ partook of our flesh and blood so that "through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil." (Hebrews 2:14.)