

The Occult

By James K. Walker¹

Origins: As one of the oldest forms of spirituality, examples of occult practices and beliefs can be traced throughout early civilizations and ancient pagan religions. With its beginnings shrouded by the mist of antiquity, there is no identifiable founder. It could be said that some elements of the occult can be traced to the earliest biblical record of the serpent's temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden.²

Unique Terms or Concepts: Animism, Cold Reading, Divination, Left Hand Path, Magick, Necromancy, Parapsychology, Psychic, Satanism, Sorcery, Spiritism, Wicca, Wiccan Rede, Warm Reading

Organizational Structure: There are a few organizations and structured religious groups whose philosophies and practices are based on the occult – such as Michael Aquino's Temple of Set. For the most part, however, occultism focuses on the individual and practitioners rarely recognize any leadership structure or hierarchy.

HISTORY

The term, occult, is based on the Latin word *occultus*³ meaning that which is hidden from view or covered up. Most commonly, the term is applied to attempts to gain secret or forbidden information or achieve spiritual powers and control through supernatural means such as astrology,⁴ fortune telling, psychics,⁵ spiritism, Kabbalah,⁶ parapsychology, witchcraft, magick, paganism, and Satanism. From a Christian perspective, occult describes any attempt to gain supernatural knowledge or power apart from the God of the Bible.⁷

Historically, elements of occult may be traced through the animism⁸ (the belief that inanimate objects, plants, and animals may be possessed by spirits) and the superstitions of primitive religions throughout antiquity. Biblical examples of occult spirituality include the Canaanite religions of Baal worship and occult rituals involving fertility goddess Asheroth (Judg. 3:7), which were utterly condemned by God (Exod. 23:32-33; 34:12-16; Deut. 7:1-5; 20:15-18).

The roots of the modern occultism in the West can be found in certain aspects of the mesmeric and Spiritualist movements. These practices spread through Europe and America in the early and middle 19th century after followers of the controversial Austrian doctor, Franz Antoine Mesmer (1766-1815), reported experiences of mind reading and clairvoyance (supernatural viewing) in addition to other psychic phenomena in "mesmerized" subjects in altered states of consciousness.⁹

The popularity of mesmerism and especially its alleged healing properties, along with the celebrated "rappings" of the Fox sisters of Hydesville, New York, led directly to the sweeping acceptance of the Spiritualist movement¹⁰ of the latter half of the 19th century. Thus, by the turn of the 20th century, the public's perception of psychic manifestation was largely limited to the infamous Spiritualist churches. These featured necromancy (alleged communication with the dead) along with an assortment of other manifestations. Critics and paranormal debunkers, such as famous illusionist and escape artist Harry Houdini, claimed they were little more than fakery and parlor tricks.

By the latter half of the 20th Century, occultism had gained significant cultural influence. Popular occultists include the astrologer Jeanne Dixon (1918-97), and psychics who allegedly contact the dead such as Arthur Ford (1896-1971). More recent examples of popular psychics who attempt to contact the dead include John Edward¹¹ (author of the book and TV show *Crossing Over*), James Van Praagh (co-executive producer of the hit CBS TV drama *Ghost Whisperer*), Sylvia Browne (best-selling author of *Contacting Your Spirit Guides*), and Allison DuBois, whose life story is purported to be the basis of NBC's TV drama *Medium*.

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In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, Wicca¹² (or witchcraft) also gained significant popularity in Europe and America. Examples include Gardnerian witchcraft officially founded in 1951 in England by Gerald B. Gardner and Alexandrian witchcraft named after Alexander Sanders, a student of Gardner.¹³ There are a growing number of films, television programs, and books glamorizing witchcraft. Blatant attempts to convert children to Wicca can be seen in the popular book like *Teen Witch* by Silver RavenWolf. In addition to Wicca, organized forms of Satanism have also appeared including The Church of Satan and the Temple of Set.

In recent decades, controversy, confusion, and misinformation concerning Satanism specifically and the occult in general were circulated throughout the Christian community through the popular books and audio products of Mike Warnke. Warnke, who was also a popular Christian comedian, wrote the best-selling autobiography, *The Satan Seller*, in 1973 claiming that he was a former satanic high priest. A thorough investigation by *Cornerstone* magazine published in 1992, however, exposed Warnke's story as a hoax perpetrated on a largely undiscerning Christian audience.¹⁴

There is no actual evidence of a satanic mafia or global network of organized crime and murder in the name of Satan. It is true that in recent decades, however, there has been an unprecedented rise in the belief, practice, and acceptance, and of many forms of occultism in Europe and America.

Practitioners of the occult have no central source of authority or unified belief system. Thus, occult philosophies and practices are eclectic and vary significantly from one group or type to another. Generally, however, occultism may be divided into two basic categories: attempts to gain supernatural, hidden knowledge and attempts to tap into or manipulate secret, supernatural powers.

Hidden Knowledge – Divination

Most occult attempts to uncover hidden knowledge through spiritual or supernatural techniques may be classified as divination. Practitioners usually attempt to gain secret information about the past or predict the future. The focus of divination often falls into “readings” in one of three areas: money, health, or relationships. The occult capitalizes on common human concerns and fears in these three areas. Divination methodologies usually involve some type of device or prop, which is “read” by the practitioner in order to gain the hidden knowledge. Examples of occult divination include astrology, palmistry (palm reading), tealeaf reading, crystal balls, Tarot cards, numerology, dowsing, rune casting, and *I Ching*.

In other forms of divination, the prop or device involves alleged communication with the dead or necromancy. In this form of occult divination, mediums or psychics attempt to make contact with the spirits of those who have died in order to elicit hidden information. Methodologies of necromancy include the Ouija Board, séances, psychics, and channeling.¹⁵ In channeling, the mediums or channelers allegedly allow the spirits of dead people to enter their bodies and take over their voices in order to teach their hidden messages.

Forms of occult deception used by psychics include cold reading, warm reading, and hot reading. Occultists who practice cold reading techniques will use the law of averages to speak in generalities while covertly “reading” their clients’ body language, facial expressions, or voice inflections for “hits.” Warm reading involves doing research on the client in advance of the reading by secretly checking with family and neighbors or by hiring private investigators. Hot reading may be used in public performances and makes use of employees or “shills” who pretend to be random audience members but are actually planted in the crowd by the psychic. In some cases, occultists will borrow the tricks and techniques of legitimate stage magicians and performers (such as slight of hand) to feign real spiritual powers. Some have suggested that Pharaoh’s magicians may have been unable to mimic all of the miracles performed by God through Moses and Aaron because they were using fake magic trick rather than having real supernatural powers (Exod. 8:16-19).

In addition to these forms of fraud, the very real possibility of demonic deception should not be ruled out. In Acts, the Apostle Paul had an encounter with a psychic woman who is described as having a “spirit of divination” (literally in Greek a “spirit of a python”) making “much profit” for her masters by occult divination or “fortune-telling.” Paul recognized her condition as demonic possession and he cast out the evil spirit in the name of Jesus (Acts 16:16-18).

Spiritual Power – Magick

The second major category of occultism involves attempts to tap into unseen spiritual or supernatural powers in order to control and manipulate events or create a desired affect. This classification of occultism falls under the heading of magick and may include elements of Wicca (witchcraft), sorcery, and Satanism (the Left Hand Path). The infamous occultist Aleister Crowley (1875-1974) first popularized this old spelling of magick (with the “k”) to differentiate his brand of magic from other forms. Eventually this archaic spelling became the preferred form used by many occultists to describe any form of magic seen to be occult or supernatural. This alternative spelling became a way to differentiate occult magick from the magic performances of entertainers such as stage magicians and illusionists (e.g., David Copperfield or Siegfried & Roy) who are not practicing the occult.

Magick is often used to specifically reference forms of ceremonial magick. Some variations of magick include Crowley’s Thelema magick (to cause an affect in accord with one’s “true will”); Hermetic magick (an occult philosophy attributed to the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thoth); Alchemical magick (the transformation of base metals into gold); Goetic magick (the calling forth of angels or demons); Chaos magick (involving techniques of an intense focus of the mind and altered states of consciousness); and Wicca (witchcraft).

Wiccans attempt to utilize spells, incantations, along with other rituals and techniques to create supernatural affects. While Wiccan methods and systems of magick vary significantly, virtually all Wiccans agree that they do not worship or even believe in Satan. Most adhere to the Wiccan Rede (law), “An Ye Harm None, Do What Ye Will,” and see their practice of magick as being morally good and ethical because they seek to conjure good and beneficial affects. The Bible, however, makes no distinction between white and black magick. Regardless of motives and means, the Bible warns against all forms of witchcraft and sorcery.¹⁶

Perhaps the best-know Satanist was Anton Szandor LaVey (1930-1997) who authored the Satanic Bible and founded the Church of Satan¹⁷ in 1966. Another prominent Satanist is Michael Aquino who broke away from LaVey’s church because of a dispute over LaVey’s alleged attempt to commercialize the movement. In 1975 Aquino formed the Temple of Set¹⁸ named for the Egyptian god, Set.

Although he is often called a Satanist, Aleister Crowley (1875-1974) is better described as an extremely influential occultist and practitioner of magick. Crowley, who called himself the Great Beast 666, gained infamy for his sex magick, homosexual rituals, and a fascination with drugs, blood, and torture. Crowley headed the British branch of the Ordo Templi Orientis, founded the Abbey of Thelema at Cefalu in Sicily and authored a number of books including *Diary of a Drug Fiend* and *Magick in Theory and Practice*.¹⁹

The Occult and Science

For over a century there have been organized attempts to validate and quantify occult phenomena using scientific principles. The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in 1882 to scientifically study parapsychology, the study of psychic phenomena (e.g., Extra Sensory Perception) that appear to be outside the natural laws understood by the scientific community. Prominent early members included Edmund Gurney (1847-1888) and “the St. Paul of Spiritualism,” Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1858-1930), author of the Sherlock Holmes stories. In an effort to validate the occult, spiritualists worked directly with scholars to scientifically measure and prove their psychic phenomena. Areas of study included thought transference and other types of telepathy, hypnotism or mesmeric trance, haunted houses, the “causes” or “laws” of Spiritualism, and the history of such manifestations.

J.B. Rhine, one of the foremost parapsychological researchers in the early 20th century, created the *Journal of Parapsychology* in 1937 and the Parapsychological Association in 1957. The Rhine Research Center at Duke University is one of the most significant and active scientific organizations studying parapsychology.

Despite their intentions, however, the controls and tests administered by the SPR and others did more to expose fraud than to prove occult manifestations.²⁰

CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Much of the attraction of the occult may be explained by fears of the future, a sense of powerlessness, and a search for meaning or significance. These fears and yearnings are common to the human experience. The Scriptures encourage people to trust God for the future and put faith in Him to supply their material and spiritual needs (Matt. 6:25-34; Heb. 11:6; Phil. 4:19). The occult is ultimately a temptation not to trust God but instead place faith in other spiritual powers and supernatural sources. The scripture warns about these temptations because the occult offers only counterfeit hope. Occultism is a quest for spiritual answers that unfortunately leads its followers away from the true God, who loves them and is the only one who can genuinely satisfy all their spiritual needs.²¹

Possession by spirits (other than the Holy Spirit) and communication with the dead by anyone except God are warned against in the Bible. In some cases, mediums attempting to communicate with deceased people may unintentionally contact fallen angels (demons) who impersonate the dead. The Scriptures warn of demonic beings functioning as “familiar spirits” in this form of demon possession.²² In such cases, evil spirits may masquerade as attractive, benign messengers or “angels of light” (2 Cor. 11:14). When seeking hidden knowledge, mediums and other practitioners of divination (along with their clients) may be led astray by “deceitful spirits” who are actually teaching “doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1).

Fortune-tellers, mediums, and psychics routinely fail the biblical test for God’s prophets who must be 100% accurate in their prophecies (Deut. 18:20-28). Parishioners of divination may be purposely perpetrating hoaxes (fakes), may be self-deceived, or may be directly influenced by evil spirits.

- ¹ This profile has been adapted from my earlier article “Occult” published in: Ed Hindson and Ergun Caner, Eds., *The Popular Encyclopedia of Apologetics* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2008) pp. 367-71.
- ² Roots of occultism may be found at the core of the serpent’s original temptation of Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:1-5). Through her disobedience, the Serpent offered Eve the occult (secret or hidden) knowledge of “good and evil,” promised her immortality (“shall not surely die”), and the supernatural power to become “as gods.”
- ³ *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 10th ed., 1997).
- ⁴ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: Marcia Montenegro, “Astrology” *Profile Notebook* (Arlington, Texas: Watchman Fellowship, Inc. 1994-2008). A complete *Profile Notebook* (over 300 pages) is available at www.watchman.org/notebook.htm.
- ⁵ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: James K. Walker, “Psychics” (see endnote 4).
- ⁶ Two 4-page *Profiles* have been published on this subject: Phillip Arnn, “Kabbalah” and Bob Waldrep, “Kabbalah Centre” (see endnote 4).
- ⁷ For a general survey of American occultism from a Christian perspective, see: Josh McDowell and Don Stewart, *Understanding the Occult* published in *The Handbook of Today’s Religions*, Nashville, Thomas Nelson, 1982 (revised ed. 1996).
- ⁸ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: James C. Ventress, “Animism” (see endnote 4).
- ⁹ Mesmer’s name is the source of the word “mesmerize.” He is was an early pioneer of hypnotism. A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: James K. Walker, “Hypnosis” (see endnote 4).
- ¹⁰ Lewis Spence, *An Encyclopaedia of Occultism* (Secaucus, NJ: The Citadel Press, 1960) s.v. “Spiritualism,” p. 381.
- ¹¹ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: James K. Walker, “John Edward” (see endnote 4).
- ¹² A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: Rick Branch, “Witchcraft or Wicca” (see endnote 4).
- ¹³ For a recent study of the scope, diversity, and influence of modern Witchcraft from a Christian perspective, see: Brooks Alexander, *Witchcraft Goes Mainstream: Uncovering Its Alarming Impact on You and Your Family* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House, 2004). For

Notes

- Wiccan perspective on their worldview, philosophies, and practices, see: Raymond Buckland, *Buckland’s Complete Book of Witchcraft* (St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1975 – note: Buckland was a leading Gardnerian witch who developed *Seax-Wica* [Saxon Witchcraft] in 1973) and Rosemary Ellen Guiley, *The Encyclopedia of Witches and Witchcraft* (New York: Facts on File, 1989).
- ¹⁴ Warnke’s book and subsequent testimonials painted a shocking picture of a huge, well-financed, worldwide network of Satanists involved in all kinds of crime including drug trafficking, Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA), and murder. Warnke’s book and testimony, however, were clearly exposed as fiction. Unfortunately, for many Christians, Warnke was a primary source in shaping their understanding of the occult and Satanism. See: Mike Hertenstein and Jon Trott, *Selling Satan: The Evangelical Media and the Mike Warnke Scandal* (Chicago: Cornerstone Press 1st ed., 1993). See also: http://www.cornerstonemag.com/features/iss098/warnke_index.htm (accessed July 23, 2008).
- ¹⁵ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: Rick Branch, “Channeling” (see endnote 4).
- ¹⁶ See: (Exod. 7:11; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:10-12; 2 Kings 21:6; Isa. 47:12; Ezek. 13:18, 20; Mic. 5:12; Acts 8:9-24; 19:19; Rev. 9:21; 22:15).
- ¹⁷ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: Michael Veronie, “Church of Satan / Anton LaVey” (see endnote 4).
- ¹⁸ A separate 4-page *Profile* has been published on this subject: C. K. Salmon, “Temple of Set” (see endnote 4).
- ¹⁹ See also: John Symonds and Kenneth Grant, eds., *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley: An Autobiography* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969, corrected ed. 1979).
- ²⁰ For specific examples including the exposé of the famous 19th Century occultist, Madame Helena Blavatsky (1831-1891), who founded the Theosophical Society, see: Walker, “Psychics” *Profile* (see endnote 4).
- ²¹ For a well-written and provocative study of the occult from a (sometimes controversial) Christian perspective, see: John Warwick Montgomery, *Principalities and Powers: The World of the Occult* (Minneapolis: Dimension, 1975 Revised).
- ²² See: Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:9-14; 1 Sam. 28; 1 Chron. 10:13; 2 Chron. 33:6; Isa. 29:4).



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