

THE METHODIST CHURCH OF SOUTHERN AFRICA.

DOCTRINE COMMISSION : MINUTES OF CONFERENCE,
1982 : PAGE 64, PARA. 30 :

ATTITUDES TO THE OCCULT AND EASTERN MYSTICISM.

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(DURBAN, SEPTEMBER 1983.)

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A. INTRODUCTION.1. THE AVAILABLE LITERATURE : A BRIEF OVERVIEW :

Objective literature on the Occult and Eastern Mysticism is currently rare. Most contemporary writers reflect a highly subjective and polemical bias, and near-hysterical reactionism. Often they are guilty of fanciful speculation (1), questionable theological method, and downright appalling exegesis (eisegesis!) and interpretation; (2.) Such writing is morbidly preoccupied with negative things, and as such tends to reflect a somewhat distorted picture of reality (3).

The popular appeal and general availability of this literature to lay persons, who are seldom equipped critically to evaluate it, has taken its toll. And ironically, it has probably contributed to the defeat of its own stated goal of preventing the spread of occultism etc, precisely by giving it such prominent, albeit negative, publicity (4), that it has proliferated rather than diminished! This is dramatically illustrated by the allarming increase in the numbers of persons needing specialised therapy, pastoral care, counselling and prayer to relieve the growth of anxiety neuroses and so forth associated with bad experiences in the Occult (5).

Thus the need exists for an objective and critical analysis and appraisal to redress the imbalance. This is neither exhaustive nor normative in this regard, but is rather an attempt to gain wider perspective so as to identify the issues, and secondly to extrapolate broad principles for the guidance of the Church.

2. DEFINITIONS :

With the above in mind, the first and primary task, is to formulate a working theological definition of the terms "Occult" and "Eastern Mysticism". The linguistic definitions (ie. the dictionary terms -(6)) are inadequate in that the two are hardly distinguished at all, whereas from a Christian perspective they are not at all synonymous. Research in this regard reveals that the outstanding common feature of things occult is that of intentionality, and specifically, the intention to do evil. By contrast, the mystical religions of the East patently strive to do good (7), and it is therefore this difference in motivation which distinguishes them theologically.

For these purposes therefore, the "Occult" shall be deemed to include any practice, system or discipline which manifestly is, or can be shown to be evil by intention.

On the other hand, "Eastern Mysticism" shall be deemed to include any (religious) system, practice, discipline or exercise which has, or can be shown to have antecedents in Indo-Aryan culture and religion (8). (Eastern Mysticism is thus also to be distinguished from classical and modern Eastern Christianity which has always been more "mystical" than its Western counterpart.)

3. TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING WHY THE OCCULT AND EASTERN MYSTICISM ARE ATTRACTIVE TO WESTERNERS :

That interest in the Occult and Eastern Mysticism thus defined has resurged, especially (but not only !) amongst young people, is undeniable (9). If the Church therefore wishes to minister effectively to persons caught up in the trend, it is necessary to understand the cause -ie the attractiveness of these things.

There is firstly, as always, the "kicks" motif (10). Just as children tell each other ghost stories with the lights off as a means of emotional stimulation, so the Occult and Eastern Mysticism are dabbled in for sheer exhilaration' sake. The wearing off of the novelty is usually sufficient as a cure here.

But secondly, and more significantly, both offer a kind of meaning to and for existence (which the Church seems lamentably unable to do in some quarters just now.) Meaning in the West, traditionally encountered in religious spirituality, has been eroded and made bankrupt by the impact of secularisation- both in the Arts and the Sciences (11), both of which have been influenced by Aristotelian philosophy and metaphysics which had no room for God in the first place (12). Furthermore, the preoccupation with hedonism and materialism in the West, both of which have infiltrated and adversely affected the Church, has further alienated many from Christ, identified as He is with such things on account of His followers. Such persons, in turning away from the Church, look for the meaning and fulfillment for which they yearn in the Occult, but to an even greater extent, in one or more of the mystical religious systems of the East.

4. THE "FIRST STEP" OF THE REMEDY :

In the light of the above, the Church must purify itself of the influence of the Zeitgeist of modern Western culture (13). Black theologians have apparently made the same criticism of the White sector of the Church, though for different reasons. Perhaps the trend towards "Africanisation," which stresses community and joy may be of great value in this regard.

B. OCCULT.1. SCOPE :

Bearing in mind the formal criterion of the intention to do evil as defined above, the following practices fall within the scope of occultism :

Satanism; devil-worship; voodoo; witchcraft; necromancy (14); spiritualism; divination (of spirits -which is simply the metaphysical equivalent of necromancy;) and the like (15).

2. CHARACTERISTICS :

Occult practices usually include one or more of the following:-

drug-usage; sexual orgy and aberration; crazed, wild music; ritual initiation (which sometimes includes drinking the urine and/or blood of tortured and ritually slain animals, and in some extreme instances, of humans); satanic prayers and "masses," often enacted before idols/images of Satan; and clandestinism (16). According to at least one source, certain manifestations of occultism have political overtones as well (17).

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS :

The truly destructive and therefore evil nature of the Occult is seen in the psychologically negative effects it has on its victims, for few escape involvement therein unscathed. The primary effect is to reduce people to being slaves to fear (18).

Often this is followed by the development of personality disorders of both the neurotic and psychotic varieties, of which paranoia seems to be the most common in the latter category. Disintegration of the personality and even total and irreparable breakdown may be the final product.

Many victims of the Occult experience intense shame and guilt, and very often feel a sense of despair and hopelessness because they believe they have committed the "unpardonable sin," (19) a notion not infrequently reinforced by the literature referred to above.

4. THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE : (20.)

Scripture unequivocally and without exception condemns the Occult and occultism as evil, destructive, and directly contrary to the benevolent will and purposes of God. Little else can really be added, since there is nothing good that can be said about these things.

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5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH :

- (i) In principle, the Church should strive at all costs to avoid inadvertently promoting the Occult by giving it undue prominence (on which, see above; p 3.) Publicity should therefore be restricted to the absolute minimum possible. This principle has ramifications for our Bookrooms which sometimes market the kind of literature referred to above.
- (ii) Secondly, because few (if any ?) ministers and lay persons are adequately qualified as therapists and/or exorcists (on which, see above; footnote 5), victims of occultism should be referred without exception to the appropriate psychiatric authorities, whilst pastoral care is maintained.
- (iii) Thirdly, because exorcism is a highly specialised form of therapy, the Church should consider as a matter of priority setting aside suitably gifted and interested persons for specialised theological and pastoral training in this regard.

C. EASTERN MYSTICISM.1. SCOPE :

Eastern Mysticism includes Yoga and Transcendental Meditation (hereinafter referred to as "TM." (21).)

2. CHARACTERISTICS :

At their best, both Yoga and TM are characterised by, inter alia :-

contemplation/meditation (often in group or community setting); pacificness; stringent discipline (both dietarily and metaphysically); high ethical standards; sincerity; mysticism (22); and are usually philosophically and/or theologically articulate. (This is especially true of TM.)

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS :

By contrast with the negative effects of occultism, Eastern Mysticism tends towards psychological harmony and integration. As indicated above, it offers value and meaning to life and existence, goals and ideals -often in the context of a caring community. Devotees seldom feel trapped or afraid, and are evidently free to leave if they so desire, without being subjected to undue coercion and pressure to stay. As such, its effects are mostly positive.

C(Ctd).

4. THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE :

Christianity is bound to affirm and commend the inclination of Eastern Mysticism to the good. However such affirmation does not automatically or logically commit the Church to an uncritical, carte blanche acceptance of it. On the contrary, the Church must necessarily proceed with its mandate to preserve sound doctrine (23), and must therefore subject it to doctrinal and theological scrutiny (24). Such scrutiny in fact reveals authentic and valid grounds for objections, but these are objections to doctrine, rather than objections in principle, as in the case of the Occult.

(i) Yoga :

Krishna shows decisively that Yoga, both in its pure form and in its "soft" or so-called "Hatha" form (a routine of 'purely' physical exercises, ostensibly devoid of any theological content) is in fact ultimately grounded in the ancient Indo-Aryan (Vedic) religious system and culture (which culminated in the various strands of contemporary Hinduism; (25).)

The doctrines of this system clash with virtually every doctrine sacred to Christianity : God; Creation and Redemption; Man, Sin and Salvation; Eschatology, and so forth (26).

(ii) TM :

Whilst the protagonists and apologists of TM deny any relationship, formal or otherwise, with Hinduism and/or its Indo-Aryan antecedents, Krishna again shows that this is in fact true (27). The same criticisms therefore apply as in the case of Yoga. However, one further particular criticism must be mentioned. TM teaches "salvation" through the attainment of "pure consciousness." This turns out to be no more than an alternative term for "knowledge," making it also a gnostic system. However, it is a highly articulate and developed system, making it more difficult than most to identify as such. For this very reason, extreme caution must be exercised in relation to TM, because on the surface it seems so very plausible, and indeed, acceptable.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE CHURCH :

- (1) Firstly, the Church should not over-react. Whilst the doctrines and theological basis of Eastern Mysticism may justifiably and rightly be dismissed, Christianity may well enrich its spiritual life and worship by appropriating the principles of the disciplines of Eastern Mysticism by "baptising" these into Christ,

as it were (just as in the case of Christmas, originally a pagan festival converted for the Church's use.) Used in a Christian context, and certainly informed by sound doctrine, Yoga and TM disciplines/exercises could conceivably contribute to and enhance spiritual growth and maturation in Christians.

(ii) Secondly, the Church must strive to create an environment truly conducive to spiritual growth and fulfillment. This may be achieved in the following ways :-

- (a) There needs to be a reaffirmation (28) of the charismata (grace-gifts; (29)) The overtly more mystical types, namely tongues, interpretation of tongues and discernment should be given special prominence.
- (b) Further, there needs to be a new approach to what are known as the "parapsychological" (or "Psi") gifts, which include clairvoyance, telepathy, precognition, psychokinesis, trances, dreams, meditation, and so forth (30).
- (c) Thirdly, as in the case of the Occult, the Church should again consider as a matter of priority setting aside suitably gifted persons for specialised theological and pastoral training in this regard (31).

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FOOTNOTES

1. Making their system no more than an obverse gnosticism, though dressed in theological garb. As such these are to be criticised and rejected for precisely the same reasons as classical gnosticism itself.
2. Eg : Kenneth Hagan; Hal Lindsay; Dereck Prince et. al. Hagan's treatment of Isa. 14:12-17 may be cited as a representative case in point. Completely ignoring the (pre-exilic) context, he adduces Satan from the text. At least vv 4, 16ff of that pericope render this absurd. (Hagan seems to be citing the AV, which admittedly translates the relevant Hebrew noun as "Satan", but what is inexcusable is that the AV text is apparently used because it conveniently supports the argument.) In any case, if there were any doubt about the matter, Verryn's critique of the Rhema movement (RICH CHRISTIAN, POOR CHRISTIAN) whose teachings are based on such authors' works, shows this criticism decisively. Objective writers like Kelsey are exceptional.
3. For example : demons, demonology and demon-activity feature in Hagan's work, but the logical opposites -angels, angelology etc. hardly occur at all. On which, consider the spirit of Phil. 4:8f.
4. This is an inverse principle of publicity. Biblically this is illustrated by the tale of the enticement and fall of Adam in Gen. 3:1ff, read with 2:16f. It is noteworthy that precisely the divine prohibition was used to stimulate interest, but inverted so as to pervert truth and goodness. Outstanding modern examples include the pornographic propaganda used by the Nazi regime of Hitler to discredit Jews; and urban terrorism, since atrocities are deliberately perpetrated in order to give publicity to an extremist groups' goals.
5. In some circles, the only form of therapy which is considered as valid and effective, is exorcism. However, more often than not this is itself no more than a fear-reaction and a talismanic and superstitious ritual, as such unbecoming and unworthy of Christians. Furthermore, the "therapy" is often more damaging than the "disease" itself when used indiscriminately and irresponsibly by untrained or insensitive persons. But see further below, B.5.(iii), p 6.
6. See "Occult;" "Mystery;" "Mystic," and "Mystical" in The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English; 6 th Ed; Ed. J.B.Sykes; (Clarendon Press; 1976) loc. cit.
7. The Church must commend and affirm this in principle. But see further below, B.4, p 7.

8. Eg : Yoga and Transcendental Meditation. But see further below, C.4.(ii); p 7.
9. Thus for example a clipping from an unspecified English (daily ?) newspaper, dated 1982, cites the findings of an official police investigation into the Occult in Southern Africa, which estimates that as many as 250,000 were (then) thought to be involved in satanist cells. This figure does not include those practising Yoga and Transcendental Meditation.
10. In keeping with this, it is hardly surprising to note that drugs feature prominently in several Occult practices. Cf. M.J.Kelsey; The Christian and the Supernatural; (Search Press, London; 1976) pp 75ff.
11. The fairly recent television serial "Cosmos," compered by Carl Sagan is a splendid (!) example of scientific secularism.
12. Kelsey; op cit; pp 79, 129 etc.
13. Cf. 1 Pet. 4:17, r/w Rom. 12:2.
14. 1 Sam. 28:8ff recounts the strange story of Saul's request to the so-called "Witch of Endor" to summon Samuel from the dead. It is noteworthy that Saul's motivation was evil (he wished to retain the monarchy contrary to the divine imperative that he was to forfeit it for disobedience to God's will; 1 Sam. 13, and esp. vv 13-15. Contrast this with the attitude of Christ in Phil. 2:5-11.) Secondly, Samuel resented being recalled from the grave (v.15), but evidently had to submit to the real power of the woman so to summon him (v.8.) With this may be contrasted other occurrences in Scripture, for example : Mk. 5:21-24, 35-43 (= Mt. 9:18-26, Lk. 8:40-56); Matt. 27:52ff, and Jn. 11, all of which are seen to be characterised by the intention to do good, and which must be understood as signs of the inauguration of the basileia tou theou (Kingdom of God) in Jesus. Not least, of course, the resurrection of Jesus himself is of significance here.
15. Nor is this an exhaustive list. In terms of the formal criterion of distinction outlined in the definition, any practice which intends to do evil, either statedly or by implication, may be included. However, some "authorities" go too far when they include Jehovah's Witnesses (however obnoxious and objectionable they might be,) Mormons, and water-divining in this category.
16. The Church should endeavour to avoid every sort of clandestinism - the more so since this is one of the traits of the Occult. Moreover, it is noteworthy that precisely when the Church celebrated the sacraments in secret for fear of exposure to the Roman authorities (circa AD 175) it was accused, on misinformation and misunderstanding

- 16(Ctd.) arising directly from the (forced) secrecy, of crimes such as cannibalism. See J.Stevenson (Ed) A New Eusebius; (SPCK; 1957) Nr. 45 (p 71.) On which see further especially 2 Cor. 4:2.
17. So Gumaer; "Satanism: A Practical Guide to With Hunting," American Opinion; (Sept. 1970) p 1, who cites F.B.I. findings in the notorious Sharon Tait murders as evidence.
18. See especially Gal.4:3-11, where the bondage is to ta stoicheia, the "elemental spirits of the universe." Cf also Rom. 8:15f; 1 Jn. 4:13-18.
19. Mk. 3:28; cf Mt. 12:31ff; Lk 12:10, r/w 11:14ff.
20. Eph. 6:10ff is the crucial text in this regard, but by no means the only.
21. Whilst there are other varieties, eg. Baha'i, Hare Krishna (itself a sect within Hinduism) these are not included within the scope of this study since they do not seem to be indicated by the relevant paragraph (30) in Min. of Conf. 1982, p 64.
22. Mysticality, often experienced in seclusion (see 1 Kgs. 19:9ff; 2 Cor. 12:2ff; Rev. 1:10) must be distinguished from clandestinism since the two are easily though mistakenly equated.
23. Tit. 2:1; cf also 1 Tim. 1:3-7; 6:1; 2 Tim. 1:13; 2 Pet. 2:1-3.
24. On which, cf. 1 Jn. 4:1-4.
25. Paul Krishna; Transcendental Meditation (Unpublished critique of TM; UDW) ad. loc.
26. ibid. However, an extended treatment of each doctrine is not included here for want of space. The information is nevertheless readily available if needed.
27. ibid; pp 19 ff.
28. Cf esp. 2 Tim. 1:6.
29. See 1 Cor. 12, 14; Rom. 12:6; Eph. 4:11.
30. Kelsey; cit. ap; passim.
31. No doubt someone with personal experience in the Renewal and/or Charismatic movements would be ideally suited to this task.

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