

# THIS WORLD WITH DEVILS FILLED... THE PROBLEM OF SUPERSTITION IN CHRISTIAN MISSIONS

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## 1. Introduction

“AS A MISSIONARY in Central America, I saw professing Christians sacrifice chickens on their way to church,” reports Kenneth B. Mulholland.<sup>1</sup> Eunice Pike and Florence Cowan describe Christian converts in Africa who use hallucinogenic mushrooms in a magic ritual, identifying the mushrooms with Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Jamie Bultatao, a Philippine scholar, confesses: “I do not believe in ghosts, but I am afraid of them.”<sup>3</sup> These are just three examples that bring out a common problem of Christian missions. While confessing Jesus Christ as Lord, many converts continue their superstitious beliefs and pagan practices. There may be many causes for this, but in this paper I will focus on one such contributing factor: the interaction between the culture of the missionary and the culture of the people among whom he works.

In summary, the problem is that while the worldview of Western missionaries often has little room for spirits that interact with life on earth, most other worldviews have this dimension of spirits and forces in it, playing a central role. The message of the Western missionary, therefore, does not effectively address this aspect of reality. Even though the new converts swap out many of their beliefs for a Christian conviction, this particular aspect remains untouched and unchanged.

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1. Paul Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tiénou. *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), back cover.

2. Eunice Pike and Florence Cowan. “Mushroom Ritual versus Christianity,” in *Readings in Missionary Anthropology*, ed. W.A. Smalley (Tarrytown, NY: Practical Anthropology, 1967), 52-57.

3. Quoted in Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 90.

## 2. Worldview and the “Middle Level”

An important aspect of a worldview is its inventory of entities that are supposed to exist. It is convenient to subdivide this inventory into three parts: the higher level, the lower level, and the middle level.<sup>4</sup> On the *higher level* we find otherworldly entities: gods, angels, and devils, as well as abstract principles such as fate. This level is the main concern of formal religion, particularly in more evolved cultures. The *lower level* consists of all earthly entities that are accessible to man’s senses, the empirical reality of physical objects, people, and animals. People have much control over this level and form scientific models to understand it. The *middle level* contains entities that are earth-bound, yet are not empirical: ghosts, demons, and magical forces.

This middle level is the focus of “folk religion” and of superstition. It is an important part of many worldviews because it is supposed to explain basic existential questions: the meaning of life and the problem of death; the good life and the threat of calamity; guidance and the problem of the unknown; and morality and the presence of evil.<sup>5</sup> For most people, the explanation of these things lies in a network of super-empirical powers and beings, which cannot be explained rationally. It is holistically interwoven with the physical realm, so that physical objects can become symbols of this spirit realm and through magic give access to it. Also, through dreams and ecstatic visions people may gain knowledge of it.

In the Western worldview, especially in its formal expression, this middle level is virtually absent. Traditional Christianity has a strong focus on the higher level. We believe in God who is not only supernatural, but is absolutely and qualitatively different from anything else: he is Creator and all else is creature. On the lower level, the Western world has a highly developed knowledge (science) of all things material. The scientific models claim detailed understanding, such as the origins of people (as a species and as individuals), the mechanics of social classes, the causes of natural disasters, and the development of physical and mental illness. Practically these models have provided us with medicine, weather forecasts, socio-economic policies, and many other things to control our life. Instead of answering existential questions from the middle level, Westerners generally believe that the lower, physical level provides sufficient explanation.

As Western Christians we also believe in the existence of God, on the higher level. This provides us with a standard for morality and guidance, and answers the questions about purpose, death, and evil. But for everything else most Christians in the West have adopted the materialistic view of secular science. For them the created realm is

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4. See e.g. Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 47ff.

5. Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 77-79.

essentially physical and mechanical; they have no need for a middle level.

### 2.1. The Problem of Non-Confrontation

Consider now a Western Christian missionary who brings the gospel to another people group. In his preaching he presents his Christian worldview over against their pagan system. Let us assume that his message is received with enthusiasm and sincerity; many of his hearers come to the faith.

The new converts experience a thorough overhaul of their worldview. Their pantheon of gods (high or low) is now replaced by One God, who is more universal, more transcendent, more other-worldly and holy, more benevolent than any god they ever had. They learn to understand the physical world as a creation of God, good and beautiful in itself but tainted by sin. They embrace the gospel of Jesus Christ, God appeared in the flesh, as the redeemer of their lives and of the physical world. They understand that God is in control, and that Christ's kingdom is breaking through on earth, and will soon bring everything to its fulfillment.

And yet the missionary often finds that these new converts, even after years of being Christian, engage in pagan rituals, magic, and superstition.

The reason is that the missionary has not addressed the middle level of reality, as it exists according to their worldview. The Western missionary not only brings the gospel but also his Western values and beliefs. For him creation is largely, if not fully, material. When he preaches about God's providence and Christ's kingship over all things, he applies it to the empirical world, with the implied understanding that this includes sickness and health, economic goods, and natural disasters. But his listeners do not share this implied understanding. The High God of Christianity may have all under his ultimate control, and the physical realm may be the work of his fingers, but what about the invisible powers on earth that cause the circumstances of our lives? If this question is not answered, the new converts will hold on to this aspect of their worldview; and so they will not only participate in Christian worship and profit from Western science, but also live with their traditional rituals and superstition.

An insightful illustration is that of a missionary teaching a class to New Caledonian young people. He asked them to summarize what they had learned about the Spirit. But one of the students replied: "Spirit? You have not brought us knowledge about the spirit. We have lived in the atmosphere of spirits; what you have brought us is the body."<sup>6</sup>

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6. Eugene A. Nida. *Customs and Cultures: Anthropology for Christian Missions* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1979), 20.

This conflict arises because the missionary, with all his theological and secular teaching, fails to confront the belief in the non-material, while in many ways this “middle level” of reality is the main concern of his hearers as they face the challenges and existential questions of life.

## 2.2. Is the Western Worldview Better?

One possible response to this problem might be that a missionary starts preaching against any “middle level” beliefs, and attempts to replace it with his own beliefs. He might argue that illness is not caused by evil spirits, but by germs or chemical imbalances; that the fertility of a woman depends on physical factors, rather than magical forces; that the place where lightning strikes is not determined by bad luck, but by random fluctuations in the electric field around the earth.

But this approach is not likely to work. Practically, “many of the people they serve believe in these deeply. If missionaries try to stomp out these beliefs and practices, they will go underground.”<sup>7</sup> More fundamentally, it is quite possible that people will reject the missionary’s worldview because it does not provide an adequate answer. We naturally take it for granted that our Western ideas about existential problems of life are superior. But are they?

Many of our beliefs about the created reality are based on secular science, and not at all on divine revelation. It is therefore valid to question them. It is not sufficient simply to pitch our fundamental dualism, i.e., our “twoism,” over against the “oneism” of the rest of the world.<sup>8</sup> We may have properly distinguished between the Creator and the creation, but do we have a proper understanding of that created reality? We may also be tempted to point out the lack of coherence in the “middle level” beliefs we encounter: there are no detailed, universally agreed upon theories about magic and good/bad luck. But this argument fails, first of all because coherence is a typical Western, modernistic ideal, while others could not care less; and second, because our own Western materialism is not exactly consistent, either.

I would argue that our materialist view of creation fails to answer the most relevant questions people might ask: Why does this happen to *me*? Why did *my* child get sick? Why was *my* barn ruined by a tornado? Why am *I* colorblind? Modern sciences may have identified general material causes of these phenomena, but they cannot explain why they happen to one person rather than another. Epidemiology, meteorology, and genetics are ultimately statistical in nature. Often

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7. Hiebert et al., *Understanding Folk Religion*, 91.

8. See e.g. Peter Jones, *One or Two: Seeing a World of Difference* (Escondido, CA: Main Entry Editions, 2010).

(but certainly not always) they may be able to tell how things happen to people *in general*, but that does not answer the personal question that really matters: why me?

It is, in fact, rather amazing that modern people are so content with the answers of secular science. One could make the case that science itself has become a folk religion that provides alternatives for “middle level” beliefs: scientists are the shamans who give people hope, while documentaries and science-fiction movies are the rituals that affirm the beliefs.

Certainly, the Christian faith hastens to add that God is in control of all these physical processes and that they ultimately accomplish his purposes. But it is difficult for a Western Christian to explain how this providence works. How does God purposefully guide the world through impersonal, purposeless physical laws? How does providence interface with matter? Of course, philosophers and theologians have proposed various answers to this question. This is not the place to discuss them; my point is simply that the Western worldview provides no clear answer to this basic question.

All of this makes it difficult to “sell” our worldview to others. It may well be that people on the mission field are more willing to believe in God the Creator than in our materialistic view of creation. We ourselves may not see the difficulty because we have been spoon-fed this worldview from early in our lives, but our hearers will consider it more critically and decide that it does not answer their existential questions. They conclude, and with some validity, that their belief in spirits gives more adequate answers.

### 3. The Biblical Worldview

The Western modernistic belief is that reality is essentially material, governed by impersonal, neutral forces. But there is no Biblical warrant for this view. Rather, the Bible often uses “middle level” language to describe events in history. Contrary to what many of us tend to believe, there are spirits and demons that can affect our lives; these are personal and purposeful powers, created by God but hidden from our senses and empirical analysis.

An excellent book that deals with this matter is *Power Encounters* by David Powlison. The author “dismiss[es] out of hand as inadequate to all serious followers of Christ: capitulation to the spirit of the age by radically reinterpreting the Bible’s ‘spirit’ realities as mythical projections of psychological, sociological, political, economic, and medical phenomena.”<sup>9</sup> Rightly so; a plain reading of Scripture clearly reveals the existence of spirits.

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9. David Powlison. *Power Encounters: Reclaiming Spiritual Warfare* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 27.

Powlison then proceeds to criticize the opposite extreme, which he calls the “ekballism movement.” Particularly in some Pentecostal circles, people “really do see demons behind every bush.”<sup>10</sup> For them the world is a scary place full of spirits and demons that may take possession of someone, and affect their spiritual identity and moral convictions. In this movement it is common to perform exorcisms, which are attempts to cast out demons in Jesus’ name.

### 3.1. Evil Spirits: Demons

Then what is the right view? First of all,<sup>11</sup> the Lord is the absolute sovereign over the world, including all demonic powers. The Old Testament speaks very sparingly about Satan, while emphasizing God’s word and work in his dealings with the world. This is very different from many pagan theologies, in which forces of good and forces of evil are in perpetual battle as equal opponents.

Second, human beings are held responsible for their own evil. Contrary to the belief of the ekballism movement, demons do not normally take over people. They may inflict damage on people and tempt them, but man’s moral responsibility remains. For those who involve themselves with demons and occultism, the proper path to healing is not exorcism but repentance.

Third, God sovereignly constrains demons. They do not exist independently, but depend on God as all creatures do. Without his will they cannot even stir. The Lord is not only more powerful than all evil forces together, but in fact he uses them to accomplish his purposes. “Scripture destroys the notion of the haunted universe.”<sup>12</sup>

Fourth, while the people of God live in a demon-filled world, they are not called to fight by seeking access to “middle level” reality, by tapping into magical power or trying to exorcise and bind demons. Rather, they are called to flee from involvement with the occult and go to the Lord for refuge.

### 3.2. Good Spirits: Angels

The created universe not only contains forces of evil, but also angels, who are personal forces (spirits) of good.<sup>13</sup>

Angels are always acting as representatives of God, and point away from themselves. The Bible reports multiple times that angels refuse to be worshiped (e.g., Rev. 19:10). In fact, angels are so pro-

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10. *Ibid.*, 11.

11. In this breakdown I follow Powlison’s summary on p. 60, and the preceding discussion on pp. 49-59.

12. *Ibid.*, 61.

13. Scripture suggests that the dwelling place of angels is not the earth but a heavenly dwelling. For the current discussion it is important to state that angels are created beings, not accessible to our senses, yet do much of their work among us on earth.

foundly the agents of God that their activity is often ascribed directly to him. For instance, Psalm 91:11 says that the Lord commands his angels to protect believers, while Psalm 121 emphasizes that the Lord himself will keep them from harm. In 2 Kings 6:16-17 we are told that a large army of angels protected God's people in battle; it stands to reason that this was the case many other times, yet we are not told about them.

Angels guide and guard people, but do not take over or possess humans. Man remains responsible for his moral choices; angels cannot make them for us.

While angels are ministering spirits, they receive their instructions from God, not from us. This means that there is no place for invocations of good spirits or white magic.

### 3.3. The Holy Spirit

The Christian view of the spiritual realm outlined above may appear rather meager. There are angels that do God's bidding, and demons from whom we should flee. Christianity, even freed from Western materialism, denies humans access to this magical-spiritual realm. For those who used to live with a strong belief in the "spiritual," this may be liberating but also somewhat disappointing.

But the Christian view of the spiritual realm is not at all meager. The existence of demons and the activity of angels is nothing compared to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Just as in Jesus God himself broke into the "lower level," i.e., into the "flesh" of the physical reality, to redeem it and to be present with man forever, so in the Holy Spirit God broke into the "middle level" of reality, to fill it and to always be with us.

In a sense, the Holy Spirit is the ultimate answer to any questions of the "middle level." Yes, our world is filled with spiritual entities, but it is the Spirit of Jesus Christ who dwells with people. Yes, the spiritual realm directly affects people and their affairs, as the Holy Spirit dwells in the church, among the believers, and gives them wisdom and guidance.

## 4. Addressing the Culture

With this Biblical view of the spiritual realm, Christian missionaries have a good starting point for addressing a culture with strong "middle level" beliefs. There is a clear point of contact: "You believe in good and evil spirits? So do I." At the same time, there will be necessary points of correction.

#### 4.1. Necessary Corrections

The missionary can address *fear* of evil spirits, by declaring God's sovereignty over this part of creation. The gospel is that Jesus is King and Lord of all, including all spiritual forces and powers (Matt. 28:18; Col. 2:15; 1 Pet. 3:22), so that even the most powerful evil spirit, Satan himself, is bound and ready to be destroyed. The Lord is always present, always in control, and will protect his people from evil. He will even accomplish his purposes by means of evil spirits; they are unwilling participants in his ultimate triumph.

The missionary can address attempts to gain the *favor* of good spirits, by assuring the people that God is for them, and that his angels minister to the saints (cf. Ps. 91:11-12; Matt. 18:10). People cannot manipulate angels, but the Lord will command them for the good of his people. Instead of exerting magical power, believers are called to pray; they do not come to beg or to make a deal with God, but commune with the Father as his children.

The missionary can address attempts to use *magic* as a means of controlling others. Any such manipulation is unethical, because it does not respect the freedom God has given to people. The only thing magic can accomplish, if the Lord allows it, is a destructive involvement with demons. Those who enlist demons to afflict others will themselves be worse off as they enslave themselves to evil.

More generally, the missionary can address *occultism* properly instead of denying its effectiveness. If man is able to contact spirits in this manner, they will be evil spirits, demons who are more than happy to seize the opportunity. Occultism is a deliberate choice for evil and a violation of the God-given order. The Bible clearly forbids occultism, and, in fact, mentions various kinds of occult behavior: divination, invocation, potions, etc. In a culture where occultism is rampant, a preacher may want to preach on such passages to make more detailed, concrete applications to his hearers.

#### 4.2. Answering Existential Questions

Positively, the missionary can incorporate angels and demons in his teaching about existential questions.

For questions surrounding *luck and misfortune*, the primary Christian answer is that the Lord arranges the lives and circumstances of man. Both in luxury and in poverty, people are called to serve the Lord and to deal responsibly with what they have been given. Blessings are given to be passed on. The idea that luck is somehow linked to good behavior or good magic, and misfortune to bad behavior or bad magic, must be forcefully battled (as Jesus did in John 9:2). There is no need to deny the agency of demons and angels. The story of Job makes clear that the Lord allows even believers



to be afflicted by demons; yet in it and through it the Lord reveals his salvation.

For questions surrounding *guidance in life*, the answer is the Word of God. The Lord graciously accommodated his revelation to us humans, so that his direction for life is available in normal language in Scripture. Dreams or divinations are unnecessary; the will of God is public. Jesus, as the ultimate Word of God, provided further instruction in his words and deeds. Within these boundaries of God's Word, there is no need for additional guides. The faculties of a sanctified person, whose heart and mind are instructed by the Holy Spirit, are God-given means to make right decisions. The Lord's promise to be with his people always and to direct their path allows us to trust that all will be well.

### 4.3. Proper Ritual

Rituals play an important role in any religion. This is a difficult area for missionaries, because rituals fulfill several functions. In particular, rituals that fulfill a social function (e.g., rite of passage, wedding, etc.) may at the same time be religious rituals in which spirits are invoked. This is natural: most folk religions are holistic, so that important events in the social realm are directly linked to spiritual power.

It would be unwise to forbid all ritual. Transition rituals are needed to order a society. The Biblical cultures had several of these rituals: the celebration of a birth, a weaning party, the Bar Mitzvah transition, a wedding, etc. Likewise, it is only natural to celebrate key moments in the annual cycle of dark and light or wet and dry seasons, or of planting and harvesting.

The challenge for the missionary is to preserve these aspects of ritual, while opposing any idolatry that may take place. The best approach is probably to direct these religious rituals to the proper address. That is, whatever concern underlies the ritual (e.g., sacrifice for fertility or prayer for protection) should be brought to the Lord himself in the way of prayer. No other god, and no good spirit will listen; no demon will stay away just because a ritual is performed. The gospel wonderfully tells Christians to bring their requests directly to the Father in Jesus' name, and he will do it. This makes any additional cultic ritual superfluous. A good starting point for teaching this is Psalm 50:23, "To him that offers thanksgiving and orders his way rightly, I will show the salvation of God."

The history of the church shows how easy it is for Christians to fall into a magic interpretation of any ritual, including the sacraments. Naturally, this danger is even more present in a culture that has just departed from paganism. Missionaries may be tempted to remove such temptations altogether. I am not sure that iconoclasm is the best answer. With proper teaching, rituals that are in themselves

not idolatrous may be given a Christian interpretation; for instance, a celebration of the return of the light at the winter solstice can be associated with Christ as the Light of the World—Christmas!

When people from a culture rich in ritual are introduced to Christian worship, they may interpret the liturgy and sacraments in the same way as their pagan customs: as invocations of earthbound spirits, as magical rituals, as ways to access esoteric truth. If the medieval church at large fell into a magical understanding of the Lord's Supper, it is hardly surprising that recent converts from paganism will make a similar mistake.

Yet the church should not hesitate to perform the sacrament and teach a high view of it. The sacrament allows us, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to commune with Jesus Christ, although he is now in heaven. The rituals of communion and baptism may have a strong appeal to the new convert from paganism: perhaps for the wrong reasons (as a form of magic), or perhaps for the right reasons (as a sacred symbol that gives access, through the Spirit, to a higher reality). I would imagine that it is tempting for missionaries to present a more Zwinglian interpretation of the sacrament as a mere commemoration, in an attempt to avoid idolatry. But it would be wrong to do so; and one would waste an important opportunity to connect to a culture.

## 5. Conclusion

The gospel addresses the whole life of a person, and impacts all aspects of a culture. A complete application of a worldview to the work of missions has, therefore, many aspects, which cannot possibly be discussed in the scope of a single paper.<sup>14</sup> I have tried to show that missionaries can make profitable use of a worldview in which a proper place is given to “middle level” entities: demons and angels, as well as the Holy Spirit. This worldview may seem a bit foreign to Westerners, but is supported by Biblical data.

And this does not only apply to missions far away. In North America there is a growing folk religion, with belief in spirit guides, magic, and so on. This may well be a reaction to the failure of Western materialism. Rather than denying the validity of this reaction, the church would do well to acknowledge the existence of the spiritual “middle level” of reality. Only then can she effectively minister to these people, and warn them against idolatry and impress on them the dangers occultism.

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14. Hiebert et al. manage to give a fairly complete overview in *Understanding Folk Religion*.