

Reasons for the Modern Occult Revival—Part One

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Occultism has now settled comfortably into American culture. Even many Christians are involved in psychic or occult practices, directly or indirectly. However, occult revivals in this nation are nothing new. The mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries boasted significant occult activity. If we consider this phenomenon historically, we may understand the potential of occultism to shape our future. For example, in 1851 there were an estimated 1,200 mediums in Cincinnati, Ohio, alone—as well as hundreds of mediums in other major cities.¹ By 1855, America boasted several thousand mediums and some two million followers, which led to an estimated eight to eleven million supporters by 1871.²

These early “channelers” and their followers undergirded an entire century of American parapsychological research—the scientific study of the occult.³ This research, in part, finally helped to pave the way for our modern occult explosion.⁴

For example, observe the consternation of G. H. Pember in *Earth's Earliest Ages*. If we had not identified the date of publication as 1876, the reader could easily have assumed it originated with a modern author, so accurate is it in describing events of our own era:

Nay, almost every characteristic of antiquity seems to be reappearing. Open intercourse with demons is being renewed on a vast scale in the very heart of Christendom, and even among the hitherto somewhat Sadducean Protestants: numerous circles are carrying on magical practices: attempts are being made to restore the influence of those ancient Mysteries which are said to have been always kept up by a few initiates: the old mesmeric healings are again performed: star-gazers and planet rulers have greatly increased, while many amateur students are zealously assisting to re-establish the power of astrology over the human race: the use of the divining rod, and countless other practices of primal and medieval times, are once more becoming common. And, impossible as it would have seemed a few years ago, all these “superstitions” are floating back to us upon the tide of “modern thought.” They come no longer veiled in mystery, nor claiming to be miraculous or Divine; but in accordance with the spirit of the age, present themselves as the fruit of science, as an evidence of the progression of knowledge in regard to the laws of the visible and invisible worlds.⁵

In our own period, a worldwide occult revival is mushrooming in obvious and less obvious guises—such as the human potential movement and certain psychotherapies in transpersonal and some forms of humanistic psychology.⁶ Even the military and some major corporations are turning to or promoting pseudo-science and the occult.⁷

In 1979 *Time* magazine estimated some 40,000 witches were active in the United States. Today, the figure may have quadrupled, with an equal number of Satanists; regardless, over 300 universities, colleges, and educational institutions (over 75 are accredited or state-approved) now offer programs or even degrees on New Age topics; some 100 American universities also offer courses in witchcraft, and in Britain alone today there are an estimated 50,000 to 75,000 spiritists plus 40,000 to 100,000 witches and Satanists.⁸ Forty years ago all this was unheard-of.

Our current occult revival can be explained, in part, by the following factors:⁹

1. *The failure of rationalism, secular humanism, and materialism as comprehensive*

worldviews. While such ideologies have provided a welcome insulation against the occult, they have also indirectly promoted it by default. Millions of people have found such philosophies cannot meet their deeper personal needs, provide an outlet for spiritual expression, or offer a legitimate basis for genuine meaning in life. This explains why those who have no religious affiliation, far from being committed rationalists, are frequently the first to explore the supernatural.

According to the Bible, man is created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26,27), and has an innate need for fellowship with God. This explains why the history of mankind is the history of almost endless religious involvement—a search after divine reality. Unfortunately, men and women often turn to counterfeit religious expression in an attempt to satisfy these yearnings.

Thus, thinking the world of the psychic realm is something divine, many have turned to the paranormal, mystical, and occult in search of what they would not or could not find elsewhere.

2. *A spiritual vacuum has resulted from the abandonment of orthodox Christianity, providing a cultural reorientation to greater acceptance of an occult/mystical worldview.* Perhaps the most important cause of our occult revival is our nation's turn from Christian faith. It is a simple fact that wherever Christianity is biblically practiced, occultism is rejected. Several decades ago there was at least a general consensus that the Bible was a divine revelation; that a personal God existed; that prayer was important—regardless of the number of people who actually lived such a philosophy in their daily lives. Even non-Christians benefited from a culture influenced by a Christian worldview. Such a cultural consensus provided a buffer against not only occult practice but also the barren implications and nihilism of non-theism.

However, our culture today has rejected even the minimal tenets of Christianity, and occultism, agnosticism, humanism, and religious and cultural relativism have come to power; as a result, in some ways our society is imploding from within. A substantial cultural shift is currently underway:

Recent developments not only in science but in the arts, politics, psychology, and religion indicate a broad shift in Western culture to increased acceptance of a common set of presuppositions that parallel the occult/mystical world view, which is in stark contrast to the biblical world view of historic Christianity.¹⁰

The influence of an Eastern-occult/New Age-mystical world-view can be seen in education, literature and the arts, business, theology, medicine, psychology, government, science, popular movies, etc.—in virtually every segment of our culture. Witness as examples the modern influence of transpersonal (occult) education,¹¹ the revival of spiritistic literature which now sells in the millions of copies,¹² astrology and human potential seminars in the business world,¹³ the influence of parapsychology and cultism in Christian theology,¹⁴ the growing influence of New Age medicine,¹⁵ how Western psychologists are being powerfully influenced by Eastern traditions,¹⁶ how our own government now sponsors psychic research and, for lack of a better term, the various renditions of the new “physics mysticism” seen in Fritjof Capra's *The Tao of Physics* and other texts.¹⁷

Well-known businessmen and movie stars routinely seek the advice of psychics and mediums; prestigious universities offer courses in the occult and conduct research into parapsychology; some hospitals even utilize the assistance of psychic healers, whom they may not identify as such to their patients lest they frighten them.

George Lucas, the cinema genius behind the Star Wars saga and the Indiana Jones movies, is only one Hollywood mogul who believes that cinema “should deal more with the occult.”¹⁸ Television now offers daily 900 ads or “infomercials” promoting psychic advice on half a dozen forms of divination (tarot, *I Ching*, astrology, etc.). These ads have reached and persuaded millions of people. Booklets are sold at supermarket checkout stands which are designed to enable the average person to “become psychic” and which encourage the development of psychic healing, spirit contact via the Ouija board, automatic writing, pendulum use, etc.¹⁹

Researcher Brooks Alexander discusses how such metaphysical ideas have been successfully assimilated into our culture:

Eastern teachings have risen to prominence and prosperity in the West with remarkable speed.... As Eastern and occult ideas are propagated to Occidentals on a mass scale, they are filtered through the pervasive secularism of our culture. In this way, they are demystified without changing their essential content. The basic components of an Eastern/occult world view are recast in forms of expression that are naturalistic, scientific, and humanistic in orientation. Occult philosophy is being secularized and psychologized with increasing refinement. In such forms, its fundamental concepts are easily adopted and easily applied by contemporary intellectuals.

Thus these mystical doctrines have influenced areas of society far removed from the sometimes bizarre world of the counterculture. Their underlying themes run through contemporary science, economics, politics, art, psychology, and religion.²⁰

(to be continued)

Notes:

¹ Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York: Pocket Books, 1972), pp. 159-160.

² Nandor Fodor cites the *North American Review*, April 1855, as accurate in giving the figure of nearly two million spiritists in 1855 (Nandor Fodor, *An Encyclopedia of Psychic Science* (Secaucus, NJ: Citadel, 1974), p. 362; G. H. Pember cites a figure of eight to eleven million followers in *Earth's Earliest Ages*, Revell edition, nd., p. 318; Alfred Douglas, *Extrasensory Powers: A Century of Psychological Research* (Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 1977), p. 54; on the authority of the editor of the *Home Journal* he cites 40,000 spiritualists in New York in 1853; cf. Alan Gauld, *The Founders of Psychological Research* (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 15

³ e.g., Clifford Wilson and John Weldon, *Psychic Forces*, Chapter 22, “The Occult History of Parapsychology” (Chattanooga, TN: Global, 1987), pp. 341-349.

⁴ This is evident from any number of historical studies. See Paul Kurtz's “Introduction: More Than a Century of Psychological Research,” in Paul Kurtz, ed., *A Skeptic's Handbook of Parapsychology* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1985), pp. xii-xiv; John Beloff, “Historical Overview,” in Benjamin B. Wolman, ed., *Handbook of Parapsychology* (New York: Van Nostrand, Reinhold, 1977), pp. 4-7; J. B. Rhine, “A Century of Parapsychology,” in Martin Ebon, ed., *The Signet Handbook of Parapsychology* (New York: Signet, 1978), p. 11.

⁵ G. H. Pember, *Earth's Earliest Ages* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publishers, 1975 rpt.) p. 243.

⁶ Documentation may be found in John Ankerberg, John Weldon, *The Coming Darkness* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1993). See also many issues of the *SCP Journal* (P. O. Box 4308, Berkeley, CA) and the *Christian Research Journal* published by The Christian Research Institute in El Toro, CA.

⁷ See *SCP Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 1, *Minding the Store: Influences of the New Age in Business* (1989), passim; “Companies Turn to Psychic Advice,” *The Daily Californian*, Apr. 23, 1983; L. F. Maire and J. D. LaMothe, *Soviet and Czechoslovakian Parapsychology Research*, Defense Intelligence

Agency Report, Sep. 1975, code DST-18105-387-75 and the related report by L. F. Maire, *Controlled Offensive Behavior*.

- ⁸ Gordon Melton, *New Age Encyclopedia* (Detroit, MI: Gale, 1990), p. xv, English statistics; Russ Parker, *Battling the Occult* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 189; Patricia Weaver, "Ritual Abuse, Pornography and the Occult," *SCP Newsletter*, Vol. 14, No. 4, 1989, p. 3.
- ⁹ Most of these are mentioned in Os Guinness, *The Dust of Death* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), pp. 280-286.
- ¹⁰ Ronald Enroth, "The Occult," in Walter Elwell, ed., *The Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), pp. 787-788.
- ¹¹ John Ankerberg, Craig Branch, and John Weldon, *Thieves of Innocence: A Parents' Handbook for Identifying New Age Religious Beliefs, Psychotherapeutic Techniques and Occult Practices in Public School Curricula* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1993), passim.
- ¹² John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Facts on Spirit Guides* (Eugene OR: Harvest House, 1989); *SCP Journal*, Vol. 7., No. 1, 1987: "Spiritism: The Medium and the Message."
- ¹³ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Astrology: Do the Heavens Rule Our Destiny?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1989).
- ¹⁴ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Cult Watch* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 1991).
- ¹⁵ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Can You Trust Your Doctor?* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1991).
- ¹⁶ For example, John Welwood, ed., *The Meeting of the Ways: Explorations in East/West Psychology* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979).
- ¹⁷ Martin Ebon, *The Devil's Bride: Exorcism Past and Present* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), p. 11.
- ¹⁸ *SCP Newsletter*, Jul.-Aug. 1984, p. 9, citing *Rolling Stone*, Jun. 25, 1981, p. 22.
- ¹⁹ E.g., Globe Communications, "Your Hidden Psychic Powers" (New York: Globe Communications, 1987), booklet.
- ²⁰ Brooks Alexander, "Occult Philosophy and Mystical Experience," in *Spiritual Counterfeits Project Special Collection Journal*, Vol. 6, no. 1 (Berkeley, CA: Spiritual Counterfeits Project, Winter 1984), p. 14.