



# The Church and Cosmic Powers through the Ages

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## Abstract

Church history demonstrates that the Church has always encountered cosmic powers. It is an appeal to church historians to consider cosmic powers as the reality to be dealt with. Through a literature review study, this paper gives some historical knowledge of the activities of cosmic powers from the Old Testament through the New Testament into the church history. The objectives are to point out that demons and their activities are part of church history; and that the current church and world at large still confront these demonic activities in diverse ways. The picture of human misery is elaborated upon and left open to interpretation as different disciplines scrutinise these miseries differently, but theologically as church history has demonstrated over centuries, they are the cosmic powers at work, manifesting as powers that promote injustice, coldness of heart, fear, and despising and abusing God's creation. These human miseries are the reason for the call to church to seriously study the subject of cosmic powers (demonology). Historical studies show that all Christian churches, especially Pentecostal and Charismatic operations seem to be in touch with the cosmic powers reality and endeavours are made to deal with them just as is the case in all mainline churches. Conclusion is an appeal to church historians to note that demons should not be treated as an absurdity and that the religion should not conclude that God is dead, or irrelevant.

**Keywords:** cosmic powers, community, church, theology, demons.

## Introduction

Through a literature review, general observation, listening to personal testimonies, and strange activities in public spaces, this article demonstrates that throughout the ages, the Church has been confronted by cosmic powers. Forces of darkness have and do exert themselves in the church through diverse voices. The objective of the paper is to reveal the reality of the cosmic powers operating both within and outside the world, and to encourage believers that as the redeemed people of God, their security in Christ is firm and assured. During the Roman Empire, the populace believed in the power of evil spirits or witches, which "surpassed the power of the gods" (Paas, 2016:44). Prior to the arrival of missionaries in Africa, "the powers of witchcraft and magic had deeply invaded the inner being of society and of individuals" (Paas, 2016:296). When liberalism of the eighteenth century gained the momentum, taciturnity and disregard of active evil forces in the cosmos waned, and 'belief in devils, witchcraft, and sorcery fell into the background (Cragg, 1990:87). Church historical surveys show that Christian thought about Satan remained consistent until the 17th and 18th centuries (Buys, 2019:3). According to Unger (1991:20) some Early Church history writers such as Justyn Martyr, Lactantius and Augustine made some references to demons and their activities. Unger continued to highlight that "For nearly a millennium and a half, for some strange reason, the true Biblical doctrine of demons was hardly spoken of." Unger later continued to inform us that by the 19th century,



the whole subject was sneered at by many as a superstitious idea which we had well get rid of or was quickly passed over in theological circles” (1994: viii). Church historian, Cairns addresses the emergence of the new movements of the twentieth century as attempts to address the spiritual forces of darkness, especially in the context of urban decay (Cairns, 1978:479-483). It is unfortunate that predominantly white Christianity within theological faculties and seminaries dominated by the curriculum based on Western theological worldview, have according to Nel (2019:1) “to a certain extent abandoned the belief in malevolent powers. They view demons as simply a metaphor in which people previously tried to explain various phenomena that we now know have psychological causes.”

Though the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 32:16,17; Psalm 106:37; 2 Chronicles 11:15; Isaiah 13:21 and 34:14) bear witness to the reality of demonic power; and the New Testament especially in Jesus’ ministry demonic activities are recorded, it is only recently that mainstream Christianity started to realise and acknowledge the reality of cosmic powers and how to confront them. This is mainly within the Pentecostal and Charismatic circles, where pneumatic spirituality is “an attractive alternative both to older forms of Christianity and to pre-Christian religions with its emphasis on deliverance and exorcism” (Nel, 2019:2). Personal testimonies flow from these communities to attest to the reality, activities and manifestations of demonic powers in people’s lives or community structures.

### **Rationale behind historical and current research on cosmic powers**

While different disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and developmental studies interpret the scenario painted below differently, theology sees it as the action of evil forces. The world communities feel vulnerable, unsafe, and insecure, especially “...in South Africa with the high crime statistics, or health security, or financial security when one retires” (Meylahn, 2012:18). The world communities in their diversities are polarised, disengaged, and disconnected. Communities are riddled with criminalities and are composed of wanting members involved in corruption activities, house break-ins, car jackings; thefts, sexual offences such as rape, discriminations based on gender orientations, adultery, fornication et cetera. Gangsterism and substance abuses are abundant and drive communities’ livelihoods into fear. Social cohesion is at the lowest level as communities are thrown out of orderly functions, with no coherence as members are detached from the social whole.

The state is failing to effectively provide safety and security for its citizens. In some areas, witchcraft, black magic, anti-God rituals et cetera, are rampant. The cosmic powers known as demonic activities are holding many communities hostage, and people’s liberties are held at ransom by fear of these unseen forces. Moreau (1990:106-108) lists these powers’ activities as bringing medical problems, causing social problems, appearing to the living, empowering objects, possessing people or animals, and driving people into activities that are associated with witchcraft, spiritism, fortune-telling, occultism et cetera.

There are cosmic powers of this present darkness at work in the world, opposing God’s good purposes, opposing Jesus’ sacrifice to redeem the world. There are indeed demonic powers that promote injustice, coldness of heart, fear, and despise and abuse God’s creation. These demonic activities revealed themselves throughout history, through ideological manifestations and:

overtly evil socio-political systems such as the idolatry of the Roman Caesars, the anti-Semitism of Hitler’s Nazism, the evil of human slavery, the atheism of the Communists, the dehumanisation of Apartheid, the wickedness of the ethnic cleansing in parts of Africa, racism and terrorism of all forms, and the greed of capitalism have all demonstrated the extent to which the evil powers can influence world systems and seek to thwart the blessings of humanity (Buys, 2019:3).

The church community is “confronted and opposed by powers that are really governing and controlling that world, the world as it is in opposition against God, the world outside God



and His blessing” (Lloyd-Jones, 1986: 59). Attacks may come from within through pseudo-doctrines, and externally through demonic activities responsible for human miseries. Although the church is the Spirit-empowered community, it faces opposition from within itself. It was to the religious leaders that Jesus had to declare: “If the head of the house has been called Beelzebub, how much more the members of his household!” (Matthew 10:25). If those within a religious circle associated and labeled Jesus with the devil, what more of his followers? Jesus’ enemies are church’s enemies and his friends are his church’s friends. The bottom line is the realities called good and evil – something that the postmodern human rationale despises. Our postmodern context avoids calling anything “evil” as its pedagogical approach is “It’s different” or “Your truth is not the same as my truth” or even “That’s not how I experience things” (Cook, 1990:11-12). Regardless of this approach, the empowered community acknowledges, and rightly so, that there are evil powers that prevent approaching life from *theodeterminist* point of view (Pendergraft in Furlong and Vicens, 2007:231).

These powers deprive humans of their sense of identity and dehumanize them, marring the image of God they carry. Any principality against God works in opposition with God and contend with the church that is destined to remain “as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless” (Ephesians 5:27).

Cosmic powers work in and through occultism, which is “...a religion, primarily following a path either opposite of the God of the Bible or ignoring the God of the Bible, worshipping various deities or man himself” (Els & Jonker, 2000:5). Satanic activities are demonic and occultic, fighting against the church. This justifies the church to aggressively engage in spiritual warfare, as these powers act in some very elusive and impalpable schemes. Cosmic powers work under the cloak of occultism, causing disruptions in social structures, bringing abject poverty, animism, syncretism, cultural confusions and mental disturbances. These encourage heretic leniencies, which is the false doctrines. Samples (2017:215-216) points out that “heresies and false doctrine are sometimes associated with demonic influence (1 Timothy 4:1-2).” False doctrines are the distortions of the meta-narratives.

From the patristic times through the history of the church these doctrines are the anti-God or anti-Christ utterances that undermine the God of the Bible and Christ. They are the doctrines that speak against the Holy Spirit, and sometimes devalue the person, the function and the place of the Holy Spirit within the Godhead. Christology is the heretics’ main area of attack, especially Christ’s personhood and His soteriological functions, including His church. Their methodology of attacks is to deceive humankind with some supernatural spiritual counterfeit. They have no regard for human dignity and sanctity of life as such. For the naïve, false doctrines are deceptive, sound genuine and pure. Historical studies on inter-alia Gnosticism, Platonism, and Skepticism support the fact that false doctrines are always extra-biblical by adding, subtracting, contradicting, or nullifying the biblical doctrines. Throughout church history, the main vehicles of their ideology have been mass literature promotion, electronic mass media (radio, television and websites), and of course word of mouth recruitment strategies.

Heresies often fail and fall short of the Apostle Paul, who after 14 years in the ministry, met with the leadership in Jerusalem and asked that they examine what he taught. He did this “for fear that I was running or had run my race in vain” (Galatians 2:2). The genuine teachers of the truth are transparent to be appraised, scrutinised, critiqued and assessed by the church and those in ordained and recognised church leadership positions. They humbly submit to proper ordination which from church history, “...legitimizes the ordinand’s role as clergy and performance of rituals” (Pogorelc, 2021:12). Generally, in the Reformed tradition, individuals must be ordained in order to preside at the sacraments and to be installed as a called priest or pastor of a congregation or parish. Rejecting this kind of submission may be cosmic powers’ plan to destroy one’s orderly life within the community where one normally should receive strength and protection. Knowledge of truth may be



marred by accepting the twisted doctrine through heretics. Heretics are used by demons to "...generally deny or cloud the genuine deity, the genuine humanity, or the substitutionary sacrifice of Christ with its appropriation by faith" (Dickason, 1978:117). Throughout church history, the influence of cosmic powers has been raging and devastating humanity, distorting and marring the human dignity, attempting to unsettle God's image that humanity is endowed with.

### **Biblical identification of cosmic powers**

The Old Testament acknowledges cosmic powers in the form of magicians, though it did not approve of them. Gwamna (2014:131-132) helps in describing them as sorcerers (people who use charms and spells), magicians (people engaged in secret arts), enchanters and charmers (engage in witchcraft and interpretations of dreams), diviners and false prophets (see false visions, engage in idolatries and the delusions of their minds), experts in charms and snake charmers), and sinners who will be punished. There is a general acceptance that even in Africa, mystical powers such as magic, sorcery and witchcraft continue to affect everyone for better or for worse (Gehman, 2005:85). The bottom line is that like throughout the world, witchcraft is widespread in Africa. In exploring the extent of African spirituality, Bourdillon expounds the subject of witchcraft as follows:

The basic belief is that certain people have special, unnatural powers to harm others, and that they use these powers in perverted ways that contradict the values or norms of society. Witchcraft is thoroughly evil, and a witch is a person who practices witchcraft (2000:176).

From the New Testament time, Jesus encountered the demoniacs such as in Mark 5 and Matthew 17:14-20, and the Pauline teaching to the Ephesian Christians is to fight against principalities, powers and evil forces in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6:10-12). Paul extends his teaching that the external attacks are real. We do not fight against enemies of flesh and blood, but against "rulers", "authorities", "cosmic powers of this present darkness", and "spiritual forces of evil" (Ephesians 6:12).

Reference to the armour implies that church life is a battlefield, what is always referred to as spiritual warfare. The believers' community life, though empowered by the Spirit, is a warfare, a struggle, hence the Pauline statement: "We wrestle." This is an ongoing battle, and the church as a community resides in a world which is 'a battle - ground, "... is a place in which we literally have to fight for our souls, to fight for our eternal welfare" (Lloyd-Jones, 1986:23). This text has led to the common concept within Christian circles known as spiritual warfare. Luka (2023:1) affirms that "This spiritual battle is not strange to the African context" where African Traditional Religions (ATR) are rampant.

Both the Old and the New Testament reinforce the church as the alternate and empowered community with Christ at her centre to provide this power against these cosmic powers. The bottom line is that the alternate community, the church, derives her victory over cosmic powers through faith in the presence of God, communitarian relationship with God, and the dependence on the *charisms* imparted by the Spirit (Kärkkäinen, 2002:139-140).

### **African communities confronting cosmic powers**

Africans are familiar with the powers of darkness and when they convert to Christianity, the two powers fight for dominance, hence evil versus good. It is therefore ideal for theologians to come to "terms with these realities of African traditional religions if they are to make Christianity intelligible in the African context" (Mosicke, 2017:127) as a historical reality. The reality comes through the studies on African Traditional Religions (ATR). According to Mbillah (2020:257), ATR is a primordial African Religion that first existed before the arrival of Christianity and Islam, forming a triad of religious heritage to Africans (ATR, Islam and Christianity). The African church like the church globally, is faced with the darker side of spiritual activities, and this calls for historical and theological understanding. Buys (2019:4)



reminds us that African people treat demonology with great seriousness. Demon activity is very real for African people as being pointed out by several scholars from Africa (Kathide, 2007; Kato, 1975; Manala, 2004; Mbiti, 1975; Nyirongo, 1997; Turaki, 1999).

The manifestations of these cosmic powers come through demonic activities that aim to sway people's attention from Jesus Christ. These powers come in the form of occultism, superstitions, fortune-telling, magic, spiritism, and the so-called deliverances practiced by some Neo-Charismatic preachers. Religious and ethnic rivals, ethnic nationalism such as Hutu-Tutsi conflict in Rwanda and Burundi, religious extremism such as Boko-haram activities in Nigeria and elsewhere, resurgences of traditional beliefs working against the God of the Bible, and toxic waves of materialism and individualism (Witte, 2000:182) are all evidences of activities of cosmic powers rising in conflict with the church. All these practices such as magical practices, fortune-telling, occultism, witchcraft etcetera, are irreconcilable with Christian ethics (Theron, 1996:109).

The bottom line is that African ecclesiology, which is communitarian and perichoretical faces these demonic forces. The tribal chief, the witchdoctor, and the ecclesial leader are always in conflict. This is a reactionary mode, as colonisers illtreated the chiefs by requiring them to act simply as their agents to advance their interests (Bujo, 2006:40), hence animosity to the church as she associates with oppressive colonisers. Disrespect to the king or a chief is stripping the tribe of its dignity, honour, and selfhood, unity symbolism, because the chief – dead or alive continues to remain the head-father of a lineage, clan or tribe (Turaki, 1997: 43). An example is when Chief Kgamanyane of Bakgatla ba Kgafela in Moruleng (Rustenburg, South Africa) was "...stripped and whipped in front of his subjects by Paul Kruger in 1870. This divided the Bakgatla tribe as Kgamanyane consequently took part of the tribe and settled in Mochudi which is currently in Botswana" (Manson & Mbenga, 2014:37). Kruger was supposed to learn that hurting the head of the tribe is like hurting the head of the family. This understanding should help church historians, especially the missiologists and ecclesiologists that the church in Africa reflects family (core, central or clan) around the chief, as Buconyori (1977:49) asserts that "Presenting Christianity as forming of extended family is most appropriate in African setting."

The African chief influenced by the witchdoctor can exert his influence by refusing a church leader a piece of land upon which to build the church. In some cases, the church can be built, and the structure is destroyed by the strange fire, lightning or thunderstorms (Olukoya, 2010:9). The community of believers can sometimes be attacked through fierce tribal opposition, strange spiritual or emotional oppressions et cetera (Geschiere, 1997:200). This is the time when the God-empowered community should stand together in unity and in communion with the trinitarian God to nullify these powers through faith and intensive prayers. It is therefore important to know the enemy and his tactics. Understanding demonology and demonic activities is crucial to spiritual warfare, compromise can easily draw one into witchcraft (Newell, 2007: 462).

The precautionary measure by the church is that "...rather than blown over by gale-force winds of global change, churches are to be empowered by the Spirit to chart the course toward the coming Kingdom" (Dearborn, 2000:179). The cosmic powers use heretic persuasions to lure believers away from Christ to a messianic figure who promotes idol worship through ungodly voices. These voices have proclivity towards subordinationism – the ideology that rejects Christ's deity by holding to the view that Christ is subordinate in nature or essence to the Father (Samples, 2017:45-46). We all know and can see how this view misconstrues the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. The ideological voices include democracy, communism, capitalism et cetera. The voices of the heretics, the dissenters who hold an opinion at odds with mainstream beliefs, through their false doctrines are in the world, and they do not believe in God, they ridicule Christianity. They flourish and produce many results, as Lloyd-Jones (1986:134) asserts: "They can make people feel



very happy, they can give them release and deliverance from worry and anxiety.” In so doing, leading them into isolationist cocoons where destruction is possible.

African Christians are cautioned that “a democracy suited to Africa should reinforce the cultural values of communal life, guarding against individualistic tendencies” (Karamaga, 1993:28). This cautionary statement alludes to the fact that inclusivist systems in socio-ecclesial systems should bring Christians together, encouraging a coexistent communal sharing and harmony. From the apostolic era, dissenters such as Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Timothy 1:19-20) and Gnostics addressed in Johannine writings prove that doctrinal error or heresy can be potent enough to dislodge one from both the centre and the circle – Christ and the Church.

From the ancient church history, the battle of cosmic powers is engaged in a spiritual, not physical battle; its source is not ultimately human. It is not the battle with flesh and blood. It goes beyond any social association or affiliation, because Christian spirituality is not measured by political, economic power or social status. Since it is a spiritual battle, it therefore needs a spiritual arsenal that is divinely provided. Community life is on and of warfare.

### **Conclusion**

In the current atmosphere of raging cosmic powers, where demonic activities are observable in peoples’ lives’ it becomes an indisputable fact that “increasingly the ordered fellowship of the church becomes the sign of grace for the warring factions of a disordered world” (Clowney, 1995:16). Historical facts of God making his dwelling among the people can never be disputed or refuted. The Old Testament, New Testament and history ascertain us that cosmic powers are real and can be dealt with through communion with God.

In the postmodern era (a late 20th-century movement in philosophy and literary theory that generally questions the basic assumptions of Western philosophy in the modern period), historical studies on cosmic powers was pushed to the margins of society and side-lined as irrelevant in theology. In fact, it is a larger notion out in the secular societies that demons are just an absurdity and that God is dead, or if He is still there, He is irrelevant. This has become the ideology prevalent throughout church history as evidenced through all media platforms - written, visual, or audio. Literature, whether hard or soft sells fast if it promotes the irrelevance of religion or the deadness of God.

Charles Colson in the *Foreword* of G.K Chesterton’s book (1908/2009) titled *Orthodoxy* recalls that there is still a market for books that tell us “how religion poisons everything” that faith is a “failed hypothesis,” God is a “delusion” and how to “break the spell” of religion, in particular Christianity. This articulates into idolatry that is promoted by endeavours of creation of optimistic societies that believe in the idols of action and success. These endeavours bear compulsive inhumanity resulting into mass despair and apathy (Moltmann, 2003:83).

The hope for the Christian community is that notice should be taken that “This earth, habitat of sinful man, is rapidly being transformed into one vast cemetery. But amid that burial ground stands the church of the living God” (Kuiper, 1998:233). Church historians and systematic theologians are encouraged to evaluate the historical surfacing of cosmic powers through the centuries; and resolve to enlighten Christendom of this phenomenon, subsequently pointing believers to the redeemed community as the place of safety where the Lordship of Christ supersedes the potency of any other cosmic powers.

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