



An Investigation on Demonic influences on human beings: Demonic Oppression or Demonic Possession: The Role of the Holy Spirit¹

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Abstract

It is not always easy when first approaching a troubled person to know the source of their distress. For instance, how does one differentiate between demonic possession and demonic oppression? Is there a difference? This article contends that there is a difference, and an explanation of this will be presented in this chapter. The article will probe the differences between demonic influence and psychological disorders because they can present with similar symptoms. It will also highlight the importance of considering the possibility of prior occultic involvement by seemingly mentally ill persons during counselling. In this article, attention will be given to the central and indispensable role of the Holy Spirit in discerning the presence of demonic activity in any given situation. Certain key occultic terms and practices will be unpacked to inform and empower helpers in their bid to facilitate the deliverance of occult dabblers from bondage, with special consideration given to witchcraft due to its unfortunate prevalence in the African context. In this article, a literature review methodology is employed.

Keywords: Demons, oppression, possession, occult, discernment, Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Demonic manifestations through the possessed, such as aggression, unusual strength, change of voice and personality, verbal intimidation, screaming, fixed evil stares, shaking and tossing of bodies on the ground, etc., often elicit great fear within believers who witness them. However, perplexity and superstition are almost inevitable in the absence or shallowness of a sound biblical demonology regarding the existence and influence of demons on man. Atwebembeira (2020:n.n.²) affirms this reality by alluding to the African context in this way:

At the heart of African traditional thinking and philosophy is the fear of the spirit world; the supernatural. For an African all things have some demon or some spirit behind it that controls them. So, when you see a rat it's not just a rat – it has been sent by somebody; an enemy, or maybe an ancestor, who died long

¹ This article comes out of Rev. Nel's Masters Thesis under the supervision of Prof. Harold submitted to Baptist Theological College, Randburg South Africa.

² <https://africa.thegospelcoalition.org/video/is-it-okay-for-christians-to-be-superstitious/>



ago and is grieved. Or by somebody jealous of your success. So things are not always what they look. There is always some power behind them.

In this article, attention is given to understanding the realities of the existence of demons and their influence on humanity. Understanding that a person might be experiencing psychological problems that might be misdiagnosed as the influence of a demon, careful attention is given to address the differences between a person who is suffering from a mental disorder, to one who might be possessed or oppressed by demons. Understanding the differences through the discernment of the Holy Spirit, the minister can be more discerning and then serve the person under his care more accurately.

Demon Possession

Beliefs surrounding demon possession differ widely from one worldview to another. Craffert (2015³) notes the following in this regard: “Belief in possession is found in 77% of a sample of 488 societies (see Bourguignon, 2004a:137). However, the ethnographic literature ‘reveals many different varieties of possession belief’” (Cohen & Barrett, 2008:25; see Salman, 1968:197).

Craffert’s research highlights how differently demonic possession can be viewed worldwide. One area where beliefs differ is with regards to the identity of the spirits that possess people. Craffert (2015⁴) has found that different people groups could believe these spirits to be any of the following:

- Spirits of the living or the dead.
- Greater or lesser gods.
- The souls or ghosts of people who have passed away, including both ancestors and unrelated persons from inside or outside the immediate society.
- Supernatural entities that have never been human beings.

Unger (1994:82) highlights the theory of demonic possession within Judaism:

In Biblical times, both before and after the earthly public ministry of the Messiah, demon possession was by no means uncommon or unheard-of. Exorcisms, with magical words and cures, were the order of the day in contemporary Judaism, and the belief in the possession of men by demons, who were considered the spirits of wicked men deceased, or evil angels, was thoroughly established among all the Jews, except for the Sadducees alone. This fact proves that long before the Advent of the Messiah, demon possession and demon expulsion were established doctrines in Jewish demonological thought.

Thus, it makes sense that so many Jews were amazed by Jesus's authority in driving out demons. They were undoubtedly perplexed by how his unorthodox exorcism methods proved to be so much more potent than their own.

In attempting to emulate his approach, the Sons of Sceva, the itinerant Jewish exorcists, were severely beaten by evil spirits (who left them wounded and running naked), when they tried to drive them out by the name of Jesus (Acts 19:13-20). Guzik (2014:n.n) explains why this attempted exorcism failed so dismally: “The Jewish exorcists failed because they had no personal relationship with Jesus. They only know Jesus is the God of Paul, not their own

³ 2022, http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222015000200024.

⁴ 2022, http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S0259-94222015000200024.



God... Do you have the “right” to use the name of Jesus? These sons of Sceva did not, because they had no personal relationship with Jesus.”

Unger (1994:91-93) refers to three prevalent unscriptural theories of demon possession:

1. The Mythical Theory

According to this theory, the whole narrative of Jesus' demon expulsions is merely symbolic, without an actual foundation of fact. Demon possession, so-called, is but a vivid symbol of the prevalence of evil in the world, and the casting out of demons by our Lord, a corresponding figure of triumph over evil by His doctrine and life.

2. The Accommodation Theory

The proponents of the accommodation theory say that our Lord and the Evangelists, in referring to demon possession, spoke only in accommodation to the prevalent ignorance and superstition of their auditors, without making any assertion as to the actual existence or non-existence of the phenomena described, or the truth or falsity of current belief.

3. The Hallucination Theory

By this theory, demon possession is explained, under the hypothesis of hallucination, as a mere psychological delusion on the part of the victim, who, diseased and distraught, becomes wrought up to such a high pitch of emotional frenzy or mental excitement that he imagines himself possessed and controlled by another and more powerful being.

But demon possession is not presented in the NT as a symbolic reality of prevalent evil in the world, nor is it so much as suggested that it was just something Jesus and the apostles spoke about to accommodate their superstitious contemporaries. Furthermore, the accounts of demon possession in the NT certainly do not represent a collection of delusional hallucinations. These accounts are presented as factual retellings of actual events.

On the scriptural view of demon possession, Page (1995:138) notes this: “The condition of being possessed is commonly indicated by a verb translation ‘demon possession’ (i.e., *daimonizomai*), which is found only in the gospels but appears there thirteen times, or by clauses using the verb ‘have’ (i.e., *echo*) such as ‘he has a demo”.

Strong (1997:107) translates the verb *daimonizomai* as, “to be exercised by a daemon: – have a (be vexed with, be possessed with) devil-s”. Hence, McArthur (1986:688) understands the verb to refer to “someone indwelt and controlled by a demon or demons to the point that they cannot successfully resist”. Guzik (2017:132) similarly understands that demonic possession refers to a situation whereby “a demonic spirit resides in a human body, and at times will exhibit its own personality through the personality of the host body”.

In Mark 5:1-20, the demoniac with a legion of demons from the region of the Gerasenes is a typical example of a demon possessed person. As eloquently stated by Ryle (1986:267), “[this] unhappy sufferer was under the complete dominion of Satan, both in body and soul...His mental faculties were under the direction of a “legion” of...demons...[and] his bodily strength was only employed for his own injury and shame”. Jesus’ encounter with this man (as recorded in Mark 5:1-20) illuminates several signs of demon possession which are very helpful when one is attempting to discern whether such possession is at play in any given context:

- Demon/s indwell the possessed (Mark 5:2a).
- The possessed are often drawn to isolated dark places (Mark 5:2b-3).
- The possessed can have supernatural strength (Mark 5:3-4).
- The possessed experience great torment (Mark 5:5a).



- The possessed experience strong desires to self-harm (Mark 5:5b).
- Demons speak through those they possess (Mark 5:7-12).
- The possessed are often out of their right minds (Mark 5:15).

Considering the above, this study understands demon possession to be the inhabitation of a person by an evil spirit such that the individual is brought under the control of that spirit (there are also cases where a person can be possessed by more than one spirit at the same time). When a person is possessed, the evil spirit that indwells them can exhibit its personality through that person's own existing personality.

Demon *possession* is the most severe form of direct demonic influence on human beings. Scriptural examples of this affliction can be found in Mark 1:23-4, Luke 8:26-39, and Acts 19:13-16. Demon oppression is a less severe form of direct demonic influence, which will be discussed in the next section.

The only way to total freedom from possession by an unclean spirit is for that spirit to be driven out by the God-Man, Jesus Christ (Matthew 8:16), who binds the strong man, Satan (Matthew 12:29).

Demonic Oppression

Some biblical scholars have introduced a distinction between demonic possession and demonic oppression. In this regard, Sappington⁵, notes the following:

[Oppression] usually denotes influence from outside the person, [as opposed to] "demon possession" which refers to demonic influence that is typically more severe in nature because the spirit is dwelling within the person who is "possessed". This type of argument is fundamentally spatial in nature, and proponents of the oppression/possession distinction focus their attention on the question, "Where is the spirit?"

It may seem purely semantic but acknowledging a clear distinction between demon possession and demonic oppression is crucial. The main reason is that the concept of demonic possession has the connotation (as explained in the previous section) of demons having direct and complete control over an individual's personality and behaviour. There is no biblical basis for a Christian to become demon possessed. However, there is no denying that Christians can be sorely vexed by demonic activity. Thus, there must be another type of direct demonic influence that can be levelled at human beings. It is less severe than possession, yet significant enough to require intervention in the name of Christ for the sake of a person's liberation from it. This second type of demonic influence has become known as demonic oppression.

On the believer's security in Christ from demon possession, Arnold (1997:80) states:

For a Christian, the issue of ownership is settled once and for all when a person turns to Christ. At that time, Satan loses any legal claim to ownership based on the blood of Christ shed on the cross. We are legally acquitted by God from our guilt due to sin (Romans 5:1) and transferred from the domain of Satan into the kingdom of God (Colossians 1:13).

McKinley (2013:24) further asserts, "Scripture says plainly that the entrance of God's salvation into a believer's life will prevent that kind of satanic control [i.e., demon possession]". Believers

⁵ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/demon-possession/>.



are under new management, under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and indwelt by the Person of the Holy Spirit and, as (Arnold 1997:88) eloquently puts it, “[Demons do not] have the ability to evict the Holy Spirit of God”.

Indeed, Scripture never speaks of demons being cast out from believers instead, the Twelve are given authority by Christ to cast out demons (Mt 10:8) Believers are, nevertheless, encouraged to resist the devil (1 Peter 5:8-9), and to put on the armour of God in order that they may withstand the wiles of the demonic world (Ephesians 6:12-17).

However, as stated above, while believers cannot be demon possessed, they can come under a type of demonic influence distinguished as oppression. As Matter (n.d.:7) puts it, “An individual may be oppressed of the devil but still not be possessed”. A believer who continues to engage in sin wilfully opens themselves to ever greater demonic influence, and therefore to greater oppression, but never out of the reach of the power of the cross and the Holy Spirit to remove such demonic attack. Repentance from sin and earnest prayer are vital to lift such oppression which, according to Matter (n.d.:25), is: “...the act of demons unjustly treating the children of God with hardship or compelling them to perform their service to God under burdens, afflictions, or depression. In plain words, it is to be afflicted by demons.”

Thus, oppression can be described as external demonic influence as opposed to demon possession which is far more internal in nature. Demonic oppression, however, can increase in severity to a point where it may seem like demon possession even though it is not.

Therefore, as stated by Sappington⁶(n.d.:n.p), the distinction between possession and oppression could be thought of as primarily spatial. In other words, distinguishing between the two requires discernment as to whether the demonic influence in the life of a particular individual is coming from inside them (i.e., possession) or from the outside (i.e., oppression).

The Difference Between Psychological Problems and Demonic Influence

In this section, an attempt will be made to define mental illness and then to draw a distinction between it and demonic influence. Stanford (2008:8) makes a relevant comment on the often-tense relationship between faith and psychology:

Science and faith have had a long and tense relationship. A dangerous and damaging battle—a battle between faith and psychiatry/psychology—is being waged daily in churches throughout the world. And lives are being destroyed. Men and women with diagnosed mental illnesses are told they must pray more and turn away from their sin. Mental illness is equated with demon possession, weak faith, and generational sin. The underlying cause of this stain on the church is a lack of knowledge of basic brain function and scriptural truth.

Although differentiating between mental illness and demonic influence is not easy, an attempt to clarify the differences between these conditions may help prevent the potentially harmful misdiagnosis of either.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual: 5th Edition (DSM-V) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) states the following, as quoted by Hambrick (2021⁷):

⁶ <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/essay/demon-possession/>

⁷ <https://bradhambrick.com/thinking-well-about-mental-health/>



A mental disorder is a syndrome characterised by clinically significant disturbance in an individual's cognition, emotion regulation, or behaviour that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning. Mental disorders are usually associated with significant distress in social, occupational, or other important activities...

While acknowledging that mental illnesses are complex and can fall into several overlapping categories, Collins (2007:902) presents his summary of some of the main diagnostic features of psychological infirmity as follows:

First, there usually is some sort of distress, which could include anxiety, depression, anger, or other suffering that is emotional or psychological more than it is physical. Deviance indicates that the person thinks or acts in ways that most people in society would consider to be unusual or socially inappropriate. Disability and dysfunction both refer to the fact that the person with a mental disorder may be unable to attain their goals, have difficulty handling the day-to-day routines of living, or not be able to hold a job or a clear conversation. People with phobias, personality disorders, or deep depression would be examples.

Feldman and Crandall (2007:138) note two kinds of harm that mental illnesses can cause: "The first is from the direct effects of the disorders—cognitive, affective, and behavioural difficulties that limit one's ability to function effectively...[and the second]...is...the social rejection, interpersonal disruption, and fractured identity that comes from the stigma of mental illness."

Mental disorders are an undeniable reality that cannot be explained away. Millions of people around the globe are experiencing distress associated with mental illness and the associated societal stigmatization. The SingleCare (2022⁸) states, "Anxiety affects 284 million people in the world. Depression affects 264 million people. Bipolar disorder affects 46 million people. Schizophrenia affects 20 million people".

Concerning mental health in the South African context, Mukwevho (2022⁹) presents this alarming reality: "The Mental State of the World report states that South Africa had the lowest MHQ score of 46%... It also revealed how the mental health of younger generations has plummeted, growing up in an internet-dominated and inequitable world."

Considering the startling prevalence of mental illness globally, what should the church's response be to those distressed by mental disorders?

Two extremes must be avoided to reach clarity in this regard. The first is to treat every case as a psychological problem and deny the existence of demons and their effects on humankind. The second is to treat every case as demon possession and deny the existence of natural mental illness.

It is clear from scripture that demons can cause physical illness, e.g., the boy with the deaf and mute spirit (Mark 9:25), the boy who suffered severely from seizures (Matthew 17:15), and the woman with the spirit of infirmity (Luke 13:11). However, Stanford (2008:16) points out the mistake of treating every illness as the direct result of demonic influence:

⁸ <https://www.singlecare.com/blog/news/mental-health-statistics/>

⁹ <https://health-e.org.za/2022/03/18/mental-wellbeing-sa-hits-rock-bottom-on-global-list/>



The four Gospels and the Book of Acts describe thirty-one specific instances of healing by Jesus or His apostles. Only five of those illnesses (all found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) are said to have resulted from demonic influence. So while Jesus and His apostles certainly did encounter demonically influenced illnesses, this appears to be less prevalent than what we might refer to as “naturally” occurring illnesses. The Scriptures differentiate between “natural” illness and demonically caused infirmity (Matthew 8:16; Mark 1:32–34), although the Gospel writers blur the lines between the two and describe both as requiring healing (Matthew 4:24).

Not all illnesses are demonically influenced. Most are natural illnesses that are part of life due to the fall. However, Satan’s influence on Adam to disobey God (Gen. 3:1-7) resulting in the consequences of sickness and death for all humankind does not erase the importance of differentiating between natural illness and demonically influenced sickness today. It is of fundamental importance for the church to discern between the two conditions to provide effective help to those suffering from either.

In guarding against the two extremes mentioned above, Packer (1990:196) discourages an unhealthy focus on the demonic:

But if all of life is seen as a battle with demons in such a way that Satan and his hosts get blamed for bad health, bad thoughts, and bad behaviour without reference to physical, psychological, and relational factors in the situation, a very unhealthy counterpart of super-supernaturalism is being developed.

There is no shame in transferring a person with mental health issues into the care of medical professionals. On the other hand, as has already been intimated, it is equally unhealthy to deny any demonic influence upon an individual and to diagnose their struggle as a mental disorder when it is, in fact, demonic possession. The body of Christ must balance this subject because rebuking demons from a person with a natural mental illness could do more harm than good. In the sense that the victim will be convinced they have demons when they do not have any indwelling them, leading to much superstition and exploitation of their vulnerability by Satan. Medicine is key in such a situation and not exorcism.

Pietkiewicz, et al. (2021:8), published a quantitative case study of four individuals with Schizophrenia, all of whom believed their condition to be a result of demonic possession when it was not. The authors of the study remarked as follows:

Delusions of possession are a separate sub-category of religious delusions in psychosis. They involve a distorted perception of having one’s mental processes or actions controlled by demons or spirits associated with local religion. Hearing voices, having incomprehensive bodily sensations, and thought control was attributed to this influence... Beliefs in possession were induced or strengthened by family, clergy or media, and delayed diagnostic assessment and treatment. Instead, participants chose religious coping strategies, including individual exorcisms or deliverance ministries. In clinical practice, it is important to understand internal conflicts or traumatic experiences which feed delusions of possession (ibid.).

Of course, there may be cases where exorcisms are attempted on individuals who are not possessed at all, which is not ideal. But it would potentially be far more dangerous to dismiss true demon possession as a mere delusion thereof erroneously. Indeed, if the church treats every case as a mental disorder without trusting the Holy Spirit for discernment, she would be guilty of sending demonically influenced people to be admitted to mental institutions that could



not effectively help them. Administering psychiatric medication to a person under demonic influence is futile and gives demons freedom to feed on the vulnerability of that person who is a victim of Satan.

Bufford (1988:121) presents a table listing and comparing several symptoms of mental illness and demonic possession, emphasizing parallels between the two conditions (see Table 5.1). The purpose of this table is to highlight why there is so much confusion when differentiating between mental illness and demonic possession, and why it is so easy for misdiagnosis to occur. Indeed, sometimes the two conditions are even regarded as synonymous, and there have been cases where two different parties have given opposing diagnoses for the condition of the same individual.

Table 1: A comparison of the characteristics of demonic affliction and mental disorders, highlighting parallels between them (Bufford, 1988:121).

Characteristics of Demonic Influence	Parallel Characteristics of Mental Disorders
Supernatural knowledge	Hallucinations, delusions or psychotic disorders
Supernatural strength	Extreme strength observed in manic episodes and certain psychotic conditions; abnormally pronounced fatigue, e.g., in catatonic patients
Going about naked	Deterioration of appearance and social graces is typical of psychotic disorders - especially schizophrenia and schizotypal personality disorder
Unable to hear, speak or see	Inability to hear, speak or see associated with conversion (hysterical) disorders
Seizures	Seizures observed in epilepsy and many chronic brain syndromes, e.g., syphilis, intoxication, trauma, cerebral arterio-sclerosis, and intracranial neoplasms
Use of "different" voice; the presence of several distinct personalities	Similar symptoms are commonly found in dissociative disorders,
Bizarre behaviour	Bizarre behaviour is a characteristic of psychosis
Fierce, violent behaviour	Violent behaviour common in certain psychotic conditions, intermittent explosive disorder, antisocial personality, and unsocialised aggressive reaction in childhood or adolescence



Claims of demonic influence	Such claims common in multiple personality disorder
Involvement in occult practices	May occur with many disorders, though not used as a diagnostic criterion

While the above table highlights the parallels between mental illness and demon possession, Warren (1994:84) cites Meier's guidelines on differentiating these different afflictions. Here are a few of them:

- The demon-possessed react negatively to the name of Jesus Christ, while those with psychological problems usually respond positively.
- Demon-possessed people can perform supernatural acts which the mentally ill cannot.
- Demons speak logically while individuals with psychological problems often do not.
- The possessed often have a history of occult activities such as participating in seances or Satan worship, while the purely mentally ill do not.
- Demon-possessed individuals do not respond to therapy while the mentally ill often do.

These important differences illustrate that mental disorders and demon possession are two distinct types of afflictions. They should not be seen as synonymous with one another as this can lead to misdiagnosis that can cause further harm and distress.

This article does not deny the ability of demonic influence to cause physical illness but, as has already been pointed out, there are more accounts in Scripture of natural illnesses being healed than demonically influenced ones (Mk 5:2; Mt 9:27-30). Scripture distinguishes between natural illness and demonically influences caused illness (Mt 8:16; Mk 1:32-34).

It must be mentioned that there may be a third type of condition, essentially a combination of the first two, i.e., mental illness and demon possession. Should this arise, it would likely be a case of demons preying on the vulnerability of a person who has a natural mental disorder. If these demons were cast out of such a sufferer, the original mental disorder would remain and require treatment with medication.

What will be considered next is the Holy Spirit's role in the discerning of demonic influence.

The Holy Spirit's Indispensable Role in Discerning Demonic Influence

The Holy Spirit not only plays a pivotal empowering role in the casting out of demons (see Matthew 12:28; Acts 10:37-38), but also enables the discernment of demonic involvement.

The Spirit of God has given some the ability to "distinguish [or discern] between spirits" (1 Colossians 12:10). According to Julian (1987:126), "...the word 'discernment' comes from the Gk. word *diakrisis*, which means 'to separate apart'. The task of discernment is thus to



separate the various influences impinging upon a person...” Concerning the gift of distinguishing between spirits, Sensinig (2020¹⁰) notes the following:

The spiritual gift of discerning spirits can aid the church, set people free, protect the integrity of what God is doing, and help us overcome in spiritual warfare...it is a spiritual detection system that measures spiritual realities not apparent to the natural senses. It is the God-given ability or enablement to recognise the source of spirits—whether they come from the Holy Spirit, angelic spirits, demonic spirits, or individual human spirits—which are behind different manifestations or activities. It is not natural discernment. Many people are by nature very perceptive or discerning, but that is not the same as the spiritual gift of discerning of spirits.

Grudem (1994:958) says, “Distinguishing between spirits is a special ability to recognise the influence of the Holy Spirit or of demonic spirits in a person”.

Thus, the gift of discernment is a supernatural enablement, bestowed by the Holy Spirit, to detect the source behind what is being manifested in people’s lives. As discussed in Chapter 3, we learn in Acts (16:16-18) of a girl with a spirit of prediction. Upon hearing Paul proclaiming the truth, she cried out, “These men, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation, are the slaves of the Most High God”. Though she spoke the truth, the Apostle Paul discerned that her utterances were demonic.

The Holy Spirit can and does grant necessary discernment to a helper attempting to distinguish between mental disorders and demonic influence. Although this task may be impossibly complex for a mere human being, the Holy Spirit is omniscient and perfectly knows the source of any person’s affliction. Bufford (1988:137-138) explains that “In [discerning the spirits], the helper seeks...for the guidance of God’s Spirit through a ‘word of wisdom’ or ‘word of knowledge’”. Barton (2001:1101) adds this:

All believers are given wisdom from the Spirit ([1 Colossians 2:15-16), but some are given the ability to give wise advice... Another person is given the gift of special knowledge... This could mean a special knowledge of spiritual realities (see 1 Colossians 13:2, 8-12; 14:6)...While some believers have a special gift to discern what is really from God’s Spirit and what is not, all believers are expected to have discernment.

Though all believers are always called to exercise discernment, God has supernaturally gifted some with a special ability to discern between spirits. However, it must always be remembered that, ultimately, only the Holy Spirit can provide the helper with the wisdom, knowledge and discernment needed to distinguish between mental disorders and demonic influence. Thus, great dependence on the Holy Spirit to detect the source of people’s afflictions and distress is of paramount importance.

Regarding how the Holy Spirit generally provides the necessary discernment to a helper seeking His wisdom for a particular person or situation, Wiersbe (2007:486) states the following: “The discerning of spirits was important in the early church, since Satan tried to counterfeit the work of God and the Word of God. Today, the Spirit especially uses the written Word to give us discernment” (1 John 2:18–24; 4:1–6).

Thus, the helper gifted with the ability to discern between spirits does not do this independent of Scripture which is the “sword of the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:17) that “judges the ideas and the thoughts of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12).

¹⁰ <https://petra.church/blog/a-most-essential-gift-discerning-of-spirits/>.



Demonic activity manifesting as the promulgation of false teachings, the emergence of false prophets, demonic oppression and demon possession are as much a reality in this present age as they were for the early church (Pillay and Harold, 2008). Thus, this article asserts that the discerning of spirits is equally as important now as it was then.

Discerning Prior and Present Occultic Involvement

Discerning whether a demon-afflicted person is dabbling or has dabbled in occultic practices is important because in some cases, what may initially appear to be a purely psychological problem is the result of such dabbling. The desire to contact deceased loved ones and friends has led many into occultism as they have naively consulted with spirit mediums to acquire knowledge from the beyond. McDowell (1992:20-22) gives three reasons for the alarming rate at which people get involved in the occult:

1. The Secularization of the Gospel

In recent years there has been increased denial of the Christian faith's cardinal doctrines by many occupying leadership positions in the church. When the church "waters down" the gospel of Christ, the door to occultic practice swings wide open. This leaves a greater spiritual vacuum in the world, which invites people with spiritual needs to go elsewhere to have them satisfied.

2. Curiosity

A certain mystery about the occult appeals to people's curiosity. Many who get involved in occultic practices do so by first dabbling in so-called "harmless" practices such as reading horoscopes or using an Ouija board. They afterwards proceed into a deeper involvement because of an increasing curiosity.

3. The Occult Offers Reality

There is a reality in the occultic experience which attracts many people to it. We all desire some ultimate answer to life's basic questions, and the world of the occult gladly supplies such answers. The astrologist will chart your future. The Ouija board promises you direction, and the medium talking to the spirit of a dead relative informs you that things are fine in the next world. Since these occultic practices reveal some amazing [though counterfeit] things, the practitioner is lulled into thinking that he has experienced ultimate reality and no longer needs to continue his search for truth.

McDowell's points above can help the church prevent people from getting involved in the occult. They warn believers that at the centre of bereavement, a vulnerable space can lead to occultism if one's desire to connect with a lost loved one results in consultation with a medium. Being intrigued by the occult and desiring to penetrate the unknown to gain information apart from God ultimately leads a person into the claws of Satan, because slavery to occultism is bondage to the devil.

So, what exactly is occultism? According to Sanou (2015:1), "Occultism...refers to secret or hidden knowledge supernaturally received through the means of divination (i.e., cartomancy, crystal-gazing, palmistry, Ouija boards...psychometry, numerology, etc.)".

Mashau (2007:638-639) agrees with Sanou as follows: "[Occultism] has to do with any form of practice in the life of human beings that acknowledges the presence of demonic powers that are hidden, e.g., activities such as divination, spiritism, magic and idolatry."

And finally, Stone (1981:16) neatly sums up the occult as "supernatural activities without God".



According to the above definitions, occultism involves concealed practices whereby demonic forces are invoked to influence society. It is essentially a dependence on Satan to manipulate physical circumstances and people. God does not feature anywhere in it.

Regarding the origin of occultism, Martin (2008:17) says this:

The moment Lucifer fell from heaven and became Satan, the world of the occult was born. The occult or “secret knowledge” born of rebellion took root and grew strong, nurtured in an oral and written tradition that passed on secret rituals, spells, and incantations from one generation to the next... Although the nature of worship and its origin have always been subjects of debate, the evidence is clear that from time immemorial, humans have acknowledged the existence of supernatural power and worship.

Dabbling in the occult inevitably leads to demonic oppression and/or possession and can sometimes result in mental distress. It has already been established that believers cannot be demon-possessed. However, Martin (2008:36) points out the following with regards to Christian involvement in the occult:

Christians open themselves to the world of the occult when they consult astrology charts, play with Ouija boards, visit palm readers, or engage in contemplative prayer that directs them to withdraw into silence and “open” their spirits to whatever may come along. It is never possible to open the door to the soul with impunity. Someone will get hurt, and it will most likely be you.

It’s an abomination to God for believers to seek assistance from the occult. A sobering realization of the above is that believers can open themselves to serious oppression and torment when they get involved in occultism. Still, unbelievers can open themselves to wholesale demonic possession.

Occultic Terminology

There is much occultic terminology that those outside this dark underworld can partially or fully misunderstand. While the children of God shouldn't dwell on these matters, the sake of effective ministry needs to have a functional literacy regarding key concepts and practices associated with the occult. Such understanding will inform and equip those who will counsel demon-afflicted people who have engaged with the occult. To this end, a glossary of some commonly encountered occultic terms and practices is presented in Table 5.2 (from Martin 2008:195-198).

Table 2: A Glossary of Key Occultic Terminology (Martin, 2008:195-198)

Term	Definition
Astrology, Horoscopes and the Zodiac	This is offered as a means by which the stars and planetary systems guide the subject. It is often called “Elysian Astrology”.
	Contact with spirits that take over their [new age groups] bodies and



Automatic Writing	write through them. This is a form of mediumship.
Clairaudience	The practice of hearing audible voices that other people do not naturally hear.
Clairvoyance	The practice of seeing things that other people do not naturally see. Usually this comes through dreams, visions, or pre-cognition.
Divination	This is any means of predicting an unknown event with the aid of physical objects or events that are read or interpreted, such as tarot cards, runes, crystal gazing, omens, scrying, palmistry, and dreams.
Medium	A person who acts as a conduit for communication between the spirits and humanity through various manifestations.
Numerology	Affixing values and meanings to certain numbers to interpret them as meaningful signs for past or future events.
Psychic	A person who acts as a medium and who uses auras, numerology, divination, clairvoyance, clairaudience, oracles, telepathy, or ESP to communicate unknown information to the participant.
Psychokinesis and Telekinesis	In the occult, psychokinesis is the belief that gifted people can move physical objects by use of their mental powers.
Séance	A session with a medium before one or more people, in which the medium attempts to make contact with deceased humans, angels, or other spirit beings; usually directed toward contact with a specific departed person known by the participant.
	Spirit guides are historically rooted in Mayan occultism. The New Age teaches that spirits, either independent spirit-



Spirit Guide	beings or spirits of the deceased, make contact with the living to assist them through life. These are called spirit-guides.
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In addition to the concepts and practices listed in this table, because this study is primarily concerned with developing insight regarding demon affliction in the African context where the practice of witchcraft is regrettably common, it is necessary to give special consideration to this phenomenon and the bondages that result from it. Section 5.8, below, is devoted to this.

In light of the existence of the occult, and with a knowledge of the effects that it can have on the lives of those who engage in it, it is wise when counselling mentally afflicted persons not to ignore the possibility that they may have opened the door to the demonic in their lives through occultic dabbling. With wisdom and discernment, it is advisable to make enquiries in this regard during the counselling process.

For anyone to be set free from occult-related demonic bondage of any kind, categorical repentance from and renouncing occultic involvement is vital.

The Bondage of Witchcraft

General Information and Personal Observations

According to Mhlophe (2013:96): “Witchcraft, wizardry and sorcery are all terms that refer to the use of spells, charms, magic, etc. to manipulate and control the outcome of people’s lives and events. The issue is about manipulation and control, which can take many forms.”

There is a commonly held perception that there are two separate categories of magic – “black magic” and “white magic”. Koch (1972:145) explained that people often understand the remits of these “different types” of magic as follows: “Black magic: persecution spells, vengeance spells, defence spells, healing spells, etc.; White magic: protection spells, defence spells, healing spells, fertility spells, etc.” However, according to Scripture, there is no distinction between “black magic” and “white magic”. All magic is evil, and an abomination to God.

In response to the Babylonians’ infatuation with sorceries and spells, the Lord said the following in Isaiah 47:12-14:

So take your stand with your spells and your many sorceries, which you have wearied yourself with from your youth. Perhaps you will be able to succeed; perhaps you will inspire terror! You are worn out with your many consultations. So let them stand and save you—the astrologers, who observe the stars and predict what will happen to you monthly. Look, they are like stubble; fire burns them up. They cannot deliver themselves from the power of the flame. This is not a coal for warming themselves, or a fire to sit beside!

In Ezekiel 13:18-20 God spoke against all false prophets, and especially the false prophetesses who were making magic bands and placing them on the Lord’s people:

This is what the Lord God says: Woe to the women who sew magic bands on the wrist of every hand and who make veils for the heads of people of every height to ensnare lives... Therefore, this is what the Lord God says: I am against your magic bands that you ensnare people with like birds, and I will tear them from your arms. I will free the people you have ensnared like birds.



In Acts 19:18-19 we see the *dunamis* (i.e., power) of the Gospel at work in those who believed the Apostles' message, causing them to turn away from the occult radically:

Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed what they had done. A number who had practiced sorcery brought their scrolls together and burned them publicly. When they calculated the value of the scrolls, the total came to fifty thousand drachmas. In this way, the word of the Lord spread widely and grew in power.

The Word of God makes it abundantly clear that all occultic practice is prohibited because it is abhorrent to God.

The term “bondage of witchcraft” in this dissertation refers to a lifestyle and worldview by which an individual attributes every trial, hardship and misfortune to witchcraft and the spiritual oppression it brings upon people. Mashau (2007:637) explains this kind of captivity as follows:

In the traditional African worldview, suffering of every sort – illness, barrenness, drought and death – is normally explained in personal terms: “there is always somebody”. This “somebody” often belongs to the world of the occult: a “spirit” has brought pain to human beings and must therefore be repelled or accommodated. This bondage causes people to fear even their own neighbours.

Mhlophe (2013:96) makes the following remarks concerning the issue of witchcraft:

In the African tradition one of the worst things you can be accused of is witchcraft. Many people have been killed because of being labelled as witches. Witches are seen as being responsible for misfortune and all manner of maladies that afflict a community.

Garrard (2017:2) comments that an excessive emphasis on witchcraft can even be to the detriment of Gospel proclamation in certain circles: “It would appear that so strong is this theme of witchcraft and deliverance that in certain contexts it has usurped the role of the preaching of the gospel almost entirely.”

The deceiver of nations, the devil, rejoices when an overwhelming consciousness of witchcraft leads to a neglect of the Gospel - the message of the cross and the empty tomb!

Asamoah-Gyadu (2015:23) describes the key to successful ministry in the African context in these terms:

For the churches in Africa, evil pre-eminently includes witchcraft. In Africa, successful Christian ministry (i.e., ministry with significant personal relevance and impact) is impossible unless one considers the supernatural evil implied by the word “witchcraft”. Grasping the power and influence of evil, including witchcraft, is critical for realistic pastoral care and understanding African responses to the Gospel throughout Christian mission history.

Ignorance regarding witchcraft and a lack of intention to engage in warfare against its power are likely to render missionaries irrelevant and ineffective in Africa.

The researcher has observed how an unhealthy preoccupation with the reality of witchcraft affects certain sectors of the coloured community in Makhanda, South Africa. During pastoral counselling sessions some have even confessed to consulting witch doctors. In contrast, others tell of how, as children, they were taken to receive an incision on either their forehead or their arm for supposed protection from witchcraft. The torment that these individuals have



endured since such consultations has been extreme. Deuteronomy 18:9-11 reveals the heart of God against witchcraft: "...do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no one be found among you who sacrifices their son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium of spirits or who consults the dead."

In God's eyes, seeking the aid of witch doctors is a serious and detestable thing. While engaging in witchcraft may offer easy and immediate protection and remove problems, its inevitable consequence is demonic bondage. Only Jesus can truly break and deliver people from such captivity, for the devil initiates it and works hard to maintain it.

The Advent of WitchTok

An alarming new way the scourge of witchcraft is being spread is through a new social media TikTok channel called "WitchTok". The Church needs to be very vigilant about this. Partridge (2020¹¹) explains WitchTok as follows:

Since the first lockdown in 2020, a number of new alternative spiritualities have been brewing in the cauldrons of internet subcultures. Making particularly strong ripples in the TikTok feeds of Gen-Zs is 'WitchTok'; a movement (or rather, a hashtag) of individuals sharing Neopagan practices such as 'manifesting' – attempting to actualise desires through various magical techniques – and 'hexing' – casting malevolent spells – in the form of short clips, often accompanied by hallucination-like filters and the kind of music one might hear at a transcendental meditation class. It is not uncommon for these videos to attract hundreds of thousands of viewers; in some cases, they have even transcended TikTok and become the subject of mainstream media articles and Twitter storms.

In a similar vein, Miller (2022:1) describes this new social media platform like this:

WitchTok describes a sub-section of the social media platform TikTok, which caters to Contemporary Pagans and other practitioners of modern Witchcraft. Through short micro-videos, users share snapshots of their lives, providing a window into their religious identities and practices.

WitchTok, which is essentially the practice of witchcraft online, is another of Satan's webs of deception designed to deceive many, to keep them blind to the truth of the Gospel, and to infiltrate their lives subtly. This channel makes witchcraft and its demonic influences accessible to many internet users, especially the young.

The reserachers believe that the existence of online platforms like WitchTok contributes to a rise in cases of demonic oppression, demon possession, and general mental distress.

The Church, whose mandate is to offer the hope of Jesus to the world, must equip herself in such a way that she will be effective in helping those who find themselves trapped in the occult due to demonic schemes like WitchTok and others. (Mt 28:19-20; Lk 5:32; Acts 1:8; 2 Cor. 10:4-5; Ep 6:11-17)

Conclusion

Differentiating between demon possession and mental illness is often difficult, largely because of the remarkable similarity between their symptoms. The few symptomatic differences between the two can help ministers to a limited degree. Still, reliance on the Holy Spirit as 'the

¹¹ <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2021/09/02/when-spirituality-meets-tiktok-genzs-answer-to-religion>.



Comforter' (*Paraclete*) remains the most crucial element in rightly discerning the root of an afflicted person's problems.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is possible to detect and diagnose demonic activity no matter how deep, hidden or cleverly disguised it may be. Those with the spiritual gift of discernment (see 1 Colossians 12:10), i.e., the ability to distinguish between spirits and to know what is holy and what is diabolical, are thus enabled by the Holy Spirit to distinguish between demon possession and mental illness. The Holy Spirit can, and often will, give an exorcist a "word of wisdom" or a "word of knowledge" to assist the helper as they pray for an afflicted person.

This article discussed that occultic involvement can lead to severe emotional disturbances. Hence, before assuming that problems like these are of purely psychological or psychiatric origin, it is wise to enquire whether the sufferer has any history of occultic participation, no matter how seemingly minor. However, should the Holy Spirit reveal that a particular affliction is purely psychiatric, the pastor or exorcist should respond by referring the sufferer for professional medical help. An overemphasis on witchcraft must be avoided. While witchcraft is not even thought of in some contexts, there are other settings in which it is part of people's daily lives causing them to live in constant fear of being bewitched. However, it is important to warn people about the demonic bondage that results from consulting with witch doctors because many are tempted to do this in desperation.

However, even more than wanting to avoid the bondage that comes from dabbling in witchcraft, people should tremble at the fact that seeking aid from workers of magic is abominable in God's eyes. At the heart of consulting a witch doctor is a disbelief in God's ability and a belief in Satan's. It amounts to seeking help from Satan, which inevitably opens the dabbler's life to his destructive influence. This is the unavoidable consequence that the clients of witchdoctors must face. The deception involved in witchcraft is of such a nature that people run to Satan to fight others who have also sought help from Satan, who is only too happy to keep all those involved in captivity. It is ludicrous, especially considering such verses as Luke 11:17-18: "Knowing their thoughts, He told them: Every kingdom divided against itself is headed for destruction, and a house divided against itself falls. How will his kingdom stand if Satan is divided against himself?"

Only God can free a person from witchcraft and other manifestations of demonic influence. Becoming involved in the occult is sin. The categorical renouncement of and repentance from occultic participation is a crucial prerequisite for a person's deliverance from the demonic bondage associated with such dabbling.

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