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The Occult Revival

Nancy Carolyn Gaines

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THE OCCULT REVIVAL

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Dr. James Berryman

by

Nancy Carolyn Gaines

"Until five years ago the only contact most Americans had with the occult was through Chinese fortune cookies and penny weighing machines. Then suddenly the Age of Aquarius was upon us."¹ It seems quite evident today that more and more Americans actually believe in witches, wizards, vampires and spirits. Many others don't actually believe but don't disbelieve either. Others find the occult subjects intriguing.

Interest in the occult has suddenly emerged as a mass phenomenon in the United States. Increasing thousands of seemingly average American citizens, are now active practitioners of such rituals as witchcraft, spiritualism, magic and devil worship. Millions more Americans are deeply involved with astrology, numerology, fortune-telling and Tarot cards.

Songs, movies and other artforms reflect the growing interest of Americans in the aspects of the occult. The popular 1968 film "Rosemary's Baby" seemed to set the stage for an outpouring of occult movies. Recent bestseller The Exorcist by William Peter Blatty is further proof of public interest in the occult. Not until the Sharon Tate murders (reportedly committed by a "family" of satan worshipers) did the public realize that witchcraft and satanism were more real than either movies or books.

¹Nicholas Peleggi, "Occult," McCalls, 97 (March, 1970), 62-65.

Witchcovens exist in many of the large cities of the U.S. These group vary in their beliefs and practices. The San Francisco Church of Satan, led by High Priest Anton LaVey encourages lustful indulgences and "controlled selfishness." The cost in one particular group is \$20.00 for a lifetime membership and LaVey boasts 7,000 dues-paying members which makes for a profitable organization. In order to recruit new converts (sort of a perverted evangelism) the "church" shows a film of a black mass to interested viewers. LaVey blesses his members in their hate and lust and encourages all their evil desires.

Another group of present-day witches compose what is known as "White Witches." These worshipers of the spirit world consider witchcraft to be a pre-Christian faith and are composed mainly of suburban housewives over the country. They view churches which wbrship satan as "perverted" and think they only attract sexual deviates and "nuts." The white witches would rather use their powers to cure cancer than to sanction orgies.

"Espiritismo" is a magical faith rooted in African beliefs and Carribean voodoo. It is practiced mainly by blacks and Spanish-speaking people and deals heavily in curses. Candles are burned to cast spells for everything from the acquisition of money, to love, to curses of death.

Another manifestation of the resurgng interest in the occult is W.I.T.C.H. (Women's International Terrorists Corps from Hell). This group is composed primarily of college students on campuses across the country. They claim to be a "continuation of a neolithic religion that worshipped the great earth mother goddess"²

² Andrew M. Greeley, "There's a New Time Religion On Campus," New York Times, (June 1, 1969) 14-15.

until it was replaced by Christianity. W.I.T.C.H. proposes to aid women in finding themselves and understanding the essence of womanhood. Their most reported activities are hexing, or attempting to hex, college professors and departments of universities.

Surprisingly, the greatest interest in the occult seems to come from the college students on America's campuses, particularly the more elite schools. College students are relying on Asian philosophy, meditation, yoga, zen, tibet, I Ching, karate, aikido, yang-yin, macrobiotic diet (brown rice), gurdjeff, mahar baba, astrology, tarot cards, parapsychology, witchcraft and magic. Psychedelic drugs also play an important part in campus rituals. When students are given a say in what courses will be a part of their curriculum, classes in astrology, sorcery and witchcraft invariably head the list.

According to Andrew M. Greeley in a recent New York Times Magazine article, "A certain Catholic university discovered that it had a coven of warlocks on campus. As the dean of the institution put it, 'We've really become progressive around here. A couple hundred years ago we would have burned them at the stake. Twenty-five years ago I would have expelled them. Now we simply sent them all to psychiatrists.'"

The brand of spiritualism generally favored by whites is based on nineteenth century theosophy and Rosicrucianism. It relies heavily on communication with the dead. The popularity of this kind of spiritualism, which indulges in seances and astrology, reached a peak in the 1920's when a magic and nupticism craze made seances almost a national pastime in the United States. The popularity of the seance faded during the thirties and forties, but has experienced a comeback in recent years. After decades of

disinterest, spiritualism is reviving once again, but its old table rapping aspects have substantially subsided. Contemporary mediums, rather than the reserved matrons of earlier years, are likely to run "churches" of their own which are supported by donations from interested persons. No longer can mediums receive payment for their services, since to tell fortunes or commune with spirits is illegal in many states. According to the National Council of Churches, there are now well over 400 churches run by mediums scattered about the country with at least 150,000 members.

Not all students or housewives, not even a majority are engaging in divination. But a minority is and the majority at this point, has not ridiculed their efforts. On the contrary, one has the impression that the majority reacts with understanding and acceptance. Few people totally deny the existence of a spirit world and perhaps the general acceptance of the occult is a result of feelings of superstition that are present in most individuals. Either witchcraft has grown more respectable with the years or the American public has grown more tolerant.

Probably one of the biggest reasons for the popularity of astrology and other forms of the occult is the tremendous advertisement it receives from the business world. Needless to say, occultism is big business. Horizon's Thomas Meehan noted recently that the United States has "no fewer than 10,000 full time astrologers...plus 175,000 part-time astrologers...some 1200 of the nation's 1,750 daily newspapers now run horoscope columns whereas a few years ago...ninety papers carried such columns."³

³ Thomas Meehan, "Flight From Reason," Horizon (Spring, 1970)

Jean Dixon has sold more than 3,000,000 copies of her books and occult book sales have doubled in the past three years.

Astrology magazines alone sell approximately ten million copies per year. The mass production of tarot cards, I Ching coins and other instruments of the occult have helped turn spiritualism into a \$2,000,000 industry.

Computer horoscopes are increasing in popularity. Astroflash, Inc. produces about 500 personalized horoscopes a day at the price of \$5.00 each. Astroflash is presently located in New York's Grand Central Station, but is planning to open other branches in major cities all over the country. Computer horoscopes have proved so popular that currently three companies are competing for the business. In several major cities there is a twenty-four-hour-a-day zodiac telephone service which gives astrological predictions for the day.

Everything from jewelry to furniture is nowadays keyed to the signs of the zodiac. Department stores offer clothes and jewelry fashionably designed with astrological themes and many people have taken to wearing their zodiac signs on all their clothing. Fashion designers, cosmetologists, hairstylists, decorators and landscape gardeners are customers of horoscope signs and banks are printing astrological checkbooks.

Is the current upsurging of interest in the occult merely a fad which will inevitably fall into a class with hoola hoops and goldfish-swallowing? Although there are many opinions from experts on the subject, the general consensus is that, although its commercial value may eventually decline, deep-rooted interest in the occult practices will remain with us. Indeed, many authorities do not believe the occult revival to be a revival at all but simply

a realization of interest which has been underground for decades but has not surfaced until now. The occultist is viewed not as being new among us but as a continuation of the interest in the occult and the mystical which has persisted for some time. "It is a form of romanticism which has occurred in one fashion or another periodically in years gone by."⁴

Some experts believe that the interest in the occult will end not with agnosticism or even a new form of religion as such, but rather it will evolve into some form of traditional religion. Many look back to the twenties and their fadish type of occultism and predict a similar fading this time around.

Mark Graubard, chairman of the National Science Program at the University of Minnesota states, "Astrology...seems to satisfy the desire for science as well as the need for faith, for belief in powers that rule and manipulate...The triumphs in the exploration of space and the new discoveries of astronomy increases man's appetite for renewed worship of unknown powers. Astrology will stay on and probably prosper."⁵

In order to determine whether the occult is here to stay, one must understand the reasons why it is here at all. It is essential that we know what is behind today's public interest in astrology and other occult subjects. According to Andrew M. Greeley, Roman Catholic Priest, once part time professor, some students give the failure of science as a reason for a return to

⁴ Andrew M. Greeley, "There's a New Time Religion On Campus," New York Times, (June 1, 1969) 14-15.

⁵ "Trend to the Occult," Senior Scholastic, 97 (November 2, 1970) 7-12.

the occult. Since science has not succeeded in its attempts to end war, poverty or injustice it simply cannot be the ultimate answer. Also science does not respond to most of man's inner needs.

The age of reason is past, it seems, for these "neosacralists." They depend more and more upon emotions and intuition and less on scientific theories and IBM cards. People refuse to believe that reason can explain either life or personhood and are disgusted with the "reasonable" society they see.

Many Americans believe that mysticism enables them to see the truth without any regard for their brains. "The future lies with feeling, intuition, knowing!"⁶ To these people, science has failed. It is opposed to humanity, beauty and wonder. They believe that they can find true beauty only by resorting to drugs and mysticism. Increasingly Americans of all backgrounds are buying the notion that reason has had it, that conventional reasoning is a bore and a chore.

Hallowell Bowser gives his opinion of this idea in an article for Saturday Review, "Wouldn't it be wonderful if major national figures got up and made a strong case for a friendly, fruitful partnership between the rational and the intuitive, the pragmatic and the fanciful? Such a partnership would necessitate radical reorderings of society, designed to admit more warmth, wonder, and celebration into our institutions. But it might well save us from becoming a nation of blood-thinkers and sleepwalkers, capable of finding beauty and meaning in mystical trance-ports, or in parapsychological portraits ground out monthly by your friendly neighborhood IBM computer."⁷

⁶Hallowell Bowser, "Thinking With Your Blood," Saturday Review, 53 (September 19, 1970) 26.

⁷Ibid.

Many people, especially the young, say that study and practice of the occult arts gives a meaning to their lives. It provides an "emotional anchor" which is essential to all people and also acts as an aid to the understanding of self. "A good horoscope," says one teenager, "makes you realize that what you do matters. All your actions can affect others as well as yourself. It makes you see that you have a responsibility to make the right choice."⁸ The occultist's are often searching for an experience that draws one out of oneself in order to see oneself more fully. This is the attraction of the sexual aspects of the occult. People over thirty who are devoted to the occult often find in their groups, a liscence for eroticism that they feel they need in an age of increasing sexual expectancies. The occult today gives comfort to the many lonely, sad and disturbed individuals who feel that life has failed to deliver the happiness and power they deserve. These people, in former years, would have most likely turned to some form of organized religion.

Another possible explanation for the trend toward the occult is the search of many people, especially the young, for something to hold their interest and attention. As stated by one college student, "We don't have to worry anymore, at least not very much, about where food and housing is going to come from so we worry about ourselves and finding ourselves. The only way we are going to find ourselves is in deep relationships with others and that means either religion or sex or both."⁹

⁸"Trend to the Occult," Senior Scholastic, 97 (November 2, 1970) 7-12.

⁹Andrew M. Greeley, "There's a New Time Religion on Campus," New York Times, (June 1, 1969) 14-15.

Young people today have more leisure time and less financial worry than any generation in our history. Fewer and fewer college students are expected to pay for their schooling or support themselves during their college years as were their parents in years past. This gives them time for self indulgence and an attempt at discovering the "mysteries of life." They feel, for the most part, that the way to discover themselves is through meaningful relationships with others. This explains, in part the sexual freedom so prevalent in our society today. It is currently believed that to open oneself and to experience another's feelings, sexual relations are necessary. Sex is an important aspect of many of the theologies of occult groups.

The religious communities that grew up around the various cults of the sacred are felt to provide opportunities for meaningful intimate relationships over against the depersonalizing formalism of the academic and government bureaucracy. "You're a person in the group even if you don't want to be. You're forced to face yourself and discover who you are."

Like the hippie culture, many people use the occult as a means of escaping from society. It provides a method of withdrawal from the everyday boredom of conventional living and is an effective means of avoiding life's routine. Most contemporary manifestations of the occult on college campuses are a form of withdrawal from the larger society. Though their desire is to escape from society as it exists, like the radicals and hippies, the neosacralists are in a definite search for something else to belong to--a society substitute. Religious groups are communities, places where they are more than just an IBM card, much the same

as hippie communes have been in the past.

Automation and mechanization seem to drive some people to the occult. They are unable to understand or to control computers and so they choose to use psychic powers to control their lives. This gives them a feeling of power over life and therefore, more meaning to living.

Whether we are comfortable about admitting it or not, the occult practices have grown to be a new form of religion with roots as far back as Christianity. The first astrologers are believed to have been priests of the Chaldeans, a star worshipping society in the ancient kingdom of Babylonia. In biblical times, Hebrew prophets considered witchcraft a rival religion. They did not contend that witchcraft did not work as many modern arguers do. They condemned those who practiced witchcraft as "evil" for calling on supernatural powers other than God.

"There shall not be found among you any one that maketh his son or daughter to pass through the fire, or that useth divination, or an observer of times, or an enchanter, or a witch, or a charmer or a consulter with familiar spirits, or a wizard or a necromancer. For all that do these things are an abomination unto the Lord; and because of these abominations the Lord thy God doth drive them out before Thee."

Deuteronomy 18:10-12

The Bible is filled with references to evil spirits and solemnly warns against them.

During the Middle Ages the Christian Church led a virtual war against witchcraft, which was said to enable devils and demons to possess people and cause them to fall ill, behave oddly, commit crimes or cast spells on others.

Pope John XII ordered execution of various people for invoking demons to kill him. Pope Innocent VII urged increasing persecution

of witches, citing the biblical statement, "Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus 22:18). Martin Luther once stated, "I would have no compassion on these witches. I would burn them all." The Salem witch trials of 1692 are remembered today for the murder of countless innocent victims who were accused of being witches and possessed by the devil.

Witch hunts reached their peak in the United States between 1450 and 1750. During that time somewhere between 300,000 and 2,000,000 men and women were executed as witches.

Today, Sybil Leek of Melbourne Beach, Fla., described by the New York Times as "perhaps the world's best known witch," estimates that more than 400 covens of witches are practicing in the United States today.

Many leaders of organized religion sharply attack such practices as witchcraft and astrology. Most churchmen see the current interest in the occult as ungodly and sinful. Said a spokesman for the Catholic Information Center in Washington, D.C. in a recent article, "Our advice to young people is to stay away from it--it's dangerous."¹⁰ Evangelist Billy Graham declares in a recent article of his syndicated newspaper column, "Followers of occultism and other Satanic doctrines may be sincere, but they are sincerely wrong. The Bible warns us against sorcerers, witchcraft...and devils."

Some churchmen see positive aspects in the revival of the occult. For example, Protestant Theologian Harvey Cox of Harvard asserts that some people turn to the occult because society ignores "the non-rational dimensions of existence." Cox believes that

¹⁰"Trend to the Occult," Senior Scholastic, 97 (November 2, 1970) 7-12.

the awesome and terrifying events of life do not fit into our production and efficiency-oriented society.

The Rev. Andrew Greeley writes: "What is going on is authentically, if perhaps transiently and bizarrely, religious." He calls it "the new pursuit of the sacred," and adds: "It is so funny and yet so serious. Students cannot talk about it without laughing and yet they must interrupt their laughter to protest that they respect the goals of the new devotees of the sacred..."¹¹

Dr. John R. Newport in his book, Demons, Demons, Demons explains how witchcraft is forbidden by the Bible:

"...Magic and sorcery are offensive to God and related to demonic forces. They are not seen as harmless games to be experimented with as a stimulant for jaded metaphysical appetites.

In the light of the danger of witches to the moral life and redemptive purposes of God's chosen people, Exodus 22:18 records that Israel was not to allow them to live. Deuteronomy 18:10-12 states that sorcerers and wizards are offensive to God. Obviously, black magic and witchcraft were widely practiced in a degrading way in Canaan as evidenced by the inscriptions found on the Ras Shamra tablets.

Jezebel, the wicked queen of the Northern Kingdom of Israel, was deeply involved in witchcraft (2 Kings 9:22). Jaram suggested that there could be no peace in Israel as long as her magical practices prevailed. King Manasseh of Judah practiced magical sorcery (2 Chronicles 33:6), and God called these deeds "abominations" and stated that Manasseh had done wrong (2 Kings 21:11). Manasseh evidently followed in the steps of Solomon, who according to tradition was a sorcerer. Manasseh went so far as to sacrifice his own children to the Pagan god Moloch in the Valley of Hinnon. He also practiced astrological divination, consulted magicians, and summoned the dead (2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chronicles 33:6).

Isaiah was paramount among the prophets of Israel in his distaste for magic and witchcraft. He used savage satire to attack them (Isa. 47:12-13). Jeremiah warned Judah not to trust occult leaders (Jer. 27:9-10). Babylon, an important home of magic, was destroyed by the Persian ruler, Cyrus, who acted as a rod of God's anger and purpose (Isa. 47:9).

¹¹ Andrew M. Greeley, "There's a New Time Religion On Campus," New York Times, (June 1, 1969) 14-15.

For Malachi, a part of God's judgement on Israel will be a swift witness against witchcraft. (Mal. 3:5)¹²

Many experts on the subject of witchcraft and its relevance to the Bible believe that the present trend to the occult is a warning of the end of time. According to the Bible, there will be a tremendous display of deonic powers immediately prior to the total reign of the Antichrist.

"And he doeth great wonders, so that he maketh fire come down from heaven on the earth in sight of men, and deceiveth them that dwell on the earth by the means of those miracles which he had power to do in the sight of the beast; saying to them that dwell on the earth, that they should make an image to the beast, which had one wound by a sword and did live."

Revelation 13:13, 14

H. Richard Neff, in his book, Psychic Phenomena and Religion expresses the opinion that individuals must make a distinction between devil worship and legitimate scientific exploration of extrasensory perception and parapsychology. Neff admits that psychic phenomena is sometimes used by the devil to entice people into false beliefs and practices. Then when they are "hooked," he moves in to destroy them.¹³ For Neff, to say that all psychic phenomena are evil is "an over-simplistic answer to a complex problem."¹⁴

It seems that society itself has produced the "occult revival" as a side effect of a more serious searching of individuals who are searching for meaning which life in American society fails to provide. Both young and old who have turned seriously to the invisible and supernatural seem not so much a group apart from the rest of society as an enlarged picture of its troubles.

¹²John R. Newport, Demons, Demons, Demons. (Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman Press, 1972), p. 15.

¹³H. Richard Neff, Psychic Phenomena and Religion: ESP, Prayer, Healing, Survival (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971) p. 162.

¹⁴Ibid.

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