

Saturday, December 10, 2011

A Reply to Michael: Further Thoughts on the Issue of Supernatural Deception

In the comments section of a previous blog entry of mine, [Cognitive Reliability vs. Supernatural Deception](#), Christian blogger Michael Russell has offered numerous points of reaction. His last two comments, dated 7 December, were so loaded with topical material that I decided to post my response to him in a new blog entry here on [Incinerating Presuppositionalism](#).

Michael wrote:

The question you left me with, was a clarifying comment on whether the human mind is subject to supernatural deception.

Yes, I was hoping for a clear and definitive 'yes' or 'no' from you on this, since your previous messages on the matter have left your position a little murky here.

Michael wrote:

Again, you've pushed me beyond my previous thought with our interaction on this specific point. I can see that my previous post on 1 Tim 4 would be better if complemented with discussion of the rest of the Biblical witness on the subject of demons, in particular, demon possession.

I think specifically the area of my inquiry can be narrowed to the supernatural abilities which Christianity ascribes to demons ("deceptive spirits") and the abilities of men to detect and resist those abilities. From what I can tell, the NT characterizes human beings as pretty much sitting ducks for the supernatural pick-off. Human beings are always "in season," and it's just a matter of which supernatural spirit gets to them first; or, it's just all a matter of "God's plan," which no man can alter. The lesson to take home, on the Christian view, is that man never has the upper hand when confronted with a supernatural will. If a supernatural spirit wants to move in and make its home in a human being's mind, what's going to stop it? How can any human being resist a supernatural force?

I'm reminded of an old *Star Trek* episode - one from the original sixties series, perhaps you've seen it - where the *Enterprise* crew picks up a group of children who were orphaned by a scientific team that encountered disaster on some distant planet. The crew of the *Enterprise* don't realize it, but these kids have supernatural powers. In one scene, the crew on the bridge of the starship are deceived into thinking that the ship is still orbiting a planet when in fact it's traveling at maximum "warp" speed to another system. Poor Sulu and Chekhov are none the wiser - they've been supernaturally deceived.

What I'm saying is that, if my worldview sincerely affirmed the existence of supernatural beings, I don't see how I could ever rule out the possibility such belief invites that I myself could be the victim of such deception. It seems extremely tenuous to think that Romans 1 alleviates such a possibility. Indeed, the whole approach that you've offered so far relies on inference, and thus assumes that one's own mental faculties, including the ability to draw inferences, are immune to supernatural deception, which is the very thing in question. To date your approach seems to rely on assuming the very thing in question.

Michael wrote:

I can also see that I have not accounted for how the demonic teaching first enters into humans. So let me amend (and perhaps contradict) what I previously said. It seems I need to propose some kind of ability in demons to 'propose false teaching to a person's heart and mind'. How this actually works is beyond me. The Bible says little.

Why do you suppose that is? Why would this god, which is said to have authored the bible and "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son," choose to keep his believers in the dark on such matters? Speaking as a parent myself, I do everything in my power to inform my daughter about the world and the

hazards she might encounter. I certainly wouldn't tell her something like, "Well, there are these supernatural spirits that might be a real menace to you, and I know precisely how they operate, but I'm not going to give you any details - I'm just going to leave you completely uninformed on the matter." Since I genuinely love my daughter, I have every intention of disclosing everything I know about the hazards that could harm her. I certainly wouldn't choose to withhold vital information from her that she could use to protect herself, as though to say, "Enjoy the darkness of your ignorance. Good luck! You'll need it!" But perhaps on the Christian view there really is nothing that a human being can do to protect himself from supernatural forces. So why go into it? Either way, the state of affairs as we find it in the bible does not speak well for the worldview it endorses.

Michael wrote:

Let me turn to your actual question. A one word answer to your question is 'yes', I think the human mind is potentially subject to supernatural deception. This is because the Bible teaches that human minds do get deceived by demons and their teaching.

Yes, it does teach this, so I don't see how one could avoid answering 'yes' to my question, even though previous efforts on your part to answer my blog [Cognitive Reliability vs. Supernatural Deception](#) implied that you were essentially trying to answer it with a 'no'.

So it's good to have a clear answer to this: Yes, you do think that the human mind is potentially subject to supernatural deception, given what the bible teaches.

Of course, I'm guessing there will now be a need to qualify this affirmation somehow, perhaps with a set of disclaimers which are intended to preserve other teachings also found in the bible, namely teachings which hold man culpable for his spiritual state, even though it is ultimately in the hands of supernatural forces beyond his control.

Michael wrote:

Demonic possession would obviously severely change the experience of the person who is possessed.

I don't know why you would say this. It seems that the contrary would be the case, given the supernatural abilities of deceptive spirits. You yourself have acknowledged that "the Bible teaches that human minds do get deceived by demons and their teaching." Effective execution of such deception would, I'd think, by virtue of such efforts qualifying as successfully deceptive, result in seamless and undetectable reshaping. Presumably demons ("deceptive spirits") have had millennia or longer to perfect their craft. So I'm not disposed to readily accept the view that demonic possession, or merely supernatural deception (if these are distinct somehow - the latter is what I've been concerned about), "would obviously severely change the experience of the person" who is deceived. On the contrary, I'd expect that it would be so subtle as to be completely undetectable by any human faculty. Otherwise it seems that efforts on the part of supernatural spirits to deceive men would never get off the ground: they would result in such an "obvious" and "severe" change in a person's experience that it would be detected right away.

Perhaps this comes down to a distinction between "supernatural deception" and "demonic possession." Perhaps Michael has something like *The Exorcist* in mind here. By contrast, I don't have such spectacular depictions in mind. Rather, I'm thinking of the average human being who simply doesn't realize that supernatural spirits have infiltrated his consciousness and imperceptibly influenced his cognition somehow. I've been talking about "supernatural deception" all along, but you've introduced the notion of "demonic possession" while interacting with my questions on the matter. I don't know that they are one and the same. Again, "the Bible says little" here.

Michael wrote:

But would such possession be rightly called 'deception'? In certain ways, yes. We're limited in how much we can say about this, given the limitations of what the Bible says about demon possession. We have very little in the Bible about what it feels like to be demon possessed.

Again, the concerns which I originally raised in [my blog](#) had to do with *supernatural deception*. It's unclear whether or not this is distinct from or identical to "demonic possession." In fact, it's not for me to answer, since none of this is part of my worldview. The concept 'deception' inherently implies that those who have been deceived do not realize that they've been deceived. If victims of "demonic possession" are aware that they've been taken over by some demonic force, then clearly my concerns do not apply in such cases. Rather, I have in mind situations analogous to the *Star Trek* episode I mentioned earlier: the victims of deception have no idea that they've been deceived, they have no way of detecting the deception on their own, since the deceivers possess skills that are far beyond the ability of those who have been so deceived to sense or detect in any way.

So in response to your point here, I would say that the person who's been supernaturally deceived doesn't *feel* any different. Since he's been deceived, he has no idea that he's been deceived, and whatever deception has taken root in his being feels perfectly natural. It's seamless in his experience.

Michael wrote:

I'll try a few comments, nonetheless: I don't know what it feels like to be demon possessed, or whether one manifestation of that might be to have one's faculties playing tricks on you.

My concern at this point is that the discussion is incrementally drifting from man's inability to know whether or not he's been supernaturally deceived, to what it "feels like to be demon possessed," the latter of which was never the focus of my concern. It's one thing to say that when a human being is possessed by a demon, he senses this, recognizes that he's been taken over by a demon, and essentially says, "Hey, I like this! It feels great! Take me for a ride, Asmodeus! Have your way with me!" It's quite another to say that a human being has been deceived "unawares," which can only imply that he's been led down the wrong path without realizing it by some supernatural influence that he can neither detect nor successfully resist on his own.

If human beings can be deceived by other human beings "unawares," how much more can they be deceived by supernatural beings "unawares," especially when the very nature of those supernatural beings is not only malevolent, but also beyond the reach of man's senses as well as vastly more powerful than any human being? By nature it's a ludicrously uneven match. But on the Christian worldview, this is all part of "God's plan."

Previously, Michael, you focused on I Timothy 4:2 ("by means of the hypocrisy of liars (A)seared in their own conscience as with a branding iron") in order to draw the inference that supernatural deception finds its way into the stream of human thought through other human beings. Your interpretation of this verse apparently assumes that the "liars" mentioned in it were *human* in nature (even though the content of the verse does not necessarily require such an interpretation so far as I can tell). Specifically you had stated (in your 3 December comment to [this blog](#), timestamped 3:25 am), regarding I Timothy 4:

Notice from verse 2 [I Tim. 4:2] that the deceitful spirits are doing their deceiving through teachings which come through human hypocritical liars.

We must keep in mind that certain verses in the NT indicate that supernatural beings have the ability to disguise themselves in human form. For instance, Hebrews 13:2 instructs believers as follows:

Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

This is one of those "just in case" instructions that the NT gives to believers, given the potential that things aren't as they appear to be in terms of "spiritual" (i.e., *supernatural*) matters. As I wrote in my 3 December comment to [the same blog](#) (timestamped 7:06 am):

I do not see that Paul specifies that the 'hypocritical liars' he mentions are to be understood as *human*. I say this partly because I recall, when I was a believer, how my pastor & his crew would continually refer to certain "worldly folks" as "demons" and "devils," and very often imply that the "wicked" individuals we encountered were actually malevolent supernatural agents disguised as human beings (perhaps sort of like Jesus being the Christian god "become flesh"). In other words, given Christianity's overt supernaturalism and the powers it ascribes to supernatural spirits, I could not take it for granted that every individual I encountered was actually a human being. I really had no way

of knowing one way or another. And I don't think this kind of self-doubt and confusion is either unbiblical or accidental.

So the biblical worldview in fact ascribes tremendous powers and abilities to supernatural beings. If I were a believer (and I'm speaking from personal experience as a former insider here), I certainly wouldn't presume to have the intellectual confidence to discount or downplay the abilities of supernatural beings. On the contrary, their very presence in the Christian worldview seems to be deliberately affirmed for the purpose of undermining any confidence in one's own mind on the part of the believer *who takes such teachings seriously*, which I'd suppose anyone calling himself a Christian would need to do, given his confession qua Christian. In other words, I think it'd be wrong - indeed "arrogant" - on the part of any human being taking Christian teachings as actually true, to say "Well, those supernatural spirits really can't do anything harmful; they're just a nuisance is all. They really have no power. Don't take them seriously."

Michael wrote:

To lose control of one's speech and action etc. to another being who is within you, that seems to be what happens to some of the demoniacs in the Bible.

What you describe here (i.e., losing control of one's own speech and actions, one's own will, as it were), does not seem to be restricted, going by the stories I've read in the bible, only to demoniacs. Indeed, there are passages, such as in the gospel of John and the Acts of the Apostles, which suggest something similar, only the supernatural agent involved is the "Holy Ghost," not some devil or demon. Some examples might include:

John 14:26: "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you." (*How will it "teach" these things to those whom it teaches?*)

John 15:26: "When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me" (*How will it do this "testifying"?*)

Acts 1:2: "until the day when He was taken up to heaven, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen." (Jesus "gives orders" through the "Holy Spirit"? How does anyone become aware of them?)

Acts 1:16: "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus." (So, did David just mouth the words that were given to him by the "Holy Spirit" to speak, regardless of his knowledge of what they meant? Or was such knowledge just implanted into his head supernaturally?)

Acts 2:4: "And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance." (So, these people supposedly spoke in some actual language that they had not already learned, and they did so because the "Holy Spirit" spoke through them?)

Acts 2:17: "'AND IT SHALL BE IN THE LAST DAYS,' God says, 'THAT I WILL POUR FORTH OF MY SPIRIT ON ALL MANKIND; AND YOUR SONS AND YOUR DAUGHTERS SHALL PROPHECY, AND YOUR YOUNG MEN SHALL SEE VISIONS, AND YOUR OLD MEN SHALL DREAM DREAMS;'" (So, this "Holy Spirit" will be "poured forth" onto "all mankind," and as a result, this will *cause* them to "prophecy" and "see visions" and "dream dreams"? How is this not an example of a supernatural being taking over human cognition?)

Acts 4:31: "And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak the word of God with boldness." (So, this "filling" with the "Holy Spirit" results in the ability "to speak the word of God with boldness"? Is it the ability to speak, or the ability to speak "the word of God," or the ability to speak this word "with boldness" that the "filling" with the "Holy Spirit" gives to men?)

Acts 8:29: "Then the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go up and join this chariot.'" (How does an immaterial, incorporeal, non-biological, and invisible "spirit" tell a man to do something like this?)

Acts 8:39: “When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away; and the eunuch no longer saw him, but went on his way rejoicing.” (Here the “Spirit of the Lord” performs what is apparently a *physical* action, namely “snatching” someone from where they are. Perhaps many of the individuals who go missing each year have really just been “snatched away” by the “Holy Spirit.” How would anyone believing any of this know otherwise?)

Acts 10:19: “While Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, “Behold, three men are looking for you.” (How did “the Spirit” say this to Peter? How did the author of Acts know what a “spirit” said to one of the characters of his story, if not by imagining this?)

Acts 13:4: “So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus” (How did the “Holy Spirit” *send* them “out,” such that “they went down to Seleucia” ? How does that work?)

Acts 16:6: “They passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia;” (How does the “Holy Spirit” forbid a person to speak? Is it through persuasion or by means of force? Again, “the Bible says little” here.)

Acts 16:7: “and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them;” (Here the “Spirit of Jesus” inexplicitly prohibits people from doing something. Apparently people do not have the ability to make their own decisions. And how does one person know whether another person is being prevented from doing something because of some supernatural force?)

According to these verses (and others which I simply haven’t had time to rummage through), the “Holy Spirit” (which is not supposed to be “deceptive,” since it represents “the Truth,” regardless of its compulsive practices), seems to work in a manner similar to the “deceptive spirits” which are said to infiltrate human minds and turn them into puppets. If the concern is to figure out how it “feels” to be supernaturally commandeered, it’s hard to see how there would be any significant difference between demonic and divine possession in this regard.

Also, consider the very phenomenon by which the “Holy Spirit” is said to manifest itself in believers, namely through “speaking in tongues.” If this is not a clear example of losing control of one’s own speech, I don’t know what is. Indeed, it seems quite strange, given the breadth of the unfolding epic of the Christian bible. In the Old Testament, diversity of tongues was a sign of divine punishment (cf. Genesis 11:1-9), while in the New Testament speaking an unknown tongue is evidence of the “indwelling” of the “Holy Spirit.” First it’s representative of something bad, then it’s representative of something good.

At any rate, I see no indication in anything I’ve read in the Christian bible which necessitates that a person who’s been taken over by a supernatural spirit will feel any different or notice the intrusion to begin with. Rather, it seems that supernatural spirits have the ability to take over one’s speech and other cognitive faculties while maintaining the impression that one is in full control of himself. Otherwise, how could it be legitimately called ‘deception’?

The curious thing to note here is that the “Holy Spirit” is characterized in the NT as behaving in a manner very similar to “deceptive spirits” in that it allegedly moves into the mind of a human being and essentially takes over. It is unclear whether or not the person so affected is actually aware of this or not. But this actually seems to be what believers are encouraged to desire: that they should invite a “spirit” to enter into their minds, hearts and/or souls and “indwell” therein, taking control or at least taking the lead in one’s life.

I remember a common piece of instruction I heard so often when I was a church-goer. The expression was “Let go and let God.” Even then I couldn’t keep images of Luke Skywalker flying an incredibly sophisticated piece of hardware through space, preparing to bomb a massive space station, and suddenly the voice of his deceased mentor could be heard, “Let go, Luke. Let go. Use your feelings.” For all the Christians who claim that atheists have no consistent foundation for reason, logic, science, morality and the rest, the appropriate response may simply be, “May the Force be with you!”

But clearly the NT indicates that spirits, both wicked and divine, essentially inhabit human beings somehow.

The stories of the “Holy Spirit” guiding missionizing travelers in the Acts of the Apostles wouldn’t make sense otherwise, nor would he many instances in the gospels where Jesus is portrayed as “casting out demons” from characters inserted into these narratives.

Michael wrote:

But it’s hard to guess what you would see and feel and think and know if that happened to you.

I’d think that, were supernaturalism true and some supernatural being deceived a person, that person would be deceived, and thus think everything he’s experiencing is completely normal. Since the supernatural spirit is actively deceiving him, that spirit would no doubt ensure that there weren’t anything available to the deceived’s consciousness calling attention to the deception. Certainly a supernatural being would be capable of concealing its own presence in one’s life, no? Indeed, what *objective* evidence do Christians provide to support the claim that the “Holy Spirit” is dwelling in them? None that I’ve ever been able to find. Frankly it all seems to be in the imagination of the believer.

Michael wrote:

I can’t think that anyone would choose to be demon possessed, or ‘demonized’ (to use a more accurate translation of the Greek verb), knowing all that it would imply.

But you do think that the vast majority of persons have in fact chosen to “suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” no doubt knowing all that this implies, right?

Michael wrote:

Therefore I think it’s fair to say that demons work in a deceptive way, in order to end up possessing/‘demonizing’ a person.

This would mean that there is in fact a distinction between “supernatural deception” (which is what I have been inquiring about all along) and “demonic possession,” which you have recently introduced into the discussion. According to what you say here, the latter (“demonic possession”) is a *goal* of the former (“supernatural deception”). The nefarious spirits do not begin by “possessing” their victims (which implies full custody of the person’s mind, heart and soul, like locking a cage door and allowing no escape), but by coaxing, misleading, perhaps seducing or beguiling their victims without letting on that their being deceived (which implies that the victim is not under full custody, but may in fact be able to escape somehow). Would you say this is at least roughly accurate? At any rate, it seems that you do in fact hold that, according to your worldview, the human mind is subject to supernatural deception.

That being the case, and given the fact that “the Bible says little” on all of this, particularly on the epistemology of discovering and identifying what’s taking place in the “supernatural” realm, how can someone who believes that there are supernatural spirits malevolently seeking out victims of their deceptive tactics, have any confidence that their mind is free of any and all deceitful intrusions on the part of supernatural spirits?

Michael wrote:

I would discuss this topic under the theme of whether a person ends up with an excuse on the last Day before God.

In other words, the preservation of this doctrine - that man is without excuse before the Christian god - is your guiding non-negotiable in determining whether or not supernatural spirits can deceive human beings, and if so, when, where and how; whatever view you end up affirming regarding deceptive spirits and whether or not supernatural beings can deceive human minds, it must be conform to this doctrine. Correct?

Michael wrote:

For example, if a person were demon possessed at birth or at a very young age, they could complain on the last Day to God that they had no opportunity as an adult to process God’s revelation of Himself

to them, so they are not to blame for their rejection of him.

So I suppose that, on your understanding of Christianity, you would rather believe that human beings, perhaps even from a very young age, are actively deceiving themselves - "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" - presumably on purpose. That's how I understand the Christian view which is explicitly informed by the interpretation of Romans 1 that you have adopted: that everyone pretty much starts out actively deceiving themselves, apparently without influence from supernatural spirits. Would you say this is an unfair assessment, and if so, why? Would you rather say that there's a point in people's lives when they make some choice or decision to "suppress the truth in unrighteousness"? If so, can you elaborate on this?

Or consider this: Do you think it's simply not possible for someone genuinely to believe that Christian theism is irrational, that its claims about supernatural beings are false? My view is that supernaturalism finds its source in people's imaginations. Do you think I'm suppressing some truth by coming to this recognition? If so, is that because you're simply trying to be faithful to Romans 1? Or, do you have any objective input from reality (i.e., actual facts about the case rather than claims made by someone 1900 years ago to keep believers from straying from the churches he wanted to grow) to support this assessment?

Michael wrote:

Lacking control over one's actions would also seem like a potentially good excuse for evil actions.

That's interesting you say this. Would you agree with Van Til when he says "God controls whatsoever comes to pass" (*The Defense of the Faith*, p. 160)?

Or how about when Greg Bahnsen writes: "God's thoughts make the world what it is and determine what happens" (*Van Til's Apologetic: Readings & Analysis*, p. 243)?

Or how about when he writes: "God controls all events and outcomes (even those that come about by human choice and activity)" (*Ibid.*, p. 489n.43)?

If the Christian god is controlling everything that happens, determining "all events and outcomes," including "those that come about human choice and activity," it seems that a human individual really doesn't have any control over his own actions. In fact, I don't see how one could. And yet, Van Til & co. affirm this all-encompassing theistic determinism while still maintaining the "no excuse" doctrine. It all strikes me to be sheerly self-contradictory, or at any rate a complete mockery of morality (which is already evident in their view that [evil is morally justifiable](#)).

So again, it seems hard to maintain the "no excuse" doctrine with any logical consistency here.

Michael wrote:

Therefore, I would conclude that God does not allow very young children to be demonized.

So if a demonic spirit wants to "demonize" a little toddler, for instance, you think something's going to prevent it? If so, what? The "hand of God"? Why would that same god allow *any* of its human children to be harmed in such a way, even when they are older?

Suppose a person in his 20s becomes demonically possessed and driven to suicide. Why couldn't this person point to his being possessed by a demon as an "excuse"? Couldn't that person say something like, "If you [God] protected me from the demon, I would have been able to call on Jesus as my Lord and Savior. But since you [God] allowed me to be demonized, all opportunity for me to repent was taken from me, so I have a legitimate excuse"? Clearly he could say this (since people can say pretty much anything they want). But I'm guessing you would say your god would not accept it for some reason, right?

Michael wrote:

Since people will have no excuse before God, it follows that God does not allow demons to possess children when they are very young, because that would give them an excuse on the last Day before

God.

I guess I just don't see how being demonized for, say the last twenty years of one's adult life, could not also constitute an excuse. At any rate, you're implying that there is an age at which the gloves come off, so to say, and a child or young person is no longer immune to supernatural deception. Can you elaborate on this? What is that age, and how do you know?

Michael wrote:

I think what likely happens is that God only allows a significant level of demonic possession/influence on people when they have done something wicked enough to deserve such possession/influence.

But what, beyond being born as a human being, can a person do such that he "deserve[s] such possession/influence"? Consider the story of Job. Did Job deserve the injustices he suffered at the hands of demonic forces? My understanding of the story (and it's been a while since I've read it) is that Job was "right with God" and thus did not deserve any injustice. But biblegod stood by and allowed it to happen, watching every moment of it. Perhaps it's more like the line from *Unforgiven*: "Deserve's got nothin' to do with it." In fact, that's precisely how I read the Calvinist view of the world. On the Calvinist view, since every soul's eternal destiny has been determined long before anyone has been born (and therefore before anyone's had a chance to exercise his own volition in his life), man does nothing to "deserve" his eternal fate, whether it's heaven or hellfire. His eternal destiny has been predetermined for all eternity. The Christian god does not choose to save anyone because he "deserves" it - there's nothing anyone can do to "merit" salvation. It's simply the Christian god's arbitrary choice (only Christians will likely resist calling it arbitrary).

Also, your statement here suggests there are degrees of wickedness, some "level" of which will "earn" one the opening of the demonic floodgates. Of course, while some NT verses may confirm such a view, it does seem to go against the view expressed quite explicitly in James 2:10, that "For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one point, he has become guilty of all." This NT verse suggests that there are no "degrees" of transgression, no "levels" of "sin."

Michael wrote:

That's why seances and witchcraft are so dangerous...

I know that the bible mentions witchcraft (and prescribes that witches be put to death), but I don't think I've ever read about "séances" in the bible. Perhaps under a different name?

Michael wrote:

...if you explicitly invite demonic power to manifest itself in and around you, there is a justice in the demons taking some control over you and (perhaps) taking some control of your cognitive powers.

I will have to take your word for it. I have to admit that I really don't understand what the word "justice" could possibly mean in a world ruled by the god described in the Christian bible. According to the NT, for instance, we've all been judged guilty even before we were born. I don't understand how this can be just. Christians insist that it is. But they seem hard-pressed to explain how it's an expression of justice.

And why suppose that "séances and witchcraft" are the only way to "explicitly invite demonic power" into one's soul or life? If I recall, somewhere in the book of Proverbs it is intimated that the stubbornness of a defiant child is sufficient to "merit" death. Merely being born and "dying in one's sins" is sufficient to "merit" eternal torment. Why isn't using the Christian god's name in vain or failing to observe the "Sabbath" sufficient to "invite demonic power" into one's life? An "unsaved" person presumably does not have the protection of the "Holy Spirit" or the Christian god's retinue of holy "angels," so why not suppose that such a condition constitutes "open season" on behalf of the countless demons and devils seeking souls to consume and devour in their orgy of sin-making and soul-destroying? James tells us that one offence is sufficient to suffuse a soul with guilt.

Michael wrote:

You invited them, after all! (There are various embedded assumptions here that witchcraft and seances have real power on account of their using the real power which demons have)

But this line of reasoning you offer here somewhat implies that deceptive spirits need to be explicitly invited in the first place, when that's not the understanding I get from the NT. They are not characterized as beings respecting the sovereignty of human beings who need to consent before being deceived or "possessed." Rather, they are characterized as aggressive, opportunistic predators "seeking whom [they] may devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). They're actively on the prowl, not sitting back and waiting for invitations.

Michael wrote:

I strongly recommend warning your daughter against witchcraft and seances, Dawson!

I warn her about all forms of mysticism, Michael, including Christianity. Ultimately she will have to make her own decisions in life. But what a cache of resources she'll have in what I have given her!

Michael wrote:

Incidentally, I also believe Christians can escape any potential demonization of themselves or their children, since if they 'resist Satan, standing firm in the faith... he will flee from them' (that's a conflation of a couple of Bible verses).

Yes, I'm familiar with those passages. But then I'm reminded of Matthew 5:39 where the following injunction is put into Jesus' mouth: "But I say to you, do not resist an evil person." Isn't Satan a personal being? Aren't devils and demons personal beings? It seems that Jesus would have believers *not* resisting evil persons.

Of course, one could be deceived into thinking that he's really saved in the first place. There are, after all, hundreds if not thousands of different denominations, sects, factions and divisions within Christianity, many of them vehemently criticizing others for getting Christian doctrine wrong and essentially sending people to hell. Given the enormous variation among Christian teachings, and the exclusivity to truth that they claim to enjoy, the question as to which version is the correct one (assuming one of them is correct in the first place) seems entirely unanswerable. It's a spiritual crap shoot. One might think he's found the right church, the right doctrine, the right interpretation of that doctrine, only to have been deceived by some conniving spirit that he can't see, hear, taste, touch or smell. He could be deceived and simply not realize it. A person in this situation may think he's going through the right motions in protecting himself against supernatural spirits bent on deceiving him, but he could be playing into their hand all along, given the premise of supernaturalism to begin with. There really seems to be no "epistemology of the supernatural" to equip believers with the cognitive resources they would need to navigate the spirit world with any confidence. That's what it all really boils down to.

Michael wrote:

One strength of my take on all of this, is the number of people who actually describe 'weird' things happening through witchdoctoring, seances and so on.

I'm guessing what you're calling a "strength" here is the number of reports of such things, and its supposed value in confirming the truth of the beliefs you've developed in your Christian walk. I'm guessing there are people who are so anxious for confirmation that, even if there were only one or two such reports, they would happily point to them as vindication. But perhaps you think a higher number is required. If so, what is that number, and why? Is it 10? 20? 100? 1000? Would one less than the number you find significant impact your beliefs negatively?

Michael wrote:

Dismissing the reality of all these testimonies would be a weakness of your position, Dawson.

Why? People who put stock in such things are already predisposed to confusing what they imagine with reality, so it would not surprise me if persons who consider such expressions of mysticism to be legitimate forms of communing with the supernatural to report "strange occurrences" happening through such activities. Here in

Thailand, mysticism is pretty much rampant throughout the culture. I see some pretty bizarre things here, and I hear some of the most outlandish stories. It's not only generated by the mysticism of their worldview, it's also interpreted as confirmation of its "truth." Many people put faith in fortune-tellers, for instance. But it's amazing how often they get things wrong, and yet still people return to them and pay for additional services. I don't know how they rationalize the failures, but I have known people in the west who rationalize the failures of their palm-readings and horoscopes. Christian apologist Phil Fernandes, in his debate with J. J. Lowder, describes the attitude of the mystic very well when he says: "I just believe that we are very good about lying to ourselves, and only accepting, uh, or interpreting the evidence the way we would like to." Of course, I take it that he's speaking for himself here.

Michael wrote:

Have you not had any friends who've gone to seances and reported strange occurrences?

I certainly don't recall any. But I'm not questioning that people who engage in such activities will come away with stories about what happened. But anything along the lines of what we see in movies like *The Changeling* and *The Haunting in Connecticut*? None that I'm aware of. The imagination seems to run wild once one buys into any form of supernaturalism.

Michael wrote:

Have you not met any Africans who ascribe real power to witchdoctors?

I work with a fellow from Cameroon. If I get a chance, I'll ask him about this. But I don't doubt the fact that people around the world put a lot of stock in mysticism. They do it today just as they did 2,000 years ago in Paul's time.

Michael wrote:

Do you treat with sheer disbelief all the accumulated accounts all over the world of the power of witchcraft in its various forms and guises?

It's not clear what I'm being asked to affirm or disaffirm here. My view is that mysticism (including belief in the supernatural) is irrational. Does that answer your question?

by Dawson Bethrick

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