

Against the Current  
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Devils, Demons, and the Powers of Darkness

Tell us the demon story!"

Every summer at teenage conference (a camping program for teenagers sponsored by the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the USA) the campers ask their spiritual director, Fr. John, to tell his "demon stories". One of them is about a trip he and some friends took in the 1960's to Mexico, where they visited a Mayan temple and, on a lark, re-enacted a human sacrifice on its pinnacle, on the very altar where the ancient Mayans would cut out the living heart of a human being and offer it to their "god".

Of course no one was actually killed, they just posed for a picture and left. But the god of the temple must not have been terribly happy at having been denied his blood. After returning to the USA they were spending a stifflingly hot and humid summer night in a hotel Pittsburgh, with no air conditioning. Fr. John was drifting off to sleep when he heard his friend - the one who had played the part of the "sacrificial victim" at the temple - cry out from the other side of the room. He looked over and saw a dark cloud above his friend's bed, and his friend shrieked "Jesus, help me!"

His friend had been baptized as a child but wasn't a practicing Christian. As soon as he cried out to Jesus, though, Fr. John saw the cloud dissipate. His friend told him that he had seen a Mayan god (presumably the god the temple had been dedicated to) hovering menacingly over him, ready to attack. We might say "so what's the big deal? People have nightmares all the time, and perhaps Fr. John didn't see a cloud, it was just an optical illusion." But on this stifflingly hot summer night, with no air conditioning, their room was ice cold, and stayed that way for good half-hour after the incident.

Both Fr. John and his friend were convinced that they had survived a demonic attack, and this experience caused his friend to return to the Church.

Experiences like this, though rare, are real. People from all cultures and religions, at all times and places, have believed that there are evil or malevolent spiritual powers which need to be appeased, want to be worshipped, or can be

manipulated to do our will - for a price. Sometimes people encounter such powers innocently or accidentally, like Fr. John and his friend. Others actively seek out these fallen spiritual beings.

Chances are you know someone involved in activities which fall under the general heading of "the occult". "Occult" means "of or pertaining to magic, astrology, or any system claiming use or knowledge of secret or supernatural powers or agencies", and the word comes from the Latin root which means "that which is hidden". Occult practices are generally understood as those which either claim to impart hidden knowledge which the practitioner can then use for their own purposes, and/or practices which can tap into hidden powers.

Like most religions, occult teachings perceive the world as including two general spheres, the physical and the spiritual, the "normal" and the "paranormal". What is in these spheres, how they relate to one another, and how humans can interact with these realities is understood in different ways depending on one's spiritual perspective.

Practices which are usually regarded as "occult" can include "witchcraft", sorcery, magic, necromancy, spiritism, certain types of paganism, Satanism, astrology, fortune telling, etc.

"Witchcraft" is a loaded word, which can have several meanings. It can refer to an esoteric means of controlling things and people by means of "spells", potions, or other pseudo-scientific practices. The modern religion of Wicca is often referred to as witchcraft, but it's important to draw the distinction between Wicca as a neo-pagan religion (that is, a religion which claims to be part of a supposed pre-Christian faith system without having a direct historical link to it) and witchcraft as a means of gaining or manipulating power over people and things, which is more properly called sorcery.

So-called "fortune tellers", people who make amulets (items which, it is claimed, will bring a person good luck or ward off evil), and those who claim to be able to cast or remove "spells" are practicing sorcery. These types of practices became widespread in eastern Europe, where the Church was suppressed for decades, and many people reverted to pre-Christian, pagan and shamanistic practices, but they're becoming more and more common in our post-Christian western society as well.

People who practice necromancy attempt to contact the dead. The idea is that the spirits of people who die are wandering around somewhere and if we know how or have the power to do so we can contact them. "Ghost hunting", séances, the use of ouija boards or "channeling" are examples of necromancy

Paganism is another loaded word. It generally refers to religious belief systems which are not Christian/Jewish/Muslim (and it's worth remembering that among all the religions of the world only these three faiths are, strictly speaking, historical in their origins). "Paganism" might involve the worship of many gods (polytheism), the worship of nature or natural phenomena as god(s), the worship of ancestors, etc.

Satanism, technically speaking, refers to people who worship satan, the fallen angel who leads the hosts of hell in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Satanism as a religion is only about 50 years old, and, like Mormonism, the Watchtower religion ("Jehovah's Witnesses"), Scientology, and most of the other religious movements founded in America over the last 200 years is clearly a fabricated faith, invented by people to serve their own ends. Technically speaking there are very few real Satanists, but I don't need to tell you how dangerous this "faith" can be.

Anyone who has had any experience with the occult knows that involvement in these and other such activities is usually a waste of time and money, but it can be dangerous and harmful as well. So why do people get involved in occult activities? It's usually out of vain curiosity, boredom, out of fear, or because they want something (power, money, revenge) and think this is an easy way to get it.

Generally speaking people who have been brought up with a deep and authentic Christian spirituality in their parish and family will neither need nor want to be involved in occult practices. Anything which is positive or beneficial in a particular occult teaching or practice - meditation in Hinduism, or love for the natural world in Wicca, for example - can be found in our Orthodox Christian tradition. As to the negative, destructive, and demonic aspects of occultism, we have to ask ourselves why anyone would want to be involved with such activities at all.

As Fr. John always tells the teenagers, "when you get involved in the occult, you open a door." Once the door is open, anyone can come in. If it's a fallen

spirit you can be sure that you're going to experience pain, fear, anxiety and oppression.

The good news is that God in Christ is more powerful than the devil, and He has given us everything we need for a good life on this earth and salvation in the world to come. The sin involved with occult activity is that when we try to "look behind the curtain" we are not trusting in God's providence. When we try to control that which is in God's power we are playing God without God. Occult activity is fundamentally a lack of trust, and therefore a lack of faith, in God.

If you are or have been involved in occult activity - whether it's consulting "fortune tellers", dabbling in astrology, practicing sorcery, whatever - stop immediately, confess this sin sacramentally and receive Holy Communion. If you have occult symbols or artifacts in your house take them outside and burn them. Make sure, though, that you have friends praying for you & spiritual resources to back you up, because the demons don't like to be snubbed, and will do their best to try to draw you back into their "sphere of influence".

If you'd like to learn more about the relationship between our Orthodox faith and occult practices read the book The Gurus, the Young Man, and Elder Paisios, by Dionysios Farasiotis. I'd also recommend an excellent pod-cast on Ancient Faith Radio ([www.ancientfaith.com](http://www.ancientfaith.com)) called "The Occult: Shining Light on Satan's Shadow". It's presented by Fr. George Aguaro on the series "The Illumined Heart" with Kevin Allen at [http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/illuminedheart/the\\_occult\\_shining\\_light\\_on\\_satans\\_shadow](http://ancientfaith.com/podcasts/illuminedheart/the_occult_shining_light_on_satans_shadow).

Evil is real. The devil is real. But Christ is the Lord of heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible. As long as we are united to Christ we have nothing to fear from the forces of evil.