

The Occult

History, Beliefs and Practices

Identity: The term “occult” derives from a Latin word that means “hidden” or “secret.” In a general sense, “the Occult” refers to real or imagined “supernatural” happenings that go beyond the realm of the human senses [“paranormal”]. More specifically, “Occult” can denote magical practices, very often secret, and the individuals who perform them. Occultic phenomena assume the presence and assistance of supernatural or spiritual forces or beings. The practices and practitioners of the Occult are highly diverse and are present in many organizations and movements (e.g., Satanism, New Age, Wicca [neopaganism]).

Founders: Occultic practices and phenomena—both ancient and modern— have no single origin or founder. In the contemporary situation, certain individuals and groups receive public attention through the promotion of their literature and in some cases through media exposure.

History: *The Encyclopedia Britannica* begins its comprehensive article on “occultism” by stating that occultic “beliefs and practices—principally magical and divinatory—have occurred in all human societies throughout recorded history....”¹ Common to all human societies, it further notes, are divination, magic, witchcraft, alchemy,² and astrology. The Bible singles out and condemns occultic practices such as child sacrifice, divination or sorcery, the use of mediums, casting of spells, spiritism and necromancy present in ancient Canaanite cultures (Deut. 18:9-13).³ In the late 20th century and at the beginning of the 21st century, occultic beliefs and practices have become increasingly common, present for instance in the so-called “Neo-Pagan” movement, in which participants seek to use rites, chants, and charms, etc., to predict the future, improve the human condition and ward off evils (see evaluation on *Wicca*).

Beliefs and Practices:

Occultic practices today may be grouped into the following three general categories:

- *Fortune-telling or “Divination.”* Included here are practices believed to aid in predicting or even “seeing” the future, or looking into people’s minds and hearts. Some of the more popular occult practices include:

Astrology. Astrology is based on the belief that the stars and their alignment determine and predict human behavior and the future (Horoscope).

Card-laying and Palm-reading. This is the belief that the way a deck of special cards (called “Tarot”) appears or the lines on a one’s hand are configured (palmistry) are predictive of the future.

Divination. This term (from Latin, *divinatio*, “the power of foreseeing, prediction”) encompasses a wide variety of practices used to foretell the future, but also to “divine” God’s will (locating lost or hidden objects through the swing of a pendulum, obtaining supernatural guidance through a Ouija Board, dousing [‘divining’ for water] etc.).

- Magick (alternate spelling to distinguish “magic” from “sleight-of-hand” or “stage” magic). Magick in occultism entails efforts to call on extra-sensory forces for the purpose of knowing and ruling the “spirit” world, and even controlling humans and inanimate objects. Magick ceremonies and those who practice

¹ *Encyclopedia Britannica, 2002 Edition, 25:76.*

² Alchemy is a chemical philosophy developed from the 12th century aimed at changing base metals into gold, curing human ills, and providing elixirs of longevity.

³ See *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 189-90.

them are seen as channels through which supernatural power effects change in human events and conditions.

- Spiritism, or Spiritualism. Spiritism is the belief that the dead communicate with the living through a medium. Spiritists attempt to be in contact with the spirits of deceased humans and claim the ability to transfer information, about either past relationships or future events. Spiritualist practices may include a so-called séance or trance-like-state, usually moderated by a “medium.” During such spiritualistic activities, participants claim to observe or sense occurrences such as appearing and disappearing, moving objects, sounds (such as knocking on a table), and strange or altered voices, usually coming through the mouth of the spiritistic medium.

A Lutheran Response

The Bible clearly condemns occultic practices: “Let no one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practices divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft, or casts spells, or who is a medium or spiritist or who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the LORD, and because of these detestable practices the LORD your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the LORD your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practice sorcery or divination. But as for you, the LORD your God has not permitted you to do so” (Deut. 18:10-14; see also Lev. 20:6, 27). This denunciation not only prohibits involvement in the occult, but presumes that God—to whom alone “the secret things belong” (Deut. 29:29)—has promised to reveal Himself only through His divinely appointed means, namely, His Word. The Bible teaches that God has not promised to reveal Himself and His will to human beings except through His divine Word spoken and written through His appointed representatives (prophet, apostle) whom He authorizes to speak in His behalf. In the fullness of time God spoke most especially through His own Son (Heb. 1:1-2), the Word made flesh (John 1:14). Immediately following the above-mentioned denunciation in Deuteronomy 18, Moses prophesied the coming of God’s Son: “The Lord God said to me...I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers; I will put my words in his mouth, and he will tell them everything I command him” (Deut. 18:17; cf. 18:15). Of Jesus the Father in heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!” (Matt. 17:5; 3:17). He is the fulfillment of the ancient promise given through the prophet Moses (Acts 3:22; 7:37). In the end, occultic practices are detestable because they seek God outside of His divinely revealed Word. Hence also, they are an idolatrous rejection of God Himself.

The Scriptures speak often of unseen powers or forces that seek to influence human life and events, but these forces stand in fierce opposition to God and the coming of His kingdom. It is highly significant that Jesus’ public ministry begins with an attack from Satan, the prince of demons (Matt. 4:1-11) and at every turn involves confrontation with the powers of darkness. But these forces receive mention in the Bible most especially because Christ has defeated them and because believers can be assured of God’s protection. The apostle John writes, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Those who are troubled by the power of the Devil in the world are urged immediately to seek strength in the promises of God’s Word which assures us that the battle is already over and that Christ has won: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he (Jesus) made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (Col. 2:15). Christians are encouraged to put on a specially designed suit of armor with which to receive protection in this very real spiritual battle. “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil’s schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. . . . And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the saints” (Eph. 6:10-12, 18). And in the words the apostle Peter, “Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith...” (1 Pet. 5:8-9; see also 1 John 4:1; 1 Thess. 5:21-22).

Occultic practices appeal especially to those who are fearful of bad things that may happen to them, hoping that knowledge and protection can be obtained through contact with the supernatural. The Bible, however, invites such persons to place their trust in the God of mercy and love, who always pursues and accomplishes the best interests of

those who love Him (Rom. 8:28-30). The present and the future belong in His hands (Ps. 31:14-15). Nothing in the present or in the future can separate Christians from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38).

For Further Reading....

Wendell Amstutz. *Exposing and Confronting Satan: Information, Insights, Help and Hope*. Rochester, MN, 1990.
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Danny Korem and Paul Meier. *The Fakers, Exploding the Myths of the Supernatural*. Grand Rapids: Baker 1980, rev. 1981.
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Links and Websites

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