

THE PYTHON EXORCISM

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Even the leading cult-watchers have generally failed to recognize the Trojan horse that has penetrated both the church and their own ranks and is seducing from within. Strangely enough, most of today's Christian leaders who rightly cry so mightily against so many evils are saying little if anything about the revival of sorcery that is sweeping both the secular world and the church. In many cases it reflects a lack of awareness or naiveté, and in some cases an unwillingness to admit their own involvement. Why is this? It is because most Christians are so uninformed about occultism that they wouldn't recognize it except in its most blatant forms.

In the life and ministry of the Apostle Paul we have a good example of how Satan tried to sneak up on him and pull the wool over his eyes. Luke records that Paul continued to worship at the place of prayer during his sojourn at Philippi. It was on this occasion that he had a direct encounter with the spirit world. It was a demonized slave girl. "And it came to pass, as we went to prayer, a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us." Acts 16:16. Day by day as the missionaries went to the place of prayer, she followed them through the streets of Philippi, advertising them aloud as servants of the most high God.

The girl, controlled by a spirit of divination, practiced fortune-telling. The word "divination" here is the word from which we get our English word "python." Thus she was called a "pythoness." The name was used to refer to persons supposedly indwelt by the spirit of the Greek god Apollo, associated with the giving of the famous Greek oracles. Apollo was worshipped as the Python god at the shrine of Delphi in central Greece.

The girl's involuntary utterances were regarded as the voice of the god, thus she was much in demand by people who wished to have their fortunes told. When another being and evil personality speaks out of the mouth of a human being often producing strange sounds or a different voice than that of the individual, that is demonism. That is what was happening with the slave girl.

Faced with an uncertain future that evoked anxiety, and confronted with difficult personal decisions, people continued to find refuge in the oracles, and they were also willing to pay for this help in taking

decisions. Some of the questions that patrons asked were rather mundane: Will I receive my wages? Will I remain in the place to which I am now going? Will I be sold (as a slave)? Will my friend bring me any gain? Will I be transferred to the heirs (of my master)? Will I get a holiday? Will I receive the money? Will I be successful? Ought I to run away? Will they catch me, if I run away? Will I be divorced from my wife? Have I been poisoned? Will I receive a bequest?

In our skeptical age we might be inclined to look back on all this and think how gullible were those primitive Greek minds to consult a soothsayer. We sneer at anything we cannot see or understand. However, we are gullible enough to patronize the fortunetellers who infest our cities. There is a lure to the psychic, a pull to the unseen.

Large percentages of people read the horoscopes and scan the newspaper astrology columns. Some even believe these predictions come true. Many have participated in some sort of occult phenomena. There is a persistent belief in flying saucers. Communication with the dead is possible. Reincarnation is a common belief.

In our state university systems you will find astrologers and mediums, reincarnation and karma, tarot cards, palmistry, and crystal balls. You will also find Indian medicine men. And Tibetan Buddhism, and Yoga in the guise of health and reducing classes. Doctors, psychiatrists, and the police have called in the psychics to solve perplexing cases.

The motive behind all of this is a for-profit industry. We read that “a certain damsel possessed with a spirit of divination met us, which brought her masters much gain by soothsaying.” Acts 16:16. This slave was bequeathed in partial shares to several persons. She had no right to make use of her physical and intellectual abilities as she wished. She was a valuable tool. Having no rights, she was a productive property to her owners who received all the proceeds by means of her prophecies.

This Pythoness attached herself to Paul as a disciple. She followed him wherever he went. She was the lead act introducing him with the following words: “These men are the servants of the most high God, which show unto us the way of salvation.” Acts 16:17. The first impression is that she spoke the truth and even the demons recognized that Paul and Silas were servants of the one and only true God. So what was the hurt or damage in allowing her to accompany them? At first sight, they appear remarkably correct, and one would

suppose that they match the self-understanding of the Christian messengers as servants of the one God and proclaimers of his words; this makes it difficult to understand why Paul reacts so negatively.

The demons always speak some truth in their practice of allurements and deception of unwary souls. There were many “Highest gods” and a pagan hearer would understand the term to be the deity he or she considered to be supreme. Hearers would not think of Jehovah. So, the primary effect of the term on pagans must have been to mislead them. They would recognize, not the Jewish God, but the deity they thought to be the highest god—Zeus, or some other deity. If pagans had a good knowledge of Judaism, they would understand that the reference was to Jehovah, but that many pagans had such a knowledge is unlikely in a city which seems to have had a very small Jewish community. For a pagan, the term would not even imply monotheism. It would simply suggest the creation of a hierarchy in their pantheon. Pagans would have thought Paul and Silas were servants of the deity they themselves considered to be “the highest god,” perhaps Zeus.

Thus, the girl’s proclamation as she followed Paul around was very misleading. She was proclaiming that the way of salvation was found in which ever god the hearer considered to be “the highest god.” Paul’s annoyance and consequent action were caused by the fact that the girl was confusing those to whom he was preaching. His anger was aroused by the fact that she was exposing his own proclamation to a polytheistic misunderstanding.

Luke in the Book of Acts gives Christianity the simple name of “*the way*”: Saul travels to Damascus as a persecutor of the Christians, in order to see “whether he might find any there belonging to *the way*” (9:2; cf. 24:14, 22). A path is offered, along which people can enter true life. Being en route to a goal becomes a distinguishing mark of the Christian existence. But the slave-girl’s words have no article before the noun, so that one could also translate: “they proclaim to you *a way* of salvation,” implying that the Christian path is only one among many. This means that it is no longer so clear that the path to salvation is involved—and *soteria*, “salvation,” was itself also a salvific promise of the ancient mystery cults, while *soter*, “redeemer,” was a title shared by the saviour god Asclepius, the divinized emperor, and many others.

We see, therefore, that the affirmation of the slave-girl is more ambiguous than might be desired. It is possible to read her words in a perfectly correct manner: when she speaks of the highest God, she means the creator God of the Bible, and when she speaks of the way of salvation, she means the soteriological efficacy of the gospel message. But a syncretistic misunderstanding would be equally possible: a new higher god is announced, a competitor to those who already exist, and a new offer of salvation with a new redeemer-figure aims merely at widening the existing spectrum, without being fundamentally different from other offers.

Why did Paul delay in dealing with her? “And this did she many days.” Acts 16:18. If we take our starting point in the fundamental ambiguity of what the slave-girl professes, we can make sense of the delay as follows: Paul ought in principle to have protested immediately, in order to ward off misunderstanding, but he did not do so, since he foresaw and feared the negative consequences, (which were subsequently realized). However, the continuous repetition without clearer specification made the public formula more and more problematic, especially since there were an increasing number of new converts and these took exception to it. Not the least reason for their irritation was that Paul not only let a soothsayer go about her business unhindered, but even seemed to welcome her support. Was it possible for her to continue to provide her consultations under the cloak of Christianity? And would that mean that the Christian faith was compatible with the practice of oracles? The borders begin to be fluid, the clear contours begin to be lost to sight. This is why Paul is now compelled to shoulder the risk of silencing the spirit that speaks out of the slave-girl.

When Paul reached a high point of annoyance, he felt grief, pain, and anger, and even compassion and love for the girl, all together. He acted to remove the danger. It proves very simple to overcome the soothsaying spirit by means of a command to depart from her (modeled on the exorcisms). Paul turns to the slave-girl and addresses the spirit directly. “But Paul, being grieved, turned and said to the spirit, I command thee in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” Acts 16:18. Christ has complete authority over the forces of the infernal world. It is by His messianic title, Christ, that the demon is abjured to depart.

By introducing the name of Jesus Christ, Paul also makes unambiguous the references to the highest God and the way of

salvation (v. 17): the highest God is the God and Father whom Jesus himself proclaimed, and the way of salvation is the way that John the Baptist made level for Him, the path on which human beings are to follow Him.

On one occasion, while counseling a traumatized believer, a powerful demon suddenly exploded into manifestation. It caught the counselor off guard. The quiet, gentle person was suddenly transformed into a screaming, evil being. It all happened so quickly the counselor pulled back, a wave of sudden fear vibrating through him.

“Look at you! Look at you!” the evil spirit screamed. “You are afraid! You are afraid! Your entire body is trembling,” it mocked. He instantly replied, “My knees may be trembling, but that has nothing to do with what is going to happen here. It is the authority and power of the Lord, the Holy Son of God who abides within me, that will expel you through my word, fear, trembling, and all. He is the one with whom you have to deal. Shut up!”

Instantly the demonic mocking subsided. Within a short time the demon was more afraid of the counselor than he had been of him. He recognized that this Christian knew the source of his authority and power over the demon. He was deathly afraid of the Lord Jesus Christ.

We live in an age that is both pluralistic and is experiencing a rediscovery of spirituality. Pluralism causes many people to assign roughly equal status to all religious approaches’ spirituality causes them to welcome different expressions of the spiritual and the supernatural. This combination has brought about a supermarket approach to religion, where people are encouraged to shop for the gods that best suit them. After all, religions are just different paths to the same god.

Consequently, the Indian “god-man” Satya Sai Baba, who claims to be an incarnation of the god Shiva, is gaining disciples in both the East and the West. He performs miracles, directs people away from sinful sensuality, and utters words of wisdom that help them live “better” lives. His followers say that he is the Christ who has come for this particular age. According to the pluralistic ideal we should welcome the service rendered by Sai Baba to humanity and affirm that his way is indeed good and helpful.

Jesus warned that in the last days people will say, “Look, here is the Christ!” and, “Look, there he is!” But, he said, “Do not believe it” (Mark

13:21). Our Lord went on to explain, "For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect—if that were possible" (13:22). These powerful "god-men" who are gaining many disciples and influencing people to move in directions that seem to be good for them are false prophets. We must be alert to this and seek to rescue people from their influence, just as Paul did with the Philippian girl.

This is not popular in today's pluralistic environment, where acceptance and affirmation of other faiths is almost mandated as a part of healthy living. But it must be done because we believe that these forces, despite the temporary good they may perform, serve to further entrench people in bondage to Satan. After a Youth for Christ magazine in Sri Lanka had published an article about Sai Baba, a top government official, who was a nominal Christian and an admirer of Sai Baba, said, "Isn't it better to be safe than sorry? This is a typical pluralist attitude in such situations: "It may not be relevant to me, but it is relevant to others, and I will just leave it alone without poking my finger into it. After all, it could be genuine." Paul was motivated by such a deep love for people that he could not endure the pain of seeing them under the grip of deception. He had to act, and so must we.

A statement of confirmation concludes the miracle story: the spirit departed from the slave-girl. "And he came out the same hour." Acts 16:18. The exit of the invader of her personality brings to the damsel that great boon of the free grace of God the restoration of the freedom of her will in Christ Jesus. She receives the forgiveness of her sins. To this freedom is added the enrichment of divine holiness and strength of new life through the indwelling of the Spirit of God. Paradise and more is regained; where sin abounded grace does much more abound.

Contact with spirits is invariably depraving, soul-darkening, and unchristian. The possessed know their moral subjugation. A common phenomenon is the liability to fits or outbursts of real Satanic fury, to descents into vile debauchery. The presence of a recognized Christian to one who has purposely sold himself to the devil can arouse such bitter dislike that he will foam at the mouth as he pours upon him a shuddering torrent of curses and abuse.

It is futile to deny or explain away the New Testament instances of demoniac possession on the hypothesis of insanity, or hallucination. The veracity of the Lord and the apostles cannot be questioned.

Foreign missionaries today recognize the signs. Demon possession is still a fact. But inability to reach the afflicted the Lord's servant does not admit. Heathen devotees are won sooner than callous worldlings. The fact that they are devotees betrays a soul-hunger that may be direct to Jesus whose Spirit alone can satisfy them. Though under the subjection of demon-possession the Name of Jesus Christ is omnipotent. And when converted they make unique witnesses to the redeeming power of the Saviour of the world. But no dalliance with idolatry is permissible. The idols require to be removed from a house before the evil spirit will cease troubling its inmates, and depart from the person particularly afflicted.

The marvel of her liberation from the demon arrests close attention. What is this? What new doctrine have we here? Who is this Saviour with such transcendent power that the very spirits whom men dread and cajole must obey Him? To seekers after truth her case raises hope of the dawn of a new day. Incontrovertibly no name given under heaven can save after this fashion; the evidence cannot be set aside. The Holy Spirit of God replaces the evil spirit that held her in bondage. To temple priests and rulers this brings alarm. Their position and influence are threatened, their living is in danger. As always, with the presentation of saving truth, a sharp division is created among men.

The division is accentuated by her positive refusal to continue her soothsaying manner of life. Did she so desire nothing could be easier since deceit, trickery make up the secret of its success. But these things she can no longer and will not practice, let her owners threaten as they may. Their rage at the loss of their gains is overwhelming proof of the holiness of her new life, and corresponding courage to withstand the evil of a degrading occupation. Another than the prince of darkness now reigns in the citadel of her heart.

What compels the comment of many concerning her, and arouses their desire for the blessing is exactly that which still calls forth the surprise of the heathen at the sight of Christian converts, the expression in her face of a radiant peace which they themselves do not have, and to this point have not seen. This rare serenity of spirit speaks of the security and soul-satisfying fellowship she has with her Saviour; something which the world cannot give and cannot take away. "There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked."

This young girl has been a double slave to both the Python spirit and her greedy masters. It's always been about the bottomline for

them. “And when her masters saw that the hope of their gains was gone, they caught Paul and Silas, and drew them into the marketplace unto the rulers, and brought them to the magistrates, saying, These men, being Jews, do exceedingly trouble our city, and teach customs, which are not lawful for us to receive, neither to observe, being Romans.” Acts 16:19-21. They were hauled in to Philippi’s central agora where the local justice of the peace held court, and they pressed charges on causing a public disturbance and proclaiming an alien religion.

Of course, the local economy is based upon their religion of the gods and so this gains the sympathy of the other townsmen whose livelihood is similarly based. “And the multitude rose up together against them: and the magistrates rent off their clothes, and commanded to beat them.” Acts 16:22.

16:23 And when they had laid many stripes upon them, they cast [them] into prison, charging the jailor to keep them safely:

16:24 Who, having received such a charge, thrust them into the inner prison, and made their feet fast in the stocks.

THE only record we have of Paul’s singing was when he was in the jail at Philippi, lying on the cold floor, his back bruised and bloody from the “many stripes” it had received. At midnight they “prayed and sang praises unto God.” Acts 16:25.

Notwithstanding their lacerated backs and their manacled feet, they prayed and sang praises to God at midnight and suddenly an earthquake shook the prison, and all the doors were opened. It was not alone the natural fear produced by feeling the earth rock beneath him nor yet the dread of Roman justice if the prisoners in his charge should escape, that caused the jailer to tremble. But he felt in that earthquake shock a premonition of the great judgment, concerning which the apostles had preached; and, trembling under his load of guilt, he fell down before Paul and Silas, saying, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Mark well the answer; for here was a soul in sorest extremity and what was sufficient for him must be the message to all lost ones. To the jailer’s anguished appeal, Paul replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved.” Acts 16:30, 31.

On one occasion the Jews said unto Jesus, “What shall we do that we might work the works of God?” Just the thing that we want to know. Mark the reply: “This is the work of God, that ye believe on him whom he hath sent.” John 6:28, 29. Would that these words might be written in letters of gold and kept continually before the eyes of every

struggling Christian. The seeming paradox is cleared up. Works are necessary, yet faith is all-sufficient, because faith does the work. Faith comprehends everything and without faith there is nothing.

The trouble is that people in general have a faulty conception of faith. They imagine that it is mere assent and that it is only a passive thing to which active works must be added. But faith is active and it is not only the most substantial thing but the only real foundation. The law is the righteousness of God (Isa. 51:6, 7), for which we are commanded to seek (Matt. 6:33), but it cannot be kept except by faith, for the only righteousness which will stand in the Judgment is "that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith." Phil. 3:9.

When God calls one of a family, it is often the means by which He draws others into the gospel net. "And they spake unto him the word of the Lord, and to all that were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night, and washed their stripes; and was baptized, he and all his, straightway." Acts 16:32, 33. When Jesus died on the cross, He legally adopted the whole human race into the household of God. The word of the Lord is proclaimed to all. "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge. There is no speech nor language, where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world." Psalm 19:1-4. It is the word of the Lord entering the soul that causes one to choose baptism into Christ and thus experience the peace which only God's forgiveness of sins can provide.

Mrs. A. J. Gordon said, "God has given every parent the privilege of claiming his children for God. If a parent would plead and believe God's promise, the child of such faith would never be lost. God had given her five children. From their birth she claimed and believed God for their salvation. As the children grew up, they one by one accepted Christ.

It is faith like this that God honors. A mother, convicted of this truth, said, "I have three grown-up children. One is backslidden, a girl of 18, who is uninterested in spiritual things, and two sons, who are unsaved." She began to pray with faith. Her Pastor said, "She herself was a different person. Instead of worrying over her children, she became filled with joy and peace through believing."

In a week, or two, the younger of the two boys was converted, and later went to Bible college. The daughter came back to God. About a year later, the older son was saved. So, the whole family was united in Christ.

Since Bible times God has been honoring the faith of men and women for the saving of their household. History records, in the fifth century, that a Christian mother went to the Bishop of Milan and implored him, "with tears," to speak to her prodigal son.

The Bishop marked her tears and with prophetic insight said, "It is impossible that the child of such prayers could ever be lost."

That mother was Monica, and her son was Augustine, converted to God by the faith of a mother who would not let God go. She gave God no rest, day or night, until her boy was saved.