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Review of “Demons of the Modern World”

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Book Review

Demons of the Modern World, by Malcolm McGrath. Foreword by Robert A. Baker. Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 324 pages including preface, bibliography and index.

In the last 300 years we have witnessed the rise of modern science, the Enlightenment, the emergence of institutions that champion reason and the importance of evidence, and the spread of science-based technologies. These events, notwithstanding the lip service we pay to science education, have done little to dampen the enthusiasm which the general public has for astrology, psychics (even pet psychics) who claim to talk to the dead, belief in aliens and alien abductions, ghosts, demonic possession, and tales about the supernatural creation of the universe. Superstitious and magical beliefs, viewed as cultural phenomena, far from being dispelled by modern science, have co-evolved with science and have continued to find large, comfortable niches in the minds of an alarming number of people who are themselves the beneficiaries of science and science-based technologies. McGrath's book is an interesting exploration of the causes and effects of magical and superstitious beliefs. In particular, the book is concerned with the curious phenomenon of the scares in the 1980s involving satanic cults engaging in ritual child abuse, and the alien abduction scares of the 1990s. The lessons to be learned from the book go way beyond these particular events.

The book opens with a discussion of beliefs about witchcraft – beliefs that enjoyed great currency even among educated folk during the 16th and 17th centuries. McGrath's contention is that underlying beliefs about witches and the pacts they supposedly made with the Devil is a dualistic conception of reality as something consisting of a natural world of physical objects obeying the laws of nature, and a supernatural realm inhabited by demons, the Devil and assorted bogeymen who from time to time manage to wreak havoc on the natural world.

It is worth noting here that demonic magic – involving belief in nonhuman supernatural agents with special powers – was part of a broader magical view of the world in which human beings themselves possessed non-physical souls or spirits as well as physical bodies. Thus spiritual magic, involving belief in special powers consequent upon the possession of a soul (for example healing powers or the ability to use the evil eye), fits very nicely with demonic magic at a metaphysical level.

Natural magic, involving belief in special natural objects with special powers, though different from both demonic and spiritual magic, is equally ancient. In the 16th and 17th centuries natural magic showed itself in alchemical beliefs and the search for special substances such as the philosopher's stone, the elixir, the alkahest and the panacea. Natural magic persists today in beliefs concerning flying saucers and aliens – natural beings with special powers and knowledge beyond human

comprehension. Unlike natural science, natural magic is quite compatible with a dualistic conception of reality.

By the dawn of the 18th century alchemy, astrology and witchcraft had lost whatever intellectual credibility they once enjoyed, but the dualistic conception of reality has persisted in popular culture, and distant echoes of the witchcraft debates can be found in contemporary fears about Satanism and satanic cults.

Having raised some historical issues in the first chapter, McGrath proceeds to an analysis of the human cognitive condition that underlies the continued prevalence of beliefs in the occult and the paranormal, where anthropologist Robin Horton's distinction between primary and secondary theories of reality is put to good use. Primary theories, roughly speaking, concern things more or less directly observable, whereas secondary theories concern things inaccessible to direct observation. The objects spoken of in secondary theories may be hidden things we invoke to explain that which is directly observable, for example electrons and viruses in the realm of modern western science, or they may be such things as spirits or occult powers.

While there is something to this distinction between primary and secondary theories, I am not convinced that the distinction is quite as simple as McGrath would have us believe – if only because observation *is* contaminated by theory, and in science at least, the contaminating theories are often about things inaccessible to direct observation. There is an enormous literature on these matters that McGrath could usefully have referred to.

Nor am I convinced that we should readily acquiesce in the similarity of status for such secondary items as electrons on the one hand, and secondary items such as spirits or occult powers on the other. Granting that electrons and spirits are both cultural productions does not establish, in and of itself, that they enjoy similar epistemological or indeed ontological status. Even if electrons and occult powers are granted to be objects in secondary theories, they may play very different roles in such theories, and enjoy different sorts of relationships with things spoken of in primary theories. More discussion of these vexing matters would have been helpful, especially since they are likely to bear on issues about causation which lie at the heart of the differences between a magical and a scientific view of the world.

McGrath tells us that the only nonhuman personality to have retained legitimate status in modern western culture is God. But McGrath tells us, “. . . although *In God We Trust* is still written on American money, God's agency has been ruled out of science, social science and legal theory” (p. 58). But once again, this is far too simple. Even a passing acquaintance with the current culture wars being fought in the United States and elsewhere in the west concerning evolutionary biology and creationism, especially in its latest mutant form as *intelligent design theory*, would have shown that even if the Enlightenment killed God, he has refused steadfastly to lie down quietly. Famous scientists may reject creationism and divine intervention, but that is hardly a representative sample of scientists as a whole, and science educators in particular.

The debate is not just about evolution either, for there is an enormous interest in sections of the medical community on the healthful benefits of religion and religious belief, so much so that there have been numerous calls to change the bio-psycho-social model of modern medicine to a bio-

psycho-social-spiritual model. The triumph of science in modern western culture has not been straightforwardly coextensive with the vindication of a naturalistic view of the world favored by the great thinkers of the Enlightenment.

I simply cannot accept McGrath's judgment that, ". . . the possibility of magic and nonhuman personalities is fundamentally incompatible with the theories that make up the modern Western view of the world" (p. 64). The existence of genuine scientists who currently speculate about the need for a cosmic being to fix the values of the constants of nature to explain the so-called anthropic coincidences of modern cosmology, the New Age mysticism surrounding attempts to invoke the intervention of consciousness in the context of measurements in quantum mechanics (not to mention the alternate realities of the "many worlds" interpretation of that metaphysically benighted theory), the physicians interested in the healing power of prayer, and the academics at reputable universities who are currently championing intelligent design creationism, are all evidence of a more complex actual state of affairs.

In chapter three, McGrath provides a good discussion of the intellectual forces that shaped an interest in witch hunting in the West. The chapter contains much interesting information about the Salem witch trials and the intellectual culture in which they took place. In chapter four the discussion moves to an analysis of fears about Satanism and satanic child-abuse cults – fears that have made a notable resurgence in the last two decades. As McGrath puts it, "If the modern Satanism scare began with individual tales of molestation, it ended with tales of satanic conspiracy no less global in their proportions than the Red Scare of the McCarthy era or Cotton Mather's fear of the Devil's invasion of New England" (p. 95). McGrath rightly warns that we should not be misled by the obvious similarities between these events, for the situation is complex, and there are important differences too. Regardless of whether they were a threat to national security, communists were nevertheless real. Though child abuse is real, the advocates of contemporary satanic conspiracies surrounding it – as often as not social workers and policemen – lack the theological sophistication and theoretical foundations of their witch hunting forebears in the Renaissance.

Chapter five shifts the focus of attention to evidence for Satanic child abuse gathered by therapists who claimed to have recovered memories of such events from their adult patients. As McGrath shows, therapists often mistook the emotional power and vivid detail of their patients' reports to be evidence of the reality of the claims they were making. Opportunity makes for strange bedfellows. Radical feminists saw evidence of child abuse in recovered memories as vindication of their claims about an oppressive patriarchy. Religious fundamentalists saw the same evidence as vindication of the threat posed by Satan and his followers for decent family values. In chapter six McGrath discusses the lack of serious science behind the recovered memory movement. The science of memory in fact reveals the hazards posed for therapists by the existence of false memories, confabulation, the effects of interpretation, suggestion, and the simple inadequacy of a videotape model of human memory.

At various points in the book, McGrath discusses the infamous McMartin preschool trial of the 1980s where there had been allegations of child abuse linked to satanic cult activity. These issues receive further attention in chapter seven where McGrath discusses the nature of evidence for these claims that was extracted from children by social workers and others. The issues discussed here focus on the nature of memory in children. Traditionally, children have been viewed as inherently unreliable sources of information. As interest in preventing child abuse came to the fore in the

1970s this all began to change. Information extracted from children by social workers came to be seen in a new epistemic light, “. . . the idea that children cannot fabricate tales of abuse was to become a kind of first principle of child-protection workers during the 1980s” (p. 171). The alternative hypothesis that such information might be an artifact, instead, of the investigative process was not given due consideration. But all this raises the issue of why social workers and child therapists so readily concluded that the abuse they thought they were seeing was a manifestation of the activity of satanic cults.

In chapter eight McGrath elaborates on the idea discussed earlier in this review that behind the world of everyday objects and experiences there is a world of demons and supernatural beings. The illusion that there is such a world is not the product of unclear thinking, as some have supposed, rather it is McGrath’s contention that it is an elaborate cognitive construct generated by mechanisms amenable to study. It is his view that these same mechanisms were at work in the Satanism scares of the 1980s that were discussed earlier. McGrath argues that though the demonic realm is hidden, it is not hidden from everyone. Chapters nine, ten and eleven examine the various windows by means of which we may catch glimpses of this world: children, dreams and madness, respectively. These chapters are richly illustrated by examples from horror movies and horror stories, and are worth reading for this reason alone. The discussion of madness is of particular interest given the way which it has been seen as the result of demonic possession. Psychiatrists may reject the hypothesis of demonic possession, but it still lives on in popular culture and some western religious traditions. Exorcisms are still performed and churches can be found all over the United States where congregants speak in tongues and roll in the aisles, claiming to be possessed by the Holy Spirit.

In chapter twelve McGrath discusses the location of portals through which it is believed the denizens of the demonic realm can work their mischief. As the Earth came to be explored in the 18th and 19th centuries, exotic geographic locations (such as darkest Africa) lost their centrality as locations for demonic portals. But McGrath contends that, “. . . the idea that demons might enter our world through a place in the mind is intuitively plausible because the source of the demon-world illusion is in fact only in the mind” (p. 241). This is a view that coheres well with the idea that madness is a consequence of demonic possession.

The demon-world illusion is viewed by McGrath as the source of the imagery for the Satanism scares of the 1980s. Chapter thirteen is concerned with the processes by which these demon-haunted fantasies came to be viewed as realities by social workers, cult-cops, therapists and religious fundamentalists. An integral part of the Satanism scares of the 1980s was the existence of a vast malignant conspiracy of Satanists whose members were drawn from all walks of life, and who were involved in child-molestation, baby-killing and other forms of horrific mischief. McGrath points a finger at social workers and therapists who took the vague fantasies and dreams of their charges and provided a framework of satanic conspiracy into which these events could be located. Many of those involved, “. . . stressed that without the active intervention of the social worker or therapist, the satanic origins of such vaguely disturbing nightmares and fantasies might go entirely unrecognized” (p. 247). McGrath goes on to observe that the Satanism scare was promoted by MDs, psychology Ph.D.’s, district attorneys and a host of law enforcement officials. “Had it not been for the support of such established medical and legal professionals, the fear of Satan would never have broken out of the religious fringe of American culture” (p. 249). Critical, skeptical faculties were

evidently turned off by people who, by the nature of their training, ought to have known better.

The Satanism scare died down in the late 1980s as research showed how unreliable claims of ritual abuse based on recovered-memory really were. The language changed, and by the mid-90s those who had once spoken confidently about “ritual satanic abuse” were talking of “ritual sadistic abuse,” and finally, simply, “sadistic abuse.” Tales of Satanic cults ceased to be urgent medical and legal realities and assumed the status of urban legends. But waiting in the wings was the gruesome specter of alien abductions, and this became the horror of the 1990s.

The alien abduction issue is the subject of the final chapter in McGrath’s entertaining volume. UFO mania in America dates back to the late 1940s and has been a matter of great fascination in popular culture ever since. Tales of abductions go back to the mid-1960s and a book published by Barney and Betty Hill outlining their abduction experiences. There are numerous parallels between the Satanism scare of the 1980s and the abduction scares of the 1990s. Both scares involved a lack of credible physical evidence, both gained credibility from the actions of therapists (recovering memories from subjects under hypnosis). McGrath considers the hypothesis that space aliens are a species of naturalized demon, visiting Earth from another (physical) world. But he quickly points out that something more interesting is going on.

John Mack, a professor of psychiatry at Harvard, published the book *Abduction* which gave much intellectual credibility to the reports of alien abduction as involving real aliens. In Mack’s hands the aliens, though real, are not physical beings in any sense recognized by science. For Mack the beings were from a spiritual realm inexplicable in terms of the materialist paradigm of modern science. Mack repeatedly claims that the aliens are from “beyond the veil.” Their ontological status is thus a good deal closer to that of ghosts and demons than to little green men from Mars.

McGrath has written an entertaining and well-argued volume. It is a valiant attempt to explain the prevalence of nonsense in contemporary culture. One does not have to agree with all of McGrath’s claims, theories and arguments to derive much satisfaction from this book. The issues it raises could be of use in philosophy classes devoted to critical thinking as well as classes discussing evidence and its interpretation in the context of science, medicine and law.

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