

## The Christian Magician

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Exodus 22:18 – “Thou shalt not suffer a [female] witch to live.”

[drawn loosely from Interpreter’s Bible:] The religion of Yahweh as described in the Hebrew Scriptures demanded absolute loyalty and participation in other cults was regarded as religious high treason, punishable by death. The persecution of witches throughout the ages, for which this verse has to bear much of the responsibility, was due to many causes, not the least of which was the fact that the gods of older religions general become the devils of newer religions. There is always evil and misfortune in life and people want someone to blame it on.

I find it interesting that this verse specifically condemns female sorcerers – but that isn’t the main point of my sermon. I just point it out for your later ruminations.

For today, for just a few minutes, I want to talk about magic. What is magic? There are many definitions. There’s simple prestidigitation. The manipulation of appearances, if you will, where cards or quarters are made to disappear and reappear and rabbits pop up out of top hats. These are simple tricks and even most fundamentalist Christians aren’t very uptight about these sorts of things anymore. We understand that they are mere parlor games that deceive but are basically harmless.

I don’t understand the magic of Wiccans so I’m really not qualified to comment on it. I’m not sure what they intend by their magic and spells. I get the impression that they are at least trying to manipulate natural forces to some extent, but primarily by working in harmony with such forces. But again, I’m not very well qualified to comment. Native American magic was similar and I think it gets incorporated into modern Wiccan practice. Native Americans had vastly divergent religions but a common, though less than universal thread, is – or was – the attempt at communion with nature. Healing can be obtained if you become at one with nature, for instance. If the soul is returned to its proper relationship with nature then peace can be obtained.

Other than the simple tricks I talked about earlier, most magic, it seems, is understood by its practitioners to be the control and manipulation of unseen powers. Magic is the belief that a person can direct supernatural forces to achieve an end. Christians in the Middle Ages and later in New England in the 1600s followed the dictates of scripture and burned witches at the stake because those witches were, the Christians fervently believed, summoning the power of the devil to accomplish the witches’ very human goals on earth – vengeance, power, avarice, etc.

Witches supposedly cast spells and stir up brews that make them pretty, or hurt others, or bring them wealth – or achieve any number of other goals that any one of us might find passing through our own minds from time to time. The alleged witches of New England or Old Europe

supposedly believed that there were supernatural forces and powers in this world that they could channel and use to do whatever they wanted. Witches could chant incantations and mix bat blood and frog toes and concentrate really hard and become wealthy, or have their dream man fall in love with them, or make that annoying woman down the road sick. Lovely.

But witches are not the only ones who practice magic. If magic is the attempt to control and manipulate supernatural power, then who else is whom we all know who practices magic. Who is the Christian magician?

Isn't it also magic to get baptized in a certain way to get into heaven. Isn't it magic to believe certain things so as to get in good with God so that we will be blessed? Isn't it practicing magic to accept certain teachings and behave in certain ways in the full belief that by doing so you'll be "blessed" with material well-being? Aren't prayers for healing mostly just incantations meant to manipulate divine power?

Now I know the Christians would say that none of these things are the same as magic, but I'm not so sure. I hear Christians all the time saying that they understand that their prayers might be answered with "no" from God – but I don't know many Christians who believe that's the case? Christians, by and large, believe that if they believe the right things, get married and have children, play by the rules, and – importantly – hate the right sins, then they'll be blessed. They'll have good lives. Most Christians believe that if they do things right, then God will owe them something.

The easiest way to see the truth of this situation is by observing its negative proofs. Just recently Hurricane Katrina whirled through New Orleans and while the winds were still settling and the water was still be drained from the Ninth Ward, Franklin Graham was suggesting that God had offered this calamity as a way of giving the debauched residents of New Orleans a second chance to behave.

The radical right-wing – who, if they don't occupy the White House at least visit it often – point out with sickening regularity that all of America's problems stem from our failure to behave properly. God is punishing us for not having the right beliefs and behaving in the correct manner. After 9-11, Falwell and others came right out and said that had it not been for the homos and the uppity women, the tragedy would not have happened.

You see? What these folks are saying is that if you DO have the right beliefs and right behavior, then God will protect you. It's just another way of saying that you can obtain a particular outcome by doing or believing certain things. You can control and manipulate supernatural forces – i.e., God – by what you say or do to achieve particular goals.

Who is the witch? Who is the magician? Who are these Christians who keep God in a Pop Tart box ready to pull God out for appropriate service at any opportune moment? I don't mean to suggest that all religion is just magic parading as something more profound. On the other hand, I do mean to say that a great deal of what passes for religion is just superstition and a profound descent into the practice of magic, the practice of attempting to control God by what you believe or what you do or say.

[Buechner:] Jesus pointed out that “Not everyone who says, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the realm of heaven (Matthew 7:21). There should have been a corollary to that verse: “Not everyone who wouldn’t be caught dead saying ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall be forbidden to enter the realm of heaven.” You see, it’s not a matter of what you say. And it isn’t a matter of what you don’t say. I’m not sure it’s really a matter about you at all. I think religion might be a matter about God, in the end. I know that’s a radical concept. But it might not matter what you think, or belief, or do, or don’t do.

When I was writing this sermon I had a brief fantasy about the next time someone started talking to me – as they are wont to do – about how this country is going to hell in a hand basket and they happen to mention all the evil and occult things going on and talk wanders anywhere close to witchcraft or spells etc. I thought that would give me an excellent opportunity to question them as to their own witchcraft – where they are trying to practice magic, to control God by their beliefs and actions. But, in the end, I just don’t care enough to go to all that trouble and it wouldn’t get me anywhere anyway – but those sorts of people are too cemented in their certainties and I would leave the conversation thoroughly frustrated while they would rush back to their prayer groups to attempt to get God to save me. So I’d just be propagating the practice of magic I denigrate.

But what I can do is smugly smile on bright, crisp fall Sunday mornings when I’m cut off on I-77 on my way to church by a well-coiffed, suited driver in a huge SUV with the bright silver outline of a fish on the back and a 91.9 bumper sticker on the chrome, with a “Support our Troops” magnet and an American flag frozen in full furl – knowing that I may have just been blithely buzzed by the broomstick of a Christian on the way to coven.