

# Spirits and the healing of body and spirit: pastoral challenges

*by Bernhard Udelhoven*

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People in Africa expect from their Church protection and help in their struggles against the calamities of life, which often include the forces of witchcraft and of demons. They have not always found a listening ear in the Catholic Church. Priests considered **people's demons and witchcraft** as mere phantasms. To conquer witchcraft, people needed education, not prayers. People often went to seek help elsewhere. Before the Pentecostal explosion, people went to traditional healers who discern their spiritual afflictions rather outside of the Christian framework. **The Christian became a "half-cast", living the Christian faith on Sundays and following the advice of traditional experts on the other days.** When the Pentecostals dealt directly with witchcraft and demons from within the Christian framework and calling directly on the Christian powers to defeat the evil spiritual afflictions, it was a relief for many suffering Christians. There was no need any longer to go for healing in the cover of the dark of the night.

Since Pentecostal Churches dealt directly with healing, they were at the heart of the discernment process of the nature of the spiritual afflictions. Notions of the spiritual world can be very situational. I have accompanied people who, within the context of Pentecostal worship, experienced their perils in terms of marine spirits (spirits from the ocean, though Zambia is landlocked!) who needed to be cast out. The same people went also to a traditional healer, who convinced them that they were dealing with the witchcraft of an elderly relative that needed to be neutralised. Again, the same people came to me, a Catholic priest, and bought into my way of thinking, that the spiritual attack is a challenge that should lead to spiritual growth and reconciliation. Many people juggle with several competing worldviews in order to make sense out of their experiences of body and soul. Concrete beliefs may come to the forefront in certain conditions, and go into the background in other conditions. In any case, the Pentecostals now were in the forefront in naming the afflictions. We started to hear about territorial spirits and strongholds, generational curses, and Satanism. Some of these names may have been given by the pastors themselves, for example the concept of generational curses. But many of the names came actually from the afflicted persons themselves, while they were in a state of trance.

## Boko Haram spirits

Last month a daughter of one of the teachers in our rural school needed prayers. A pastor tried to cast out the **demons and demanded their names.** The girl eventually cried out: **"We are Boko Haram!"** Now, this is rural Zambia, not Nigeria! I do not know what the "Boko Haram spirits" seek in Zambia and how they corresponded with the girl's own inner experiences of terror. But I was struck with the way that the name of the demon, "Boko Haram" resonated with the onlookers. People commented about it extensively. One concerned Parishioner told me, "If the

demons of Boko Haram have now entered Zambia, then we will not get rid anymore of the **ritual killings.**” Many people in Zambia look at Boko Haram as a demonic organisation that commits enormous atrocities and that must be sustained by evil spiritual powers, since the whole world seems unable to eradicate it, not the Nigerian government nor the entire African and Western World. Zambia has been traumatised in recent months by a series of ritual killings for human body-parts. The police have arrested some of the alleged perpetrators, but rumours of ritual killings continue to rip through the whole of Zambia. The point I am making is that **the inner experiences of a girl, who sees herself as being terrorised by “Boko Haram spirits”,** provided a vehicle also to the community to express a public feeling of helplessness and powerlessness in the face of new forms of insecurity that are experienced by many in Zambia. Demonic names spread across different sections of the population, because they can be **appropriated to make sense for people’s own** *new* concerns and experiences.

Walter Wink has made this point also for some demons in the Bible, for example for the **demon named “Legio” (Mark 5) whose name recalled the fears and neurosis of the surrounding** community in the Decapolis in regards to the Roman legions and their absolute military power.<sup>1</sup> In many ways, demon possessed people are the artists of a community, absorbing their tensions and expressing in the possession dramas their conflicts and neuroses. In former times in the Zambian cultural traditions, people with spirits have always been symbolising for the community the social tensions. In many African traditions the spirit possessed became themselves healers—wounded healers more precisely—because through their own sickness and condition they had developed extraordinary faculties to feel themselves into the conditions of **other people, and feel also the tensions in the patient’s family as well as the unresolved and** unspoken conflicts. Their ways of healing was never purely medical in nature, but had always also a social and reconciling component.

In Africa, we have experienced ever new hordes of demons falling on us, especially since the explosion of Pentecostalism. The more we pray, the more they seem to be multiplying. Critics often use this point against the charismatic experience that sees demons everywhere and that seems to produce ever new demonic worlds. My own answer as an anthropologist is rather simple: There will always be new words for the demonic because we continue to walk through new experiences with evil and with new social tensions. The evils we face in the twenty-first century are different from the evils that our parents faced. For example, when Satanism came up in a number of African countries as a new word and concept, it linked up with new experiences and new desires in the new context of globalisation (for example in Ghana, Kenya and Zambia). In Ghana, for example, some researchers see in Satanism a concept that appropriates, from an angle of Prosperity theology, the new possibilities of the modern world as well as the need for a new moral discourse to deal with these possibilities: Riches are good, if God gives them in answer to prayer. But many other people get rich the wrong way, by sacrificing their own families.<sup>2</sup> When people speak about Satanism, they also make a commentary about the lack of a moral discourse in the country that guides the access to the new riches.

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<sup>1</sup> In Wink, W. (1984). *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress.

<sup>2</sup> See the writings of Birgit Meyer on Satanism in Ghana.

Demonic names and entities will continue to change as long as **people's** experiences with evil also change.

### Healing ministry in the Catholic Church

The fact that Pentecostal names for spiritual afflictions made more sense to people than the Catholic vocabulary (which is often framed in secular discourses about the effects of poverty, lack of education or bad governance), shows that the healing discourse of the Church is not really understood. Of course, the Catholic Church has always understood its whole mission as a healing mission. The Church sees the healing ministry as flowing from the whole life in the Church. Every true prayer in the tradition of the Church and in the sacramental life of the Church should bring healing. This was always part of Catholic teaching. Now, while the Church recognises charismatic healing, she is certainly reluctant to acknowledge it in the form of an entity that seems rather separate from the ordinary church life.

To avoid abuse, official liturgical and non-liturgical prayers for healing have been carefully formalised and official prayer meetings for healing need to be authorised and should, where possible, be led by a priest. **The Church's careful approach to healing stressed that not all** sicknesses are cured, not even by sincere prayer. While we can pray for healing and should pray for healing, we are guided by a sober theology that reminds us that eternal life is the prime aim of the Christian life, more than physical healing, and that through sickness we can participate **in the cross of Christ. We also learn that God's way of responding to our prayers for healing** may sometimes be very different from our own hopes and dreams. Now, we should not be surprised that this official careful and somehow overly guarded approach to healing in the church is not very attractive to the ordinary Christian who has concrete problems that they want to be solved in this life and not just in the life to come.

In any case, whatever careful position the Vatican took, in the countries of Africa that I know, the grassroots initiatives of the charismatic renewal, following the Pentecostal explosion, have in practice long overrun the official approach. For ordinary people it was Pentecostalism which made the healing ministry visible, and at least in Zambia, the various strands of Pentecostal practice also found their way into the grassroots of the Catholic renewal.

One of the reasons I encountered in my own research with new Pentecostal Churches, and indeed the charismatic movement, is that people could find their own giftedness in the collaborative prayers. The charismatic ministry is not centred on one leader, say the priest, but different gifts given to different members of the community become complementary.<sup>3</sup> Young enthusiasts found an easy entry into the loose structures and came to identify with a new healing ministry. Here things were happening. Demons manifested and people testified that they got cured. People prayed for healing, loudly, boldly, without liturgical books, but from the heart and in the Spirit, and it was here that many ordinary Christians felt that God was listening to their prayers. Healing was extended to areas far beyond physical sickness, but included protection, removal of bad luck and of curses, the finding of an appropriate spouse, prayers for **promotion at work and a breakthrough to general prosperity. "God does not want you to be**

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<sup>3</sup> Even in Churches which are marked by an absolute leadership of the founding figure, on a lower level the ministry is usually complementary and communitarian.

poor, **God does not want you to be sick!**" The charismatic and Pentecostal Christian believes and proclaims that God is always responding to sincere and repeated prayers for healing, and that healing takes place on all layers of the soul, including the body, the mind and heart, forgiveness of sin, **finding one's appropriate place in the community and in the world, and that one's own life-story**, wherever one comes from, can become a real success in the eyes of God. Many Christians experienced such prayers as empowering, while the sober Catholic practice seemed to idealise the silent sufferer. In the Catholic Church, charismatic prayers of course also came with official guidelines and many official restrictions, but in practice the charismatics try to be guided by the free flow of the Holy Spirit, and at least in Zambia, many prayers and practices take place away from the official eye of the Church.

#### Healing linked to deliverance

Charismatic ministries, following the lead of Pentecostal expressions, linked the healing ministry directly to deliverance. In Africa, spirits and witchcraft were always seen at the root of **people's sufferings**. Spreading at the grassroots, deliverance became a must, because this **ministry linked up with people's needs and with people's responses**. Very often in (neo)-Pentecostal worship, witchcraft and demons provide a name for an experience that people feel in their bodies. Naming is a process that makes a situation comprehensible and that gives some measure of control back to the person who is a victim of these situations. In mainstream Catholic practice the name of a sickness is medical in nature, not spiritual. In contrast, in some popular forms of neo-Pentecostal and charismatic worship, demons are discerned as the root-cause of sicknesses. On the positive side one could say that naming a sickness in terms of the demonic links the condition to the area of faith. In Pentecostal practice, the devil is always understood in the process of his defeat. The moment the devil is named, the devil is also beaten and expelled. This can give confidence in the sovereignty of God even in the context of sickness and misfortune. But what if I *identify* a sickness with a demon? The believer will expect a miraculous healing since demons are always defeated and totally expelled in the Gospels and in **the pastor's preaching**. However, human life teaches us that certain conditions stay with us until we die. The conclusion of a person dying of AIDS, in spite of many prayers, is that he/she is abandoned by God and that the demons have triumphed!

The identification of sickness and misfortune with demons or with witchcraft attacks has led to all kinds of abuses and misunderstandings. Already a long time ago, Abraham Akrong has **warned us of the "witchcraft mentality" that is so often present in neo-Pentecostal worship.**

It "promotes very dangerous and naive assumptions about human life and existence, which lead to an almost infantile view of life. If every misfortune must be the work of evil agents then the assumption is that life is created perfect and must come to fruition without any disturbance."<sup>4</sup>

That real and concrete dangers can emanate from these assumptions can be witnessed in the witchhunts that have arisen from deliverance services. Just a year ago we had an incident in our local Catholic school, where a Diocesan charismatic team held a rally for deliverance. During

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<sup>4</sup> Akrong, A. (2000). Neo-Witchcraft Mentality in Popular Christianity. *Research Review*, 16(1), 1-12. Page 5.

the prayers, a girl fell on the floor into a trance, and the group discerned in her the spirits of Satanism. The girl responded positively to the diagnoses and confessed to be a Satanist. **“The teacher Chite initiated me. He holds a very high position in the underworld.”** The prayer warriors subsequently prayed over the girl and defeated the **“Satanism of teacher Chite”** and exorcised all the satanic demons. **The girl went home “delivered”.** But teacher Chite at school now stands accused of being one of the chief Satanists, and he was not even present during the prayers. In fact he was totally ignorant of all the accusations that were aired against him by a girl who was in a trance! Some years ago I was linked up to a case where a man arranged the murder of his brother and his **brother’s wife** and then burnt down their house on account of his ten-years old epileptic daughter, who revealed under prayers, while in a trance, **that her father’s** brother, a witch, had stolen her uterus so that his own barren daughter could give birth. Trance revelations, including those of children, are too easily taken as direct prompting of the Holy Spirit that presumably reveal the truth. Witchfinding of so-called **“witch-doctors”** is outlawed in Zambia, but the practice of many Christian prophets follows the same dynamics with the only difference that they hold a Bible in their hand instead of the traditional mirror. Needless to say that also many minority groups in society and also minority faiths have been labelled as Satanic and demonic under the impact of Pentecostal and charismatic prayers for deliverance and on account of the public testimonies that delivered persons were encouraged to give. In full churches, they testified about the Satanism of the Freemasons, of Buddhism, of the Mormons, of Eckankar, of the Rotary Club and of many other minority groups or minority faiths.

The official Catholic Church avoids such dangers with its careful approach to demons and with her guidelines for the ministry of exorcism. While the Church affirms her belief in devil and demons, she is extremely careful when it comes to concrete applications. Demon-possession is seen as rather rare. **“Most people who come for an exorcism need rather psychological counselling or treatment”,** one European exorcist told me. **“Only few are truly possessed.”** I wondered, however, who can ever have this certainty of who is really possessed, and I tend to doubt those who claim this gift. There also seems to be the assumption that a condition is either psychological in nature or spiritual. But in the African context this position is rather difficult to apply. Where in rural Africa does one find a psychologist? And if one is found, he/she would hardly know the local cultural realities in which the beliefs in spirits unfold. The distinction between **“real demonic possession”** and **“imagined possession”** is not easily put into practice, even if people naturally look for easily recognisable signs, and even if many **“delivered Satanists”** testify to the availability of such easy signs. We must acknowledge that demons successfully evade the realm of science and the realm of proof. At the same time, the spiritualised answer, coming from charismatics **who claim that “while in the Spirit we can see the witches (or the demons)”**, leaves the discernment solely in their own hands, which leads us again deep into the practice of divination.

The need for a person-centred and inclusive approach in a pluralistic world

Some years ago, the Catholic Forum in Zambia, a body made up of the bishops and of representatives of the laity and religious communities, called for a study into new phenomena of demon possession, including Satanism in Zambia, and for proposals of how to deal with

them. The Faith & Encounter Centre in Zambia was entrusted with this research. I published the outcome of the study in the book *Unseen Worlds: Dealing with Spirits, Witchcraft, and Satanism*, together with our recommended approach and method **to answer to people's needs** in a direct way without falling into the traps that I will outline later in this paper.

In the concrete pastoral setting, we call for a departure from an either-or approach (a condition is either demonic or medical/psychological) and propose instead a person-centred and inclusive approach. We do not start with an outside definition of a demon, but with the experience of the affected person. Different people hold different beliefs about demons and they all should find help and a listening ear. Their own experiences should be our starting ground, even if they sound very weird to us at times.

While we are person-centred in our approach, we have to offer an informed solution that holds ground in a pluralistic world. Pentecostals in its many diverse strands are not the only **ones who shape people's understanding of spirits and demons**. Also other religious movements influence the understanding of the unseen world, including the traditional healers who in Zambia are numerous and diverse. This compels us to become indeterminate and careful with **diagnosing the "true spiritual nature" of a condition, even when, under given circumstances, it may look clearly like demon-possession or Satanism, and where a person may even be confessing to be a Satanist**. Our focus always shifts from the external demon to the inner, situational experience of the affected person.

Personally, I do not believe in demons in the same way as the people do to whom I minister. I always seek for mundane explanations where people see witchcraft and spirits. But this, I hope, **does not prevent me to feel myself as far as possible into people's experiences**. In our support group, different members hold quite different ideas about demons and witchcraft, but this does not prevent us to bracket out our beliefs and to concentrate in our responses on an approach that builds on common ground between the various disciplines that can shed light on the deliverance ministry, including theology, history, the medical sciences, psychology, cultural studies and sociology. How I deal with my belief with actions that arise from my Christian vocation becomes the focal point of our approach. We will, for example, always work towards reconciliation and towards the conquering of fear.

### Three shifts

We work towards three shifts in focus: (1) a shift from outer spirits, which I cannot control, to inner spiritual conditions that correspond to these outer spirits (real or perceived); (2) a shift from a focus on demons to a focus on the demonic, and (3) a shift from a deliverance of a specific evil force towards deliverance from the obstacles that can derail my Christian vocation.

(1) Our approach is inclusive: Every experience that touches a human being in an existential way and **that becomes part of the person's autobiography, any such experience is always also spiritual in nature and belongs into the realm of prayer**. We concentrate not on the ontological status of some external spirit in which the person believes, but we focus on the response of the person to his/her belief. The experience of the patient with spirits touches very personal and intimate layers that have unfolded in the **person's own frames of reference** and often has roots

deep in **person's childhood**. We call this the *inner world* in our approach. The inner world of a person always deserves respect; it is holy ground where God himself meets the person. Biblical visions happened in the inner world. The belief in certain types of spirits is neither moral nor immoral. But what I do with this belief is and how I respond to the challenge of the spirits.

We apply the same logic also to witchcraft attacks. I am unable to ascertain whether a certain person uses witchcraft against my client or not. But I can know that the client believes to be attacked by witchcraft. Instead of focussing on neutralising the external witchcraft by means of **“prayers of binding” or Holy Water, I focus on the Christian obligation to make sincere efforts** to mend broken relationships, including the relationship with the witch. This will change the **inner dispositions of the client that makes witchcraft work, that “activate”** so to say the external agencies and allows them to affect the soul of the person. To use a metaphor of **“spiritual warfare” that is often used in Pentecostal ministries: in our own approach we direct this warfare** not at some external demons and witchcraft attacks, but at broken relationships and obligations to which the attacks often point and at the corresponding negative emotions in our own heart that stand in the way of the Kingdom of God. In as far as witchcraft is spiritual, I often explain to my clients, it should not affect the person if it does not also find some corresponding inner spiritual conditions to which it can attach itself, like hatred or fear, which in turn can often be related to an interpersonal problem or an outstanding issue that the person has with the suspected witch. People who do not fear the witch, and who have no outstanding issue with the witch, and who do not even hate the witch, and who do not use any form of witchcraft themselves, are much less likely to be affected by witchcraft attacks than those who do.

(2) Theologically speaking, our approach shifts from a focus on demons to a focus on the demonic, in which we see any condition that has the potential to seriously derail a person from his/her Christian vocation and source of life. For example, some people, motivated by certain strands of Pentecostal preaching, see a demon in their condition of HIV, and they come for prayers in the hope that this demon can be cast out by a person of faith. When they come to our group, we always encourage them to take ARVs. But we will also pray for them and with them, because we **believe that such a grave illness is also spiritual in nature, since it affects the person's** hopes and fears in a very existential manner. It affects their *inner world*. While I do not believe that HIV is a demon, I do believe that it can be demonic, because it has the potential to derail a person from his/her source of life and divine destiny. Here my own interpretation can link up with that of the patient. HIV can lead people into despair, into a life of lies, and some into suicide and others into resignation into alcohol—bringing about the destruction not only of their own lives but also of their families. Here I must see the demonic in this condition. But in so far as life with the same virus has provoked other people to become more open to their partners in an effort to be remembered for something good, and make the best possible use of the remaining time to draw closer to their children and loved ones, and draw also closer to God, the virus can even be a vehicle of grace. Whether it is demonic or a channel of grace depends very much on the response of faith or lack of faith in the heart of the affected person. Here is our starting point. This applies of course not only to painful conditions. Money in this sense can also be demonic: many people have forgotten God once they became rich. Here our own discourse can **link up with people's moral discourses on Satanism**.

(3) Deliverance is not something that some demon-possessed people need. We all need deliverance and pray for deliverance every day in the Our Father. Deliverance in its wider sense can be described as each person's own journey from the land of enslavements towards one's own destiny, which is prefigured in the Bible by the journey of the people of Israel from Egypt to the promised land, and which is fulfilled in Christ's own journey to Jerusalem, to the cross and to his resurrection, in which the believer participates. While we find many helping forces on this journey, we also find many stumbling blocks, adversaries, and "Satan" who want to derail us from our destiny. Pentecostalism, by naming these forces as demonic, have made us more aware of the need for prayer and for God's active interventions to keep us on track.

Satan can derail us, but Satan can also strengthen us, in the same way as he (involuntarily of course) helped Jesus in the desert (Mt 5) to find his true mission as Son of God. Whether Satan brings us down or up depends not so much on his own nature but on our response and God's grace.

The discernments of truth in the inner world

We do not deny that gifted people have visions. Nor that God speaks to people sometimes in clear and direct ways. What we say in our approach is that this takes place in the inner world. It would be wrong to say that the inner world is less real or less concerned with the truth than the outer world. In certain ways, it is more real. The awareness of spiritual truths arises from the inner world. Biblical examples would be Isaiah's vision in the temple (Is 6), Stephen's vision of the heavenly Jesus prior to his death (Acts 7:55-56) or Paul's conversion when meeting with the risen Christ. Encounters with spiritual truths pass through the inner life of a person, but are also filtered through this inner life, linking up with its symbolic frameworks. Both Paul and Stephen saw the risen Christ, but they surely did so in different ways. Saint Teresa of Avila knew that God can speak to us in the inner world, but so can the devil. Today we also know that the whole of our unconscious worlds express themselves in our inner worlds.

In the Catholic Church, the process of discerning spiritual truths is in the hands not of an individual person, but of the Church at large, which is guided by the bishops. Therefore, the Church implicitly makes a distinction between an inner experience of an individual and the discernment process of the spiritual truths that are linked to this experience. This distinction is crucial in our approach.

A boy in a mountain

For example, in our support group we do have gifted people, members of the Charismatic Renewal, who have frequent visions about other people. Once we prayed together over a boy and his sister, and one woman in our prayer group had the vision of seeing the boy locked up in a mountain, unable to come out, while the girl was struggling with a snake. I told her: "It is not the mountain of the boy, because the boy did not see the mountain. It is not the snake of the girl. It is your mountain and your snake!" At first, the woman was shocked, and refused, "The boy was in the mountain, not me!" But since she was a member of our group, I could explain to her and she understood. We don't deny that she saw the boy in a mountain, and she

did well to tell me about the vision (in the absence of the boy and the girl, of course!) But this does not mean that the boy is locked up in a mountain in a spiritual sense and needs deliverance. She can discern the truth of this vision insofar as she applies the mountain to herself, as the vision was filtered through her inner world. But it is not up to her to discern the truth of this vision in so far as it concerns the boy or other people. This would be to take the vision out of the inner world and place it into the outer world. If she thinks that the vision concerns a spiritual truth that is important also for others, this has to be discerned by the Church at large, not just by herself. St Paul made a similar distinction: some people are given the gift of tongues, others the gift to interpret what the tongues mean and again others the gift of discerning the spirits (1 Cor 12:10). While the visionary is the owner of his/her inner experience, he/she is not the owner of the spiritual truth of this experience as far as it concerns others. The woman was at first not happy with my response. But then I decided to take her symbols into prayer with our group (without the boy and the girl, of course). I felt that the symbols are powerful, and in the prayer service we applied them to ourselves: We shared amongst ourselves what being trapped in a mountain would mean for each one of us or indeed for our group as a group. The sharing became very personal, and even the woman herself spoke about her own ways of being trapped; **she had been praying for a “break-through” already for years!** It was one of our most powerful prayer events within our group. Though we denied the symbols to be applied directly to the specific boy and girl, we allowed them in another way to be prophetic.

#### Inner experiences and outer tensions

In my ministry I was privileged to gain a glimpse into the inner lives of many demon-possessed people and confessing “Satanists” who shared their rich experiences with me and with our support group. Through listening to these experiences, two convictions formed in me that I want to share in this paper. The first one is, and this is not really something new, that demon possession often (but not always!) is related to an inner terror that people experience, that can sometimes be seen as a response to trauma, sometimes to abandonment and very often to an awareness that they are not really belonging to their families and to the parts of society to which they would like to belong or should belong. Demons attach themselves to these conditions, whether they be outer demons or inner, psychological demons, which we will never ascertain in our approach. I will always explore a way of help that makes the person more accepting towards his/her conditions, building on his/her own strength and pursue positive change in the living conditions where this is possible.

But apart from these painful inner conditions, many people who experienced themselves as demon-possessed and were recognised by the community as such, have an extraordinary ability to absorb tensions that also the community experiences and to re-enact these tensions while in trance; such a trance does not come about when the demon-possessed pray secretly in their rooms. It always happens in a group and with an audience, and the audience is as much part of the drama as the possessed person.

“Being attacked by the spirit of my great-**grandmother**”<sup>5</sup>

One can link the symbols in possession dramas sometimes to **tensions in the person’s family** or to concrete conflicts between different sections of the family or of wider groups. In one case we dealt with, a young woman suffered from regular, violent attacks, many of which happened in my presence. During the attacks, we had to prevent her by force to strangle herself. The family explained that her paternal great-grandmother had been killed by hanging as a witch. **“The girl has the same name as her great-grandmother. She inherited her bad spirit.”** After the death of her father, her whole **family became estranged from her father’s family because they feared their witchcraft.** The condition was not resolved by saying Mass for the dead woman. Nor was it resolved by prayers of the charismatics, **who tried to “bind” the bad spirit of the great-grandmother.** It was finally resolved by **re-entering a relationship with the father’s family.** They had not met for ten years! After having Mass together with the two estranged parties, the attacks somehow seized. I interpreted them as a spiritual call for reconciliation. We are reminded of the Biblical fight of Jacob (Gen 32) with what seemed to be an evil force, but which turned out to be God himself. Jacob wrestled with the intruder until he released a blessing. From there Jacob went to reconcile with his estranged twin-brother. In a similar way, the above woman turned her fight with the evil spirit of her great-grandmother into a blessing, leading to the attempts of reconciliation of her family with the estranged part of her late **father’s lineage.**

“Dreaming of my late mother”

One middle-aged woman had a recurring dream, which frightened her. She dreamt of her mother in a dream that was compellingly real. Her mother had died ten years earlier. Now, in the recurring dream, she saw her mother as if she had just died. The whole family was gathered around the coffin, aggrieved and sad. Waking up, she knew that her mother had appeared to her and wanted to say something. **At first she thought in negative terms: “Maybe my mother is warning us that witchcraft attacks are at work in our family. Soon somebody will die!”** But a Christian councillor managed to give the dream experience a positive direction. He asked the person several times to narrate the details of the dream: who was at the coffin? How did they look like? The woman then recalled that there was also her niece, the orphan-daughter of her late brother. She was standing there at a distance, not really part of the group, and she looked very sad but also very poor. The elder then asked more questions about this niece. The woman explained that she was **kept by her mother’s relatives, but that she was not well cared for. She did not even go to school.** The elder told her: **“The dream is clear. Your mother is telling you that you should care for your niece!”** This prompted the woman to welcome her niece into our house, and to bring her to school. Since then the dream never came back. Moreover, the woman knew that her late mother was happy with what she did.

A theologian may have argued about the nature of the mother-figure in the dream: Can a dead person come back to give messages to the living? But if one leaves the question about the precise nature of the mother-figure in the background, I believe, the solution offered by the

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<sup>5</sup> The following examples are taken from my book *Unseen Worlds: Dealing with Spirits, Witchcraft, and Satanism*, Lusaka: FENZA, 2015.

traditional approach to this captivating dream remains compelling and ingenious, both from a Zambian traditional and from a Christian angle.

**“Haunted by dreams of having sex with my late husband”**

Another woman came to our group for help. She was dreaming of her late husband. He had died 10 years earlier. But now he came back in her dreams to force himself on her and have sex with her. These dreams were very uncomfortable. She was Catholic and went at first to a priest to ask for Mass. The priest said Mass for the late husband, but it did not seem to help. She continued to be disturbed by the figure of her late husband. Then she went to members of the Catholic charismatic renewal, asking for prayers. These members discerned that she had a **“spiritual husband”, a demon in form of her late husband, who needed to be exorcised.** They heaped many types of prayers on her, but the dreams did not stop at all. Next she went to a traditional healer. He told her that she was still with the shade of her late husband. In Zambian cultural traditions, once a spouse dies, the remaining spouse needs to be cleansed by the late spouse’s family. **The traditional healer offered private cleansing rituals with a number of roots and herbs and a ritual bath.** Again, it did not seem to help. The dreams continued. Finally the woman came to our support group, asking for prayers. We asked her what she herself thought was the cause. She replied that the answer of the traditional healer made a lot of sense for her. **“I am with a *cibanda*—with the shade of my late husband.”** Now the healer had tried to cure her with a private healing ritual. But according to the cultural dynamics, it is only the family of the late spouse who has ritual control over the *cibanda*.

One member of our group then asked her how she was going on with her late husband’s family. She mentioned that for the first five years after her husband’s death all was well. Tensions came only after she changed the ownership of the house to her own name and the name of her children (which is in accordance with the Zambian law.)

The member of our group asked: **“When did your late husband start coming back to you?”**

Only then did she realise that it was at the same time!

We said that we needed to talk with her late husband’s family. **This was very difficult for her.** But finally she got in touch with them again and invited some of them for our prayer service. **Before we prayed, we talked about the issue of the house.** The members of her late husband’s family shared their frustrations with us, saying that the woman was wrong to register the house in her own name. **“She stole it from us!”** But at least they talked together for the first time. We then prayed together, and they even blessed her. The experience of the bad dreams stopped from one day to the next.

What could not be solved by prayers for the dead (looking at the *cibanda* purely as a spiritual force in itself) or by prayers of deliverance (praying for the troubled woman just by herself), was successfully addressed by the process of re-entering relationships with the family of her late husband.

In our approach we do not pretend that cultural notions of the spirit world are always perfect. A pastoral approach needs to be intelligent; one needs to know where one wants to go to when working with such notions. But where we develop a sense of playfulness with cultural notions, we should always find a way of working *with* them instead of working *against* them, because

cultural concepts usually allow for an interpretation to be pulled in different directions. Uncomfortable dreams or spiritual encounters have often been used in Africa to accuse others of witchcraft. But the same dreams can also be given a positive and life-giving direction, if one applies cultural discernment patterns in an intelligent way. A Christian spirituality can give the whole process of seeking meaning in a dream an upbuilding direction.

In short, we do not start with an outside definition of a demon or of witchcraft, but open ourselves genuinely to the **person's experience and description of it**. We recognise in these concepts the best possible way with which the person, at that moment, can describe what is happening to him or her. From there, we try to respond in a way that is as holistic as possible, while also recognising that the concepts of witchcraft and of demons can easily channel anger and aggression onto scapegoats in the community. We regard the demon or the witchcraft attack as a real though subjective experience of the patient. It is real in what we call the *inner world*, which is the world of faith and of inner experience. But truth of the inner world should not be easily projected as a truth of the *outer world*, which is the world of common experiences that proves itself in communication between people of different beliefs. We respond by building on the inner world experiences and taking it into prayer, but without objectifying them. Instead, we allow the symbols of the experience to lead us to the broken relationships that need to be addressed from a Christian perspective, in the outer world. We also make the people aware that the acts of reconciliation release a real spiritual power which is stronger than the attacking powers. In one dramatic case that I described in my book, a couple overcame the witchcraft of an intruder who wanted to possess the wife by means of mutual forgiveness and of rebuilding trust in small steps.

I have often been amazed by how much such simple steps can accomplish, even in very difficult and dramatic forms of attacks that people went through. I do not need to know what exactly triggered such experiences, what is behind the attack (spiritually or psychologically), or what is the reason for it. We do not have to pretend to have extraordinary knowledge to deal with such things. The above steps are often enough to start a healing process.

### Healing as a drama

**Many forms of Pentecostalism stress the aspect of God's power that needs to be channelled into a given person's life situation and that needs to be experienced.** This has brought to the ministry of healing and deliverance the element of drama and performance. My own experiences with the healing ministry teaches me that *some* people, who experience themselves to be demon-possessed, are helped by a form of *public* drama, which becomes a rupture, after which they can go back to a life without demons.

Hans-Urs van Balthasar is one of the theologians who looked at God's action and human response in the terminology of the divine drama. The whole of the Catholic liturgy can be regarded as a re-enactment of this drama: **God's coming into the world, his abandonment to his salvific death on the cross, his entering into the underworld or into Hell on Holy Saturday, and his resurrection, ascension and the outpouring of his Spirit.** In the Western Catholic celebration of the Eucharist, this drama is unfolding more on the cerebral level, where carefully,

pre-formulated and approved prayers are meant to lead the believer to accept this Divine drama in his/her own life, again and again, and allow this drama to shape his/her inner and outer life.

In the African, Pentecostal setting, this drama unfolds not just on the intellectual, cerebral level. But the powers of the death and resurrection of Christ and of the Outpouring of his Spirit are channelled and mediated by the whole human body. In charismatic worship the believers stand. They pray loudly and boldly. They call on the Lordship of Jesus Christ, with their own voice and words. They surrender, believe in His power to forgive sins, and believe that they receive as a community of believers the Outpouring of the Holy Spirit. This goes hand in hand with the deliverance from evil forces, which is not always very sober and would not always fit into the rubrics of the liturgical books. It often includes the element of catharsis, the purgation and purification of very strong emotions, which should be experienced as disturbing, as the demons did in the time of Jesus, but which in the unfolding of the drama should also lead to relief, after the person has experienced the deep emotions that may be associated with events in the past which had been repressed, and had never been adequately expressed, experienced or **addressed. In some churches the drama may be rather “clean”, restricted to singing and prayer.** In other churches the drama is ecstatic, accompanied by shouting, stamping, falling and crawling in a trance; **some vomit out “demons” and “mystical objects” in dramatic experiences;** others are slain by the Holy Spirit and experience his inner peace when HE takes control over their tongues, bodies and senses. Charismatic worship has to do with drama, in which everybody participates, and where the Holy Spirit is invited to be the director to whom the believer wants totally to surrender.

The positive aspect of this is **the experience of the divine drama with one’s own body.** Of course, in a heightened sense of awareness (“emotionalism”) many may confuse the Holy Spirit or demons **with one’s own feelings** and with trance experiences, including hypnosis. But I am mentioning this point, because I know of a number of people who found healing in charismatic prayers through this element of catharsis.

Are their ways that one can limit the negative side?

In our own healing ministry we avoid the terminology of spiritual warfare that circles around **the powers of some individual charismatic “prayer-warriors”.** **Alternative rituals can bring out more clearly the dimension of the power of the believing community’s faith, while also providing a peaceful atmosphere of prayer with an emphasis on growth, not extraordinary spiritual battles.**

We have made very positive experiences with rituals that invoke a symbolic burial rite, reminiscent of baptism: where the demon-possessed were symbolically buried by their relatives so as to rise again to new life in the Church, a life without the demons. Demons left, without any formal exorcism and even without any extraordinary battles, just by the flow of the ritual within the setting of a supportive community.<sup>6</sup>

Well-prepared rituals that engage the Christian community can give the support that people need at the time they feel overpowered, without falling into the trap of a showdown between the powers of the devil and the powers of the healer or pastor. The healing rituals that we advocate are **community-centred, not “pastor-centred” or “exorcist-centred”;** **God’s powers are**

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<sup>6</sup> *Unseen Worlds*, 190-194.

mediated through the local church community, however ordinary its individual members may look on first sight. All members play a role: some listen to the stories of the possessed long before the ritual is arranged. Others help them to reflect on their meaning. Others prepare the Bible texts, others prepare the songs. Many eventually will lay hands on the sick and pray for them and with them in their own way. Others will visit the respective families also after the ritual (aftercare). Others again will evaluate the event and try to look at its significance in broader lines. My experience is that a well prepared healing ritual will renew as much the church community as it renews the individual sick to whom it is administered. When such a ministry of healing also looks at the social tensions that are revealed in the possession dramas, then prayers for deliverance will always go hand in hand with efforts of reconciliation, community building, and addressing the tensions brought about by injustice. Precisely because of their ability to express these tensions in the dramas of possession, the charismatic ministry can bring a truly prophetic role also to the ministry of Justice and Peace.

### Conclusion

The charismatic experience has given back to the church a healing ministry that corresponds to **people's needs**. **Being a grassroots movement**, open also to various positive and negative Pentecostal influences, the ministries can develop a number of pitfalls (some of which I have mentioned, others I confine into the appendix), but there are always ways around these traps where one engages with the groups on a long-term basis. In the charismatic experience itself we find its own purifying tendencies. I have outlined in this paper our own approach of dealing with demon-possessed people and I hope to have shown that it can be integrated into the charismatic healing ministry, if one widens the concept of deliverance, does not meddle up inner and outer worlds, and dares to become person-centred instead of being demon-centred. I have also shown that the process of healing from spiritual afflictions has always wider social and inter-personal dimensions that need much attention and that cannot really be left in the hands of groups who narrow down the deliverance ministry just to the process of exorcising the disturbing demons. Where demons remind us of our neglected responsibilities towards family, marriage, parenthood, work and society, to which they often point, prayers for deliverance should empower a person to address these issues. Where such concerns are bypassed, we should not even pray for deliverance—let the demons continue to haunt and do their job!

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### Appendix: some areas of concern in the charismatic healing ministry that I encountered in some Zambian groups

- theological pitfalls, which include the tendency towards a very strong dualism of the Kingdom of God versus the Kingdom of the Devil, the uncritical acceptance of the prosperity gospel, or of

syncretism where Biblical and doctrinal statements are blended with traditional African beliefs about spirits and witchcraft.

- Exclusiveness, where the charismatics see themselves on an advanced spiritual level (baptism in the spirit) that downplays the church activities of non-charismatic members as well as the whole of the church's tradition and theology.
- An illuminism, where emotional excitement is identified directly with the Holy Spirit or where the Holy Spirit is seen in phenomena that seem extraordinary on first sight, but that can also be explained in terms of the effects of trance, hypnosis, mass hypnosis or other terms by a person who is more sceptical. This includes also some experiences of relief of pain through hypnotic effects that is often *exclusively* understood in terms of faith-healing.
- Eclipsing the available insights of the helpful human and medical sciences (medicine, psychology, sociology).
- demonising the African cultural and spiritual heritage in a born-again framework, as well as the heritage of other religions.
- an increased focus on contamination by outside, "satanic" or demonic objects, needing more and more prayers of protection
- political pitfalls, for example the belief in the predestination of the "anointed leader": ("whomever you vote for in this election does not really matter, because God has already anointed his rightful candidate..."—as if God himself is voting)
- Exploitative relationship between pastor and possessed clients, who become easily coerced into the expectations of the charismatic believers, especially where churches or groups have developed a strong personality cult around a given "man of God". People who seek help or who are brought for help are often in a very vulnerable state. Their real or imagined delivery from evil powers will testify to the glory of the pastor, but their public testimonies after buying into the group's discourse can lead to harassment from their own communities
- The close linkage of healing and deliverance to the ministry of prophecy and vision, where prophecy is understood not so much as a way of making Christ's heart present to a given situation, but as a private revelation of God to some gifted person about the present or the future that is meant to be believed in without any hint of doubt.
- Another area of concern is an easy identification of the believer with God in the commanding, demanding, decreeing and declaring strands of Pentecostal prayers: "I decree you to be healed... I command you to be healed... I declare you to be healed...etc." I personally also take offence with the terminology of "binding" (the devil, demons) in many deliverance services.
- Failed leadership where leaders fear to intervene in abuses, "less one goes against the Holy Spirit".

In my experience, these areas of concern are best discussed from the viewpoint of the charismatic experience, not besides it, so that the believers can be met on their home-ground. I believe that healthy charismatic prayer for healing is not focussed on the manifestation of demons, though it sometimes happens, but on the believers to "surrender their lives to Jesus", by which charismatics mean that they try to shape their lives and hearts and desires according to the spirit of Jesus whom they have received. This I believe is the goal of every solid Pentecostal and charismatic preaching and ministry, which does bring its checks and controls to many of the malpractices that are listed above.