

Unseen Worlds: When Haunting Demons Emerge as a Cry for Help

Bernhard Udelhoven's endeavour to bring some light into so far Unseen Worlds of witchcraft, satanism and sorcery, marks a huge step in Pastoral Theology. Hitherto, Catholic Theology and pastoral care mostly denied the existence of the world of spirits: Western education came to Africa with the message that witchcraft did not exist. Christian Education should replace the traditional beliefs. But after 100 years of Christianity in Zambia for example, where Bernhard Udelhoven has been working as a White Father missionary for more than two decades now, most Christians "– including members of the elite – do not question the world of demons or of witchcraft. They live in it and with it." (11) They feel the urgent need to lead a double religious life.

And the Church remains an outsider, condemning what, obviously, fulfils spiritual needs of the Christians. They live with their ancestors and spirits, and the "Church could not be part of this realm." In Christian villages this aspect of the African reality went underground. – What often increased its "attraction, especially in times of crisis". (41)

Unseen Worlds offers a totally new Pastoral approach to overcome such a dualistic view: The Catholic faith on the one hand and the so called superstition on the other hand. Bernhard Udelhoven presents both a theoretical framework how pastoral care can rescue those who are afflicted by spirits, witchcraft and demons and he presents numerous case studies and practical examples. These cases are often matters of death or life. The author's conclusion is that the Church should not simply look away, or even worse, condemn those who are longing for acceptance and for a life in a loving community. The Church should develop new answers to the spiritual needs of the faithful.

As a solution, Udelhoven invites all pastoral agents to walk on a twofold path: 1. "We try to increase the positive faith of the affected person. In prayer, we focus on God, not on demons." 2. We also "address specific relationships and notions of belonging". (17/18) Experience teaches that the possession by demons always is closely connected with and related to problems on an interpersonal level.

Consequently, the core point of Udelhoven's approach is to thoroughly study and heal the frictions in these relationships. – For me as a professional counsellor Udelhoven's path to healing coincides very often with fragments of methods developed in modern schools of psychology, such as ego-state therapy, solution oriented therapy, family constellation, trauma therapy and methods which use bodily experiences in order to initiate healing.

As these approaches are not explicitly known to the author and his therapy/research teams, it seems that these pastoral agents have attuned themselves with love and compassion so deeply to the suffering Christians that the healers have "reinvented" some of these psychological tools. While feeling with the haunted victims and inquiring their stories the White Father and his teams have

found pastoral solutions which are both helpful on the path of healing and totally concordant with catholic beliefs and theology.

This pastoral approach marks the dissolution of the above mentioned dualistic view. The haunting demons can vanish. And at the same time the surprising fact becomes obvious that the demons fulfilled an important, even a “healing” task: The world of spirits always appears in order to reveal hidden frictions in families, to mark social injustice towards certain persons or groups, to point at unresolved matters between individuals or to denounce taboos which stabilize and sustain injustice and oppression. The demons turn out to be indicators for human frictions or social imbalance. “The possessed have an inverted prophetic role: they show visibly the concrete effects of evil and of the idol, which would otherwise remain invisible.” (23) – When a new balance can be developed, the victim is healed from the haunting demons and likewise the world becomes a bit better: The demon is superfluous as soon as the friction is healed or the injustice is overcome.

Therefore, Udelhoven points out: “In our approach, we have to deal just as much with the community as we do with the possessed individual.” (15) The work with the witchcraft victim is always both pastoral care for the suffering person and a strengthening of the community.

As mentioned above, Udelhoven’s healing process finds a lot of analogies in practical psychology. In my opinion this very fact proves the value of this new pastoral approach in a twofold way: First, the partly “reinvention” of successful psychological tools mirrors how deep the researchers have understood the suffering victims and the underlying psychological needs. Secondly, as these tools are known as successful, there remains no doubt that Udelhoven’s approach is a valuable step towards overcoming suffering through haunting demons in Africa and beyond.

Not to be misunderstood: This process, developed by Udelhoven and his healing and research teams, is not a psychological but a pastoral approach. It remains deeply embedded into reflection on faith and it is interwoven with the wise use of catholic rituals, prayers and bible sharing.

Besides giving a practical introduction into his new pastoral approach the author analyses and describes in his book many different aspects closely connected with the realm of spirits. Indispensable is the study of Unseen Worlds for example for all those who want to better understand the phenomenon of the Pentecostal Churches in Africa and the necessity of a Pentecostal movement within the Catholic Church. Furthermore, Udelhoven points out the differences between witchcraft and Satanism – Satanism has become “a disturbing issue in Zambia since the late 1990s” (286), and he offers methods how affected people can be rescued. Last but not least, he positions his approach and his reflections into Catholic faith and theology; for example he offers a clarifying analysis of “devil and demons in the Bible” (357) and of the “devil according to the teaching of the Catholic Church”. (366)

The importance of Udelhoven’s findings and proposals should not be underestimated. In 1998 Laurent Magesa opened up a totally new view on the value of the traditional African religion (compare L. Magesa: “African Religion: The Moral Traditions of Abundant Life.” Nairobi. Paulines

Publications Africa). Since then it is impossible to go on with the traditional devaluation of African Religions as mere superstition. Now in 2015, Bernhard Udelhoven presents a second step: He breaks up the alleged incompatibility and disaccord between the Christian faith and the reality of a spiritual life with ancestors and spirits. He presents a first set of tools how to practically resolve this antagonism between the Christianity and the traditional African life experiences.

Therefore, this book is a “must” for every pastoral agent. Helpful for its reception might be a “less weighty” edition which could serve as a kind of handbook in formation and training.

With view to the numerous suffering Christians – torn apart between their roots and the catholic path to salvation and wellbeing – Udelhoven’s “marriage” between the two sides marks a valuable and reconciliatory step in pastoral care and theology.

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