



*Understanding and dealing
with the spirit world*

Abstract

This paper examines Kraft's claim that 'Western perspectives have crippled [Westerners] when it comes to understanding and dealing with the spirit world.'¹¹⁸ It is argued that the western worldview typically separated the material and spiritual worlds, unlike the integrated view of animists who engage with the spirit world. As a result, Western Christians have neglected temporal concerns, and the fear of spiritual powers which are so strong for animists. This has deterred animists from Christianity or led to split-level Christianity. However, there are also approaches such as critical contextualization which utilize parts of Western worldview to help Christians engage appropriately with the spirit world, and there are many examples where good work has occurred despite the dualistic western bias. So Kraft's use of the word 'crippled' is overstated. Moreover, the western worldview Kraft refers to is simplistic given the renewed interest and openness to the spiritual that is evident in the modern west.

¹¹⁸ Charles H. Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1996), 84.

Introduction

An 18 year old woman presents to the mental health clinic, claiming to be possessed by jinn. Six months ago, her family engaged her to a much older man who she does not want to marry. Also six months ago, a mullah was praying that a jinn would be expelled from her mother, and the jinn entered the client. Now her sleep and appetite are disordered, and she has possession episodes where her voice changes, and through her voice, the jinn orders her not to go out of the house, or to come to the clinic. Western psychiatry would suggest some kind of dissociative expression of her distress about the marriage¹¹⁹. However, the family is convinced that the cause is spiritual not psychological.

Kraft claims that 'Western perspectives have crippled [Westerners] when it comes to understanding and dealing with the spirit world'.¹²⁰ This paper will consider what western perspectives are being referred to, and to what extent Kraft's claim is valid. Those people for whom 'the primary reality is that of the spirit world and the natural world is an expression of it',¹²¹ will be referred to as animists and will be contrasted with Westerners.

What Western perspectives are in view?

'Perspectives' is assumed to refer to worldview, which Kraft defines as the 'culturally structured set of assumptions... underlying how people perceive and respond to reality'.¹²² Hiebert identifies the attitudes of the 17th Century as the origin of western worldview. These include: the belief of superiority that accompanied colonisation, the advance of cultural evolutionism which saw some cultures as more advanced than others, and the influence of the

¹¹⁹ See Tony Perman, "Awakening Spirits: The Ontology of Spirit, Self and Society in Nda Spirit Possession Practices in Zimbabwe," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 41 (2011): 71; Caleb C. Kim, "Jinn Possession and Uganga (Healing) among the Swahili: A Phenomenological Exploration of Swahili Experiences of Jinn," *Muslim-Christian Encounter* 3, no. 2 (2010): 74, 80.

¹²⁰ Kraft, *Anthropology for Christian Witness*, 84.

¹²¹ Denise Hodgman, "'The Flaw of the Excluded Middle' among the Cree People of Canada" (Providence Theological Seminary, 2004), 12.

¹²² Charles H. Kraft, "Culture, Worldview and Contextualization," in *Perspectives on the World Christian Movement*, ed. Ralph Winter and Steven Hawthorne (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1998), 385.

Enlightenment.¹²³ At that time, science with its emphasis on experience, testing and proof became the preeminent tool to explain the world.¹²⁴ This left little room for the supernatural and resulted in a dualistic worldview that separated the material and spiritual worlds.¹²⁵

For western Christians in particular, this created a dichotomy between the 'low' material world of science, and spirit world, which was limited to 'high' religious thought, preoccupied by ultimate issues such as salvation and eternal destiny.¹²⁶ The middle level, of interaction with spirits, ghosts, demons, ancestors, jinn etc, was completely excluded.¹²⁷ Although many western Christians theoretically assent to their reality based on the examples that litter the Bible¹²⁸, they struggle to integrate it into their practical worldview.¹²⁹ Animists, for whom the middle is essential, explain matters of daily importance such as sickness, infertility and drought through the activity of these spiritual beings, while westerners look for rational or scientific explanations and reference germs, genetics and meteorology.¹³⁰ Scientists have been so unable to cope with the idea of unseen spiritual beings that they have sought a scientific explanation for the phenomenon of the movement of Ouija boards.¹³¹

This western dualistic perspective is evident in the staff at the mental health clinic. When asked for an explanation for the client's symptoms, all replied "The Qur'an says that jinn

¹²³ Paul G. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw, and Tite Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religions: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 16-17.

¹²⁴ Robin Dale Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam: A Case Study in the Sudan" (University of South Africa, 2010), 159.

¹²⁵ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 197.

¹²⁶ A. H. Mathias Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony: Making Disciples across Cultures*, Innovations in Mission (Monrovia: MARC), 49; Edward F. Murphy, "World View Clash: A Handbook for Spiritual Warfare," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 10, no. 4 (1993): 164.

¹²⁷ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 196.

¹²⁸ Peter G. Bolt, "Jesus, the Daimons and the Dead," in *The Unseen World: Christian Reflection on Angels, Demons and the Heavenly Realm*, ed. Anthony N. S. Lane (? : Paternoster Press, 1996), 97-100; Murphy, "World View Clash: A Handbook for Spiritual Warfare," 165.

¹²⁹ Craig Ott, Stephen J. Strauss, and Timothy C. Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission: Biblical Foundations, Historical Developments and Contemporary Issues* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010), 253; Martin Parsons, "Binding the Strong Man: The Flaw of the Excluded Middle," in *Angels and Demons*, ed. Peter G. Riddell and Beverly Smith Riddell (Apollos, 2007), 107.

¹³⁰ Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 49; Erwin Van Der Meer, "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology of C. Peter Wagner and Its Implications for Christian Mission in Malawi" (University of South Africa, 2008), 206.

¹³¹ Tom Stafford, "How the Ouija Board Really Moves," BBC, <http://www.bbc.com/future/story/20130729-what-makes-the-ouija-board-move>.

exist, so I believe in them, however I have never seen their effect in the world, so I think that this case is dissociation/psychosis/malingering.” If we accept Caleb’s argument that Islam traditionally integrates both high and low religion with the material world,¹³² we see that having been trained by western (Christian) doctors and nurses, the Afghan clinicians have rejected their traditional worldview in this case.¹³³

Have Western perspectives crippled Westerners in understanding and dealing with the spirit world?

The western exclusion of the middle has left Western Christians with deficits in understanding and relating to animists and their spirit world. First, since western Christians focus on ‘high’ religion, they tend to neglect temporal concerns such as how to prevent the rains from ruining the crops.¹³⁴ In the case of the girl at the clinic, her eternal destiny was of much less concern to her than the man she was engaged to marry. However, this western neglect of the temporal may not be completely crippling in dealing with animists. For example, based on the witness of western Christians, the Cree people gleaned that becoming Christians led to a better life for them and their families – a very temporal concern.¹³⁵

Second, western Christians neglect animists’ fear that they are at the mercy of powerful spiritual forces.¹³⁶ Westerners come armed with rational explanations, believing that if they can explain the scientific mechanism for an event,¹³⁷ animists will reject their spiritual explanation for the event, negating their fear.¹³⁸ Hiebert recalls himself that when he worked

¹³² Kim, "Jinn Possession," 68, 82.

¹³³ Hadaway presents an alternative view that Islam is just an overlay on traditional beliefs, and they were never integrated. This does not match my experience with the staff at the clinic, where all explanations about the spirit world are related back to “In Islam....” It may not be Qur’anic Islam, but within the worldview of the clinic staff, Islam and the spirit world were previously integrated. See Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 76, 78, 236.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 80-81, 255.

¹³⁵ Hodgman, ""The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" among the Cree People of Canada," 34.

¹³⁶ Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 16, 195, 226; Hodgman, ""The Flaw of the Excluded Middle" among the Cree People of Canada," 12, 16, 36; Fannuel Mashoko, "The Need for Contextualization in Inter-Cultural Communication of the Gospel" (University of South Africa, 2005), 56; Meer, "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology," 259.

¹³⁷ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 193; Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 227; Kim, "Jinn Possession," 73; Mashoko, "The Need for Contextualization," 54-55.

¹³⁸ Meer, "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare Theology," 255.

in India, he was unprepared to answer the questions of his local friends because he presented 'Christ on the basis of rational arguments, not by evidences of his power in the lives of people who were sick, possessed and destitute...'¹³⁹ Similarly in a Muslim context, folk Muslims focus on the effects of jinn, with only a peripheral awareness of the Qur'an. Yet a large proportion of western Christian interaction with them has been based on weakening the claims of the Qur'an!¹⁴⁰ Even when they do address practical concerns such as health, western Christians set up hospitals or mental health clinics and explain about germs or vulnerable personalities, never realising that their animistic audiences are hungry for more – they want to know who sent the germs or created the vulnerability!¹⁴¹ So at the mental health clinic, the typical western approach has been to treat the 'dissociative symptoms', without consideration for the family's belief that the problem is spiritual.¹⁴²

This invalidation of the individual's lived experience can deter animists from Christianity altogether.¹⁴³ If they somehow overcome that, they are likely to have a split-level Christianity¹⁴⁴ where they assent to the doctrines of Christianity but return to traditional healers and spiritual diviners when everyday problems occur. Hodgman records an example of a girl whose grandmother had instilled 'the fear of God in her' and yet during her last days of life, the grandmother consulted a medicine man to cure her diabetes.¹⁴⁵ Another Christian who was interviewed saw no contradiction in his intention to smudge his house with the smoke of sweet-grass if the spirit living there became troublesome.¹⁴⁶

The staff at the clinic also display a split-level worldview. They use rational western explanations to explain mental illness, yet in their personal lives, they outline their babies' eyes

¹³⁹ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 189.

¹⁴⁰ Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 2, 13, 15; Hodgman, "'The Flaw of the Excluded Middle' among the Cree People of Canada," 13.

¹⁴¹ Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 139.

¹⁴² Charles H. Kraft, *Defeating Dark Angels: Breaking Demonic Oppression in the Believer's Life* (Ann Arbor: Servant Publications, 1992), 26; Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 229.

¹⁴³ Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 45.

¹⁴⁴ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues*, 198.

¹⁴⁵ Hodgman, "'The Flaw of the Excluded Middle' among the Cree People of Canada," 57.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

with charcoal, pin evil eye charms to them and ensure they wear a hat at all times, all to protect the baby from jinn.

In line with Kraft's claim, dualistic Western worldviews have therefore hampered the development of integrated faith in those with animistic worldviews. However, this is not unavoidable, and the Western worldview can even be an asset if used appropriately. Hiebert, Shaw and Tienou advocate a critical contextualization approach that examines the assets and flaws of both western and animistic worldviews, to consider how they might contribute to each other in forming a more biblical worldview.¹⁴⁷ Regarding the spirit world, they suggest that the concern for power may be married with western rational explanation by heralding God's supreme power demonstrated on the cross.¹⁴⁸ Utilizing the strength of the scientific rational process, westerners can explore their own biases and then give animists confidence in God's power over spirits. Given this possibility, Kraft's claim that Western perspectives have crippled westerners in engaging with the spirit world is overstated.

Moreover, although Hodgman notes that many of the Cree people displayed elements of split-level Christianity, she also noted that the western-Christian witnesses among them had given them many helpful practices in dealing with the spirit world such as praying when they felt dark powers and rebuking those powers in Jesus' name.¹⁴⁹ Based on these experiences, the Cree people went on to develop a strong sense of power from church attendance, prayer, talking with others about Christ, and their own faith in Jesus.¹⁵⁰ So even where the western Christians did not actively attempt to overcome the bias of their worldview, they still did much good ministry done among these animistic people. Again, the extremity of Kraft's statement is unsympathetic to this history.

In the present, Kraft's view is also simplistic. In the last two decades, there has been a growing dissatisfaction in the West with pure rationalism, and the New Age and spiritualist

¹⁴⁷ Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, *Understanding Folk Religions*, 383.

¹⁴⁸ "Responding to Split-Level Christianity and Folk Religion," *International Journal of Frontier Missions* 16, no. 4 (1999/2000): 17.

¹⁴⁹ Hodgman, "'The Flaw of the Excluded Middle' among the Cree People of Canada," 52.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

movements have thrived.¹⁵¹ This has carried over to Western Christianity,¹⁵² where there has been a growing interest in middle beings such as angels and demons,¹⁵³ and a general greater openness to the spirit world. As a product of this new openness, I have been able to appropriately focus the staff at the clinic on the spirit world. During the case discussion about the girl with the jinn, I gave an example of seeing my pastor and a baptisee from a strongly Hindu background attacked in church by a man shouting “What do you want with me? Have you come to destroy me? I rebuke you.” My staff appeared shocked that I would admit to such ‘unscientific’ experiences, but it opened up a discussion about jinn in their lives, and the following week, two members of staff approached me to ask how I thought they should respond to the growth of Satanic cults and rituals. Even though I am a westerner whose default is to explain the material world through science, growing up more recently in the West gave me an openness to engage with the spirit world as it manifested in my staff and client’s lives.

Conclusion

It is thus clear that while Kraft’s traditional Western worldview does not account for more modern influences, overall he is justified in claiming that Western Christians have struggled to understand and deal with the spirit world. Nevertheless, ‘crippled’ seems to be an overstatement given that there are good examples of Western Christians who have overcome their bias of their worldview to interact effectively with the spirit world, or who have managed good work despite their western bias. Perhaps a more justifiable statement would be: “*traditional Western perspectives have hampered [Westerners] in understanding and dealing with the spirit world.*”

¹⁵¹ Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 239; Zahniser, *Symbol and Ceremony*, 49; Kraft, *Defeating Dark Angels: Breaking Demonic Oppression in the Believer’s Life*, 26.

¹⁵² Ott, Strauss, and Tennent, *Encountering Theology of Mission*, 239; Hadaway, "Contextualization and Folk Islam," 226.

¹⁵³ Marilyn Carlson Webber and William D. Webber, *A Rustle of Angels* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 14.

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