

## **Concerning witchcraft: From what to be delivered, and how to be delivered?<sup>1</sup>**

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Whatever conclusion different people may draw about the ontological existence of witchcraft (denied in the Western world, but believed in in Africa), for many Christians in Zambia it simply is real and they want this reality to be addressed in the ministry of deliverance. This does not mean that the idea of witchcraft is immutable. People's understanding changes and develops constantly, and the forms of witchcraft they struggle with today are not identical with those of their ancestors. Concepts of witchcraft are sustained and developed in the process of communication. Therefore, the ministry of witchcraft can (and should) imprint its own dynamics on the concept of witchcraft. It needs to be freed from its dehumanising tendencies.

To answer the questions of the title, I am building on my argument that I have presented to this forum last year: that the Western concepts of science, religion, and superstition do not suffice to define what witchcraft is, in the way it is understood in Zambia and I believe also in various other regions of Africa. Of course, there exist several different understandings of witchcraft side by side or mutating into each other; I deal here with witchcraft as it is understood as a relational concept: a living force that feeds on destructive emotions (jealousy, hatred, greed), and that maintains an intrinsic connection to the person or the soul of the witch, who becomes dehumanised in the process. It also seeks to establish an intimate connection to the soul of the victim, who will perish. A witch (or wizard or sorcerer)<sup>2</sup> is no longer a full human being. The forces of witchcraft will lead a life on their own. In many notions of witchcraft, the soul of the witch gains affinity with that of animals, and the community needs to be protected from the witch. The appropriate response is lynch justice, expulsion or ostracization of the witch, and we see too often these dynamics at work in Africa today, even in Christian churches. As a result of divinations (in Christian churches these are now called "prophecies"), suspected witches have been killed in Zambia, while the pastor washed his hands in innocence.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on my presentation at the viii Colloque International, Abidjan: "Sorcellerie en Afrique, quel moyens de libération?" at the Institut Catholique Missionnaire d'Abidjan (16 – 17 April 2021).

<sup>2</sup> in Zambia, the witch has no specific gender; both male and female practitioners are known as witches, and I use the term in this presentation as such. Also the Africanistic distinction between witchcraft (an inherent faculty) and sorcery (a learned craft) is blurred in Zambian concepts of witchcraft, together with the voluntary and involuntary aspects of witchcraft. (See Bernhard Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds: Dealing with Spirits, Witchcraft, and Satanism* (Lusaka: FENZA, 2021): chapter 12 & 13.

<sup>3</sup> I have documented one case in detail in Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*: drama 12.

Since witchcraft is something alive, people expect from the deliverance ministry to provoke witchcraft to reveal itself in a bodily reaction, just like demons, in the victims of attacks (and of course also in the witches) in response to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Many believe that witchcraft can be detected through some sort of technology, and that deliverance is such a technology. Deliverance, however, is not a technology but a faith experience. Its dynamics are different from the dynamics of witchcraft. In this presentation I look at the Christian notion of deliverance and propose a way how to free it from the logic of witchcraft by moulding it on the Lord's prayer. I then propose a way how to evaluate truth-claims about witchcraft in a strife towards reconciliation and justice, that should never be absent from the ministry of deliverance. Since any witchcraft discourse is inherently dehumanising, a Christian response to witchcraft will always be humanising or re-humanising for all parties involved.

### ***Confession as a traditional re-humanising strategy?***

How can a suspected witch, guilty or innocent of the crime of witchcraft, become again human in the eyes of the public? The maxim "innocent until proven guilty" may apply to theft or other crimes in Zambia, but it does not apply to witchcraft in popular thought, because witchcraft can by its nature not be proven or disproven by ordinary means. People rather hold that "There is no smoke without fire!" Believers in witchcraft expect that the witch denies all allegations of witchcraft. Since a witch needs to be operating in hiding, he/she cannot confess while still being a witch. This is part of the "witchcraft paradox" that I have explained in my last presentation. A practicing witch can only talk about witchcraft through allusions, but never in a straight-forward way. Secrecy is part of the essence of witchcraft. A person suspected to be a witch will not become innocent in the eyes of the community just because he/she denies the charges.

Suspected witches therefore may want to prove their innocence by undergoing a divination or cleansing ritual. In the hope of becoming cleared, or under pressure from the community, they submit themselves under the extraordinary eyes of a diviner or a prophet of high reputation (since the diviner's ability to detect witchcraft needs to be acknowledged by the community). When proven guilty by divination, the refusal to confess may be equated with the refusal to repent, which relinquishes any hope of reintegration. In Zambia, witchfinding activities have sometimes resulted in accused witches bringing heaps of traditional medicines, horns or amulets to the diviner (including rosaries!), voluntarily, so as to mark their complete break with practices of witchcraft. Some confessions do happen as a result of such pressures.

But other witchcraft confessions are much more readily given—seemingly under no pressure or force. In Zambia we witnessed many confessions of former Satanists that were given voluntarily

before large audiences, and the video- or audio-recordings in which they confess to the most repulsive crimes, including sacrificing and drinking human blood, spread even to the most isolated villages of Zambia. Many of them were youths. I have given elsewhere several case studies that show that personal testimonies about initiation into Satanism are not procured in a neutral environment. In the context of Pentecostal and charismatic settings of deliverance, testimonies follow specific roles, scripts, and sets of expectations. People recognise testimonies as producing an own realm of truths. They are taken as true, but as true in a certain sense that cannot be dealt with by ordinary means. Even inconsistencies in the testimonies were not seen to devalue them. In a way, such confusion even proved their level of truth! In the cases that we followed up, we could prove many parts of the testimonies to be empirically outright false. But this did not disqualify the testimonies. Since Satanists and witches are masters of deception, and since the confessing Satanists presented themselves as having totally lived within the satanic world, the audience did not expect their experiences to be free from contradictions.

True and honest confessions demand courage and strength of character and are, I believe, always humanising. They allow to bring closure into grief, but they also allow us to see human emotions and motives on the side of the perpetrator. But the confessions and testimonies about witchcraft and Satanism that I listened to were of a different kind. Their contents were shocking, too shocking maybe and too far removed from ordinary reality to become humanising. Some testifying Satanists displayed their emotions, and had to stop from time to time, “because it is too horrible for me to think about these things.” Others simply spoke in a monotonous voice, seemingly without any emotions at all. But unlike a confession of personal guilt, the testimonies showed how the forces of witchcraft or Satanism *made them do* what they did (or what they claimed to have done). This force had taken over; they themselves had no real willpower left. In many ways, their state of being a Satanist resembled the state of being possessed, and deliverance always manifested such dramas of possession.

Let me look at two famous anthropological theories that seek to explain the plausibility of witchcraft confessions: The first comes from Claude Lévi-Strauss, who looked at testimonies of witches as part of the dynamics that validates a people’s belief system. In one of his case studies,<sup>4</sup> a boy stands accused of bewitching a girl, after touching her. At first, he denies the charge (on which stood the death penalty), but notices that this does not satisfy the community. He then confesses his crimes in graphic details together with many other crimes of witchcraft. He becomes more and more attuned to the reactions of the audience, and (seemingly) starts to believe in his

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<sup>4</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Sorcerer and his Magic” in *Structural Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 167–85. The case study I refer to is on pp. 172–5.

own story and powers. Thereby he corroborates the worldview of the community and preserves their system of meaning in times of crisis. The community in turn acquits him. Lévi-Strauss understood testimonies of witches in their interplay with specific audiences as confirming people's structure of thinking, without which the world slips into chaos. Since the confessing witches share the community's symbolic world, they come to believe in their own stories by reinterpreting their lives.

Lévi-Strauss' analysis may shed some light on Zambian confessions. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> Christian audiences see their faith dramatically confirmed in a testimony that demonstrates the powers of Jesus over the devil. They want to believe in the testimonies, because the narratives affirm their faith and even prove it. The testimonies show what cannot be shown. Faith always wins and the devil is always defeated. In return, the community acquits the youths of their real past misadventures (in some of our own case studies, these consisted of stealing, lying, disobedience, absenteeism in school, abortions, or same-sex relationships, which are criminalised in Zambia and socially unacceptable) while they confess to impossible crimes that they claim to have committed as Satanists.

A second theory comes from Rowlands and Warnier.<sup>6</sup> They tried to work with the contents of witchcraft beliefs (instead of explaining the persistence of such beliefs, like Lévi-Strauss, from the viewpoint of an unbeliever). Their analysis is situated in the context of Cameroon where witchcraft, in some parts, is known as *evu*. They describe *evu* as a substance in the human body which becomes destructive witchcraft when the selfish owner fails to integrate his/her *evu*-powers into society, but it can also be a positive substance when fully socialised, allowing for successful social, economic and political power that will benefit the community. Through confession, "The strength of the witch's *evu* gained public recognition and was socialised to the owner's best advantage."<sup>7</sup> A confessed witch can gather for himself/herself more social capital and influence than a person with weak *evu*, who will always be unsuccessful and toothless while walking through life. Better to have socialized forms of witchcraft than none at all! All forms of traditional forms of authority needed this element of fear and respect, which comes from access to legitimate forms of spiritual powers.

Zambian Satanism has, unlike *evu*, no real positive counterpart of the same substance.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, we could say that people confess about all possible or impossible crimes of Satanism

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<sup>5</sup> Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*: chapter 20.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Rowlands and Jean-Pierre Warnier, "Sorcery, Power and the Modern State in Cameroon," *Man* 23, no. 1 (1988): 118–32.

<sup>7</sup> Rowlands and Warnier, "Sorcery, Power and the Modern State", 129.

<sup>8</sup> The direct counterpart of the Zambian Satanist would be the Christian prophet who is given by God a certain affinity to the world of witchcraft or Satanism that enables him/her to detect witches. But in spite of this affinity, the prophet is believed to

and witchcraft, because the testimonies afford them a special social status. A person who has known the occult world first-hand is more useful to society than a person who knows nothing about that world, which secretly influences so many events. One well-known ex-Satanist, the late Evangelist Gideon Mulenga Kabila, whose story is on YouTube and on several other internet channels (interviewed by Pastor Jan-Aage Torp),<sup>9</sup> managed after his conversion to become a pastor in his own right; his written and recorded testimonies had become a national event. But he mentioned in his Facebook posts, not long before his death, that the Satanist label never left him; even friends asked themselves whether he was “truly delivered”.<sup>10</sup> He interpreted all his accidents and sicknesses as satanic attacks; the devil wanted to silence him.

We too recorded a number of cases of “redeemed Satanists” who, after testifying publicly to their crimes, tried to become active in one church or another in the popular ministry of healing and deliverance. One tried (unsuccessfully) to found her own church. Maybe they hoped that their special status of having inside knowledge would also give them a privileged position inside the church. However, very few succeeded, and never for long! One girl, who testified that she had been the wife of Lucifer in the Satanic world, became a well-known member in the deliverance team of a famous Catholic priest in Lusaka and toured with him many Parishes. But after some time, the suspicion that she may not be fully delivered bounced back on her in public gossip, not unlike the case of Gideon Mulenga. Where people saw that a former Satanist could gain any advantage from a testimony, be it in form of financial rights over the sale of such testimonies, or in terms of prestige, their status of being delivered easily became disputed. They continued to be associated with Satanism, in spite of their powerful confessions. Those who managed to free themselves successfully from the label of witchcraft or Satanism were people who “turned a page” after their confession, who stopped giving public testimonies about Satanism or witchcraft in church or elsewhere, who did not seek any fame about their special knowledge, but who simply wanted to get on with their lives. Eventually they themselves forgot their past misdeeds in the satanic world. Their memories of their involvement in Satanism had evaporated, sometimes within less than a year, like a forgotten dream.<sup>11</sup>

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work with the Holy Spirit, while the Satanist works with demons. They are not seen to share the same substance as in the case of *evu*. Also Zambian concepts of witchcraft have a positive counterpart, since legitimate authorities (chiefs, headmen, parents) are believed to have legitimate spiritual powers over their subjects. But again, such powers that are employed legitimately for the benefit of the community are rarely known as witchcraft, since the source of such powers is seen to come from the ancestors. But witches have no place among the ancestors.

<sup>9</sup> Prior to his internet presence, Kabila’s written pamphlets had already spread through many areas of Zambia, in spite of a written warning not to photocopy the booklet illegally, which would give Satan an entry-point into the life of the reader.

<sup>10</sup> Post of Gideon Mulenga Kabila on Facebook, 23 February 2017, reposted on Facebook by Shalom Embassy Ministry, Matero Branch, on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2017 at his funeral announcement.

<sup>11</sup> Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, chapter 20. About pastors’ role in co-authoring the testimonies, and about the pressure on delivered Satanists to testify, and their falling into oblivion after the testimony, while the pastor stays in the lime-light, see

With these considerations I do not want to explain why such testimonies are given. Every case is different, and people who testify about their former involvement in witchcraft or Satanism may have very mixed motives for doing so. (An honest desire to confess the truth? Seeking fame? A new role or status in society? Being coerced by the dynamics of an expectant audience or by the pressure put on by the pastor?) I don't doubt that some of the people who testified to Satanism had undergone a chain of very dramatic spiritual experiences. Maybe some were indeed caught up in occult practices from which they sought redemption. Public confession is a traditional humanising strategy. My point is that it usually remains tied to the logic of witchcraft. Where things go well, the audience forgives the past, and embraces the confessed Satanist as a redeemed person, since the testimony proves the clear cut from witchcraft, making the person, again, human. However, experience in Zambia shows that things do not always go well. Actually, they rarely go well. The testimonies may confirm the powers of Jesus, but the bulk of the testimonies, and that is of course their source of attraction, is about the world of the devil and his extraordinary powers. The "smell of witchcraft" always remains with the person who gives the testimony. The rehumanising strategies of the deliverance ministry should not flow out of the logic of witchcraft but of the Christian faith.

### ***The "Our Father" as a model for deliverance***

The dynamics of the Lord's prayer places the deliverance ministry into inherently humanising dynamics. The "Our Father" initiates community and fellowship. It seeks to transform not only the affected person but also the surrounding community and the Church ("deliver us", instead of "deliver them"). The prayer does not open, but closes with a petition for deliverance. It does so by addressing God, not the devil. Before Christians ask God for deliverance from the evil one, they have already longed for His kingdom, His will, His help in providing for their daily needs, and His forgiveness. And they have professed their own willingness to forgive. Only then do they pray for deliverance. Deliverance here is not some powerful act that removes unwanted circumstances and misfortune. God's intervention has freed nobody if people continue to live their lives in a way that remains untouched by the offer of God's kingdom as it is revealed by the life of Jesus Christ.

People in Africa know that witchcraft is rooted in hatred, greed, selfishness, exclusion, despair, lust for power and jealousy. Deliverance removes neither the devil nor such negative emotions from this world. Instead, it repositions people into a new relationship with God and with others. I stress the word repositioning, because I have argued in my last presentation that witchcraft

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especially Johanneke Kamps, *Speaking of Satan in Zambia: The persuasiveness of contemporary narratives about Satanism* (PhD thesis, Utrecht, *Quaestiones Infnitae*, Volume CVIII, 2018).

needs the “witchcraft space” in order to unfold its powers. Outside of that space, it is powerless. According to Zambian notions of witchcraft, the witch needs to create opportunities that allow the forces of witchcraft to interact with the victim’s body or soul. It needs to draw the victim inside that witchcraft space. Now, when the victim of witchcraft repositions himself or herself into a new kind of relationship with God and also with the person of the witch (real or suspected), marked by the Christian faith and the command of love and respect, the Christian victim of witchcraft can hope that the witchcraft space becomes itself disturbed.

We embark into the deliverance ministry not through claims of knowledge about the objective workings of the world of witchcraft (as if we had been there ourselves), but by turning to God. Deliverance seeks to help the patient (be it the accuser or the accused) to gain a new experience of life. The patient cannot be regarded as a passive recipient of deliverance but needs to be ready for a new quality of relationships.

Catholic guidelines on deliverance state that deliverance frees the person not only from outside powers but also from the power of the own imagination. Witchcraft, whatever its nature, does not operate in total independence of the inner life of the person. Where witchcraft has become an idol, people respect its powers to an extent that overshadows the powers of their Christian faith. The possibilities, fascination, threats and terrors of witchcraft start to determine the language of faith, of prayer, and of the images of the spiritual world. The idol of witchcraft hooks the mind like a fish on a bait. The deliverance ministry based on the “Our Father” asks the believer to be fascinated by God, more than by witchcraft. Only then is the person freed from the hook.

### ***The language of witchcraft and the language of deliverance***

The language of deliverance needs to make sense where witchcraft is persuasive and alive for the victim. The traditional Catholic response to witchcraft in Africa has focused especially on education, in two different ways. Either the church sought to debunk witchcraft as a false belief and reduced witchcraft beliefs to attempts of explanation that will need to make room for better, scientific concepts. Or it emphasised catechesis, where Christians should believe in the superior powers of Jesus Christ, even over witchcraft. Neither approach prevented witchcraft to appear in its own space even in the lives of the most educated and fervent Christians. Because witchcraft is not simply a way of explaining unsuspected misfortune. It is not only an intellectual construct, false or true. Witchcraft is arguably even more persuasive in volatile situations where we fail to explain or control the events of our lives.<sup>12</sup> It presents itself not as a rational argument or

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<sup>12</sup> Hermen Kroesbergen, *The Language of Faith in Southern Africa: Spirit World, Power, Community, Holism* (Cape Town: OASIS Ltd., 2019).

hypothesis, but as a power or force in its own right. The language of deliverance needs to make sense not only in the catechism class but also inside this “witchcraft space”. Witchcraft becomes alive and persuasive in specific contexts, where people are aligned to each other in a certain way that predispose them to recognise the reality of witchcraft in an existential way. A witchcraft attack means for the victim that the witch managed to gain access to a part of his/her soul, that the witch has started to control or manipulate part of the victim’s life and body.

Pentecostal language and charismatic prayer have managed to penetrate the witchcraft space in a more direct way than classical Catholic prayers from the book. For example, prolonged singing that assists trance, the emphasis on fasting, long periods of spontaneous prayer, praying in tongues, the surrounding circle of people praying with outstretched arms, or the emphasis on touch, often enkindle the inner awareness of witchcraft to manifest itself in a powerful bodily reaction. Pentecostal and charismatic prayer is welcoming to such bodily reactions. They can enable the patient to engage with witchcraft not only on an intellectual but also on an emotional and spiritual level, through a concrete bodily awareness. The Holy Spirit, too, is expected to manifest himself through a shift and change in bodily awareness. Pentecostalism in Africa speaks the language of witchcraft.

This comes, of course, also with its own sets of risks. Witchcraft becomes objectified, since both victim and pastor acknowledge it as an objective reality in their prayers and interventions. Many scholars have bemoaned a “witchcraft mentality” that establishes patterns of blame and victim roles on the expense of a sense of own responsibility.<sup>13</sup> But deliverance will never be free from risk. It is the responsibility of the pastor, and of the church (through guidelines and evaluation), to ensure that the process of deliverance does not sideline the challenge of conversion, a strive towards reconciliation, and a re-humanizing response towards all people involved. The aim of deliverance is to enable the patient to make a personal response to the challenge of faith brought by Jesus Christ, also inside the witchcraft space. I believe it is possible to acknowledge the reality of witchcraft in the ministry of deliverance (whose presence is for many Christians in Africa a non-negotiable reality) and yet give it a humanising response. All Catholic sacraments have a powerful bodily component which has, unfortunately, been consistently downplayed since the Enlightenment in favour of privileging the intellectual message of the sacrament. It is especially in the deliverance ministry that the body plays again a sacramental role. It becomes a channel to the spiritual world: to witchcraft, to demons, but also to God’s grace. The challenge for the deliverance ministry is to draw attention from the former to the latter—also in a felt bodily reaction.

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<sup>13</sup> Abraham Akrong, “Neo-Witchcraft Mentality in Popular Christianity,” *Research Review* vol 16, no. 1 (2000), 1-12.



### ***Person-centred deliverance***

We start in our approach not with outside concepts of witchcraft or Satanism, but with the way our patients experience and understand these forces, how they look at themselves in relation to these forces, and how they evaluate these forces in regards to their Christian faith. We avoid any form of denial of these experiences. Such a denial can come through scepticism, thinking that witchcraft is only imagined, or from quickly praying witchcraft away. Instead, through empathy we encourage the patient to stay close to the own bodily awareness that corresponds with the attack. We hope that the deliverance ministry will eventually bring about a felt shift in this awareness.

We also avoid to interpret the attack. For example, we avoid to relate it to trauma, unless patients or their families draw such a link themselves (I will give some examples later). For a start, we allow the experience of the patient simply to be there, just as it is, without forcing outside meaning on it. Our own contribution is to be present to the person's experience, as people of faith. We are close to their experiences of misfortune or pain of loss, the feeling of powerlessness or vulnerability, or their fears for their children. We acknowledge their dreams to be spiritual experiences. Through our presence and prayers, the person hopefully comes to experience the evil forces not alone. We pray that also the risen Christ is present to the patient and the forces. We are not battling with the forces ourselves. We are simply present as people of faith. From there our interventions try to lead the patient away from a victim role towards making a response to these forces that is shaped by a new sense of Christian agency.

If witchcraft is experienced as part of enmity, and we fail to deal with this enmity in our ministry, then the blessings we give will "expire" very fast. Such enmity is often constitutive of the witchcraft space. Success of deliverance must be evaluated by the question whether it has transformed a victim of witchcraft into an agent of reconciliation. The victim of witchcraft needs to acknowledge a shared humanity with the person of the witch. Of course, we cannot enforce reconciliation. But we can demand first steps to open up humanizing channels of communication, however small, towards the "witch-other".

### ***Inner and outer worlds, and the interior and exterior forum***

If we acknowledge witchcraft as a reality (since it is an ontological reality for its victims), and if we demand that the deliverance ministry is marked by a strife towards reconciliation, which always entails also a strive towards justice, how do we negotiate through the truth-claims about witchcraft?

Truth-claims about the world of witchcraft, like heaven or hell, depend on faith and belief. We refer to God or to witchcraft not in the same way as we refer to other invisible forces like magnetism, electricity, or radiation. Witchcraft beliefs have a personal and intimate dimension. It

does not make sense to speak of witchcraft in Zambia outside a discourse on identity and morality. I propose to employ the concept of inner and outer worlds in our pastoral approach that can guide us to identify the elements that need public attention from those that should remain in the realm of prayer and the confidential forum. As part of a relationship of trust, we consider all statements that a person shares with us about witchcraft to be true—true for the patient. We say it is true in the “inner world”. Now, some aspects of the story are in principle also open to other people and can be verified or falsified by common standards for evaluating truth-claims. Of course, we have to admit that such common standards change over time, including the standards for science or for empirical evidence. Nevertheless, even in the absence of a cross-cultural metanarrative for evaluating truth-claims, we can always find aspects in a narrative that prove themselves in communication between people who hold fundamentally different beliefs about witchcraft. Whatever people’s educational background or belief system: they will always be able to find elements in conversation that are not disputed. In spite of having different beliefs, they still live in the same world and interact with each other on many issues. We place the uncontested aspects of a narrative into what we call the “outer world”.

For example, in our parish in Zambia, albinos fear for their lives. Recently a school girl, an albino, was abducted in our neighbouring parish by her own teacher, who cut off one arm, which he then tried to sell. He was caught. This is what we call the “outer world”. Nobody can dispute such incidences, where they happen, whatever our beliefs about witchcraft. Empirically, a severed human arm was put for sale. This incident needs to be responded to publicly and with all means of law-enforcement. The teacher is today in jail. Other examples: People threaten others with witchcraft in public meetings and we can address this openly in our ministry. Even the ingredients of a charm can become part of a public investigation, but the forces of witchcraft that may be tied to the charm cannot—as little as demons, angels, or the human soul. In our approach, we do not render these powers unreal or reduce them to psychology. By inner world we simply mean that they fail to prove themselves in communication across different belief systems. We place spiritual issues about witchcraft or dreams or visions, or other forms of spectral evidence as well as contested events into the inner world, not because they are not true, but because they cannot prove themselves across different belief systems.

Let me introduce a second distinction that the Church has long maintained in pastoral care: the separation of interior and exterior forum (or private and public forum). The interior forum deals with confidential matters, where a person with the help of trusted others (for example a spiritual director) discerns the will of God—for him/herself. The public forum deals with public knowledge and shapes a public response. This distinction can become part of a Christian response to witchcraft. In the interior/private forum, we can talk and pray about witchcraft, as experienced in

the inner world of the victim, to discern a response shaped by the Gospel. However, we take care not to objectify a person's experiences with witchcraft. Because by dealing with witchcraft, we always play into hidden agendas. These are rooted in the dislike of certain people, personal vendettas, disputes, or unresolved issues and concerns, which characterise how witchcraft is felt in the person's inner world. People experience witchcraft often through dreams or trance—both shaped, besides a whole range of other unknown factors, also by inner desires and fears. Unwittingly, the delivering pastor or “prayer warrior” becomes himself a player in these agendas of which he/she knows very little.

In the exterior/public forum we can address public issues that stand in some relation to the affected person's experience: for example, verbal threats or allusions to the use of witchcraft, injustices, abuse of power, or unsettling forms of behaviour. The community has sometimes valid reasons for experiencing certain people as a threat to the moral order and associating them with witchcraft. Such issues should be clearly addressed in the exterior forum. But they should not be addressed *as witchcraft*. The method of “non-violent communication” as worked out by Marshall Rosenberg is a very good guide on how to walk that tight rope.<sup>14</sup> When followed intelligently, it disarms the dehumanising tendencies in witchcraft narratives and re-humanises the different characters involved.

This approach is empathetic to the victim who has encountered witchcraft. It acknowledges that the experience has affected the person's sense of identity and internal compass of reference. Therefore, as a pastor, I should place any deep experience with witchcraft into the realm of prayer—even where I cannot give a definitive statement about its ontological status. By affirming the human sufferings of the victim (with empathy) we are sometimes able to evoke re-humanising aspirations. The challenge is to help the victim out of a victim role and enhance Christian agency that addresses the relevant relationships in a way that is not destructive but life-giving.

### ***Deliverance from witchcraft in the context of hatred***

I generally assume in the context of pastoral counselling that people are honest in their descriptions of witchcraft events. Take the following example of an intimate dream that a person (let me call him Paul) had about John, and that he courageously shared with me:

I dreamt that John [a fellow church member] came to me and greeted me in a strange way. Suddenly there was a snake, and the snake entered my body through my arse. It clearly had the face of John. Next, I found myself in the

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<sup>14</sup> Marshall B. Rosenberg, *Non-violent Communication: A Language of Life* (Puddledancer Press; 2nd edition, 2003).

hospital [still in the dream]. Doctor so-and-so and Mr so-and-so [the chairman of the church council] tried to catch the snake through my arse. But in the process of pulling it out, the snake was cut in two. One part came out, but the other part is still inside. Father, the snake is still inside. I have pain here. And I know that John is a witch who wants to kill me!

I take it that Paul really had such a dream and that he tried to use the best words for narrating his dream experience, which, we must concede, is not always easy. How can we react to such a situation in our pastoral engagements? I asked Paul to keep the dream to himself—not to speak about it to others. “We will pray and find a way forward, but let us be wise; witchcraft is a difficult issue. God will help us.”

But Paul had already shared his dream with others, and it did not take long for John to be told about Paul’s allegations. John calmly denied the charge of witchcraft: “Paul may have dreamt about me, and many mysterious events may have happened in his life, but I am not a witch!”

Not all listeners bought into Paul’s conclusion. John was a respected person. But after a short time, everybody in the village knew that Paul considered John to be a witch. In our approach we simply say that John is a witch *for Paul*. Or, that John is a witch in the inner world of Paul.

Paul’s strategy now was to attempt to convince the community that John is a witch *also objectively*. He wanted to raise a private concern to a public level. A witch will be dangerous for everybody in the village. Furthermore, John held a prestigious position at church, already for a long time. By making his dream public, Paul discredited John also in our church. Here we had to come in and warn Paul. There was nothing wrong with sharing his dream with a priest in the private forum, in which I listened to him with empathy and good will. But through his attempts to objectify his vision, he overstepped a boundary and endangered the reputation of John. He saw himself as the victim of John, but now he had become himself an aggressor, causing real reputational damage to John.

Paul still went a step further. He wanted to force John to be brought to a famous diviner. And John himself seemed quite willing to prove his innocence through the same means. Again, we had to come in. “If you consult the diviner, either of you, then you take the treatment of your soul away from the church. Then stay with the diviner—don’t come back to church!”

Both Paul and John needed to make a choice: deal with the witchcraft attack with the help of the church, or with the help of a diviner. They opted for staying in the church. Thereby the case was now in our hands. We managed to arrange a lengthy meeting, which both of them attended.

What is the challenge for deliverance in such a meeting? In the inner world of Paul, John was an aggressive witch, proven through his dream. But in the common world, the outer world, there

were no signs that John was practicing witchcraft. His family did not accuse him. He had not made any threatening words. We had to declare publicly that John was the one who was harmed by the witchcraft accusations, and demanded an apology from Paul.

Paul and John knew each other for a long time. Their relationship was clearly not easy. Whatever ontological reality can be attributed to the mystical snake, it was also entangled in other issues that brought tensions. John had secured a bursary for his son, while Paul's son had been refused the same bursary. The two had also had a public clash at the local clinic, where both worked as volunteers for minor enumerations. In another witchcraft dispute that involved the family of the catechist, they had stood on opposite sides. Their spouses, too, seemed not get on well with each other. All these were issues that we tried to talk about in our meeting. We could not solve them, but we could bring them into the open and into discussion. While the relationship between John and Paul continued to remain quite frosty, it no longer erupted into witchcraft accusations.

But we also wanted to address Paul's concern about the mystical snake. Yes, it looked like John in his dream. But is witchcraft not a deceptive power that tries to lead us into wrong conclusions? And did it need to be witchcraft? Could it not also be a medical problem? And if it was indeed a mystical snake, was Paul ready to place the experience into prayer? And did he believe that God may use this snake as a means to come closer to Paul, or to challenge his faith? It was clear that we still needed a lot of time with Paul—not for the sake of making him stop to believe in witchcraft, but to give the witchcraft symbol a chance to transform itself within a faith experience into a life-giving bodily awareness. This process is not accomplished by the priest or those who help him in the team. It can only be done by Paul himself. But the priest or the team can help to provide an atmosphere of prayer to help Paul to accept that the risen Christ is not absent from his experience of being attacked, and that his faith, and that of the community, is a real power too.

### ***From witchcraft to demons***

In the deliverance ministry in Africa, we can witness that many witchcraft attacks become dissolved or transformed into demonic attacks. For example, that the mystical snake of Paul in which he recognises the face of John becomes a demonic snake, a demon, rather than a snake of witchcraft. This is a humanising strategy, since it blames the devil rather than any other member of the human community. But demons alone are not enough to stop the cycle of blame. Humans can again be blamed for bringing demons. Or for being close to the devil. The emphasis of deliverance, like in the Our Father, must always move away from the dynamics of blame and seek the dynamics of conversion—for all who are involved.

Some witchcraft attacks clearly resemble demonic possession. Take the following example: A teenage girl, whose grandmother had been killed (hung) as a witch at the hands of her own children, began to experience frequent and violent episodes of trance experiences in which she needed to be constraint from strangling herself. It seemed as if another voice was speaking through her, that of her grandmother, claiming to be initiating her into the world of witchcraft.<sup>15</sup> We have also dealt with a number of young people who experienced possession by “demons of Satanism” that tried to force them to enter the world of Satanism. During our prayers, such spirits called themselves “Lucifer” or “Beelzebub”. They enticed the victims with powers and possibilities, but also demanded cooperation and threatened them with many sorts of evils.

When we prayed for the above girl, did we deliver her from the spirit of her grandmother-witch? And others from Lucifer and Beelzebub? Yes—in the inner world of the patient, the invading evil force was called Lucifer or Beelzebub, or grandmother-witch. This was the name that the force gave itself and that the person experienced. Most likely it was the best name that could designate the inner experience at that point of time. But if we confirm that the devil was nearer to the possessed who manifested than to anybody of us who prayed for them, then we are back in the cycle of blame. In Africa, dictators show up in church at election time, but they never fall down during prayer! Those who do manifest may, for one reason or another, be more sensitive to being triggered into such reactions. In the Gospels, the demon possessed are subjects who deserve compassion, not blame.

In our approach, the grand-mother witch, Lucifer, or Beelzebub are truth-characters of the inner world; as such they do stand in relation to the personal history and inner life of the patient. I have documented a number of cases where such visions changed over time, or where they even evaporated in response to changing life-situations. Such “truth-characters” of the inner world also know how to adapt themselves to an audience. In Catholic exorcisms, the devil often shrinks away from the superior powers of the sacraments, from the name of Mary or of Jesus, the cross, or the sacred vestments of the priest. In Pentecostal settings, the devil affirms that he is only afraid of the power of the Holy Spirit in the Pentecostal churches. Among Seventh Day Adventists, he shrinks away from the Sabbath Day. In my experience in different churches or denominations, the devil whom we encounter in deliverance is a chameleon who adapts his own defeat to the beliefs of the audience! Lévy-Strauss would not be surprised.

Most Dioceses have introduced the ministry of exorcism to create an important space to deal with demonic possession. I want to stress that the office of the exorcist should not be taken as an excuse by priests or pastoral agents to neglect the question of deliverance in their own pastoral

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<sup>15</sup> See Udelhoven, *Unseen Worlds*, drama 7 for the whole case study.

setting. At Parish level, pastoral agents are much better placed to know a person's family background, history, friends, habits, commitments, and living environment. I believe that each Parish should provide a safe space where afflicted people can find prayers and help.

The Vatican guidelines on exorcisms distinguish between "true demonic possession" and manifestations that go back to psychological disturbances.<sup>16</sup> The major exorcism evokes the authority of the Church to address the presence of the devil. It is understandable that the official guidelines try to discern when to evoke the official exorcism and when other means are more suitable for addressing the needs of the patient. My objection for the African context concerns the fact that we rarely have qualified psychologists in our villages who are at the same time attuned to African cultural realities. And secondly, psychologists disagree among themselves how to evaluate possession dramas.<sup>17</sup> Psychology looks at such manifestations in terms dissociative identity disorders, trance disorders, pseudo-possession, hypnosis, altered states of consciousness, or the loss of psychic integration. Devils seem to manifest in a way that is socially scripted—meaning that is based on precedencies that were recognised as authentic. The mental representations of a demon become linked to a pattern of behaviour and to a bodily awareness that is allowed to release a variety of affects. In Africa, the prosperity gospel furthermore associates sickness and misfortune closely with demons that can be cast out if the patient has only enough faith. It comes as no surprise that demons multiply in the deliverance ministry. I don't believe that we will ever come to a cross-cultural method that allows us to clearly distinguish "real demons" from psychological or social predispositions.

Of course, many exorcists are convinced that they are well able to discern the presence of demons. One exorcist explained that when he is praying with the patient, he can feel with an acute awareness with which kinds of demons he is dealing. He said,

When I am exorcising a demon of anger, I will feel a tremendous power of anger.  
And when I am exorcising a demon of lust, I will have myself an erection while  
I am praying,"

and so on. But again, the "witchcraft paradox" applies also to demons and shows that such "clear evidence" depends on the person's own beliefs. Sigmund Freud knew that the patient, by believing in the therapist (or we may say in the exorcist or prayer team), sets free powerful emotions and

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<sup>16</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to Ordinaries regarding norms on Exorcism* (Vatican City, 1985), and Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Christian Faith and Demonology" in *L'Osservatore Romano, English Edition* (Vatican City, 1975, July 10). I have not managed to access the recent guidelines on exorcisms that were published in 2020 (in Italian), but believe from extracts that they maintain the distinction I am referring to.

<sup>17</sup> B. Stafford, "The Growing Evidence for 'Demonic Possession': What Should Psychiatry's Response be? *Journal of Religion and Health*, vol. 44, no. 1 (2005): 13–30.

unfettered desires that incorporate the therapist as solution for inner conflicts. An intersubjective reality unfolds its powers in the patient and also in the therapist. Freud, being an atheist, did not need to postulate any demon to explain this phenomenon. He called it transference and countertransference.<sup>18</sup> But surely not a proof for demons.

My point is that at the grassroots, there is no need to make a distinction between real and imagined demons or witchcraft attacks. We should pray for everybody—whether demons or witchcraft hold a person hostage, or biopsychosocial forces, or ordinary sicknesses, or other problems. I propose an approach to deliverance in which we simply consider demons as real and as true, as long as they are real and true for the people whom we treat. But we refrain from objectifying them as real also in the outer world.

Of course, medical and psychosocial issues need to be addressed also outside our prayers in the best possible way. I have given elsewhere examples, where the patients related their demonic manifestations explicitly to trauma, for example to rejection and devaluation by their own family, sexual abuse, or shame because of their sexual orientation and practices that are not acceptable in Zambian society. When a person collapses into a trance in our presence, it is always also a call for help.

While we cannot deny that there can be a link between demonic manifestations and trauma or psychosocial tensions, we have to acknowledge that psychological solutions raised in the Western secularised world have not always worked well on the African continent. The purpose of trauma studies, psychodynamics, cognitive psychology, behavioural psychology, and biological psychology is to come up with workable solutions to a problem. But in Africa, the translation of demons into psychosomatic problems has rarely led to any solution at all. Instead, such an assessment has often marginalised the patient's problems into the realm of the irrational. The patient is silenced but not helped!

African approaches show the opposite dynamics. When people link their misfortunes to demons, they raise a private concern to the public level. Demons or spirits are fascinating and exciting. People like to watch possession dramas. The problem of the afflicted becomes the problem of the community. Where the pastor or priest manages to break the cycle of blame, the devil goes away with all the blame, and the patients' families can forget and forgive the past misdeeds and move on. Deliverance in Africa has helped many families to win back a daughter or to win back a son.

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<sup>18</sup> Freud developed his notion of transference and countertransference for the first time in 1910 in his essay "The future prospects of psycho-analytic therapy".



### ***From outer demons to demonic conditions***

Once we have acknowledged that demons are real in the inner world, we work towards a shift towards a focus on the demonic. We call afflictions demonic not when they are painful but when they have the potential to derail a person from the Christian vocation and source of life. Serious sickness may be described as a biomedical condition but it can also be described in terms of the demonic. HIV has led many people into despair, into a life of lies, the search for scapegoats and a conspiracy of silence, some into suicide and others into resignation into alcohol—bringing about the destruction not only of their own lives but also that of their families. We can call this a demonic situation. But the same virus can also be a channel of grace: It has provoked others to become more open to their partners, and closer to their children, and draw closer also to God. Demonic conditions concern not only painful conditions. Money and success in Africa are often understood as God’s blessing. But they can also be demonic. Many people forget about God when they become rich or become caught up in a prestigious job. While we find many helping forces on our journey of faith, we also find many stumbling blocks, adversaries, and “Satans” who want to derail us from our vocation. Pentecostalism, by naming these forces as demons, have made us more aware of the need for prayer and for God’s active intervention to keep us on track. Unlike witchcraft, the discernment of a demon takes the dehumanising blame away from the human community. The demon is blamed for the affliction, not a family member or the neighbour.

When demons are experienced as outside forces that temporarily take over a person’s willpower, then delivery will focus inevitably on strengthening the person’s own Christian vocation in the church with an own sense of agency. The prime Biblical example is the deliverance of Mary Magdalene from her seven demons—she started a new life by accompanying Jesus, being unable anymore to live without him, following him even to the grave, and becoming eventually the apostle of the apostles.

### ***Conclusion***

Looking at the Catholic church’s response to witchcraft, I believe that we have too often presumed that witchcraft is a force out there (real or imagined), that can either be investigated or refuted by science, or that can be defeated in prayer – apart from looking at it in the context of specific relationships. In the Church we have never failed to give an answer to witchcraft on such an ontological level. From the first day of evangelisation in Africa, missionaries have assured their flock that “The powers of Christ are more powerful than the forces of witchcraft,” and that “Holy Mass contains it all; if you receive the sacraments, it also protects you from witchcraft.” We tried

to overcome witchcraft through teaching, both in school (“witchcraft is superstition”) and in the Church (“God is more powerful – fear not!”) But rarely with any great sense of impact.

Pentecostal churches and charismatic prayers allow the body of the victim to symbolise or to manifest a witchcraft attack. Such forms of prayers are welcoming to bodily manifestations of witchcraft. But also here, the power of witchcraft is rarely addressed as part of specific relationships between the witch and the victim that constitutes the witchcraft space.

In this presentation I have linked deliverance to reconciliation and justice, strengthening a person’s own vocation in the church, and developing a new sense of belonging to the family and the Christian community. All Christians involved in a witchcraft event are responsible for driving the witchcraft discourse into life-giving directions—even the victim of witchcraft. For this we need to learn how to address outstanding social and relational issues in a humanising way. As a conclusion I want to say that 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. Apart from the painful inner conditions of terror, alienation, and self-disintegration that they had to suffer, they also had an extraordinary ability to absorb tensions and contradictions, and to re-enact these whiles in trance. Such a trance always happens with an audience, and the audience is as much part of the drama as the possessed person. The Western church has banned deliverance into a private corner. Exorcisms are performed today often behind soundproof walls. Africa has restored deliverance to the public arena. Whoever takes part in deliverance in Africa will testify that it has the potential to renew as much the church as it renews the patient. If it goes well! It is up to us pastors and theologians to help the ministry to do well. I thank everybody for listening to my presentation and wish you well in your ministry.