

QUESTION 1

Why Is There a Fascination with the Supernatural?

Many secularists argue that supernatural explanations or beliefs are linked with a primitive past that is unbecoming for our modern times. In the past, we all believed in intelligent spirits that inhabited our world from some other realm, with distinct powers over the elements and over the natural world; but it is now widely considered irrational to hold such views. They simply are not scientific. Rather, belief in spiritual or supernatural things is thought to be superstitious. These ideas have even penetrated biblical studies. Rudolf Bultmann famously quipped, “It is impossible to use electric lights and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern medical and surgical discoveries, and at the same time to believe in the New Testament world of spirits and miracles.”¹ Of course, it is not impossible to believe in angels and electric lights—since many persons do believe in both—but some hold that it is inconsistent to believe in both. Nevertheless, it is not at all obvious how use of technology says anything at all about whether spirits exist. Bultmann’s point is, I think, a strong example of the tendency to assume that modern developments have made beliefs in angels and demons (or even in God) obsolete. The thought is, perhaps, that our scientific advancements, such as they are, have made supernatural hypotheses unnecessary.

Yet, for all our technological and scientific advancement, belief in the supernatural has not dissipated among the general populace. An atheist might suggest that this fact is due to widespread ignorance of scientific developments or to the inertia of rapidly sinking religions. I think a more likely answer is that there is something to the belief in the supernatural, and that its lingering presence—even after it has become “lowbrow” to believe in things like spirits—can be better explained by other considerations. This kind of

1. Rudolf Bultmann, “New Testament and Mythology,” in *Kerygma and Myth*, ed. Hans Bartsch (New York: Harper & Row, 1961), 5.

question defies a conclusive answer because there may be many reasons that there is a fascination with the supernatural, but I will suggest a few contributing theological and anthropological factors.

Humans Are for God

Historically, the Christian response to this question turns on the fact that human beings are designed by God for a relationship with him. Hence, all men seek after the numinous (i.e., the spiritual or “otherworldly”), and the prevailing worldview of scientific naturalism does not satisfy this appetite. In the opening lines of his autobiography, Augustine confesses to God, “You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you.”² Augustine is reflecting on the fact that human beings are made in God’s image and that God is our proper end. In other words, God is the one—and the only one—who can fulfill our needs and desires. He has made us for himself and for his glory.

At the same time, men deny the knowledge of God that is presented to them. Hence, all men seek to fill their desire for the numinous with something other than God. Men have a need for God, whether they know it or not. This condition leads men naturally to idolatry of various kinds (Rom. 1:18–23). However, the prevailing worldview in the West—scientific naturalism—holds that there really are no supernatural or spiritual entities. The desire for contact with such things is a vestigial sociobiological holdover from a more primitive time. Hence, man’s desire for contact with such things is a desire that cannot be fulfilled, according to this worldview. In fact, the desire for God or the supernatural is a desire that we should probably outgrow. Yet, we cannot deny that our longing for wonder remains. For example, even the strongest naturalists attempt to satisfy their desire for the numinous with the wonder of scientific discovery. Some even go so far as to claim that religion shortcuts such discovery and is thus ultimately less satisfying than a scientific worldview.

Such arguments have not been successful in deterring the majority of people from believing in the supernatural. Studies repeatedly confirm that there are widespread beliefs in ghosts, paranormal activity, angels, and the afterlife. These beliefs are independent of commitments to specific religious doctrines, Christian or otherwise.³ In part, the failure of naturalism to take hold seems to be that its materialism—the claim that all that exists is physical stuff, mere particles in motion—does not satisfy our appetite for wonder and contact with the numinous. It seems to us too reductive to be true.

2. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3.

3. For example, 74 percent of cultures studied in a world ethnographic research project exhibited belief in spirits and demonic possession. See Erika Bourguignon, “Spirit Possession Belief and Social Structure,” in *The Realm of the Extra-Human: Ideas and Actions*, ed. A. Bharatic (Paris: Mouton, 1976), 19.

Perhaps for a similar reason, Eastern worldviews are increasingly embedded in the thinking of the West. There are more mundane reasons for these developments as well. For example, sociologists have noted a significant increase in the penetration of Eastern religion in the United States, due mainly to the success of immigrant peoples.⁴ An increasing religious pluralism has given rise to alternative worldviews that take seriously the presence of spiritual realities. Furthermore, recent developments in academia, particularly in sociology and anthropology, have made beliefs in spiritual or supernatural entities less taboo than they have been in the recent past.

The Supernatural Is Exciting

Second, there seem to be no rules regarding the supernatural, which makes speculation free and uncontrolled. A world controlled totally by inflexible laws and mechanical reactions feels stodgy and boring, whereas the realm of the supernatural seems both exciting and terrifying. It seems reductive to suppose that there are not greater forces at work than attractions between particles. Furthermore, we are conditioned to craft idols for ourselves because of our sin-natures. Hence, it is not unique to our moment in history that we take delight in fantastic stories about spiritual beings or preternatural occurrences. However, our materialistic worldview enhances the sense in which speculations about the supernatural serve as an escape from the doldrums of daily life. Since we may believe that there really are not such things as supernatural beings or events, we feel free to craft stories about them according to our own preferences. So, fascination with the supernatural provides both a continuation of the idolatrous tendency in man and an escape from the limitations of an unsatisfying worldview. These two factors seem to contribute to our fascination with the supernatural. Supernatural stories are exciting, and it is tempting to think the world is a bit more like our stories.

Not all discussion of the supernatural needs to be ominous. Much of our popular fiction involves some elements of magic or the supernatural, often with explicitly Christian themes, as in the writings of C. S. Lewis or J. R. R. Tolkien. The supernatural elements of these stories increase our wonder and invite us to consider who we are and what the numinous is really like, in comparison to the characters of the stories. We need to be careful, lest our caution about supernatural practices overturn works of fiction that make use of fairies and goblins to communicate a broader message.

Spiritual Beings, Including Demons, Are Real

Finally, the Devil and his angels are real, and occult speculation provides many lies and obstacles against the faith. There really is a world above the “mundane” experiences of humankind, and much of that world is interested

4. See Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2001).

in directing our attention to anything other than the truth. Hence, fascination with the supernatural is plausibly a means by which the enemy can lead us into temptation. Of course, he wants to do this, so it is natural to think he would stir up unhealthy interests when the opportunity arose.

Once we understand that we are ensouled beings intended for communion with God, who is spirit (John 4:24), the longing for some supernatural contact—or the lingering suspicion that spirits exist—begins to make sense.

Summary

Because God made mankind to have communion with him, we are naturally oriented toward spiritual realities. Unfortunately, our sin-natures lead us to seek replacements for God. When the prevailing scientific worldview denies the existence of the numinous, people search for it in fantasies and occult speculation as well as beliefs in the supernatural and a variety of religious practices.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How does focus on Christ help avoid unhealthy supernatural speculation?
2. Do you think interest in the supernatural could provide an opportunity for sharing the gospel?
3. What challenges might there be in discussing the supernatural?
4. Does it matter what we think about the supernatural? Why or why not?
5. How might you discuss the supernatural with unbelievers?