

Youth and the Occult

by Jason Barker

As the next article shows, the occult is becoming an increasingly common component of television programs oriented towards youth. The increased exposure of witchcraft and other occultic practices is increasing the acceptance of these practices by youth as exciting, exotic alternatives to mainstream religion (particularly Christianity).

An informal study of local teenagers by the Lexington (Kentucky) Herald-Leader in 1997 showed that “Most said there’s a subculture at nearly every school that includes Anne Rice-influenced gothic kids, faux vampires and outcast kids who dabble in the occult. After all, in the Bible Belt, what could be more shocking than experimenting with witchcraft, vampirism or Satanism?”¹ The study concluded that most signs of teenage involvement in the occult (such as satanic symbols on book bag or bumper sticker) are merely a superficial sign of temporary rebellion against societal boundaries. A small percentage of teens who show signs of occultic interests, however, become heavily involved in serious occultic practices.² The results of their involvement in the occult can be tragic.

Youth and the Occult: A Worst-Case Example

The study by the Herald-Leader was motivated by the murder of two people on November 25, 1996, by a vampire cult led by Kentucky teenager Rod Ferrell. Ferrell claims that, as a young child, he was exposed to occult rituals and human sacrifices by his father and first stepfather.³ More plausibly, Ferrell also claims to have been exposed to the occult and vampirism as a child through playing *Dungeons & Dragons*.⁴ He began to engage in serious occultic practices following his mother’s second divorce, walking in cemeteries at night, cutting himself and offering his blood to others, and pretending to be a 500 year-old vampire named “Vesago.”⁵

In addition to more typical acts of teenage rebellion (such as using drugs and avoiding school), Ferrell became involved in a role-playing game called *Vampire: The Masquerade*. *Masquerade players* physically engage in the actions of their characters, much like they would do if performing in a play, whereas traditional tabletop role-playing games involve dice, playing cards, and other components used by players to imagine the action being described.

Ferrell’s pretense at vampirism eventually led him into contact with a young man named Stephen Murphy, who led Ferrell towards “crossing over” and becoming a real vampire.⁶ This friendship ended in 1996 after Murphy attacked Ferrell; shortly after, Ferrell’s mother was charged with soliciting a minor (Murphy’s 14 year-old brother), whom she begged to “‘cross her over’ and have her as his vampire bride.”⁷

During his friendship with Murphy, Ferrell began his friendships with Charity Lynn Keesee, Howard Scott Anderson, and Dana Cooper. These three constituted the members of Ferrell’s “vampire cult,” engaging in group sex and drinking blood as part of their vampire rituals.⁸ The four youth allegedly killed Richard Wendorf and Naoma Queen at the behest of their daughter, Heather Wendorf, so that Heather could join the cult. The cult was captured in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, allegedly while travelling to New Orleans to meet Anne Rice.⁹

Ferrell was sentenced to death for the murders of Wendorf and Queen. At his sentencing the judge described Ferrell as “a disturbed young man” who proves “there is genuine evil in the world.”¹⁰

“Mainstream” Occultic Activities for Youth

The above example is admittedly a worst-case scenario; few youth join vampire cults and murder their parents. By positing such a horrifying scenario as the extreme pole of occultic activity, with conservative Christianity (or at least opposition to occultic activity) marking the other pole, it is reasonable to consider where the “middle ground,” or most popular forms of occultism for youth, can be found. What are some of the more popular forms of occultism being marketed for youth?

“Gothic” Music and Dress

The Gothic (or Goth) movement started in 1981 at a London nightclub called “The Batcave.” Goth devotees, named after the medieval Gothic period, “were pale-faced, black-swathed, hair-sprayed nightdwellers, who worshiped imagery religious and sacrilegious, consumptive poets, and all things spooky.”¹¹ The movement reached the height of its popularity in Great Britain in the late 1980s, when such “pop-Goth” bands as the Cure and Depeche Mode created a synthesis of pop music and Goth-inspired attire, topping music charts and filling stadiums for their concerts.

The action-horror movie, *The Crow* (released in 1996), is an example of stereotypical Goth imagery: actor Brandon Lee wears black leather costumes, has long black hair and black eye shadow, and has his face painted a death-masque white. He frequented a dank, mausoleum-like abode (redolent of the haunts of the vampires in Anne Rice’s novels) lit with ornate candelabra and punctuated with religious iconography.

The Goth movement, while somewhat reduced in popularity, is still a thriving countercultural niche for many teens. In its most basic form, Goth is an expression of alienation from societal expectations. J. Gordon Melton explains, “The goth culture is made up of a lot of people who are wounded souls, who feel alienated in some way.”¹² The attire, musical themes, and décor are an expression of nihilism; Goths “celebrate the death of things like dreams and hope and humanity for our culture.”¹³

As the Goth aesthetic has crept into the mainstream, it has divided into three cliques. The first and smallest clique are those described above, for whom Goth is essentially an existentialist statement. The second and most visible clique are those who have temporarily adopted Goth music and attire as a rebellion against the expectations of their parents

and community leaders. The cynical cultural index, *Alt.Culture*, describes the orientation of these individuals by claiming that Goth provides “a highly stylized, almost glamorous, alternative to punk fashion for suburban rebels, as well as safe androgyny for boys.”¹⁴ This is the market towards whom Marilyn Manson targets his act. Despite a “Marilyn Manson Awareness” training seminar being offered in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, which claims that Manson and other Goth and pseudo-Goth adherents should be classified as gang members, police and school districts largely consider the “suburban rebel” clique of Goth to be innocuous.¹⁵

It is the third clique that poses the greatest concern: the small number of Goths who, inspired by the imagery of religious decay they have adopted, begin to dabble in vampirism and the occult.

Vampirism

Melton identifies two groups of vampires who are involved in the Goth scene: “the metaphorical vampires, who adopt such trappings as sleeping in coffins, wearing fangs, and keeping nighttime jobs; and the ‘real’ vampires who drink blood and exhibit a psychosis. Many cross the lines of these groups, but almost all of them are adults with marginal incomes ‘who appear to be living out a fantasy world.’”¹⁶ The Los Angeles Times notes that the second group of vampires’ “lifestyle is beyond mere trend. They avoid the sun at all costs. Some drink blood and perform ritual magic. Most claim to possess psychic abilities. Some say they are tormented by wandering spirits.”¹⁷

The line between “playing” at being a vampire and actually believing oneself to be a member of the undead is crossed less frequently than some alarmists claim. Nonetheless, youth with emotional problems occasionally cross that line. Community services director Helen Carter states, “A lot of kids will do this, and they're just playing, but other kids get into it and lose their sense of reality... It can be just one of those adolescent things. But if you get a kid who has emotional problems involved, it can be deadly.”¹⁸

Rod Ferrell’s murderous vampire cult is an example of the danger of emotionally unstable youth dabbling in the occult. Carter claims that there are nine vampire cults in Arizona’s Paradise Valley. In most such groups a young adult is the leader, and followers are typically 14 to 18.¹⁹ A group in Arizona is led by a 20 year-old named Angel, who promises his followers will receive eternal life and unimaginable power, and follows an occult book called *The Book of Nod* (which allegedly describes the first vampires).²⁰

Witchcraft

One of the most notable practices being marketed to youth is witchcraft, or magic, frequently in the form of Wicca. The 1996 movie *The Craft* picked up on the trend, inaccurately presenting a coven of high school students who use magick to fulfill their personal desires.

Silver Ravenwolf, self-described as one of the foremost witches in the United States, accurately describes witchcraft as “an earth-centered religion focused on raising an individual’s spirituality. WitchCraft [sic] is not, nor was it ever, a vehicle for Satanic worship.”²¹ Affiliated with Goddess worship, witchcraft is an experiential religion in which rituals and the celebration of seasonal festivals are intended to enhance an individual’s self-awareness and increase the power that person has to influence her destiny without outside influence. Displaying the syncretism that is so much a part of current New Age and occult practices, Ravenwolf teaches that the techniques of witchcraft can be used in any religious tradition.²²

Witchcraft is on the rise among young people, particularly high school and college-age females. This author had a student in a technical writing class at a major state university who, for a semester project, developed a manual for the Wicca coven in which she was involved. This project was merely part of the trend of publishing books that market witchcraft to teens. For example, *Inside a Witches’ Coven* attempts to address the concern students seeking to find or join a coven, describing the beliefs, styles and customs that a witch may choose to consider.

The most significant new publication for youth is *Teen Witch: Wicca for a New Generation* by Silver Ravenwolf. Its colorful cover, with a painting depicting four adolescent females (and one male) provocatively posing in front of a full moon rising over a fog-shrouded grove, clearly is intended to attract its target audience (a free poster of the cover is available for purchasers “while supplies last”²³). Showing the popularity of the book, *Teen Witch* was sold out in all but one of five major chain bookstores visited by the author while searching for a copy; he bought the last copy in the fifth store. Ravenwolf is well aware that many parents, and particularly Christians, object to witchcraft. For this reason, the first section of the book is addressed to parents and claims (in bold print), “This is an okay book for your children to read. There’s nothing bad in here, and maybe the book will help you understand why WitchCraft is one of the fastest growing religions in America.”²⁴ She further advises parents, “For pity’s sake, don’t ‘tell’ [your children] what religion is and is not. Let them discover spirituality for themselves.”²⁵

What is it that teens are supposed to discover for themselves? In its own words, *Teen Witch* was written so that “Now, for the first time, [teens] can explore what it’s like to be a real Witch with a book written especially for you. Find out how the Wiccan mysteries can enhance your life. Begin your journey with the Teen Seeker Ceremony. Combine common herbs from the supermarket to make your magickal formulas. Create your own sacred space. Read true stories of Wiccan teens. Work magick with real spells. Learn the Craft techniques for gaining love, money, health, protection, and wisdom. Discover how to talk to friends, parents, and other people about your involvement with WitchCraft.”²⁶

The contents of *Teen Witch* are clearly intended to appeal to disillusioned teens who “sense an aliveness or ‘presence’ in nature... They share the goal of living in harmony with nature, and they tend to view humanity’s ‘advancement’ and separation from nature as the prime source of alienation. They see ritual as a tool to end that

alienation.”²⁷ Teens who read *Teen Witch* are thus hoping to learn how to manipulate natural forces to end their sense of loneliness and alienation from society and the world.

The spells described in *Teen Witch* constitute a thorough inventory of the concerns of American teens. There are numerous spells for receiving money, a “Hot Wheels” spell for receiving a car, a “Crabby Teacher” spell, a spell for passing exams, a prayer for “Owl Wisdom” (divine assistance in planning for the future), a “Doodle Bug Love Spell” for raising self-esteem, a “Do You Like Me?” spell, a “Call Me” spell (as well as a “Don’t Call Me” spell), and even a “Little Bo Peep Spell to Find Lost Objects.”

The book concludes with a plan for teens to win approval for their witchcraft from parents. Ravenwolf advises teens to link philosophical and theological difficulties to a need for the existence and practice of witchcraft. Knowing that some parents “won’t get past their fear” and accept witchcraft (she says that such parents “aren’t behaving in an adult manner”²⁸), Ravenwolf tells the children of parents who “still won’t budge [to] pray. The Mother will hear you.”²⁹

How Widespread is the Problem?

The involvement of American youth in the occult is, for lack of a better description, broad but shallow. In other words, occultic activity by teens has been observed across the country in such areas as Nashua, New Hampshire; Dallas; Burlington, Wisconsin; Salt Lake City; and Los Angeles. At the same time, it is only a small percentage of youth who are engaging in occultic practices; Ravenwolf states that teen witches will lose many of their friends, particularly Christians (she sarcastically describes these as “real winners”³⁰). Goths (both the philosophical Goths, and those who use the movement as a springboard for occultism) register similar complaints.³¹

Despite the relatively small number of youth currently involved in occultic activity, the growing movement should be a source of concern for Christians. The example of Rod Ferrell, or of an Arizona boy who wrote to his grandparents before committing suicide, “Dear Grandma and Grandpa, please forgive me but tonite [sic] is the night I give my life to Satan. I am going to sacrifice myself... God told me to skin you alive,”³² show the potential dangers for youth who flirt with the occult.

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