

Satanism touched by the fingers of the doubting Thomas

By Bernhard Udelhoven

Witchcraft was never far away from life-experience in Zambia. Satanism is more of a new thing, and an urban thing, but for the past 15 years or so, it has become a popular and dominant word for talking about the occult, though it is not very precise: Lumped together into the concept of “Satanism” are ritual crime, occult practices meant to produce riches, diverse secret societies or clubs, dubious business connections, new and unfamiliar churches and faiths, and issues of demon possession. More specifically Satanism in Zambia refers to an awareness or fear that Satanic and demonic forces are intimately at work in individual persons: the *Satanists*, who have become totally obedient subjects and follow a line-of-command proceeding from the underworld. These Satanists have been made to penetrate schools, hospitals, churches, the neighbourhood, and maybe even one’s own family.

As such, Satanism in Zambia, and indeed in other parts of Africa, refers to a different reality than Satanism in the Western world (USA, Europe), where we find open Satanic churches with spelled out doctrines, that people join out of an inner conviction or ideology. Here in Zambia the concept of Satanism refers more to a dark, anonymous world, that grants riches and powers to few individual Satanists in return for sacrifices of innocent families or recruitment of others, who will then also be drawn irresistibly into the dark world against their own wills.

Satanism, urban life and the “Gospel of Prosperity”

Since Zambia’s economy opened up 20 years ago, urban expectations are marked more and more by the promises of consumerism, modernity, and globalization, that can be satisfied in ever new shopping malls – for those who have money. Many young people find their life-ideals in the global world, and no longer in the village from where their parents came. No wonder that also the vocabulary of the occult changed in the urban context: witchcraft seems too intimately connected with the life of the elders back in the village; Satanism is modern, urban, and global.

The new fears of Satanism also feed on a worldview that coincides with the explosion of new Pentecostal churches preaching the “Gospel of prosperity” and televised mass-healings that come with promises of “breakthrough” and success: The greater your faith, the more you may expect to gain – not only spiritually, but also financially, health-wise, in marriage, and indeed in all areas of life. But with such high expectations of purely spiritual solutions, “Satanism” easily builds up on the other side of the same coin (at least as an imagined counter-culture): When God’s blessings don’t seem to work – in spite of your great faith – then something must be blocking your success: demonic or Satanic forces have gained an “entry-point”, and you need deliverance, which is gladly offered by ever multiplying churches and ministries.

It is especially in Christian church circles that the testimonies of delivered Satanists are circulating on photocopied booklets, or on audio / video recordings – most of them starting with the solemn warning to pray hard before reading or watching, since “the

Devil will do all to prevent you from knowing these facts.”– “We did not know what was happening to us, and we want to warn people, because the same can happen to you, if you are not very prayerful.” Before captivated Christian audiences, ex-Satanists testify how they were “initiated” by others, and then sent out to destroy marriages, bring confusion into churches, sacrifice family members, cause accidents, and initiate others into the Satanic world through food, cosmetics, fashion clothes, and popular consumer goods that are manufactured “underground” to provide “contact points” with the Satanic world for the ignorant masses.

Whether one takes the stories lightly or seriously, one cannot ignore that they have affected Zambia in many ways. Secondary schools experience real panics, and in clinics people have become more apprehensive to donate blood. Recently a Zambian company based in Southern Province had to change the name of its product and its label, when it became associated with “Satanism” – partly also due to a prophecy of TB Joshua on Emmanuel TV. Minority groups, but also a number of different charitable organizations, are openly suspected of spreading Satanism. In January 2011, a new church was burnt down together with 20 homes and a community school in Chongwe District by an angry mob, who suspected that Satanism was being practiced in the new church. Rumours of Satanism could turn also into an ugly political weapon.¹

The “Fingers of Thomas”

Four years ago a Christian support group formed itself in Regiment Catholic Church (Lusaka), called the “Fingers of Thomas”, who work with the Faith & Encounter Centre (FENZA) of Bauleni. The group has followed up more than 50 different cases of Satanism or alleged Satanism all over Lusaka, many over a long period of time. One aim was to put the finger of the “doubting Thomas” (of the Bible) on stories and rumours of Satanism.

In spite of a very empiric starting point, the group was quickly drawn into many cases, where categories such as “true” – “false”, “real” – “not real” don’t easily work. Most cases or testimonies contained some clear factual elements, but at a certain point one had either to rely on the testimony in good faith, or to dismiss it, since the powers of Satanism belonged to a spiritual parallel world, which evades empirical verification. “Only the fully initiated can enter in”. Moreover, many affected people saw also in waking life visions, heard voices and experienced at times strong forms of dissociation, which made the boundaries between objective and subjective, between the outer and the inner worlds, often very porous. Many affected people themselves were not always too sure, whether other people could see what they saw, or not.

“I killed more than 200 people”

Memory comes from Northern Province. Because of school, she was sent by her mum to Lusaka to stay with her elder sister Grace, who is married and working. Memory was

¹ So far – to my knowledge – accusations of Satanism in politics have been a serious issue only on the local level. A widely reported example was a court case (local court) in 2009 of a Ward councilor in Ndola accused to initiate youths and children into Satanism.

doing quite alright at school, until she came into grade 12. Then her sister noticed a drop in interest, in concentration, and also a change in character. She explained that Memory was becoming increasingly irritated, rude and disobedient to Grace and to Grace's husband. She rarely smiled, and no longer ate much food at home – “I have already eaten”. Hearing many stories about Satanism, Grace began to fear that her young sister was maybe on the way to become “initiated”. At one point she asked a charismatic prayer-group to pray for Memory, but Memory refused the prayers. In fact she was growing more and more irritated towards any suggestion of prayer in their home. When her school reports were becoming disastrous, Grace made a visit to the school authorities. To her surprise she was told that Memory hardly attended school. Though she was leaving her home every morning in school uniform, her school attendance was marked by long spells of absence.

Back home, Grace took the school bag of Memory, and started to go through her papers, hoping to find some traces of Memory's friends. She was shocked to find in one copybook handwritten letters addressed to Satan, in which Memory offered herself to the Prince of darkness. Grace is a devout Catholic, and in a state of shock she burnt all the notebooks under lots of prayers. Then she confronted Memory, who fainted. Upon waking up, Memory said that she had tried that very day to “sacrifice” Grace. “They have given me a knife and a dish and a mirror, and they showed me how I should use them in order to sacrifice people. I sacrificed more than 200 people and drank their blood. But now they said I should bring my sister (Grace) and my sister's son (Anton, 6 years old) to be sacrificed, because I love them too much. Then I would become the ‘Queen of Africa’. But when I tried, I found my sister full of light, because she was too prayerful, and I collapsed. It was the first mission in which I failed. Now they will punish me.”

Grace brought Memory to the charismatic prayer group to be prayed over. During prayers she exhibited all the standard signs of “demonic possession” as they are known in Christian charismatic circles: she avoided sacred symbols, like the Bible, she collapsed, crawled on the floor like a snake, had serious convulsions, said she was feeling a burning heat of prayers, and eventually started vomiting “slippery things”. She spoke of invisible rings around her fingers, signs of her covenant with a spiritual husband, “a black man from Nigeria”, with whom she had been many times pregnant in the underworld “though I never knew how I delivered my babies or what happened to them”. The charismatic prophets “removed” the spiritual rings by means of powerful prayers, and they broke Memory's “covenants” with demons, spiritual husbands, and the Devil. After deliverance, she gave a testimony to the prayer group: “It all started when I was visited by two members of a certain church, who wrote down my name. That same night I dreamed of them and they initiated me, until I made a covenant with the Devil.” Then followed a vivid eye-witness account of the Satanic world.

The outer world

Grace, however, was not yet convinced that her sister was fully “delivered”, since her behaviour continued to raise questions and concerns. Through a friend, the Fingers of Thomas were approached. They listened sympathetically to Memory, but they also tried to correlate her testimony with the outer world. None of the 200 “sacrifices” which Memory said she had committed, could be confirmed. Concrete names and persons could

not be given or located, her own family did not experience the deaths that she had stated, and the known accidents that Memory said she had caused did not match her description. After two months a different reality was revealed in the outer world: Memory was pregnant (already for quite some time) - not because of some spiritual husband in the underworld, but because of her boyfriend, with whom she was spending days and days instead of going to school. Once these issues came out openly, the efforts of her family shifted towards securing a future for Memory and sorting out issues with the family of the boyfriend. Six months later the Fingers interviewed Memory again. By now Memory had no desire to go back to her memories of Satanism. "I feel like when you have woken up from a bad dream, the longer you wait, the dream evaporates from memory."

One could conclude that Memory had simply made up her story of Satanism so as to mask her relationship with her boyfriend, the pregnancy, failure in school or problems to cope with a strained relationship with her older sister Grace. Yet the Fingers of Thomas did not think that she just pretended. Listening to friends at school and to one of her teachers, the "Fingers" found a consistent pattern, which showed that Memory at that time had considered herself to be a Satanist. She had been approaching other students and teachers with strange stories, was speaking about initiating them (with the effect that a number of students dreamed about her in a negative way), spoke of her powers, and at one moment she had organized funeral prayers at the school for her sister who never died! Memory was living in two worlds simultaneously, she had lively dreams, she was hearing voices, and had strong experiences of dissociation. But the Fingers did not see in her a person who could not cope with reality. She coped well before this episode, and she is coping well at present with her baby. And during the episode, she managed to excite and engage hundreds of people with her life-story! The Fingers found Memory to have extraordinary faculties of imagination, determination and the ability to touch the inner world of other people, though sometimes in a very frightening way. The expectations and beliefs of the family, friends at school, and of the prayer group had surely also played a great role on the way in which Memory experienced Satanism. Memory's testimony in turn confirmed the prayer-group in their own beliefs, and it provided them also with a concrete proof of the powers of their prayers.

The approach of the "Fingers of Thomas"

The group has no in-depth experiences with people who practise Satanism in organised groups in the outer world (at this point many readers may be disappointed!) – though they know personally a number of youths who are looking for ways to join this sort of Satanism. The Fingers investigated a good number of suspected groups, but could not identify clear forms of Satanism in any of them. The group did come across very ugly forms of ritual crimes – yet not necessarily related to Satanism. The Fingers of Thomas are a Christian support group, not a Police force, and as such they are approached mainly by families who experience Satanism not as a concrete and organised group, but as an overwhelming *spiritual* force, which is often felt to come as unanticipated, autonomous and undesired intrusions. Some of the Fingers had had such experiences themselves.

Saying this, the members of the group do not necessarily share a common view in regards to the nature of this spiritual reality. What is common to them is that they want "to put a finger" and be challenged by the experiences of the affected persons, which is always

their starting point. Sometimes such experiences could be related to their life-contexts: Many delivered Satanists had a traumatic childhood. Some could not cope with family pressures or contradictory expectations within a divided family. Others had experienced grave forms of abuse and/or defilement and rape. Yet in other cases the life-contexts seemed healthy. The Fingers could not always link Satanism to traumas. Some cases just popped up without tangible reasons for the Fingers to see. But whatever the known or unknown reasons for experiences of “Satanism”, the Fingers help by working simultaneously on the social surroundings (for example involving and uniting the families), on inner attitudes (for example trying to reduce suspicions, building up confidence) and faith. The demons then could often be left to go their own ways.

Instead of talking about true or false demons, “a true underworld” or “mere illusions”, the Fingers prefer to distinguish between inner and outer worlds: what cannot prove itself in communication between people of different beliefs – what cannot be touched by “the finger of the doubting Thomas” – is (for a start) allocated into the inner world. This does not make the spiritual world unreal or less important, but implies for the Fingers that inner and outer world need different approaches. It becomes dangerous, when the inner world of one person becomes the standard for public action for others. Pupils have been kicked out of boarding schools, because they featured as Satanists in the dreams of other students, or because they were identified as Satanists by a prophet in a vision.

Going a step further, the Fingers acknowledge that the negative forces which ex-Satanists experienced (powers which Memory tried to appropriate for herself as a “Satanist”), are a reality also for the people who listen eagerly to their testimonies: Memory provided through her personal life-story images and spiritual concepts for many people, who could find back their own experiences of alienations, of being exploited, of failing to cope with death and sickness, and of living in circumstances in modern Zambia, where access to power and wealth is still very opaque, secretive and with many unanswered open questions. The Fingers prefer to see in delivered Satanists not demonic maniacs, but wounded artists, who have created (or had to live through) a powerful symbolic world, that mirrors also experiences of many other people. To follow such a testimony blindly, however, leads to the same disaster as when someone mistakes a piece of art for a road map. Innocent people then are accused of Satanism, while negative social forces remain in tact.

By “putting the finger”, the group hopes to bring the discussion on Satanism to a level where it can be addressed. So far they have tried, through workshops and training sessions in churches and schools, and through a popular documentary on TV (produced by CMSTV), to reduce fear in the community and so be able to look at the phenomenon with new eyes. For more information see <http://www.fenza.org/fingers-of-thomas>.