



SATANISM AND THE “FINGERS OF THOMAS”

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When FENZA opened in 2007, the issue of Satanism was a burning question; fears were widespread, and they posed (and still pose) a challenge to many pastors, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. Therefore we took up this issue; we tried to see what is happening, to analyse, and to reflect on the strange and frightening events, on people’s interpretations, and on the meaning of the surrounding rumours. We formed a Think Tank, in which priests, sisters and pastoral workers meet to share concrete experiences with Satanism which they encounter in their parishes and schools.

How the “Fingers of Thomas” were born

At the end of 2007, we were joined by an initiative at the grass-roots level that took place in Regiment Parish: Some youths had been following up some of their friends who had been involved in Satanism directly or indirectly; others felt overcome by dark and evil powers. Many went to Pentecostal pastors to be prayed over. Others wanted to know how to protect themselves. Among quite a few there was also a spirit of curiosity, an urge to know what was really happening.

The “Fingers of Thomas” were born when the St. Agnes Small Christian Community group had a seminar on Satanism: Some youth leaders presented their findings, and one delivered Satanist also shared her experiences of having been initiated into Satanism as a child, into an underground world of ranks and strict lines of command. She spoke of sacrifices, underground factories, underground schools and universities, and spiritual marriages with demons and with the Devil himself. She spoke of diverse missions that were entrusted to her, of leaving her body behind and splitting her soul, moving to many different places to cause confusion and accidents. She narrated how her heart was taken from her to be locked up, how she lost her willpower and the capability to love. Finally she narrated how through intercessory prayers she came to be delivered from the dark powers that had enslaved her (“prayers are very powerful!”), with a solemn warning always to pray when buying food and clothing, and also not to forget prayers when on a journey, to prevent similar things from happening. After the seminar, discussions remained alive: What are we to do with such a





testimony? Is that underground world real? In which sense? Can we visit it? Can we verify parts of the testimony, or is belief or disbelief a sheer matter of faith? Some youths wanted to put the finger of the doubting Thomas on the story, to find out what they could see and touch for themselves. Thus the “Fingers of Thomas” were born.

“Putting the finger”

The “Fingers of Thomas” started to meet every week to discuss and follow up new cases of suspected Satanism, mainly in Chilenje and Libala, but also in Woodlands, Kabwata, Misisi, Zingalume, Bauleni, Garden and Makeni. After one year they had dealt with more than 30 cases. They were different from one another, and the term “Satanism” covered many different things. In some cases the descriptions of the delivered Satanists could not be correlated to external data, and the stories simply evaporated when the “Fingers” tried to “touch” them. Fatal car accidents that appeared in the testimonies of teenagers did not happen where they were said to have happened; one girl talked about the sacrifice and killing of her sister and her brother, but on a subsequent visit to the family, both turned out to be alive and healthy, happily. Among those who consider themselves Satanists, many are teenagers (often in boarding schools); in the process of growing up they restructure their world and worldviews, and some come to live in a world of their own. To confront their world with the presence or absence of external and objective data can be part of a healing process. Other cases, however, were very complex and were accompanied by frightening events, strange and regular deaths in the family, sicknesses, dreams and visions that concerned whole households. They evaded any easy answer. The “Fingers” were not there to give answers. Their task was to listen, pay attention also to the family histories, and try to see which external events and data were supporting the stories and experiences. A number of cases were documented so as to be analysed better.

“Putting their fingers” meant also that the group had to visit a number of churches that were (and some of them still are) commonly suspected of Satanism. They wanted to see for themselves what was going on and what was not. They learned also about groups that can be mistaken as Satanism: about Freemasons in Zambia, and about other secret societies. They learned about Western Satanist churches that try to recruit through the internet; they also visited a number of different traditional healers (ng’anga), Zion and Mutumwa churches, and they interviewed Pentecostal and charismatic pastors about their ways of deliverance, and compared different testimonies of “delivered Satanists”. Through “putting their fingers” they came to see that “Satanism” means many different things in Zambia, and that the term has also transformed older notions such as witchcraft and spirit possession.





The journey of the “Fingers”

At the beginning there was quite some fear among the “Fingers”. When one member visited a certain church that is commonly suspected of Satanism, his wife remained at home praying the rosary on her knees with the children until the husband returned, fearing that he might become initiated by visiting that church. Similar fears arose when visiting or interviewing suspected or self-confessed Satanists. But very soon this fear gave way to something else. In many cases the “Fingers” were well received. The people they interviewed were open; the churches they visited were welcoming. Many actually appreciated that at last somebody was listening to them and that they could speak about their experiences by which they themselves were frightened. The “Fingers” came to see the suspected Satanists as fellow human beings with whom they could share and even develop friendships. They discovered that many people who feel overcome by evil forces had passed through very tragic life histories, sometimes rejection within their families, sometimes abuse, and that many had undergone much pain. Satanism encountered by the group was largely of an involuntary type: Satanists themselves felt that they were victims. “I was initiated without knowing and understanding what was happening.”

In addition, by visiting other churches and witnessing other forms of worship, the “Fingers” learned a great deal about different faiths. This caused them to dig deeper into their own faith. They organised a number of workshops on the Bible, for example on the complex role of Satan in the different Biblical books, which helped them to go beyond a dualistic worldview that many held before.

The approach of the “Fingers of Thomas”: Inner and outer worlds

A number of delivered Satanists (many coming from a charismatic or Pentecostal background) speak about an underground world, about mysterious journeys to Nigeria, to the USA, to Kilimanjaro or the Indian Ocean; they speak about selling years and months of their lives, drinking blood, causing accidents, sacrificing relatives and friends to gain higher ranks and powers in the underground world. Such testimonies are usually approached in different ways, depending on the worldview that we hold. Some of us suspect the presence and interventions of spiritual powers everywhere, and see in the narratives of delivered Satanists a confirmation of the spiritual world that is all around us. Others say from the outset that the stories make no sense, and that we are dealing at best with dreams and hallucinations, if not with deliberate lies. “It is not real!” Since our view on Satanism depends so much on our own beliefs, and since our worldviews determine what we consider





real and what not, the “Fingers of Thomas” find it of little help to press the testimonies of ex-Satanists into the categories of “real” and “unreal”. When listening to a story, a testimony or a dream, the “Fingers” don’t start with the assumption of “just a story”, or a “false consciousness” or a “false memory”, but with the assumption of a “true experience” or a “true dream”. They acknowledge that all of us continuously construct our worlds, and that many times we do so in different and even contradictory ways. Still, while listening, they also they wish to “put their finger” on the story, not in order to “prove” what is true or false, but in order to see what is objective and what is subjective. (They use these terms as simple working tools to start an analysis together with the concerned families, not as part of some philosophical debate about reality.)

The outer world:

Objective means those parts of a story that were witnessed by different people involved in the story. We may interpret them in different ways, but in principle all of us have access to them; we can verify or evaluate them in accordance to certain standards and procedures. We may call them facts. They prove themselves in communication between people of different beliefs and faiths. One case, for example, was accompanied by a handwritten letter that spoke of sacrificing a girl who had run away from home, and the concerned family handed the letter over to the police as concrete evidence of a sinister plot. In another case, an exercise book contained prayers of worship to Satan. In a number of cases, family members found their patient lying on the floor or bed in a stiff body and they failed to wake them up, until they came to themselves; then the patients (some of them small children, others young adults) narrated “where they had been and what they had seen”. Here we enter the subjective sphere.

The inner world:

Subjective means those parts and experiences to which we have no access, where we depend on testimony and description. We cannot put the “finger of Thomas” on it. That does not make the testimony false or wrong. It is a realm that stands in connection with a person’s feelings, desires and fears, worldviews and beliefs that were shaped by her own life history. Here the dimension of faith comes in, and also the power of prayer can be felt. A medical expert dealing with mental illnesses at Chainama advised the group to help patients through their own concepts and worldview: “Those overcome by evil forces cannot be healed by you; they can only be healed by themselves. Therefore you must start with the categories of the patient, and see from there how to help them build up faith and confidence in themselves. Faith plays a very important role.”





The “Fingers” aim at going still a step further. Many people struggling with evil forces spoke of what they called “entry-points”. Such entry-points for Satanism proved in a number of cases to be painful experiences of rejection, failure and abuse. Four members of the group have training in counselling and psychology. The “Fingers” try to reconcile the patients with their families, with whom many have broken relationships. Sometimes they have to put their finger on painful but hidden wounds to allow them to heal. They also put their fingers on types of behaviour which they can observe and which can be addressed. They understand themselves as peace-builders.

Public action

While acknowledging the importance of subjective realities (and the inner world as such), the “Fingers” hold that public action should be based on the objective parts of the stories that are accessible in principle to all and that can be scrutinised. But this is not always how allegations of Satanism are addressed in the public sphere. The “Fingers” came across a number of cases where pupils had been expelled from school simply because fellow students dreamed about them and regarded them as Satanists, or because of “revelations” during some prayer meetings. The group also found that a general fear of Satanism often breeds suspicion and intolerance with regard to a number of new churches and faiths. By “putting their fingers” the group tries to counteract this fear and make a contribution towards mutual knowledge. Another major problem fueling widespread fears concerning Satanism which the group encountered has to do with present-day experiences of social and economic life in Zambia: many new riches are around (and people wonder where they come from), but most people keep struggling with economic hardship, insecurity, poverty, early and sudden death, and an opaqueness with regard to accessing to the promises of modern life. The “Fingers” know that they must proceed carefully in this environment and continue to encourage public action that is based, not on mere rumours, but on accessible, objective facts.

