

Homework: The Occult

This session focuses on recognizing and understanding the occult in our lives.

OCCULT: A set of mostly unrelated divination and/or spiritual practices or activities that appear to tap into forces that have not been explained by science, and which are not conventional practices seen in traditional religions.

Through the twentieth century, the psychic/occult movement has grown and diversified widely. Each generation has produced a host of psychics with variant revelations and a wide range of attitudes towards the dominant Christian perspective in society.

—*J. Gordon Melton, A New Handbook of Living Religions*

It is a mistake to consider any belief more liberated than another. It is the possibility of change which is important. Every new form of liberation is destined to eventually become another form of enslavement for most of its adherents. There is no freedom from duality on this plane of existence, but one may at least aspire to a choice of duality.

—*Peter J. Carroll, Liber Null and Psychonaut: An Introduction to Chaos Magic*

OCCULT: Beyond the realm of human comprehension; inscrutable.

A turkey is more occult and awful than all the angels and archangels. In so far as God has partly revealed to us an angelic world, he has partly told us what an angel means. But God has never told us what a turkey means. And if you go and stare at a live turkey for an hour or two, you will find by the end of it that the enigma has rather increased than diminished.

—*Gilbert K. Chesterton*

That against which we have set up compulsive resistance is the unknown. And the unknown is the occult. The occult does not underlie only things outside us. It is within ourselves.

—*Hugh Shearman*

OCCULT: matters regarded as involving the action or influence of supernatural or supernormal powers or some secret knowledge of them.

Possibly there are few imaginative writers who have not a leaning, secret or avowed, to the occult. The creative gift is in very close relationship with the Great Force behind the universe; for aught we know, may be an atom thereof. It is not strange, therefore, that the lesser and closer of the unseen forces should send their vibrations to it occasionally; or, at all events, that the imagination should incline its ear to the most mysterious and picturesque of all beliefs.

—*Gertrude Atherton, The Bell in the Fog and Other Stories*

Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog,
Adder's fork and blind-worm's sting,
Lizard's leg and owlet's wing,
For a charm of powerful trouble,
Like a hell-broth boil and bubble.

—*Shakespeare*

OCCULTISM: the study of occult practices including (but not limited to) magic, alchemy, extrasensory perception, astrology, spiritualism, and divination.

Different groups might view an occultic practice, such as Tarot card readings, in very different ways:

- Evangelical or fundamentalist Christians might see them as dangerous
- Some Wiccans might see them as an integral component of their religion
- A Unitarian Universalist might see them as a harmless hobby or pastime

OCCULTISM: has its basis in a religious way of thinking, the roots of which stretch back into antiquity and which may be described as the Western esoteric tradition. Its principal ingredients have been identified as Gnosticism, the Hermetic treatises on alchemy and magic, Neo-Platonism, and the Kabbalah, all originating in the eastern Mediterranean area during the first few centuries AD.

—*Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance*

Interpretation of occultism and its concepts can be found in the belief structures of various religions, such as Gnosticism, Hermeticism, Wicca, Satanism, Thelema, and Neopaganism.

Upon reflection, the writer of this session has come to question where “occult” ends and “traditional religions” begin. A possible interpretation might be that all religion—traditional or not—is in fact occult, that is, connected to inscrutable forces that have not been explained by science, and whose very existence has not been demonstrated scientifically.

Questions to Ponder

- What activities have you either participated in or been asked to participate in that you would say fit into the definition of occult?
- What are your feelings about such practices, e.g., do you believe they are beneficial to participants or do they provide a crutch?
- How are recent events occult, such as: channeling, automatic writing, Carl Jung’s writing about the “collective unconscious” and archetypes, or not watching a Jets game because “I seem to bring them bad luck?”
- What about mass suicide based on the expectation that a space ship is hiding behind a meteor and will transport believers to a better place? Where do “occult” and “cult” overlap?