

# My Pilgrimage in Spiritism

Herbert Hoefler

**Abstract:** Herbert Hoefler shares with us his experiences and reflections concerning Spiritism. He draws both on experiences from his service in India and also from here in the States. He shares the challenges he has wrestled with as his Western worldview and theology have been challenged by these experiences.

My organizing principle in this article is chronological, basically my pilgrimage of views and experiences on the topic of Spiritism. My thought is that the readers might possibly identify themselves with me somewhere in this account.

## My Original Views

I recall being visited by a couple of LCMS Board for Missions representatives after a few years in India. After hearing my views on Spiritism, one of them commented to the other, for me to hear: “I wonder why we send people like this.” I responded, “It’s not what we are when we are sent but what happens to us when we are here.”

This is true also concerning my views on the spirit worlds. While in the U. S., I had the common view on demons, visions, satan,<sup>1</sup> dreams, angels, etc. I thought these might possibly be real, simply because the Bible speaks about them a great deal. However, they weren’t real to me, either personally or intellectually. Even during my first years in India, I had heard about the different spirit worlds from Indian colleagues, but I really didn’t take these viewpoints seriously.

My first academic consideration of these otherworldly phenomena came through a course under Peter Wagner out of Fuller that I took by correspondence. He spoke about the “power encounter” phenomenon in missiology. The term refers to the supernatural resistance/war that breaks out when we bring the Gospel into a new place. The concept is that the “prince of this world” and his cohorts are already there, and they will defend their territory in supernatural ways.

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“Power Encounter,” then, refers to the battle that takes place between the Holy Spirit and the satanic spirits. While in the States, I had thought of this battle as only emotional and intellectual. However, this missiological concept also refers directly to the battle in the spirit worlds, which can impact us directly. For example, an Indian pastor related to me how one new convert had been having dreams and visions of satan confronting him and promising him a great deal of prosperity if he would return to his idol worship. (Later in this article, I will relate subsequent examples and experiences.)

A second influence was when I decided to learn some yoga. I felt that this was part of the Hindu worldview and practice that I needed to understand personally. There are Christian mystics and yogis in India, and I read some of their materials and met a couple of them for training. One of the cautions they gave was that one must be surrounded by prayer when going into meditation.

They explained that one removes one’s intellectual guard when in meditation. We use our intellect to filter experiences that we have, deciding what to absorb and what to reject. In meditation, these guards are down, and so evil presences might intrude and influence unhindered. Therefore, one begins by claiming the shield of God’s Spirit and committing the process to His guidance and blessing.

A third early influence was a few brief encounters with places and individuals who just “spooked me out.” I wasn’t at the point of processing these experiences theologically, but I did have a sense of the presence of evil, and I should just get out of there. I was also warned by Indian colleagues that in situations like this it would be best if we left.

In all of this, nothing particularly changed my views and theology. During my first missionary term of five years, I was still a product of Western post-Enlightenment, dismissing things that I couldn’t see physically or comprehend rationally. I was within the safe confines of a Western missionary community. The local Christians also had learned from experience that the missionaries didn’t take the spirit worlds seriously. They would do their exorcisms, for example, almost in secret or among Pentecostal fellowships. They knew we were incapable and unwilling to help in this area. We just winked at the practice.

## **My Worldview Is Challenged in India**

During my next two terms, I was based at the pan-Lutheran Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute in Madras City (now Chennai) for almost four years as Director and then for four years as Research Director. In the ecumenical fervor surrounding the formation of the Church of South India, there had been a strong push by Western mission organizations for their partner Indian churches and institutions to become ecumenical and even to consolidate. In this process, Gurukul was convinced to end its academic program, sending faculty,

students, and books to the United Theological College in Bangalore. Gurukul, in turn, was to provide non-theological education and training ecumenically.

For me, it involved encountering pastors and lay leaders from many different backgrounds and traditions. At our various workshops, in-service training courses, and seminars, these seasoned leaders would share their experiences. Many frontline evangelists, particularly from Pentecostal backgrounds, spoke about these “power encounter” situations: visions, miracles, exorcisms, and healings that brought people to faith. At one workshop of thirty or so pastors, I pointedly asked how many of them had ever been involved in raising of the dead. To my astonishment, half of them raised their hands, and no one spoofed the claims.

Their experience was that people knew the power of the spirits they were now worshipping and serving. Before they made the switch of allegiance to Jesus, they had to be convinced that His power was greater. Otherwise, they knew they would face supernatural retribution from the spirits they had abandoned.

I encountered similar situations when I travelled around South India doing my interviews for my *Churchless Christianity*<sup>2</sup> book. Many of these “nonbaptized believers in Christ” (who now call themselves *Jesu bhaktas*) had come to faith through such direct encounters with Jesus, who had shown His personal attention and power to them. I learned from frontline evangelists and pastors, both during this research and in subsequent readings, that these kinds of supernatural experiences are the common way adherents of major religions come to faith.<sup>3</sup>

At one of our LCMS missionary conferences, held in Thailand, we had a husband and wife who were converts from Buddhism speaking to us. At one point, the lady posed a situation to us. She said, “If someone comes to you and says that the god they worshiped had miraculously helped them, what would you say?” No missionaries in our group ventured a reply. I recalled a comment by one of the Indian professors at our Concordia Seminary, Nagercoil, Dr. J. C. Gamaliel, on this question, and so I tried it out on her: “I think I might say that sometimes God answers even when He is addressed by the wrong name.”

She didn’t like my response. Instead, she said we should say, “I’m really happy for you. But let me tell you about the God who is above all gods.” Her point was that we cannot deny the fact of their experience. We must not deny the fact of the power of these demonic beings. We cannot change their worldview. Rather, we must add another layer, new depth, to their existing worldview. She didn’t say it, but the implication I drew was that it may well be that it was my own post-Enlightenment worldview that needed to be altered and expanded.

I decided I needed to try to see some of this demonic power at work. Sathiya Sai Baba was a highly popular Hindu guru who was famous for his miraculous powers. He was a devotee of the god Siva and was noted for showing his miraculous powers

at the annual Siva Rathri, when his devotees gather to honor this god and seek his blessings. I had four encounters.

The first encounter was soon upon arrival. I was staying in a tent on the grounds of Sai Baba's ashram in his home village in southern Andhra Pradesh state. As evening approached, I noticed a Westerner walking by and asked him why he was there. He said he was a devotee, and so I asked him if he had ever met Sai Baba personally and seen any of his miracles. He told of being in a group of ten or twelve devotees. As was Sai Baba's custom, he would present the devotees with a sacred ash. He said he simply opened his hand as he reached out to each devotee in the circle and produced this ash to put in their hands. However, he said, when he came to the last person, he saw that it was a small boy. Sai Baba then closed his hand again and produced a piece of candy instead for him.

I responded to this young man: "Well, I'd have to see that to believe it." To which he promptly retorted, "Even if you saw it, you wouldn't believe it," and moved on. As I reflected on that comment, I thought how true that is. Since I don't believe Sai Baba is a walking deity, I would question what I saw and try to interpret differently. You have to have faith first for a miracle to be convincing.

The second experience with the "miraculous" was a sacred tree that was on the grounds. There often were devotees in meditation around it because it was said to have sprung up from a plaque that Sai Baba had buried on that spot while a small boy. The plaque was said to have letters on it from some ancient script, and now these letters could be seen all over the bark of the tree. With my lack of faith, I inspected the bark. It seemed to me that they were carved markings, as one could see the scrape marks and also that there were no letters up higher on the tree, on the thinner branches.<sup>4</sup>

Later in the day, Sai Baba conducted a worship time. As the climax to that event, he took a brass pot and held it over his statue on the altar. Like a magician, he showed to the crowd that the pot was empty and then turned it upside down. He swiftly moved his hand around the inside of the pot and sacred ash came flowing out. As soon as he stopped, the flow of ash stopped, and then it started up again when he churned his hand. Once again, in skepticism, I thought this was just a trick that any magician could do with a rigged pot.

The big event with Sai Baba on this sacred night was when he would reveal his own divinity. As a Westerner, I was part of a group that had close-up seating to the front. He led his devotees in antiphonal *bhajans* for a while. Then he suddenly started convulsing and gagging. Within a minute, he vomited up fluid that included a stone lingam (the phallic-shaped symbol of Siva). Devotees around me commented that each year it was a stone of some rare kind and proved his divine nature as an incarnation of Siva. Once again, I was skeptical, thinking that anyone could learn to swallow an object and then spout it back up.

Except for the story by the Western devotee, I left surmising that everything was a fraud. Afterward, I often heard of Sai Baba walking through his free hospital clinic in Bangalore healing people. My desire to see the power of the demonic spirit world remained unfulfilled.

Then I had an experience while I was conducting the research for *Churchless Christianity*. I was walking down the street in Nagercoil when I ran across the commissioning of a roadside Hindu shrine. A priest was there conducting rituals, and suddenly he began convulsing and dancing.<sup>5</sup> Then it suddenly stopped. The belief was that the spirit had entered him and then transferred to the shrine. Now the shrine was a sacred place with spiritual power.

It reminded me of a newspaper story that reported on a major museum desiring to have some ancient idols from the temple in a nearby village. The curators negotiated with the villagers, and they agreed that replicas could be made to replace the originals. The museum brought in a Hindu priest who did some rituals and transferred the spirits from the idols into pots of water. Now the idols were just pieces of stone as far as the villagers were concerned. After the replicas had been made, the report said, the priest returned and transferred the spirits from the pots into the new statues.<sup>6</sup>

My first truly convincing experience with the spirit world came during our trek to the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the Himalayas. It was an expedition organized and led by Michael von Brueck, a pastor from East Germany who was a colleague at Gurukul.<sup>7</sup> After meeting the Dalai Lama and having a forty-five-minute theological discussion with him, we received a letter of introduction. With this document, we were able to gain entrance into the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries tucked away in the high Himalayas and have discussions with the monks.

Along the way, we learned of a shaman who was living in one village. He was just an ordinary peasant working the fields during the day and did his shamanic activity before and after work. The group went on to the next monastery, leaving me behind to keep track of the shaman and try to form a relationship. We had hoped to see him do some healing or miracle. When the group returned, we approached him. But the shaman discerned that we were just voyeurs, just Westerners wanting to take photos and tell stories. He said, "I have a good spirit, and I fear that he will end up beating you through me if you come with the wrong heart."

However, Michael did have a serious matter on which he wanted guidance. The shaman discerned his sincerity and agreed to see him. I guess because I had been around all the time, he agreed that I could join. Early in the morning, we gathered in his hut with our interpreters. He turned to his shrine and did some incantations, when suddenly he began talking in a high, squeaky voice. The spirit was possessing him and speaking through him. What was immediately striking was that the spirit began

addressing Michael and me as spiritual teachers. We looked like very scruffy trekkers, not at all like pastors, but the spirit knew who we were.

Michael told him his problem, and the spirit gave him advice. To confirm that the advice was from the spirit, the shaman asked Michael to take a grain of rice from his pile and place it on a small leather drum. If the grain turned in one direction, it was confirming the truth of the advice. (I don't recall which direction, clockwise or counter-clockwise.) It indeed started to spin around.

The shaman then turned to me and asked me what I wanted. I thought, "Oh no, I'm going to get beaten!" When I said I had nothing, he simply told me, "Be careful with your official registration." I had no idea what he was talking about. But when I returned to mainland India a month later, I learned that our permission to stay in the country had been revoked at that very time. It took a good deal of negotiations to get the permission renewed, but the point is that the spirit knew about this development two thousand miles away.

I had wanted a convincing experience of the reality of the spirit world. Now I'd had it. The shaman also gave me a long, dirty piece of cloth that is important to me. It is a cloth he used in his healing work. I was told that he would put one end of the cloth on the wound and then suck at the other end, spitting out some green stuff. Later, I read in the book, *A Journey to Ladakh*, by Andrew Harvey<sup>8</sup> that he had seen a phenomenon like this.

Then I had another startling experience. I had been assigned by the LCMS Board for Missions to work with a U. S. attorney, Roger Ellison, on solving the complex legal and social problems of our partner church, the India Evangelical Lutheran Church. It entailed much travel to various reconciliation/negotiation meetings all over South India, frequently by night bus.

On one of these journeys, I was sitting in the front seat, opposite the driver. I had learned how to sleep in all kinds of conditions, including on night busses. On this trip to Nagercoil, we were traveling through a wooded, wilderness area around midnight, and I was awake for a while. As I watched the road ahead, suddenly a woman in a bright yellow *saree* jumped in front of the bus with her arms high over her head.

I jumped in my seat. To my amazement, the bus just passed right through her. I looked over at the driver, and he had just kept on barreling ahead, never hitting the brakes at all. My heart was pounding, but he seemed to be quite oblivious to the woman's appearance. I asked him in Tamil, "What was that?" He simply commented, "There are a lot of spirits in this region." Obviously, he had driven this route many times, and apparently had become accustomed to the spirits that reside there.

As I studied up on the spirit phenomenon, I learned that there are many different kinds of spirits. Tibetan Buddhism speaks of innumerable spirit worlds. One of these

spirit dimensions is trickster spirits. Apparently, the one on the road that night was from this dimension. A vestige of this ancient awareness in Western countries is the custom of knocking on wood when wishing something to come true. The belief is that these trickster spirits live in wood, and so you should knock on wood while (not after!) expressing your hope so that they can't hear.

## **Worldview Change Back in the USA**

I never talked about the experiences once we returned to the U. S. and I took up parish ministry in River Falls, Wisconsin. I had been warned that one of the hesitations people have about taking on a longtime former missionary is that they will only talk about their overseas experiences and never really connect with life in the States. In addition, I knew that talk about spirits—and even angels—was considered hokey, not only by laypeople but by pastors as well.

Nonetheless, there were several times when congregation members shared with me their angel stories. The typical pattern is for some dangerous situation to occur when suddenly someone appears who rescues the situation, and then suddenly disappears. One person spoke of seeing an angel occasionally in her bedroom.

One specific instance is worth sharing. An elderly member of the congregation came to my office. She had been out shopping in St. Paul at a small strip mall. There were very few people there in the middle of the day, but an elderly lady approached her on the sidewalk. The woman asked her about the location of a post office. She replied, "There's one just over there. What do you need?" "I just need a postage stamp." "I have one," she said, and began looking through her purse.

As she looked down, she noticed that the woman's shoelace was untied (she even noticed that the laces were green!). She said, "Here, let me take care of that shoelace," and she knelt down and tied it. When she got up, she greeted the woman again and turned to leave. As soon as she had turned, she realized that she had forgotten all about the stamp and turned back. The woman had disappeared. There was no crowd or cars around, and the woman couldn't have ducked into a store that quickly.

In my office, the member asked me, "Pastor, what was that?" I said, "The only thing I can think of is Heb. 13:2. I think you just 'showed hospitality' to an angel."

Since my parish was a town/gown ministry, I did a lot of marriage preparation. One young lady said that whenever she entered a room, she could discern if the good spirits or the bad spirits were dominant or if they were in conflict. At the time, I had no idea what that was about, but now in later years, I have been blessed with a granddaughter who has this same spiritual sensitivity. All this certainly challenges and expands my worldview, but I've become more and more comfortable with these awarenesses when I understand how common these sensibilities are in other cultures,<sup>9</sup> also among devout Christians.

Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School of Samford University, wrote an article in *First Things*, titled “A Tale of Two Demons,” on the contrast between the African and Western Christian worldviews.<sup>10</sup> Here is a summary section:

Like the robust faith of the New Testament, this kind of affective Christianity embraces the charismatic, the visionary, and the apocalyptic. These are all held in deep suspicion by those who still find spiritual warmth in the dying embers of rationalist religion. As Kenya’s Musimbi Kanyoro wrote, “Those cultures which are far removed from biblical culture risk reading the Bible as fiction.”

Why do so many southern Christians take with utter seriousness spiritual things that seem to most of us as outmoded leftovers from a redundant worldview? Is it that we have allowed our hearts to become hardened to the spiritual realities all around us?

As I was preparing for my adjunct teaching in missions at Concordia University, St. Paul, while in the nearby River Falls parish, I came across a very stimulating book by Jacob Loewen, *The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, about mission work in Africa. I was attracted to it first because I had gone for a couple of weeks to teach among the Masais in Kenya a couple of years earlier.

In the book, Loewen provides five tables with four columns on African, Biblical, Western Materialist, and Western Christian views on topics such as spirits, healing, divination, and exorcism. In almost every instance, the African view is consonant with the biblical and the Western views are consonant with each other. Here are some samples from the forty-five illustrations in his tables:

African: Material things can change into spirit and spirits can be manifested in material form.

Biblical: Instances recorded.<sup>11</sup>

Western Materialist: Superstition.

Western Christian: Bible is true but such things no longer happen.

Again:

African: Good and bad spirits both exist.

Biblical: Good and bad spirits both exist.

Western materialist: No spirits exist.

Western Christian: At least Spirit of God exists; bad spirits are more problematical.

Again:

African: Souls of the dead speak to the living.

Biblical: Instances recorded.<sup>12</sup>

Western Materialist: Superstition.

Western Christian: The dead do not communicate with the living.  
Consulting with the dead is “of the devil.”

Again:

African: People communicate with spirits.

Biblical: Instances recorded.<sup>13</sup>

Western Materialist: Superstition.

Western Christian: Generally unknown except in exorcism.

Again:

African: Evil spirits cause illness.

Biblical: Instances recorded.<sup>14</sup>

Western Materialist: Germs, malfunctions, etc., cause illness.

Western Christian: Hesitantly believe that evil spirits cause illness in Bible.

Again:

African: Evil spirit helpers can heal or kill.

Biblical: Instances recorded.<sup>15</sup>

Western Materialist: Superstition.

Western Christian: Some fundamentalists believe in Satanic miracles.

Again:

African: Certain people are mediums who communicate with spirits.

Biblical: Instances recorded.<sup>16</sup>

Western Materialist: Superstition.

Western Christian: Forbidden by scripture.

Again:

African: Amulets and charms have magic effect.

Biblical: Instances recorded.<sup>17</sup>

Western Materialist: Superstition.

Western Christian: Some people use amulets and charms.

Again:

African: Exorcism is normal, expected happening.

Biblical: Numerous instances recorded, but observers marveled.<sup>18</sup>

Western Materialist: Psychiatry frowns on exorcism because does not accept existence of demons.

Western Christian: Church at large skeptical, but some Catholics, charismatics, and others are exorcising.

These witnesses from non-Western Christian communities made me more comfortable with the possibility of direct supernatural intervention in our lives. Then my wife Carol and I had our own experience. A major reason for us returning to the States from missionary service in India after fifteen years was the realization that my mother was dying of cancer and my father would need a place to go.

During the months that my mother was bedridden at home, I would try to get back to Chicago once a month to see her and my father. One of these times, a congregation member offered to drop me off at the airport on his way to work. He was a little late, so as we neared the airport, I readied myself for a dash to the gate by putting my book and ticket on his dashboard. When I jumped out of the car and he sped off, I realized that I had left the book and ticket in the car.

His report was that a sudden wind blew through the car as he was driving out of the airport. He saw something fly out and stopped to get it, my book and ticket. He circled back and quickly gave it to a red cap at the curbside. In the meantime, I went to the counter and asked what I could do. This was pre-9/11, so they told me to go to the gate and see if I could get on. As I lined up at that counter, one of the agents answered a phone and said, "No, no one has come yet for that." I thought that this might well be my ticket so I raced to the front, and they directed me to go back to the ticket counter. When I got there, they said, they had no ticket. As I wandered rather hopelessly and aimlessly in the huge, milling crowd, an ordinary middle-aged woman suddenly approached me and said, "Here's your ticket." I don't even recall if I took the time to say thanks, but I ran off to the gate.

When I returned, Carol was supposed to meet me, but she was not at the gate. I thought that perhaps she was thinking I had checked luggage, so I went to baggage claim. She wasn't there either, and so I thought perhaps there was some trouble at home delaying her and I got into line to phone home. As I was standing there, I heard over the intercom "Carol Hoefer, Carol Hoefer, meet your party at . . ." I thought, "That's a great idea, Carol," and went off to the specified counter and found her waiting there.

I complimented Carol on making the announcement, but she replied, "I didn't do that. You did." I said, "I didn't do it, but somebody did." We went to the counter and asked if we could inquire who had paged us. They put us through to the pager, and the pager said there was no such page. Yet, we both heard it at different areas of the airport. The only explanation we could have is that an angel (and perhaps more than one!) was looking after us on that trip.

There were a few more experiences during these days in River Falls:

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- My father shared how his mother had come to him in a dream the night she died back in Germany, to say good-bye. Only weeks later did he hear by letter that she had died on that date.
- Here's what our daughter Pamela reports one time when she was commuting from work in St. Paul, MN:  
"I was in the left lane out of 3 lanes of traffic [plus onramps]. You'll remember the reason it's called Spaghetti Junction! All of a sudden, I spun out to the right. Of course, the freeway was absolutely packed. There was barely a spare square inch. I was spinning toward the middle lane when the next thing I knew, I was sitting in my car, facing forward like I should have been, with traffic moving at a slow and steady pace. No honking, nothing abnormal, as though nothing had happened at all. I had no whiplash, no back strain. Only this feeling of knowing . . . wow, you really don't go before your time and knowing absolutely for sure that Heaven had intervened and saved not only my life but the lives and cars of those around me. It would've been one awful pile-up."
- Another daughter was away in college in Colorado when she phoned and asked how to get rid of a bad spirit. It turned out that she and a couple housemates had been playing with a Ouija board, and some strange things had happened. She and another housemate returned to their rooms, and she said suddenly she felt very cold. She said she stepped out of her room to see what the heating problem was, and the other girl had felt the same thing and had stepped out of her room.  
They went downstairs and found the third housemate with a rather sheepish look on her face. She said she had continued playing the board and had asked for a really bad spirit to come. Then the place got really cold, and she couldn't get the board to respond anymore. Now my daughter said, "You are a pastor. What should we do to get rid of that spirit?" I said, "I really don't know. If you ask a spirit to come, it will come. But these are supernatural beings, and they do what they want. We can't control them. Nonetheless, you don't have to worry. You are a baptized child of God, sealed in the Holy Spirit. That spirit can do nothing to you."
- Later, when that daughter moved into an apartment in Minneapolis, she reported several instances of things moving mysteriously. But there was no harm done. She also writes:  
"At that apartment in Minneapolis, I started waking up with nightmares every night at the same time, feeling very afraid. This went on for weeks. I read somewhere that at that time—3 am, I think—the spirit world is at its most active. Who knows, but it freaked me out. I remembered what you had told me, so when I woke up I would affirm my baptism, and that I was a child of God, and it gave me comfort. Ultimately, I took my baptismal

certificate, framed it, and put it on my nightstand along with my cross. My nightmares went away and I was able to sleep through the night.”

- I’ve never had the experience of a miracle happening in response to one of my prayers—though I still regularly pray for miracles. The one miraculous healing I experienced in my parish ministry came as a total surprise when I went to the ICU room of a dying parishioner. As her family gathered, I gave her a very small taste of the Sacrament. The elderly woman immediately shot up in bed, all her tubes flying around. Of course, all kinds of bells went off and the nurses came rushing in demanding to know what was going on. I went to see her a couple of days later, and she was convinced that God did this so that her grandson would see it and become a believer. She died a few weeks later.

### **Academic Experiences at Concordia, Portland**

The first topic in my World Religions courses at Concordia University, Portland, was Animism. I would share with the students some of the experiences just related. After telling one or two of my angel stories, I would invite students to share theirs. Typically, it would take a little while for students to speak up, but usually three or four shared and sometimes twice that, out of a class of twenty-five to thirty. Often a student would begin by saying, “I’ve never told anybody about this but. . . .” It always was much more persuasive in class when students heard their peers confirming what I was saying.

In one more example that I recall, a student said they were driving on a beach in Washington when they got stuck in the sand. Suddenly, two guys appeared in pickup truck and pulled the car out. As the group was gathering back into the car, they turned to say thanks, but the truck had completely disappeared—the typical way angel appearances occur.

It’s my conviction that people in the West have spirit experiences just like anywhere else in the world. But the pervading worldview does not encourage them to process the experiences through this lens, much less to talk about them. Spirit experiences are considered “hokey” and unscientific. When they occur, people simply just say, “That was weird.”

At the very beginning of my World Religions courses, I announced that this word “weird” was banned in our discussions. I explained that we would be challenged with facts that may not fit our worldview. To simply dismiss these facts by calling them “weird” was an act of cowardice and fear. We will do anything to keep our worldview intact.

Back in the parish, when people asked me what would change in their life if they became Christian, I would tell them, “Everything will stay the same, and everything will change.” We begin to see the events of our life through a different lens, the lens

of faith. I think this is true also when one begins to acknowledge the reality of the spirit worlds active in our lives.

This reluctance to talk about supernatural events extends even to people who experience it in their own Christian context. Many Christians have a great difficulty explaining events that seem obviously to be the experience of angels or of divine miracles. Recently, a staunch church member, who knew of my comfort with the topic, shared an experience she says she's hardly ever told anybody.

She had a very debilitating hereditary long-term illness from an early age, as did several of her family members. Some Christian friends brought a healer to see her. Though she was very hesitant and skeptical about it, as she tells it: "She [the healer] just laid her finger on my forehead and I fell over 'slain in the Spirit.' My illness has not progressed since that date, though doctors had told me I would be in a wheelchair by now, at best, just as my relatives are now." In more evangelical circles, she would happily have shared this testimony, to the upbuilding of faith of many believers. Yet, in our circles, she has feared people's skepticism and even criticism. As Loewen illustrated above, we in the Western church are so much more imbued with the surrounding secularist worldview than with the biblical one.

Regarding my classroom experiences, one event was particularly striking. After we had discussed these phenomena in class, a thirty-year-old student approached me to discuss further. It turned out that she had been in training as a healer, which she understood as a form of *reiki*. The trainers talked about spirits helping them to heal. As a devout Christian, she had processed all the spirit talk as the Holy Spirit aiding her, and she had indeed been quite effective at her healing work.

However, for the final session, the trainers informed the group that they would be making commitments to some spirits to facilitate their healing. The student said she had discussed with her boyfriend, who warned her away from something like this, and she had resolved not to go through with the final step of a ritual commitment with the spirits.

After that, she said, she experienced spirit attacks. The first was when she was driving with her young son in the backseat. Suddenly, he began choking, so she stopped the car and eventually the choking stopped.

Then she began to experience the spirits coming to her in her home. She said there were five of them, and they looked very ugly. They clearly told her that she must proceed with the commitment ceremony, or they would continue to harass her. If she committed, they would help her. Of course, the woman was totally confused and afraid. She went to her pastor, but he just told her to get some psychological help. She knew it was more than that, and so she came to me, hoping that I would understand and direct her. We talked about the need for exorcism, but I told her I was unable to do that for her.

A week or so later, a very unsettling event occurred. I was working on my computer in my university office, and I got an e-mail from her address. It was a whole line of meaningless letters. I thought that was very strange and dismissed it. Then a few minutes later, I got another e-mail with just three random letters. I thought I should talk with her about this the next day in class. Then I got a regular e-mail from her with a class assignment. When I asked her about the e-mails, she said she had no idea. Do bad spirits mess with our computers?

A couple of weeks later, she shared with me that she had gone downtown to a church group that did exorcisms. She said they indeed exorcized five spirits, with the last one strongly resisting. Now, however, she felt free and released. That was the last she talked about it during the semester.

One more dramatic student report involved my asking a class to share any angel or spirit experience they had. One student spoke about a mission trip he had been on among the Navajos. He said their locked meeting room kept on getting broken into and ransacked during the night. Even when they put their Bibles into the safe there, the safe was opened and trashed. One of the Navajos volunteered to camp out overnight with his shotgun to catch the intruder. He reported that a huge wolf came. When he confronted it, it ran off, but he was able to shoot it square on. The next day one of the Navajos appeared with a huge hole in his chest. The “skin-walker” of Navajo lore.

Academically, as I taught various religions, I learned how almost all of them spoke about spirit worlds, the one exception being Theravada Buddhism. And it’s not only in religions like Animism, Hinduism, and Wicca/Druid, but also in Islam, Judaism, and Tibetan Buddhism. It is also striking how the description of these worlds is largely the same all over the world and all through history: good spirits, evil spirits, trickster spirits, spirits that marry and propagate just like us, wandering spirits, ancestor spirits, etc. How could this all be imagined when it is so universally the same across time and cultures and continents?

The other dimension that is so common is the involvement of ancestors in our lives and the belief in reincarnation. I could fit the spirit world into an expanded worldview because of its strong biblical authentication, but the beliefs in ancestors and reincarnation really does not fit in. Nonetheless, I have to deal with the evidence, as uncomfortable as it is for me.

Of course, the belief in reincarnation is very common in all ancient religions. Among major religions, it’s even in some forms of Judaism. Thus, only Islam and Christianity don’t share this belief. And even among Christians, it is not unknown. Once again, when the belief is so universal and ancient, one wonders how it could have developed and grown up in so many different locations if there wasn’t some truth/experience to it.

My experience with this belief has come in several ways. I'll begin with one that occurred in our own home. We have a special needs granddaughter who had a birth trauma and is unable to walk or talk. When she was around three, her mother was walking her along the hallway in our home that has a shelf where we display photos of our parents, both in their later years and in their youth. Our daughter said that the girl suddenly stopped when she saw those photos. She's able to nod her head for "yes" and "no," and the mother discerned that she was looking at the photo of my parents' wedding. She asked, "Do you see them?" and the girl nodded yes.

This prompted our daughter to research the matter a bit. She found that the belief is that ancestors appear as they were in the prime of their life, which would be their wedding.<sup>19</sup> Is there a hint about this reality in the Hebrews 12:1 reference to the "cloud of witnesses"?

In my World Religions classes, we would talk about previous births. We discussed how people have had *déjà vu* experiences, such as visiting a European castle and knowing what would be in the next room. Sometimes, students would share how they've had similar inexplicable experiences. I recall one older student who shared that he was visiting Hindu temples in North India when he began realizing that he knew what was inside some of them before he entered.

In addition, I usually had a medium come to class to share her beliefs and practices. She would speak of having had experiences of spirits of dead people already in her childhood, and even as she travelled to different locations. She spoke quite emphatically—and credibly—about her experiences contacting ancestors for people and relaying messages from them. It's very much like what is portrayed in the TV series "Long Island Medium."

It's become my conviction that God comes to people in terms of their worldview. If their worldview includes visions and dreams and miracles, He will use those. If their worldview discounts all this, He will use other means, more intellectual. It is the general experience of missionaries working among adherents of major religions that people come to faith primarily through these supernatural experiences.

Such was certainly the case with a new church, the Everlasting Life Church, that I visited in the Punjab, North India, when I was working among the Sikhs. In my visits there in 2002 and 2014, the founding pastor, Pastor Daniel Masih, related that exorcisms are a common part of their ministry. When they enter a new area, typically they are soon confronted by an individual threatening them as a spirit. They need to do an exorcism, in a typical "power encounter." When the people see that Jesus has this power, they start coming to church worship and some eventually take Baptism.

I spoke at a couple of workshops for this church, supported by the LCMS mission organization, People of the Book Lutheran Outreach, in November 2014. They had asked for a study on outreach approaches in Acts and invited leaders from

all denominations. As I spoke about the way Jesus had come through visions, miracles, healings, and exorcisms, I asked them to raise their hands to indicate if they have had these experiences. In each case, more than half indicated that these were was part of their experiences in ministry too. They are in “power encounter” contexts.

Pastor Daniel himself had a crisis at the beginning of his ministry that was answered by a vision. His wife and he had no children, so people mocked him for promoting a deity who could not even do that for him. It was a very depressing time for him. But then he had a vision that he would have two children, a son to be named Wittness and a daughter to be named Vision. Within two years, they had their boy and girl.

Another dramatic event that sparked the success of his ministry was a miraculous healing. A wealthy man had a daughter who was gravely ill. They had gone to many doctors and visited many religious sites to get her cured. Finally, they came to Pastor Daniel, when the girl had hardly any pulse left. He prayed for her and, within five minutes, she was up and walking and totally cured. The family donated the land on which their church now stands in Dasuya, Punjab.

Another example: I had a Hindu student, Kanagasabai Umashaknar, originally from Sri Lanka, in a New Testament class at Concordia. He was quite withdrawn and almost hostile. Then, he also got a vision calling him. Here’s his story:

I don’t remember the date, but it was Fall semester of 1998 in Dr. Hill’s Humanities 351 class. It was a late evening class, 6:00pm– 9:00pm! We were covering the role of Germany in WWI when John Murray and I were sitting in back row. It was during that time, my mind drifted sort of . . . and I felt this overwhelming sense of calmness and peace. As I tried to wrap my head around what it was, I heard or felt this calling—really hard to explain, but the next thing I knew, I was leaning into John’s year whispering that “He was calling me.” John was confused, and asked me “What?” I then said, “God is calling . . . Jesus is calling me.” This caused John to scream in delight, disrupting the class . . . and as Dr. Hill inquired, we both ran out of the class (Luther Hall 2nd floor), out through the back stairs and out to the area in front of Centennial. My memory gets fuzzy after that...but it was truly an amazing experience and I am glad John was there to be with me.

Uma was baptized, changed his studies from biology to theology, and now is a DCE serving in Tacoma, WA.

My wife Carol and I served a couple of years ago as trainers of ESL teachers in Northeast India, a tribal area that is largely Christian. The Christians there continue the cultural expectation of God’s coming to them in visions and dreams. They look for God to guide their lives through their dreams.

I recall one of our senior missionaries in India recounting how work began in one area to the north in another state. He said a delegation came to them from that area asking who Jesus is. They had been experiencing visions of someone named Jesus calling to them. Of course, the missionaries followed up, and now there is a vital church in that town and more around that state.

All of these supernatural experiences might easily be dismissed as weird or psychological disorders in our post-Enlightenment culture. When God uses them, they are not effective among us, but they are very effective in other societies. When Jesus comes to people of these non-Western cultures in these direct and personal ways, they respond and immediately accept Him as their Lord.

## **Conclusion**

What do we make of all this? What do I make of all this?

A more relevant question is: What do we do with all this missiologically? In the May 2014 issue of *Missio Apostolica*,<sup>20</sup> I had already expressed how I have found these phenomena of spirit experiences as my most effective approach to confronting atheism, both in class and personally. These individuals want tangible evidence for any belief. When we can give personal, eyewitness testimony, they must either disbelieve us or reconsider their materialistic worldview.

Secondly, in terms of our world mission, we must seriously question the post-Enlightenment lens with which we Westerners see the world. Our goal must not be to change people's worldview, for our own worldview may be highly distorted and constricted. Indeed, the fastest growing churches are in those regions and denominations that take the spirit worlds seriously. The biblical witness and message speaks to them, where it often does not speak to us, as we saw in the Loewen charts. Celebrate and embrace the way God comes to them within their worldview.

Also, in our own society, especially among the youth, there is a growing interest in Eastern and animistic religions. They are not so interested in intellectual arguments and doctrines. These seem to them quite arbitrary and conflicting. Rather, they seek an authentic personal spiritual experience that is relevant and transformative. This does not mean that we encourage them to go to mediums, but it does mean that we help them to identify and embrace the authentic spiritual experiences that they do have, particularly with angels.

Next, we need to become comfortable personally and existentially with this phenomenon of spirit worlds. We need to expand our worldview so that we are comfortable talking about it, both with fellow believers and non-believers—with believers so that they can enrich their lives with this spiritual depth and encouragement and then share their faith convincingly with others.

Spiritism is not something we should fear. These spirit worlds are God's gracious creation, the One who is the Maker of "all things visible and invisible," in the words of the Nicene Creed. All these powers are "under His feet" (Eph 1:22). We should see this phenomenon as highly important and useful in our outreach. First, of course, we need to appreciate and understand it ourselves honestly and openheartedly.

Finally, we need to become comfortable with godly supernatural activity. Miracles should be expected and celebrated. Angels, in particular, are a gift of God that we should recognize and value. Let God become real for our people.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I intentionally leave the word "satan" uncapitalized. I came to this realization from a laywoman in a Bible study hour at the Ascension Lutheran Church, where I'm a member in Portland, Oregon. She objected to giving such an evil force the prominence of capitalization, almost putting him/it on the same level of prominence as God.

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Hofer, *Churchless Christianity* (Chennai, India: Asian Programme for the Advancement of Training and Studies and Gurukul Lutheran Theological College and Research Institute, 1991) and *Churchless Christianity* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Herbert Hofer, "Gospel Proclamation of the Ascended Lord," *Missiology* (October 2005), 435–450.

<sup>4</sup> When I described this tree years later to one who had visited the ashram, he said that no such tree exists there. In my skepticism, I surmised that its fraudulent nature was too apparent so they had cut the tree down.

<sup>5</sup> Andrew Harvey reports a similar incident in *A Journey to Ladakh* (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), 214–215.

<sup>6</sup> The story also demonstrated to me that Hindus don't worship stones or trees or rivers. Rather, they worship the spirits that they believe reside in these objects.

<sup>7</sup> We were with a group of two other Germans, a photographer and a journalist, and two interpreters, one a Tibetan college student who knew English and the other a Buddhist monk who knew the local languages.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew Harvey, *A Journey to Ladakh*, 79–80.

<sup>9</sup> An example of a Marxist atheist being challenged to open his worldview to the spirit realities in Buddhist Thailand is recorded in "The Visitor" as told to Thomas Fuller, *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Feb. 22, 2015, 96.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy George, "A Tale of Two Demons," *First Things* (June 2013) <http://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2013/06/a-tale-of-two-demons>.

<sup>11</sup> Jacob Loewen, *The Bible in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2000), 137. Loewen's amplification:

Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus when he was transfigured (Mt 17:3–7); dead saints appeared to the followers of Jesus in Jerusalem (Mt 27:52–53); Jesus appeared several times after his death (Jn 20:14–29, 21:4–14, Acts 1:3–9, Mt. 28:9, Lk 24:28–51); an angel appeared and freed Peter from prison (Acts 12:6–11); Philip

disappeared when the Spirit of God took him away (Acts 8:39); Aaron's rod became a living snake (Ex 7:10).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

Jesus talked to his disciples after his death and resurrection (Jn 20:26–29); dead saints appeared to disciples at Jerusalem (Mt 27:52–53); witch conjured up Saul's soul (1 Sam 28:11–12); consultation with mediums and necromancers condemned (Deut 18:10–11).

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 138.

Jesus spoke to devil (Mt 4:4–10), to evil spirits (Mt 8:32, Mk 9:25); Paul commanded evil spirits (Acts 16:18); exorcists spoke to evil spirits (Acts 19:13).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 139–140.

Bent woman (Lk 13:11); blind and dumb people (Mt 12:22, 9:32); epilepsy (Mt 17:14–21); insanity (Mk 5:1–13).

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 140.

Satanic miracles (2 Thes 2:9, Rev 13:13, 16:14).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 141.

Medium at Endor (1 Sam 28:7); prohibitions against communicating with the spirit world (Lev 19:31, 20:6, Mic 5:12, Gal 5:19–20).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 143. St. Christopher's medals, crucifixes, used for protection. I think Loewen might also have cited biblical references such as the high priest's Urim and Thummin (Ex 28:30; Lev 8:8; Num 27:21), Uzzah's touching the ark (2 Sam 6:6–7), the touching of Jesus' garment (Mt 9:21; 14:36), and Peter's shadow (Acts 5:15)

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 145.

Exorcism by Jews (Acts 13:6–9, 19:13, Mt 12:27); by Jesus (Mt 8:16, 9:33, Mk 7:29); by apostles (Acts 16:18); by people who did not follow Jesus (Mt 7:22).

<sup>19</sup> It's the same way little Colton describes heaven in *Heaven is for Real*. Todd Burpo, *Heaven Is For Real* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 120–123.

<sup>20</sup> Herbert Hofer, "Outreach to Atheists," *Missio Apostolica* 22, no. 1 (May 2014), 150–151.