

## Contacts with the Other World? A Christian Guide

### *A study document to be discussed and complemented by the Lutheran churches in Europe*

- (1) Representatives of LWF member churches attending the LWF study seminar on “Spiritualism: A Challenge to the Churches in Europe” in Svätý Jur, Slovak Republic, October 16–19, 2003, had such intensive discussions that they did not have the time to draft a study document. Therefore, the European follow-up working group (Kajsa Ahlstrand, Harald Lamprecht, Matthias Pöhlmann, Robert H. de Vos) were asked to come up with a study document which would facilitate a dialogue in Lutheran congregations and training institutions in Europe.

You are kindly asked to submit your comments and contributions to the coordinator of the group, Dr. Matthias Pöhlmann, Auguststrasse 80, DE-10117 Berlin Germany, [poehlmann@ezw-berlin.de](mailto:poehlmann@ezw-berlin.de). Based on the feedback, the follow-up group will complete the study document and present it at the LWF global consultation on “Spiritualism as a Global Challenge to the Church,” in October 2005. This global consultation will elaborate the final document, *Spiritualism as a Global Challenge to the Church – Theses and Guidelines*.

For further reading we recommend the following publication: Ingo Wulforth (ed.), *Spiritualism: A Challenge the Churches in Europe* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 2004). This book contains the papers presented at the study seminar as well as other articles and can be ordered from Ursula Liesch [liesch@lutheranworld.org](mailto:liesch@lutheranworld.org) (10.00 Euros + postage).

### Introduction

- (2) Moving glasses—contact with the spirits—a horrible business, best done only with one’s friends. In order to receive secret messages from the realm of the deceased, you will need at least two, better three, of your friends to participate. It is neither necessary to meet at midnight nor to light black candles—moving glasses will also work at noon. It will be more fun if you play gloomy music and the atmosphere is creepy. You will need a normal glass, which should not be too small. Take a large piece of cardboard and draw a circle on it. Around this circle, write down the letters of the alphabet and the numbers from 0 to 9. At the top of the circle write the word “no” and lower down, “yes.” Your *ouija* board is ready.<sup>1</sup>
- (3) Channeling makes life more joyful and successful and one’s spiritual development will speed up. No experiences will be spared; they will be experienced more consciously and in peace. There are moments of intuition -

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpt from an Austrian internet site for young people.  
[http://wcm.krone.at/krone/C00/S57/A2/object\\_id\\_15020/hxcms/](http://wcm.krone.at/krone/C00/S57/A2/object_id_15020/hxcms/) (23.4.2004).

moments when you suddenly get an overview of everything from a distant perspective.<sup>2</sup>

- (4) Handling a pendulum is very simple; everyone can learn it. For example, with the help of a pendulum you can look into the future, trace water lines, earth rays and review the beneficial influences of food.<sup>3</sup>

### **Ambivalent experiences**

- (5) About two years ago, I participated in a glass moving séance with eight other people. We came into contact with a spirit and asked him about the circumstance of his death. The following day we asked at school whether something like this had occurred. Except for the name, our information was correct. None of us had this information before (Julia, 18 years old).
- (6) A few friends of mine had the idea to “enact” a glass moving ceremony. In the beginning, it was just for fun. Then we asked, again just for fun, which one of us would be the first to die. He answered with the name of my best friend. After half an hour, my friend wanted to stop the game, because he had become frightened. We asked the spirits if he was allowed to stop, but they kept telling us to go on. Suddenly my friend ran away from the room, crying (Robert, 16 years old).

### **New interest in contacts with the other side**

- (7) Europe is currently undergoing fundamental changes. In today’s postmodern society, we are seeing the collapse of authorities, institutions and great ideologies that had previously provided orientation. In the light of growing secularization and individualism, traditional religions and family bonds are losing strength. Migration and globalization are leading to the increased religious pluralization of society. The actual encounter with new religious ideas and the necessity to define one’s own religious identity means that there is a definite need for discernment and orientation.
- (6) If we look at the spiritual situation, we can easily discern that the era of rationalism is over. Scientific, rationalistic and well-founded insights are no longer simply taken for granted: we can observe a growing interest in supernatural phenomena and are experiencing a “re-enchantment of the world.”
- (7) In many parts of Europe, there is considerable interest in establishing contact with the “other world.” The growing popularity of esotericism and occultism has resulted in increased magic practices which the churches and theology must urgently respond to. Due to the influence of the Enlightenment, the churches paid less and less attention in their preaching and teaching to the spiritual

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<sup>2</sup> From a Channeling offer on the internet, <http://www.irene-schumacher.de/channeling.html> (23.4.2004).

<sup>3</sup> Flyer handed out at an esoteric exhibition. Original in the archives of the Evangelische Zentralstelle für Weltanschauungsfragen (E/W), Berlin.

world. Today, more and more people, also inside the churches, are seeking spiritual experiences. Christians are encouraged to examine what it means to believe in God, Creator of all things, visible and invisible, as we profess in the Nicene Creed.

- (8) The following reflections are to provide help, information and orientation from a Christian perspective and are primarily addressed to congregations, pastors and teachers. In spite of the necessary critique, these reflections do not set out to demonize those who are involved in spiritualistic, occult or magic practices. They seek to involve in dialogue those engaged in spiritualistic practices, including those who consciously live as Christians or members of Christian congregations.
- (9) This document endeavors to encourage and inspire people who have found a home in the Christian church, to diminish fears of magic beliefs and to create an open atmosphere, where meaningful conversation is possible and different opinions can be expressed freely. Moreover, the church should view positively the challenges arising from the renewed interest in the world beyond. In conversation with today's different religious movements, Christians must "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you" (1 Pt 3:15).

### Definitions

- (10) By occultism, we understand concepts and practices emanating from an invisible world or force that cannot be explained with conventional scientific methods.
- (11) By spiritism, in the strictest sense, we understand the conviction that by employing certain practices and techniques one can enter into contact with the dead or spirits in order to receive messages from beyond. This can happen through a physical medium (writing table, pendulum, moving of glasses) or a talented individual who acts as a medium.
- (12) Traditionally, spiritualism is understood as a worldview which on the basis of messages from spirits seeks scientifically to prove the existence of life after death and a world beyond. Modern esotericism is closely linked to occultism. More often than not, esoteric "methods" currently on offer do not relate to exploring the world beyond, but focus on the expectation and hope to be saved/healed in this world and have been accordingly "secularized." Offers include individual assistance to face life's problems, healing or the development or liberation of spiritual powers.
- (13) **Pendulum:** contact with the powers and spirits from beyond is to be established with the help of a so-called sideric pendulum - a light thread with a heavy object attached to it which can swing around its own axis. It is hoped through vibrations to find answers to personal questions regarding the future etc.
- (14) **Moving glasses and the ouija board:** the letters of the alphabet (in normal order) and the numbers from 0 to 9 as well as the words "yes" and "no" are placed in a semicircle on a smooth surface (table or cardboard). The

participants place their fingers on the upended glass or planchette and call the dead or protective spirits. In the further course of events, questions are asked and the glass or planchette points to letters or figures. In this way, the answers of the putative spirits are spelt out.

- (15) **Channeling:** a concept within the esoteric movement according to which an elected, sensitive person can become a medium or channel for higher beings or ascended masters. Messages are conveyed through trance, automatic writing, or talking. In light of the growing popularity of channeling there is a plethora of textbooks, which within the context of an esoteric worldview and concept of humankind, seek to assist the spiritual development of humanity. Next to this pedagogical, literary approach there is the actual channeling offered to individuals as a means of helping with life's problems and for healing.
- (16) **New Age:** a network-like worldview that has spread since the 1980s from the USA to Europe via books, seminars and training courses, and which on the basis of astrological calculations is convinced that the age of Aquarius will commence shortly. It is expected that this will replace the age of Pisces, which is influenced by Christianity, and lead people of various religious convictions to enlightenment. In light of the fact that more and more is being attributed to New Age a definition seems near to impossible. New Age hopes for a new type of person and humankind's spiritual progress. At the same time, there is a boom in occult and magical practices, which are highly esteemed as further developing individual spiritual awareness.
- (17) Currently the term New Age is only rarely used by practitioners. Nonetheless, the fundamental principles especially of the esoteric movement continue to prevail and adherents today speak of an individualistic "holistic spirituality" strongly influenced by anti-institutional sentiments. This concept of faith has extra-church, syncretistic characteristics that span different religions.
- (18) **Notions of reincarnation:** different notions of repeated life on earth appear especially in the field of spiritistic movements, as well as within the framework of institutionalized esoteric contexts such as theosophy, anthroposophy and popular esotericism. Western models of reincarnation prevalent in Europe assume the idea of progress, whereas traditional Hindu and Buddhist understandings are less optimistic. A repeated life on earth serves self-perfection, maturing and higher development. Death is merely a transitory phase leading to the next higher existence. This notion can be combined with the concept of karma. Adverse effects in this life are attributed to "guilt" in a previous life. This leads to a particular worldview, the so-called reincarnation therapy, which seeks to identify and remove "blockages" from a previous life.
- (19) In Europe today there is widespread belief in reincarnation. Recent figures show that 20-25 percent of the population are captivated by the idea of reincarnation. In the Nordic countries, the majority of those attracted to reincarnation are also members of the Lutheran church. It is safe to assume that a significant number in other Lutheran churches are fascinated by the concept of reincarnation. This means that the question of reincarnation is a pastoral issue.

### **The parties concerned**

- (20) People have very different motives for participating in occult practices. It is very important to pay attention to the differences.
- a) Some youngsters experiment with spiritistic practices out of curiosity and the desire to experience an adventure. This can be dangerous since what might begin as a game can end in fear.
  - b) There are those who in their grief seek contact to the deceased. They must be given the opportunity to take leave of their loved ones and be offered help through the living.
  - c) There are some who unintentionally establish a spiritual connection with a distant or deceased person. They should not be excluded but be able in the Christian community to talk about their experience.
  - d) There are others for whom searching for a religious worldview provides a coherent explanation for exceptional phenomena and life after death.
- (21) In view of the increasingly popular notion of reincarnation it is vital to examine why this belief is important to a particular person. One can believe in reincarnation because it,
- a) Helps allay the fear of death, since one has some conception as to what one might expect (that is to say, another life on earth).
  - b) Promises new opportunities to gather life experience, and to make up for missed opportunities.
  - c) By making the karma responsible for everything, suggests a possible explanation for suffering.
  - d) Can convey a new identity where belonging makes palpable the affiliation to one's ancestors (to compensate for today's lacking family bonds).
  - e) Attenuate the burden of responsibility since further lives offer possibilities to correct previous errors.

### **Biblical, theological and counseling aspects**

- (22) A considerable number of transcendental psychic phenomena are described in the Bible. The assessment of these does not depend on the phenomenon *per se* but on its function. What is decisive is whether the phenomenon serves God or whether it pushes itself between God and the human being. Peter had visions and auditions (*cf.* Acts 10:10 f.), was clairvoyant, (*cf.* Acts 5) and Christ appeared to him. Occult practices are explicitly rejected. This concerns any attempt to take up contact with the dead (1 Sam 28) as well as any endeavor to use spiritual connections in order to gain power (Acts 8:9-24).

- (23) The recognition of the visible and invisible worlds as God's creation shows that there is a further realm between God and evil which provides a space for human experience. Therefore, we should not immediately assign all phenomena which currently defy scientific explanation to divine or demonic causes. The limits of modern science are not the limits of divine creation. Exceptional events and experiences also belong to the realm of creation. Just like entities of the visible creation they can be used for good or misused for evil.
- (24) Modern channeling media often refer to the Bible and claim to have contact to angels, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or God. It is therefore crucial that the actual content of the messages is checked on the basis of the Bible. The Lutheran church believes in the principle of *sola scriptura* i.e., God has revealed all that is necessary for salvation in Jesus Christ. Therefore, new messages cannot replace what is said in the Bible.
- (25) Different notions of reincarnation challenge theology to give answers to questions regarding life after death. The Christian hope of resurrection surpasses earthly experience. With regard to life after death even the Bible has to resort to the use of imagery. We are assured that Christians can expect a new life in connection with Christ in whom all suffering will be overcome (Phil 1:23; 1 Cor 15; Rev 21:4).
- (26) Karma means receiving the punishment one deserves; the same applies to reward. The Lutheran doctrine of justification by grace through faith alone clearly indicates God's gift to humanity. The concept of karma differs from the Lutheran understanding of God's unmerited grace.

### **The quest for a communion that is not broken by death**

- (27) It is often maintained that today's Western culture is characterized by strong individualism. Be that as it may, when people are attracted by ideas such as reincarnation or spiritism they are expressing a longing for a fellowship that is stronger than death. Admittedly, there is also the component of the individual's ego surviving death, but in this passage, we will focus on the fellowship-communion aspect. The spirituality that we encounter in many of our churches today is less focussed on how to get to heaven than on life in this world. There are many reasons for this, e.g., a reaction to a "pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die theology." What remains is a very real need to find a place where death is not final, where hope is to be found and where the communion that we have experienced on earth is not destroyed forever. If the church cannot provide such a place, then it is understandable that many people will search for it elsewhere. A theologically qualified, but often abstract, way of speaking of eternal life is also not very helpful for a person who is longing for concrete communion. If God is perceived as distant, the expression "life with God" does not convey very much hope. Life in communion has for many been life in communion with loved humans: spouses, children, parents, siblings and friends. Protestant theology has been reticent to promise reunion with the loved ones after death. Theologically, there has been a tension between the view that "dead is dead" and the belief in an eternal soul; the former has been the dominant view in the last century.

- (28) Where is hope for communion to be found? The spiritualists claim that they can establish a communion between the living and the dead. Many who believe in reincarnation maintain that we can meet again in this or another world in new bodies, but still as the same persons, and thus reunite and reestablish the communion that was broken by death.

### **The communion of the living and the dead**

- (29) In the late Middle Ages, the fear of death was very much present in European society. Consequently, the fear of hell was a real fear which was capitalized on in the practice of indulgences, strongly criticized by Luther and others. In Europe today, death is as present as it was before. Nonetheless, although we are all going to die, death itself has become more distant occurring more often in hospital than at home. People are afraid of sickness, suffering, dying and death, but very rarely of hell. Death is seen either as the end or as the beginning of a better life. Since today European Christians are no longer so afraid of hell and damnation, the prayers for the dead are not aimed at easing their time in purgatory or to change God's judgement. We could say that there is no need to pray for the dead since God has already taken care of them, but this is a minimalist understanding of prayer and human needs. We do not pray in order to tell God something that God already knows, but because what is important to us also matters to God, and because we believe that communication is central to our relationship with God. This means that our friends who have died are still our friends and as we cared and prayed for them in life, so they continue to matter to us. We do not have to worry any more, but we can still give thanks for them and trust that their care for us has not been interrupted by death. This means that we can name the dead in our prayers to God.
- (30) "Now he is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive" (Lk 20:38). As Jesus testified, so we believe in a God for whom all of us are alive. Death is a dividing line to us, not to God. How can we then express this faith?
- a) Name the dead in our prayers. Although many Lutherans would hesitate to pray for the dead, we can be confident in speaking the names of our dead friends (and enemies) in connection with God's love: "We give thanks to you God, for what you have given us through NN our friend." "We trust that through your abundant love NN has found the joy that you have promised."
  - b) When the announcements of the deceased members of the congregation are read in church, light a candle for each person.
  - c) Celebrate "All Souls' Day" when the families who have lost someone during the year are invited to a special service.
  - d) Provide a prayer candle stand in the church where people can place a candle and say a prayer.
  - e) Celebrate the Eucharist and in the prayers mention the names of "those who have reached their home in you and now rest in peace."

### Some advice

- a) **Acknowledge** that there are experiences of the supernatural, and try to understand what the experiences mean to those who have had them. What is experienced is real to the person who has had the experience. (In this first instance, it is important that pastors do not give their interpretation, but listen attentively to the person who has had the experience.) This does not mean that it is supernatural, it may belong to the order of creation, and it is not necessarily evil in itself, but can be used for good or evil.
  - b) **Learn** about contemporary beliefs and ways that give meaning to life. This can be learnt both directly from encounters with people and from research. Consider the ethical consequences of various beliefs.
  - c) **Provide** counseling through dialogue. Be aware of the resources that are available in the Christian tradition: prayer, thanksgiving, sacraments, lighting of candles, groups for the grieving. It is important that people who have had extra ordinary experiences are not thrown out of the congregation, but find a safe haven in the Christian community.
  - d) **Ask** for the gift of discernment in order to be able to help. Pastors have to realize their own limitations. For treatment that is more extensive, cooperate with experts in psychology and medicine. When there is a channeled message it is important that it is tested against given criteria.
  - e) **Dare** to use the many images, symbols and metaphors from the Christian tradition that try to describe the life that overcomes death. We cannot give details about the life to come, but believe that what God will give is more than we can think or imagine.
  - f) **Preach** on “forgotten things”: e.g., the resurrection, prayers for the dead, prophesy, the gifts of the Spirit, angels, individual and collective eschatology.
  - g) **Share** insights from the Bible, e.g., it is not good to try to contact the dead but there is a difference between active efforts to contact the dead and uninvited apparitions.
  - h) **Dialogue** with spiritist/spiritualist/channeling groups and individuals. Dialogue with representatives of spiritualistic movements, although difficult, is necessary. Difficulties arise particularly there where from the esoteric perspective a “higher instance” is invoked which can only be judged “from the inside.” Dialogue is necessary so that the gospel of Jesus’ salvation through death and resurrection is understood by people who are convinced by spiritualistic concepts. This, in turn, requires translation which can only be effective if the partners know one another well, and there is a willingness to express the Christian faith in new ways.
- (31) Christianity is faced with the challenges posed by inculturation as it seeks to translate its message at different times and in different cultural settings. In accordance with its tradition, Lutheranism is constantly looking for new ways of

translating the Christian message into the language of the people listening to the Word of God, so that new faith can come into being and can grow.