

RESPONSE

Christian Pastors and Alleged Witches in Kinshasa, DRC. A Response.

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A resurgence of witchcraft accusations has been observed in countries that are predominantly low on the Human Development Index (HDI) scale. The composite impact of poverty, as in Kinshasa in this report predisposes to factors of ignorance, illness, misfortune and family marginality that are correlated with the accusations. Fair enough.

To me, one critical dimension needs additional research by Christian anthropologists. The question of whether the accused have superpowers that supersede physical reality with capacities that are unavailable to normal human beings obscures the actual problem: the apparent inhumanity, or capacity for evil by the core accusers and their harmful behaviors towards the accused.

There is a dimension of human personality worth considering, then correlating with the child-witchcraft accusations in Kinshasa and elsewhere: the question of narcissism. In recent years, behaviors of prominent persons have illuminated narcissistic tendencies and reintroduced public discourse about human beings' inclination to evil. Psychologists describe the narcissistic personality disorder as a mental condition in which people have an inflated sense of importance and entitlement concealed behind a façade of humility and benign benevolence. Behind the mask of extreme confidence lies a deeply fragile and vulnerable self, though narcissists never admit weakness. Rather they expect uncompromising compliance and are said to lack the capacity to empathize. They are unable to comprehend the destructiveness of their narcissistic behaviors towards their co-dependent victims and vulnerable subjects.

What does this have to do with witchcraft accusations, and with this report by Priest, Ngolo and Stabell (2020) in particular? It occurs to me that the focus of analysis and prognosis in this and other writing on the subject of the accused—children in this case, or elsewhere, vulnerable elderly men and women, and the various consequences for the accused, and interventions to help the accused obscures the real problem—that there are some people who are inclined

to be evil. I think research needs to be focused on the pathological narcissism of accusers, the evil they cause, including manipulation gaslighting others as accomplices in the accusations.

Having recently read materials relating to the narcissistic personality, it occurred to me that pathological narcissism is the closest we come to an ontological description of how evil—as extreme self-centeredness, and resultant harmful behaviors directed at others—manifests in a human person.

Erich Fromm, a psychologist who fled Nazi Germany spent his career trying to understand why normal people allowed Nazis to rise to power and attempt the annihilation of a whole race. In *The Heart of Man, Its Genius for Good and Evil*, Fromm coined the term *malignant narcissism* to describe extreme, exploitative selfishness, the pathology at the root of the vicious destructiveness and inhumanity. While it is possible that a sizable portion of humanity are relatively harmless narcissists, malignant narcissists are driven by malevolent envy that is dead set to destroy the object of their envy. Fromm thought Hitler exhibited the *quintessence of evil*: a man totally lacking the emotional aspects of a conscience, yet a brain quite capable of calculated manipulateness. A psychopath, he observed, may be indifferent to the feelings or fates of others and might not actively want to inflict harm or control. But malignant narcissism, more than vanity, is the maladaptive form of self-obsession.

As a child, I knew an extended family member whom I may now describe as a narcissist. He had the same qualities as those who accuse children and vulnerable women of being witches. This man took distinct delight in subjecting women, including his mother, his wife and little stepdaughter to spiteful malice. Custom and taboo were insufficient to stop him from beating the daylights out of a five-year-old for a normal thing as losing control of bowel movement. He threatened physical harm to in-laws and disrespected his elderly mother while he charmed his way into social spaces to divide others. In the world I grew up in, the idea of witchcraft accusations was absent. I realize now,

had such a concept existed, he would have accused his little stepdaughter and his mother of being witches.

This private story links narcissism to radical evil in certain human beings. The evangelical understanding of evil is tied to the Fall of Adam and Eve. While the Fall sets the theological foundation for imagining what is wrong in the world in a generalized theological sense, it is inadequate for describing why the world has such characters as Hitler, who perpetuate what Fromm referred to as sociological narcissism, the calculated inclination to bring evils like the holocaust or genocide. It also does not explain what Hannah Arendt referred to as the banality of evil, the tendency groups of people, like soldiers and bureaucrats, or villagers for that matter, to blindly contribute to destructive actions at the command of malignant narcissists. It also comes short of elucidating why a familiar individual can cause unbearable suffering to persons in one's care for no reason except a malignant will to power.

I think that witchcraft accusations, particularly as directed towards children offer an opportunity to move beyond the hypothetical question of whether such superpowers as ascribed to accused witches exist to the ontological reality of evil as resident in some humans. The dimensions of witchcraft accusations—proclivity to attack an assumed witch, complicit hypocrisy of onlookers, and the “othering” of certain groups—these may situate concrete research on people who seem to be patently hardwired to generate and perpetuate the unimaginable.

Popular references seem to suggest that narcissism begins in a distorted childhood with an unloving, or an excessively dotting parent who uses the child to satisfy their own ego. In the absence of positive mitigation, such a child may grow up into a narcissist who might take on deeply pathological behaviors that seem to invite what may be affiliation to dark powers or demonic possession. Iterative research on pathological narcissists as accusers, and the psychosocial vulnerabilities of the accused would also help to locate the idea of witchcraft itself as a category among other categories that analyze human moral agency. Correlates of witchcraft may then be found in societies that for instance, do not have witchcraft in their lexicon, but are equally capable of destructive actions towards the vulnerable.

In conclusion, there are individuals that seem hardwired to carry out evil. But I think so far, it has been difficult to research “evil” as an anthropological category. I think witchcraft accusations offer that anthropological category to Christian anthropologists. Such research might correlate this to the dark power of Satan, spirits, demons, and related issues of agency, victimhood and consequences in the larger world.

References

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