

EIGHTH UNISA SYMPOSIUM OF NEW TESTAMENT AND EARLY CHRISTIAN STUDIES

Department of Biblical and Ancient Studies
University of South Africa, Pretoria

19-21 September 2016

Theme:

Where do we stand on the *supernatural*? An interdisciplinary exploration

THE ISSUE

There are certain concepts that will not disappear from our vocabulary. *Supernatural* is one of them!

The term is often used, also in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and scholarship. One can hardly read a scholarly book on New Testament and Early Christian Studies where the term *supernatural* does not appear. It is not only the miraculous elements, such as the resurrection and the miracles in the New Testament, but also numerous aspects in the early Christian tradition that are labelled supernatural while the notion of the “supernatural” is presupposed in Christian theistic theologies. *Supernatural* is used to describe **entities**, such as, gods, demons, ghosts and spirits but also for **events**, such as, healings, exorcisms witchcraft and miracles and for **unusual experiences**, such as, apparitions, visions (revelations) , out-of-body experiences (soul journeys), contact with the dead and trance.



One of the features in New Testament and Early Christian Studies is the remarkable absence of a systematic and critical reflection about the concept. It has achieved the status of a common-sense concept and its everyday usage presupposes that there is no need to define and demarcate it. One of the reasons is, as Raverty states: "In its Christian sense, the nature/supernature dichotomy is fixed and foundational to a systematic theological anthropology" (2003:188). Traditionally modern scientists ignore the social reality of supernatural phenomena but its cross-cultural distribution and impact on all societies call for a reconsideration.

In recent years the concept *supernatural* has been subjected to various critical analyses and scholarly debates in a number of different fields. In a publication some ten years ago the anthropologist Roger Lohmann wrote the following:

'Supernatural' is a word that conjures spine-tingling feelings of mystical awe, fear, and joy. Does it exist as a concept, or as a phenomenon, however, among all peoples? What does it mean as a cultural construction and as a response to reality? What is its relationship to religion and spirituality, to experiences of ghosts and ideas about gods? What part of the ineffable world that informs cosmologies is captured by the term 'supernatural', and what is distorted or left out when we use it? Why is it such a contentious term in anthropology, vigorously condemned by some, championed by others, and blithely used by the rest? (2003:117).

The above was written as an introduction to a critical analysis of the term in anthropological research. These, and many more questions, haunt several other disciplines concerned with the human condition. Some argues that religion as such cannot be defined without reference to the concept "supernatural": "It is my contention that the supernatural is the key concept of religion" (Hultkrantz 1983:231). Others contend that it is a uniquely Western category: "I contested the term's presentation as a universal analytic category following field research among Sulawesi peoples with ancestral traditions, and comparative research on other non-Western cosmologies" (Aragon 2003:131). Yet, for Bosco it is a useful cross-cultural and analytical concept because it does not belong to a single culture-bound perspective. That does not mean that the boundary between natural and supernatural is fixed; in fact, that boundary is shifting (Bosco 2003:148). It is, therefore, a contested concept.



Besides the definitional and conceptual debates about the supernatural and our understanding of religion, the concept is also drawing attention from the cognitive science of religion, neurosciences and neuroanthropology, among others. Here the focus is on the recurring patterns of supernatural beliefs and attempts to find interpretive and explanatory models to deal with them. If the supernatural is so ubiquitous, what are the interpretive models that inform debates about it? Ilkka Pyysiäinen, **cognitive scientist of religion**, argues: “knowledge about the cognitive architecture of the human mind can help us understand the nature and spread of beliefs about both human souls and spirits and supernatural agents such as gods” (2009:3) while Michael Winkelman and John Baker, **neuroanthropologists**, suggest: “*It is natural to think about the supernatural*. This does not mean that all of the ‘otherworldly’ things that religions talk about actually exist. Rather, we believe that it is a natural condition of human beings to have religions, which we *talk* about as beliefs, and we *do* as rituals” (2010:xxii). **Neuroscientists** focus on the neural structures and processes that contribute to the creation of supernatural entities, agents and experiences. For example, some highlight the role of dreams in creating such concepts (see McNamara and Bulkeley 2015) while others focus on religious experiences as the source for supernatural agents (see Jeeves and Brown 2009; Pennycook, et al. 2012). The “supernatural” and the “natural” are pulled into a variety of discourses that differ from those that gave birth to the concept in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

All in all this is an exciting time to think about the supernatural. It is no longer the reserved terrain of scholars of religion and theology but the playing field for the interdisciplinary study of one of the most fascinating aspects of the human condition. Cognitive psychologist Joseph Bulbulia says: “Lots of us believe in supernatural realities—gods—and why this is so presents one of the most fascinating and underexamined questions in the naturalistic study of our species” (2006:87). It can be added, what it is, is capturing the imagination of scholars from many fields. In evolutionary terms, James McClenon suggests that supernatural phenomena have physiological and genetic bases that can account for the origin of religion as well as folk beliefs in souls, spirits and life after death (McClenon 2006). Ethnographic, cross-cultural, neuroscientific, cognitive scientific, science of religion, cultural studies and other insights come together in exploring the “ineffable” (Lohmann 2003) and thinking about the miraculous, the anomalous and the “natural” in human life in a holistic and



integrated way. The supernatural becomes embodied in the understanding of what it is to be human and is, so to speak, domesticated in new ways.

Therefore, today there is an opportunity to rethink the concept and to reflect about the variety of interpretive tools available to explore the supernatural as a cross-cultural feature of the human condition. The focus is no longer primarily on the natural – supernatural dichotomy (supernatural versus natural) but include notions, such as, supernatural as natural, supernatural as cultural, supernatural as natural and cultural phenomenon.

Papers are called for in any of the following areas:

- What is the supernatural?
- What are supernatural events, agents and experiences?
- Why does the supernatural exist?
- How do we deal scientifically with supernatural events, agents and experiences?
- Supernatural phenomena and the human condition

References

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- Raverty, T., D. 2003. Starting with the supernatural: Implications for method, comparison, and communication in religious anthropology and inter-religious dialogue. *Anthropological Forum* 13(2):187–94.
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COST

The cost to register for the symposium is as follows:

Academics: R 1200
Students: R 400

Travel and accommodation is for the cost of participants and should be arranged personally. Below we give details of a recommended guest house in Pretoria.

VENUE

The symposium will take place at the Muckleneuk Campus in Pretoria.

Preller Street
Muckleneuk
Pretoria

See attached PDF for a map of the Muckleneuk Campus.



CONTACT PERSONS

We look forward to your contributions and making your stay as comfortable as possible. For all queries before and during your stay please contact:

Pieter Craffert
Tel. +27 83 324 4485
craffpf@unisa.ac.za

Itumeleng Mothoagae
Tel. +27 83 504 4345
mothodi@unisa.ac.za

ACCOMMODATION

Participants have the responsibility to arrange their own accommodation. We recommend that you stay at the Brooklyn Guesthouse.

Contact person at Brooklyn Guesthouse: Lienkie
Tel: +27 12 362 1728
Fax: +27 12 362 1727
Cel: +27 84 252 4626
Email: info@brooklynguesthouses.co.za

Address:
128 Murray Street, Brooklyn, Pretoria, South Africa, 0181

TRANSPORT

Transport from and to the airport, as well from and to your place of residence will be arranged for all the participants.

Please forward your arrival and departure details to one of the contact persons listed above.

