

News From the Magic Kingdom

From Saudi Arabia comes the news that the *mutaween*, the feared religious police under the control of the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, who patrol the streets and regulate the daily life of the populace, are now being given five-day courses in how to recognize, and then how to neutralize, a small army of wizards, witches, ghosts, demons, fortunetellers in the Magic Kingdom. Apparently it's a big problem. Why, there have even been reports of leprechaun-like creatures – possibly they've wandered down from the Old Sod to end up in the Empty Quarter – who find it great fun to persuade innocent Saudis to break the rules of Sharia. All these dealers in the magical and supernatural will be hunted down, and dealt with sternly, by the Saudi religious police – “sternly” can mean anything from long prison sentences to decapitation. Such worries are not new to the Saudis, however – the official anti-witchcraft unit within the Ministry of the Interior was first formed in May 2009.

The reason the Saudis are so worried about wizards and witches is that the Saudi people, like other Muslims, are especially vulnerable to the appeal of the occult. Muslims learn from the Qur'an that there exists an intelligent creature (the only other intelligent creature in the universe, according to Islamic doctrine, aside from humans and angels), called the Djinn (or Jinn), whose meddling with humans explains Evil, as well as health and illness, wealth and poverty, that Man as a creature of fate – where everything may be inshallah but is not necessarily hunky-dory – may enjoy or endure. Evil djinn – not all djinn in Islam are bad – can take possession of people and cause them to behave in wicked ways.

This is not foreign to, but part of, orthodox Islam. Fortunately, there are those who, after appropriate training, can become qualified exorcisers of the evil djinn, using special Qur'anically-approved healing methods. There are also

those who have not undergone training to be exorcists and who use methods which have not been approved, and this gets them into trouble with officials even if their methods prove effective. The Saudi witchcraft-hunt offers us a glimpse of the Bizarro-World that we enter whenever we penetrate the world of Islam. In the West, we hardly bother to denounce those who claim to be witches and wizards, exorcists and fortunetellers, that is, all who lay claim to supernatural powers, because we know, as rational creatures, that they are frauds and fakes, they cannot possibly have these powers. And because we don't believe any of that stuff, we don't worry about them in this, our Western world, the dutiful child of the Enlightenment and rationalism. If we punish any fortunetellers or magicians at all, it's only because they have charged for services we know are worthless and we want them to disgorge their ill-gotten gains. Witchcraft has not been taken seriously, i.e. as effective, since Salem, when outside it was 1692.

But in the Islamic world, magic (bad or black magic and good magic) is everywhere and taken very seriously – i.e., thought to be effective – indeed. In the Islamic world, belief in witchcraft, magic, sorcery of all kinds, is widespread. Fear of black magic is pervasive. Fortunetellers, witches and wizards, exorcists of bad djinn are to be found everywhere. And this is because Magic and the Occult are very much a part of Muslim teachings and Muslim life.

The Occult – the Djinn – transmitted by the Qur'an, helps to explain the widespread belief in other kinds of sorcery and magic in the Muslim world. But it is not the whole explanation for that belief. The heightened vulnerability of Muslims to the promise and threat of assorted wizards, fortunetellers, sorcerers, and exorcists, as compared to the sturdy resistance of rational Western man, is to be explained also by the more general effect of Islam's encouragement of the habit of mental submission, and its punishment of skepticism. A good Muslim

never questions any of the teachings of Islam, and the observant Muslim state (as Saudi Arabia certainly is) punishes those Muslims who dare to demonstrate the least display of skepticism (the end-point of that skepticism is apostasy, punishable by death). The result is that Muslims, even without the whole business of the Djinn, inhabit a mental universe of encouraged credulity. And as the latest news with which I began this post reveals, the most comically extreme example of this Bizarro World has a local habitation and is better known, to most of us, by its Rand-McNally Atlas name – Saudi Arabia.