Evil is a frightening reality, but the devil is a fairytale. If we are to get to the root of genuine horrors, we can’t afford to place our faith in ‘occult experts’ who prize hysteria above logic, and myth over method, writes Jacques Rousseau.

Goblins and gobbledegook

IN AUGUST last year, an 18-year-old schoolboy in KwaZulu-Natal killed a 8-month-old child and tried to kill another pupil and two grandparents. On Thursday he was sentenced to life in jail.

In the course of Harmse’s murder, the typically vague “occult” emerged into the open. Harmse admitted to having a Satanist manual of interior design, “Shades of Satan”, in which he had scrawled notes about his plan to commit murder.

The Star’s Simon Chesterfield, who has followed the “Satanic Panic” in the 1980s and the “Satanic Attacks” in the 1990s, when he headed the Occult Crimes Unit of the SAPS, thinks the panic is now deepening.

Given the lack of any consensus, even among experts, as to what the “occult” is, it is helpful to start by defining it. Perhaps an “occult” person is someone who is justifiably worried about what an “occult crime specialist”, in the form of Kobus Jonker, is able to do. Jonker, who has a master’s degree in criminology, is the author of 19 books on the subject, one of which is the Satanist manual of interior design. Jonker himself could find no such book, but he said the manual had a pentagram on the cover, and that before the incident he and a group of people had written to the SAPS about it.

Could Jonker, an expert on what he termed “occult crimes”, be warned about your child’s danger? Probably. But the danger is not in the texts themselves, or in the ideas they contain. It is in the way they are used.

Anyone reading the relevant texts quickly conclude that the Satanists and pagans studied are not simply committed to mass murder and mayhem. They are likely to commit violent crime. Jonker’s friend Marco’s was to “[brings] rolling heads [because of] what he did, although the bomb ended up in his hair.”

Nor does it help to make an analogy with the apartheid-era courts. That was established by law, and its decisions were handed down by judges who were themselves apartheid’s agents. The “occult” case, on the other hand, is the result of an informal and voluntary marketplace that allows anyone who cares to to become an “expert” in that area. Jonker himself was not satisfied that the case required the testimony of an “occult crime specialist,” therefore he did not require it.

But, like with apartheid-era courts, the “occult” case is concerned with more than murder. It is also about demonstrating the need to have either that Jonker is a modern-day witch doctor, and that Jonker is a modern-day ghoul.

Another possibility is that some confused individuals believe in ghosts, demons, faeries, the healing power of caynbal and the like, and allow these beliefs to unfold into irrational and sometimes criminal actions. That is why any “occult” person – or anyone who is too easily frightened by the shadows – would be best advised to ignore the “occult.”

Having said that, we are talking about some adults who are people who are confused. For one thing, the satanic Bible itself, reveals nothing generally considered worse than burning candles, goats, swords or knives.

But this rational approach might not be enough, because the issue is deeper. We must also perhaps undertake the competitive misappropriations that allow the (imaginary) mere bogies and bedevils of metaphysical beliefs (like the “Satanic Panic”) to masquerade as something that they are not, in order to manipulate and distort.

Given that this story has been reported as involving occultism, and not just crimes committed under the assumed sanction of something like “Satanism,” it is necessary to explore what it means that some crucial details have been left out of this story.

Harmse’s father had written letters to the police, claiming his son was confused. For one thing, and that fact that Harmse cited the Anti-Satanic Covenant as a fanatic, and that his mask was inspired by those worn by the band Slipknot as a favourite, and that some crucial details have been left out.

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