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 Krugersdorp killed a fellow pupil with an ornamental sword, and tried to kill another pupil and two groundsmen. On Thursday, he was sentenced to an effective 20 years in prison.

In the course of Morne Harmse's trial, social workers and other expert witnesses provided what context and analysis they could, as you might expect.

Less expected, perhaps, was the involvement of an "occult crime specialist", in the form of Kobus Jonker (or Donker Jonker, to those of us who remember his fomentation of "Satanic Panic" in the 1980s and the 1990s, when he headed the Occult Crimes Unit of the SAPS).

Given the lack of any consensus, even among pagans, as to what "the occult" really means, we are perhaps justified in wondering what an "occult crime specialist" is, and how the testimony of one could possibly add value in a case like this (or any case, for that matter).

One hypothesis could be that there are occult forces that commit crimes, and that Jonker is a modern-day ghostbuster.

Another possibility is that some confused individuals believe in ghosts, demons, fairies, the healing power of crystals and the like, and allow those beliefs to lead them into irrational (and sometimes criminal) actions.

Such people exist, but if one can be an "expert" in them and their behaviour, then surely the sort of expertise required is simply that of understanding various pathologies, rather than being a so-called "expert" in the exact lore and fantasies that could be involved.

Not according to rent-seeker extraordinaire Jonker, who made a living – while achieving mini-celebrity status among those prone to metaphysical confusions – pretending that there is something extraordinary going on when confused people do bad things involving candles, goats, swords or anything generally considered "occult".

Any reading of the relevant texts, such as the Satanic Bible itself, reveals that these people are confused. For one thing, the Satanic Bible expressly condemns killing animals for ritual purposes, while also making it clear that if you want a person to die, the most you should do is to put a curse on them.

However, when these cases hit the news it is usually quite clear that the alleged "Satanists" have not read those texts – and that Jonker seems not to have either. Both parties are instead relying on a convenient trope, much as apartheid-era courts did in labelling people "terrorists".

Having said that, we are talking about confused people, so it is entirely possible that some poor kid could swallow the version of Satanism (or the typically vague "occult") promoted by Jonker, and aspire to live up to those fabricated standards.

An objective observer might at this point notice the strategy of minimising crimes committed under the assumed sanction of something like Satanism by talking about these beliefs more, in a more informed fashion – thereby hopefully allowing people to realise that they don't involve killing sentient beings.

But this rational approach might cost Jonker his livelihood, and will also perhaps undermine the competitive marketplace that allows the (arguably) more benign and orthodox sets of metaphysical beliefs (like Christianity) to flourish, seeing as one of their selling points is that they protect you from the phantoms of demons and damnation.

Given that this story has been reported as involving occultism on the part of the kids, a reader might think that some crucial details have been left out of this account.

What about the masks they wore, and the fact that Harmse cited the band Slipknot as a favourite, and that his mask was inspired by those worn by the band?

Well, two things come to mind.

First, rebellious and attention-seeking kids – like Harmse – listen to aggressive, countercultural, attention-seeking music, and we don't have any good evidence that violent music or computer games make people more likely to commit violent crime.

Second, it's not as if Harmse and his friends suddenly decided to put on their masks and go on a rampage: they had planned their attention-seeking day in advance, and swords and masks were but one element of their plan.

Harmse's friend Marco was to bring a "rolling bomb" (whatever that is), which he did, although the bomb turned out to be a fake.

Newspaper reports indicate that in his admission of guilt, Harmse said that before the incident he and a group of friends discussed the various methods they would use in a school massacre. Harmse planned to use the ninja sword hanging on his bedroom wall.

In other words, he used what was available to him – it wasn't part of some ritual, and I can find no evidence in the quotations attributed to the kids that provide a shred of evidence that they thought their behaviour related to the occult.

Jonker himself could find no such evidence: Harmse had clearly not read his Satanist manual of interior design carefully enough, as the bedding and curtains in his bedroom were coloured, "whereas a practising Satanist would have had only black or red". On the day of the murder, Harmse had also apparently "not spoken in any demonic language", and it is common knowledge that backwards-Latin is prescribed by the Seta for Satanism.

But Harmse and others like him may well – with the help of the likes of Jonker – start to think in terms of their anger and frustration being grounded in the occult, and that is a shame. Because instead of reflecting on what they did in terms of simple or more typical motivations like anger, attention-seeking and alienation, they may now start thinking more about nonsense metaphysics, and that could potentially lead them to further irrationality down the road.

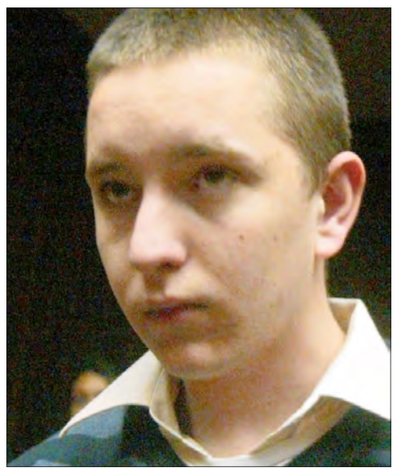
As for the courts, and their "expert witnesses", it is a shame that our judicial system is encouraging this sort of nonsense. If this case required the testimony of an "occult expert" like Jonker, did it also not perhaps require the services of expert witnesses in garden gnomes, just in case they had something to do with it?

● *Jacques Rousseau is from the Free Society Institute (http://fsi.org.za)*

INCANTATIONS AND IGNORANCE: A pentagram surrounded by candles. Self-proclaimed Satanists often follow a highly confused version of the 'occult'.

DONKER JONKER: Expert on Satanism and occult crime Kobus Jonker.

HALLOWEEN: The masks Morne Harmse made while planning the school attack. PICTURE: SIZWE NDINGANE



THE BOY WHO KILLED: Morne Harmse, who was convicted of murder.

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