

The Practice of Exorcism and the Challenge to Clerical Authority

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“There are the sacraments, which are both illuminating and purifying; there is the pastoral priesthood, which is both purified and purifying; and there is the faithful people, which is purified and does not purify...”

- Nicholas of Cusa¹

This statement represents a late medieval attempt to explain how the component parts of the Catholic Church should interact; the priesthood is the exclusive mediator between the source of spiritual power and the passive laity. Yet, despite the uncompromising tone in which this is stated the priesthood occupied a far more ambiguous role in reality. An analysis of the contexts in which the ceremony of exorcism took place will demonstrate this. The right to exorcise created tension between many different groups; clergy fought laity, Catholic fought Protestant, church hierarchy fought clerical practitioners and religious orders and denominations fought other orders and denominations. Exorcism, in short, was a *casus belli*.

This essay will examine how the theory and practice of exorcism affected the status of the priesthood from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries. This time period covers the establishment of the mendicant orders, the tensions leading up to the reformation, and the post-reformation religious environment, all of which, particularly the latter, made significant impacts on the concept of exorcism and the priesthood. Priesthood here primarily refers to ordained Catholic priests, although Protestant ministers will be discussed as their prestige could also be enhanced by expelling demons. In theory the most effective exorcisms were those performed by the clergy and in its most orthodox form exorcism was a successful tool for increasing the status of the priesthood. For it vindicated the Church's claim to being the inheritor of Christ's powers and demonstrated the piety of the individual priest. Exorcism could also be used as propaganda, depicting priests as the upholders of the correct hierarchy in eschatological, political and social terms.

Yet, the disadvantages often ran parallel. Its status as a sacramental made it easy for the laity to appropriate aspects for their own use, and even influence the exorcist's actions. Priests themselves often used exorcism in ways verging on the

¹ Nicholas of Cusa, “The Unity of the Church” [1433], in James Bruce Ross & Mary Martin McLaughlin, ed., *Portable Renaissance Reader* (New York: Viking Press, 1953), p. 626.

magical and demonic. Individual self-aggrandisement through the power to exorcise further debased the idea of the priesthood and threatened the hierarchy of the Church. Furthermore, the relationship between exorcists and demoniacs was fluid; the demoniac sometimes overshadowed the priest and in other cases worked so well with him that suspicions that it was a scripted performance arose. Thus, a successful exorcism vastly heightened the influence of the priesthood but was dependent on many variables.

Exorcism was largely a prerogative of the Catholic Church and an important component in its pastoral activities. Exorcism dispossesses people of demons that are inhabiting their bodies and was considered an essential of Catholic and Lutheran baptism, in addition to its more famous usage in healing demonic possession.² 'Exorcise' is derived from the ancient Greek verb 'to put under oath'; 'to exorcise' becomes in Latin *adjuro* or *conjuro*.³ Therefore the demon is exorcised, in the name of God, and ordered to depart from the body. According to Catholic theology, exorcism works because demons are members of the universal hierarchy and are subordinate to God. Girolamo Menghi, author of best-selling exorcism manuals in the sixteenth century, wrote that "Christ has delegated this power to him [the exorcist]...[and] In this matter Exorcists are not only equals but even the superiors of demons"⁴. That a Catholic exorcist was seen as superordinate to a fallen angel constitutes a definite status enhancement.

Perplexingly, in light of the great prestige that exorcism could bestow on priests, the Catholic Church was very lax in its supervision of this 'miracle of miracles'. Authorised exorcists were not required to be ordained priests though this was seen as distinctly increasing the efficacy of the rite; priests could exorcise, though only with their bishops' permission after the Counter-reformation.⁵ Priest-exorcists were of relatively low status on the priestly hierarchy⁶ and were often also marginal members of secular society.⁷ It is interesting to speculate why exorcism was not delegated to members of the higher clergy. Perhaps the Church felt that lesser rites

² Bodo Nischan, "The Exorcism Controversy and Baptism in the Late Reformation", in Brian Levack, ed., *Possession and Exorcism* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1992), pp. 161-181, discusses the meaning of Protestant denomination debates over the baptism exorcism.

³ D. P. Walker, *Unclean Spirits: possession and exorcism in France and England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries* (London: Scholar Press, 1981), p. 5.

⁴ *Fuga Daemonum* [1596] quoted in Mary R. O'Neil, *Discerning Superstition: popular errors and orthodox response in late sixteenth century Italy*, Ph.D. dissertation (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms International, 1982), p. 371.

⁵ Sarah Ferber, "The Demonic Possession of Marthe Brossier, France 1598-1600", in Charles Zika, ed., *No Gods Except Me: orthodoxy and religious practice in Europe 1200-1600* (Parkville, Vic.: University of Melbourne, History Department, 1991), p. 64.

⁶ Richard Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 153.

⁷ O'Neil, *Discerning Superstition*, p. 334.

such as exorcisms through their pastoral use would reinforce to the laity the even greater powers of the sacraments. In any case, Lutherans and Puritans were highly critical of the Catholic method of exorcising that relied on 'popish' paraphernalia. However, they held that demonic possession was possible and could be 'cured' by earnest prayer and fasting by ministers and laity, though the minister retained the leading position as "the mouth of God unto the rest".⁸ Thus, though exorcism was an enormously prestigious ceremony for both the Catholic and Protestant clergy little effort was made to monopolise it for the direct benefit of the church hierarchies.

Catholic exorcism is not a sacrament. It is a ritual that is categorised as a sacramental, a ceremony or object whose efficacy is entirely dependent on the moral purity of the user.⁹ A successful exorcism is therefore highly prestigious for the exorcist because it proves that God has deemed the person morally superior and worthy of exercising His grace.¹⁰ Yet a Catholic exorcist was, as Roper argues, much more "than a mere 'servant of the Word' and representative member of his congregation" as Protestant exorcists were.¹¹ For a Protestant could only pray to God to expel the demon unlike the Catholic who acted as Christ's proxy. This was emphasised by the priestly paraphernalia that was used in exorcisms. The priest's stole, the Host, holy water and relics all greatly increased the efficacy, as did the physical person of the priest himself whose hands were popularly believed to be supernaturally endowed.¹² A Catholic exorcist could, in consequence, both reinforce the faith and convert sceptics by demonstrating the efficacy of the priesthood and the sacraments.¹³

A significant period in the history of Christian exorcism is the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As Scribner states, religion has always aimed to control the profane world through the means of the sacred¹⁴ and during this time exorcism became a barely concealed weapon of propaganda to aggrandise specific religious groups. The efficacy of this was reliant on demonstrating the eschatological, or apocalyptic, significance of demonic possession and the power to exorcise. Both

⁸ John Swan, *A True and Breife Report of Mary Glovers Vexation, and of Her Deliverance by Fastings and Prayer* [1603]. Reprinted in Michael MacDonald, ed., *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 7.

⁹ R. W. Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany* (London & Ronceverte: Hambledon Press, 1987), p. 5.

¹⁰ Ferber, "Demonic Possession of Marthe Brossier", p. 63.

¹¹ Lyndal Roper, "Magic and the Theology of the Body: exorcism in sixteenth-century Augsburg", in Charles Zika, ed., *No Gods Except Me: orthodoxy and religious practice in Europe 1200-1600* (Parkville, Vic.: University of Melbourne, History Department, 1991), p. 96.

¹² Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, p. 11.

¹³ Ferber, "Demonic Possession of Marthe Brossier", p. 62.

¹⁴ Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements*, p. 11

Catholics and Protestants took an eschatological world-view; for example the Lutherans interpreted the ‘epidemic’ of demonic possessions in Germany in the 1560s as forewarning of the approaching end of time.¹⁵ Since the Church of Christ was meant to triumph at this time intense rivalry manifested itself between Protestants and Catholics. George More, a close ally of the Puritan exorcist John Darrell, wrote:

*If the Church of Englande have this power to cast out devils then the Church of Rome is a false Church, for there can be but one true Churche, the principall marke whereof (as they say) is to worke miracles, and of them this is the greatest, namely to cast out Devills.*¹⁶

Catholic exorcists, in general, triumphed in these terms and through their power ‘to put under oath’, could reinforce their ‘true Churche’ representatives claims by drawing out important information from demons regarding the end of the world.¹⁷ For example, the devil Verin, who possessed the Provençal Ursuline nun Louise Capeau in 1610, proclaimed that he was sent by God to give the heathen one last chance to convert before the imminent Apocalypse.¹⁸ As both the laity and clergy thought in eschatological terms the efficacy of exorcism as propaganda is easy to comprehend.

As propaganda, exorcisms sought to convert for both spiritual and political motives. The most famous cases arose in the very tense religious-political conditions in England and France. The unusual prominence of the Host in French exorcisms was significant because France was the most divided country in Europe with significant numbers of fervent Catholics and Protestants and an even more significant number of indifferent citizens.¹⁹ By validating the Catholic belief of transubstantiation the whole faith was validated.²⁰ Less polemic but just as effective were the Catholic exorcisms in the German city of Augsburg. Predominantly Protestant, the city was the site of very public exorcisms of members of the elite Catholic Fugger household. As it was commonly believed that heresy makes the body sick, the Jesuit priests demonstrated

¹⁵ H. C. Erik Midelfort, “Sin, Melancholy, Obsession: insanity and culture in sixteenth century Germany”, in Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century* (Berlin & New York: Mouton, 1984), p. 137.

¹⁶ Michael MacDonald, ed. & introduction, *Witchcraft and Hysteria in Elizabethan London* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. xxi.

¹⁷ Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: the idea of witchcraft in early modern Europe* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 428.

¹⁸ Clark, *Thinking With Demons*, p. 424.

¹⁹ Jonathon L. Pearl, “‘A School for the Rebel Soul’: politics and demonic possession in France”, *Historical Reflections*, 16: 2 & 3 (Summer/Fall 1989), p. 288.

²⁰ Walker, *Unclean Spirits*, pp. 5 & 6.

by successfully 'healing' these women that health was equivalent to the Catholic Church.²¹ Furthermore, the Jesuits also demonstrated their ability to reassert the social order, for the demoniacs were both female and servants. During their possessions they behaved in ways both unfeminine - for example, displaying their genitals - and unbecoming their rank - insulting superiors.²² By exorcising them the priests showed that they were capable of acting in the best interests of the secular as well as the spiritual world. The effect was the conversion of many Protestants.

A common trait of these 'propagandist' exorcisms was their public setting and the protracted time required to expel the demons. Far from detracting from the priest's expertise however, these long exorcisms enabled him to display it to a vast number of people by 'performing' on specially constructed platforms in churches. This theatrical setting acted on the spectators' subconscious, enabling a suspension of disbelief.²³ The ordinary world was thus transformed into a supernatural world where good and bad spirits waged war.²⁴ This visual enactment of theology often led to the conversion of people who had previously held an opposing religious view. One convert to Catholicism after the 1566 Miracle of Laon said: "I believe. Because I have seen it. I will no longer be a Huguenot. Damned are those who fooled me. Now I know the Mass is good and that the priests are virtuous."²⁵ That a contemporary could claim that 150 000 people witnessed the Miracle²⁶ indicates how wide-reaching the effects of a successful exorcism could be, and how these effects boosted the reputation of the priesthood, for they were shown as the arbiters of both the supernatural and secular hierarchy. Yet, the marginality of exorcists and the lack of supervision given to the rite concurrently produced many disadvantages.

The fact that exorcism was a sacramental meant that it could easily be appropriated by the laity. The 'reform of popular culture' undertaken by both Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth century merely unearthed the many unorthodox practices to which sacramentals were put to use.²⁷ Although it is true that "Magic was often frankly parasitic on Catholic belief",²⁸ the Church was largely

²¹ Roper, "Magic and the Theology of the Body", p. 85.

²² Roper, "Magic and the Theology of the Body", p. 89.

²³ Stephen Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists", in *Shakespearean Negotiations: the circulation of social energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988), p. 100.

²⁴ Stephen Greenblatt, "Loudon and London", *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (Winter 1986), p. 330.

²⁵ Pearl, "'A School for the Rebel Soul'", p. 294.

²⁶ Walker, *Unclean Spirits*, pp. 22 & 35.

²⁷ Mary R. O'Neil, "'Sacerdote ovvero strione': ecclesiastical and superstitious remedies in sixteenth-century Italy", in Steven L. Kaplan, ed., *Understanding Popular Culture: Europe from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century* (Berlin & New York: Mouton, 1984), p. 53.

²⁸ Roper, "Magic and the Theology of the Body", p. 95.

responsible for this. For in practice the Church taught that prayers and sacramentals worked *ex opere operato*, like a sacrament.²⁹ The real danger in this situation though was that in the majority of cases the lower clergy, the exorcist class, were members of this laity, sharing in their “milieu and *mentalite*”.³⁰ O’Neil has emphasised that it was very often the laity who sought after the assistance of priests and even directed them in exorcisms. Exorcists in turn were often not concerned with maintaining a monopoly on the rite.³¹

Priests’ close relationship with the supernatural often led to them being seen as witches or familiars of the devil. Exorcists often only had “a little learning” and this learning was “a dangerous thing” because they could easily use it in unorthodox or even heretical ways.³² This suspicion was applied to the whole profession and even the most orthodox exorcists were vulnerable to accusations that exorcism was the means to achieving worldly and personal ends. This trend reached its climax with the group possessions of nuns in France in the early seventeenth century, in which their priest-confessors were executed for *maleficia*.³³ However, throughout the middle ages the idea that there were only good and bad spirits in the world had also nurtured ambivalent attitudes to the priest-as-exorcist.³⁴ The problem was not helped by the ambiguity created by the upper echelons of the Church. For example, the *Malleus Maleficarum* makes unclear, if not contradictory, statements. For it recommends one method “not because it must be rigidly observed”, whilst later it commands “let no one meddle with such sacred offices by any accidental or habitual omission of any necessary forms or words”.³⁵ This official ambiguity must be held considerably responsible for the confusion that both clergy and laity exhibited.

The exorcist could pose a threat to the hierarchy within the clergy and between the Church and laity. Its sacramental nature meant that the exorcist wielded attained rather than delegated authority. In such cases it was the exorcist’s ‘charisma’, the personal quality of directly accessing sacred powers, rather than their religious position that led to success.³⁶ For example, saints of the thirteenth century, both male

²⁹ Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971), p. 42.

³⁰ O’Neil, “*Sacerdote ovvero strione*”, p. 56.

³¹ O’Neil, *Discerning Superstition*, p. 273.

³² Kieckhefer, *Magic in the Middle Ages*, p. 155.

³³ Pearl, ““A School for the Rebel Soul””, p. 300.

³⁴ H. C. Erik Midelfort, “The Devil and the German People: reflections on the popularity of demon possession in sixteenth-century Germany”, in Brian Levack, ed., *Possession and Exorcism* (New York & London: Garland Publishing, 1992), p. 101.

³⁵ Jacobus Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum* [1486], trans. Montague Summers, ed. Pennethorne Hughes (London: Folio Society, 1968), pp. 196 & 198.

³⁶ Greenblatt, “Shakespeare and the Exorcists”, p. 96.

and female, were renowned for their successful exorcisms.³⁷ Even Menghi conceded that the laity could legitimately exorcise under certain circumstances in his vernacular *Compendio*.³⁸ Itinerant exorcists, usually either defrocked priests, delicensed, or lay practitioners competed with legitimate exorcists, whilst their unorthodox behaviour in specific cases could debase the idea of exorcism, and by extension, the priesthood.³⁹ The propagandist exorcisms also represented a threat because lay popularity challenges the authority of the ordained hierarchy; sceptical attitudes to exorcism therefore developed within the upper clergy.⁴⁰ Religious infighting also lessened lay faith in the idea of priesthood. For example, the Mexican Franciscans very publicly used exorcism against the Carmelites and Dominicans, leading a Carmelite to comment that “Men are disconsolate, women are afflicted and souls are everywhere riddled with doubt. The holy religious orders are nearing a very grave confrontation which is emerging from the disunity and the difference of opinion over the recent happenings.”⁴¹ Therefore while the charismatic basis of exorcism could increase the prestige of the individual in the process it lessened the authority of the priesthood.

Similarly, demoniacs could supplant the exorcists as the real spiritual powerhouses. They were commonly viewed as prophets because although demons were known to be liars by nature, they could be made to speak the truth under oath.⁴² The credit often went to the demoniac rather than the exorcist in these situations. Moreover, when they were not under oath demoniacs insulted and taunted the exorcist;⁴³ Mary Glover “did belch out spittle disdainfully” at her exorcist, and this was typical behaviour.⁴⁴ Furthermore, it can be argued that in certain cases it lay within the demoniac’s power to deny that the exorcism had worked in order to humiliate the priest. Newman suggests that the failed exorcism of a woman obsessed by the devil in the guise of an invisible lapdog in the *vita* of Abbot John of Cantimpre is an example of the demoniac punishing the priest for judging her personal eccentricities as demonic and exposing them in public.⁴⁵

³⁷ Barbara Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit: devout women, demoniacs, and the apostolic life in the thirteenth century”, *Speculum*, 73:3 (July 1998), p. 738.

³⁸ O’Neil, *Discerning Superstition*, p. 336.

³⁹ E.g. O’Neil, *Discerning Superstition*, p. 258.

⁴⁰ Ferber, “Demonic Possession of Marthe Brossier”, p. 61.

⁴¹ Fernando Cervantes, “The Devils of Queretaro: scepticism and credulity in late seventeenth-century Mexico”, *Past and Present*, 130 (1991), p. 57.

⁴² Clark, *Thinking with Demons*, p. 433.

⁴³ E.g. Walker, *Unclean Spirits*, p. 32.

⁴⁴ Swan, *True and Breife Report*, p. 44.

⁴⁵ Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit”, p. 747.

Priests were therefore so eager to exorcise that they often did not ascertain the veracity of the ‘possession’. This led to situations where the patient was afflicted by something other than possession or was a fraud. Clerical treatises readily admitted that demoniacs often faked possession, which suggests that this was easy to do and that it was a role worthy of playing.⁴⁶ Unlike witches, demoniacs were not held responsible for their diabolical contact and were not considered responsible for their behaviour. For priests, demoniacs verified and gained an attentive audience for their own preaching.⁴⁷ They also presented an opportunity for the priest to act as spiritual advisor to a potential saint, a prestigious position.⁴⁸ Hence, it was common for priests to “sponsor” demoniacs and share the spotlight with them.⁴⁹ The danger was that public exorcisms often came across as wholly theatrical, creating scepticism. Thomas Killigrew, a Protestant observer of the Loudon possessions in 1635 explained: “The Preist then gave one boue more for my sake. being loath that I should Continue an Heriticke...This last I confesses I was glad to see, for it confirmed me in beleiving nothing this Devill did or said”.⁵⁰ Ironically, Killigrew was a theatre manager and playwright but even to theatrical outsiders the construct and motivations of the exorcism were often all too obvious.

The ambiguous contexts in which exorcism took place ended up debasing a ritual that was theoretically so advantageous to the priesthood. For the priesthood was never able to monopolise the prestige a successful exorcism created. One solution offered by the Church was to shift exorcism into a theoretical, theological realm where it could be neither debased nor criticised.⁵¹ Yet, paradoxically, this removed it from the pastoral realm where it could exert the greatest influence on the laity. The conclusion must be that in the majority of cases exorcism was a valuable tool in enhancing the reputation of the priesthood and the churches. However, the lack of guidelines and supervision surrounding its practice ultimately led to it being cancelled out as a practical tool for the priesthood.

⁴⁶ Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit”, p. 753.

⁴⁷ Newman, “Possessed by the Spirit”, p. 757.

⁴⁸ Cervantes, “The Devils of Queretaro”, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Ferber, “Demonic Possession of Marthe Brossier”, p. 64.

⁵⁰ J. Lough and D. E. L. Crane, ed., “Thomas Killigrew and the Possessed Nuns of Loudon: the text of a letter of 1635”, *Durham University Journal*, 78:2 (1986), p. 265.

⁵¹ Ferber, “Demonic Possession of Marthe Brossier”, p. 75.

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