

POSSESSION AND EXORCISM

By JOHN NAVONE

WILLIAM PETER BLATTY, author of both the novel and the script of the film, *The Exorcist*, had his finger firmly on the popular pulse at the time he began writing his story of demonic possession. The youthful counter-culture was in flower, and one of its fads was satanism, described by Andrew Greeley 'as partly a put-on, partly neurotic, partly an escape, and partly dead serious'.

The devil, demons, and witches have not only fascinated mankind through the ages; they have, in more recent times, also intrigued film makers. As far as the entertainment media are concerned, it is perhaps no exaggeration to say that the devil has eclipsed God in popularity. He appears frequently on late-night television (and occasionally in 'prime time') in one horrible form or another. He was responsible for Rosemary's notorious baby; and in *The Mephisto Waltz* his favourite theme-music was the familiar Liszt composition for piano. But never has he assumed more awesome and vivid form than in *The Exorcist*, described by William S. Pechter as the *Godfather* of horror films.¹

Stanley Kauffmann takes issue with the moralistic critics of *The Exorcist*, 'who invariably object when they happen not to like a current instance of horror or violence, although they may have been carolling the week before about Clint Eastwood or Hitchcock'.² Such critics bemoan the fact that a child is called upon to mouth some obscenities and to perform an obscene action. Kauffmann does not see how the child's satanic possession could have been shown by having her exclaim 'Darn!', and by breaking Mom's favourite vase.

Not even its most negative critics have denied the emotional impact of *The Exorcist*. No one has dozed off or has claimed to be bored during this film experience. John Hartl, film critic of the

¹ *Commentary*, Vol 57, (3, March 1974). The theme of possession is an old reliable: it is the basis of a chief work on the Yiddish theatre, Anski's *The Dybbuk*. The idea of a doomed-haunted object has worked for dozens of writers, including Lord Dunsany and W. W. Jacobs.

² Kauffmann, Stanley: *The New Republic*, Feb 9, 1974.

Seattle Times, acknowledges the impact of this film, which refuses to violate the mystery with which it deals: 'Its implicit rejection of the answers given by medicine and psychology, for which the film has been heavily criticized, is simply an admission that man can never entirely comprehend his own world, let alone the universe'.³ In this sense, Hartl believes that the film evokes religious awe – not because it advocates belief in the devil (it is actually quite ambivalent about this point), but because it reminds us how little we really know, of how helpless we can be in the face of something that does not fit into our narrow, conventional view of reality. Hartl concludes that this film is 'a slap in the face to the kind of pride that lends support to a sense of security and omniscience that man can never justify. It is the shock of that slap – not the devil, vomit or the levitating bed or the foul language – that is sending critics and audiences reeling'.⁴

Demonic possession in the New Testament is often accompanied or at least assimilated by disease, because disease, a consequence of sin,⁵ is another indication of Satan's domination.⁶ The gospel exorcisms therefore often take the form of cures,⁷ although there are also cases of simple expulsions,⁸ and of sicknesses that have no features of possession and are still attributed to Satan.⁹ Most of Jesus's miracles are miracles of healing or nature miracles. The gospels record only about five expulsions of demons; and they often and clearly distinguish between the possessed by demons and the sick.¹⁰ Although the gospel may attribute to a spirit, in some cases, what we would recognize as epilepsy or insanity, there is little doubt that in many cases there is question of real exorcism of real devils.

Did Jesus really cast out demons from men? Some believe that Jesus adapted himself to common popular belief. The texts seem to indicate more than that. Jesus appears to share with his contemporaries the belief in the existence and operation of evil spirits. The

³ Mar 3, 1974.

⁴ *Ibid.* *SR/World* (15 June, 1974), featured two articles on *The Exorcist*: 'A Psychoanalyst's Indictment of *The Exorcist*' by Ralph H. Greenon, M. D., and 'In Answer to Dr Greenon', by Hollis Alpert. Alpert believes that Dr Greenon goes utterly wrong when he takes the film to be a story about a girl who developed bizarre *symptoms*, an *illness*. Rather, this is a story about a devil of pre-Christian origins (that prologue in Iraq was not there for local colour) who uses a lovely child for his malevolent work. It is not about a *neurotic* or a *psychotic* child. She is not a suitable case for treatment! That is the whole point, according to Alpert, and it was utterly lost on Dr Greenon and those critics who share his understanding of the film.

⁵ Mt 9, 2.

⁶ Lk 13, 16.

⁷ Mk 9, 14–29.

⁸ Mk 5, 1–20.

⁹ Lk 13, 10–17.

¹⁰ Mt 4, 23–25; Mk 1, 32.

issue in the gospel narratives of exorcism is often more than mere illness. This is implied by the unnatural signs of violence,¹¹ and the religious knowledge exhibited by the expelled demons.¹² Exorcism is an important New Testament theme. Furthermore, were the belief in demons a fact based on religious error, it would seem that Jesus would have to correct it.¹³ Nevertheless, it is true that what is primary in the New Testament account is that Jesus overcomes the power of evil; the material conception of this power, manifested in the action of personal evil spirits, is secondary, yet seems required by the texts understood in the context of the total biblical revelation. To explain Jesus's power over demons as due to a pact with the demons is the sin against the Holy Spirit that is unforgiven.¹⁴

When the disciples of John the Baptist inquire of Jesus, 'Are you the one who is to come or have we to wait for someone else?'¹⁵ Jesus replies that his healings and announcing of the good news to the poor are the signs that he is 'the one to come'. Again, in the context of the suffering Servant of Isaiah, Jesus's mission is linked with the healing of the whole person in body, mind, psyche and spirit. In dealing with diseases and sicknesses of every type as well as with human sinfulness and ignorance, Jesus performs exorcisms:

That evening they brought him many who were possessed by devils. He cast out the spirits with a word and cured all who were sick. This was to fulfil the prophecy of Isaiah: He took our sicknesses away and carried our diseases for us.¹⁶

In his course of lectures, 'Christotherapy: Healing through Enlightenment', Bernard Tyrrell, s.j. notes the subtlety of Jesus's way of bringing healing through enlightenment in the case of the Gerasene demoniac, when Jesus and his disciples are confronted with a possessed, insane man near a cemetery in the pitch dark of night.¹⁷ Mark describes the man as being possessed by unclean spirits, and psychologically the man appears twisted and torn in many directions, divided and shattered in mind. Although Jesus attempts to drive out the unclean spirits with the words, 'Come out of the man, unclean spirit', the spirit would not leave. Jesus then asks the spirit for its name, because knowledge of a name represented the possession of power over the person with that name. Once the

¹¹ Mk 5, 4-5; 9, 22; Lk 4, 25.

¹² Lussier, Ernest: 'Satan', in *Catholic Mind* (Sept, 1974), p 22ff; his essay is reprinted from the Spring, 1974 issue of *Chicago Studies*.

¹³ Lk 7, 19-20.

¹⁴ Mt 8, 16-17.

¹⁵ Mk 1, 24, 5, 7.

¹⁶ Mk 3, 22-27.

¹⁷ Mk 5, 3-5.

name was uttered, the man was released from the control of the spirits and his madness left him. Jesus's exorcism brought the man to self-knowledge and hence to self-possession and healing. Jesus remained with the man for some time. The people from the nearby town came out to see what had happened, and were startled by the total transformation of the demoniac who was now fully clothed and in full control of his senses. The naked, howling, self-wounding demoniac had been restored to sanity. He typifies the subtle way in which Jesus often gradually led men in desperate need of wholeness through various stages of enlightenment until full healing occurred.

Christ understood that it is never enough just to exorcize a devil. He taught that the demonic power must be replaced by a power for good and an inward enlightenment in the individual; otherwise, the last stage of the individual may be worse than the first:

When an unclean spirit goes out of a man it wanders through waterless country looking for a place to rest, and cannot find one. Then it says, 'I will return to the home I came from'. But on arrival, finding it unoccupied, swept and tidied, it then goes off and collects seven other spirits more evil than itself, and they go in and set up house there, so that the man ends up being worse than he was before.¹⁸

Exorcism is but the first step in the process of healing: the evil spirit is cast out to be replaced by the holy Spirit. Mind-fasting – the avoidance of those thoughts and desires which pollute the mind and heart of man – and spirit-feasting characterize these complementary aspects of healing; both of which occur in the sacrament of baptism which initiates the life of the Christ-self and the demise of the anti-Christ-self.

Exorcism must be understood within its authentic ecclesial context. It is not an arcane, gnostic ritual, the mastery of a technique, a mystic expertise of the individual Shaman-like performer. The exorcist is the minister of Christ and his Church: it is Christ who exorcizes, whose power conquers and dispels evil, through his minister and his body, the Church. The exorcist must be authorized by the Church, because it is the Church which empowers him to perform the work of Christ in the name of Christ. He performs the exorcism in the company of other holy Church members, who join his prayers, recalling that wherever there are two or three gathered in Christ's name, there too has been promised the especially

¹⁸ Mt 12, 43-45.

efficacious presence of Christ himself. This presence alone guarantees the successful outcome of the exorcism.

An exorcism is a prayer to God to drive out or ward off demons or evil spirits from persons, places, or things that are, or are believed to be, possessed or infested by them or are liable to become victims or instruments of their malice.¹⁹ In the performance of an exorcism it is always the Church that prays through the instrumentality of the exorcist, so that the efficacy of the rite is comparable to that of the sacramentals. The exorcist's personal faith and integrity, as is clear in the gospels themselves,²⁰ play a determining role in the outcome of the exorcism. Hence the Church is especially cautious in authorizing clerics who have received the power of exorcism through Holy Orders to put it to use. This is not the case of exorcisms employed during the rite of baptism, but of those uses of the power that an apparently authentic instance of possession has required.

The foundation for a theology of exorcism is the New Testament's witness to Christ's conflict with and victory over the powers of evil. Christ himself proclaimed in word and deed such a victory.²¹ The authority and ability to cast out devils was entrusted to the Twelve;²² and all 'those who believe' are also understood to share in this power.²³ A continuing sign of man's redemption is Satan's loss of power.²⁴ This was the conviction of the Fathers, Tertullian and Hilary of Potiers, and of the schools of the Middle Ages, including St Thomas Aquinas.²⁵

The Church recognizes the possibility of diabolical possession and regulates the manner of dealing with it. The Code of Canon Law allows authorized ministers (exorcists) to perform solemn exorcisms not only over the faithful, but also over non-catholics and those who are excommunicated. The *Roman Ritual* contains a solemn rite for exorcizing.

Primitive christians exorcized demons. Justin Martyr speaks of the many demoniacs who were exorcized by christians in the name of Jesus, even though they could not be exorcized by those who used incantations and drugs.²⁶ Tertullian laments the ingratitude of the pagans who accused the christians of being the enemies of the

¹⁹ Gratsch, E. J.: 'Exorcism', in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol V (New York and London, 1967), pp 748ff.

²⁰ Mt 17, 14-20; Mk 9, 13-28; Lk 9, 37-43.

²¹ Cf Lk 11, 20; Jn 12, 31.

²² Mk 3, 14ff; Cf, Mt 10, 1.

²³ Mk 16, 17; Lk 10, 17-19.

²⁴ 1 Jn 5, 18.

²⁵ Cf *Summa Theol.* II-II ae, 90, 2.

²⁶ 2 *Apol.* 6.

human race, even though the christians exorcized the pagans without reward or hire.²⁷ Origen observed that the name of Jesus expelled myriad evil spirits from the souls and bodies of men.²⁸ Lactantius writes that the followers of Christ, in the name of their Master and by the sign of his passion, the cross, banished polluted spirits from men.²⁹ Cyril of Jerusalem writes that the invocation of the name of God scorches and drives out evil spirits like a fierce flame. These views reveal the attitude of the early Church, for which an exorcism was an invocation of God against the harassment of devils. Symbolic actions frequently accompanied the invocation: breathing upon the subject, or laying hands upon him, or signing him with the cross. The invocation might take the form of calling upon the name of Jesus, of cursing the devil, of commanding him to depart, of reading a passage from scripture.

The early Church not only exorcized demoniacs, but it also exorcized catechumens as a preparation for baptism. Because of original sin, and of personal sin in the case of adults, catechumens were considered subject to the power of the devil, whose 'works' and 'poms' they were summoned to renounce. The exorcism preceding baptism was a symbolical anticipation of deliverance from the power of the devil through baptism; it was also understood as a means of restraining the devil from impeding the reception of the Sacrament.³⁰

An exorcist is one who expels evil spirits from possessed persons by adjuring them in the name of a more powerful spirit to depart.³¹ The english word, exorcist, derives from the greek verb, *exorkizō*, which means 'to adjure'. This verb is employed by Matthew in the juridical sense of making someone testify under oath.³² In Acts, mention is made of jewish exorcists at Ephesus, who vainly attempted 'to invoke the name of the Lord Jesus over those who had evil spirits in them, saying, I adjure you by Jesus whom Paul preaches'.³³ Jewish exorcists were common at the time of Christ. Josephus describes an exorcism by magical rites performed in the presence of Vespasian by a certain Jew, Eleazar.³⁴ According to Josephus, this exorcist used incantations reputedly composed by Solomon.

²⁷ *Apol.* 37.

²⁸ *Contra Celsum*, 1: 25.

²⁹ *Instit.* 4, 27.

³⁰ *Summa Theol.* III, 71, 2.

³¹ Hartman, L. F.: 'Exorcist', in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol V (New York and London, 1967), p 750.

³² Mt 26, 63.

³³ Acts 10, 13-16.

³⁴ *Ant. Jud.* 8, 42-49.

An exorcist, in ecclesiastical language, is a cleric who has received the third of the four minor orders. Like the other minor orders, the order of exorcist is not part of the sacrament of Holy Orders, but is of ecclesiastical institution. This order has recently been suppressed.

Today, the use of the power of exorcism is restricted by ecclesiastical law. The rite of solemn exorcism requires special permission from the Ordinary, to be given only to priests of considerable piety and prudence. There is assumed the need of personal victory over the temptations of the evil spirits in those who receive the power to expel them from others.

Although psychiatry has shown that the workings of the subconscious explain many, if not most, of the abnormal activities that earlier generations had attributed to diabolical activity, psychiatry does not claim to give the total explanation for such activities: it can give only the *psychological* explanation. Even presuming that such an explanation is correct in a particular case, it is always an explanation made within the limits of that science. It does not, of itself, exclude the concomitant causality that may possibly be exerted by elements which are not the object of the science of psychiatry.

Some who have worked with the criminally insane, although accepting as valid the psychiatrist's explanation of a case, are open to the possibility of the diabolical as a concomitant cause, even though this cannot be established with certitude in any particular case. It is possible to accept, for example, the view that Satan is an indication of how the human mind copes with the problem of evil, and yet to believe that such a creature as Satan actually exists.

In his article 'The Demonological Problem in the Bible', Silverio Zedda, S.J., President of the Italian Biblical Association and Professor at the Gregorian University, held that the living tradition of the Church is perhaps the strongest support for the doctrine of the devil, devils, and angels. It is, he affirmed, within this context that the biblical exegete works, and that a synthesis is attempted between the results of his study and traditional teaching.³⁵

The bible did not 'invent' the notion of malign spirits. Church teaching about demons and the devil represents the interpretation of the natural experience of a variety of supernatural principalities and powers. The findings of comparative religion show that this

³⁵ Cf *L'Osservatore Romano*, (Dec. 17, 1972).

natural experience is not restricted to the judeo-christian tradition. The teaching of scripture and revelation on this matter seems to be based on the natural presuppositions of human experience, which scripture critically corrects and incorporates into the doctrine of Christ's liberation of man from all 'principalities and powers'. Despite his endurance of suffering and evil, the christian is an optimist, convinced that Christ is Lord and that sin, death, and Satan do not have the last word about man's ultimate fate.

Literature offers a secularized sense of the demonic in such works as Kafka's *The Castle* and *The Trial*, which show us an almost unbearable extreme of powerlessness in the face of an unknown evil. Here everything 'means something'; we share the obsessive suspicions of the insane; everything whispers, cunningly cajoles, promises hollowly, accuses and waits. In 'crime novels' we are continually confronted with the 'victim'. What quiver of meaning stirs in the hunting and 'detecting' malice, in the fugitive's panic and guile with which our popular literature is saturated?

Such literature reflects the human consciousness of the numinous, the fearful, the uncanny, the dauntingly 'other'. The gothic exploration of the 'night-side of Nature' and the romantic emphasis upon a demonic, fatal, insatiable hero pointed inexorably to human complexities and needs that eluded an adequate explanation. Dread, in contemporary literature, has shifted from the outer to the inner scene. Terrible events now take place in the most usual surroundings to the most ordinary people. In Graham Greene we encounter the hero, conscious of inner guilt, who draws to himself the outer guilty situations as a magnet draws iron.³⁶ The hero is tested by a confrontation with a spiritual or physical evil he cannot move, change or understand.

'Charlie and the Devil', an article by Ed Sanders,³⁷ explained the consciousness of the diabolical in Charles Manson's planning of the Tate murders. Patricia Krenwinkel, one of the murderers under Manson's influence, felt that she had been summoned by the devil for this gruesome task. It was the claim of Manson that he was merely a reflection of those around him, that he was 'dead in the head', and therefore acted from the soul. Sanders claims that Manson was influenced by the Process Church of the Final Judgment, an organization espousing 'End of the World' slaughter. At

³⁶ Cf Bogan, Louise: *Selected Criticism* (New York, 1955), p 315.

³⁷ Cf *Esquire* (Nov. 1972), p 109.

one stage 'processans' are required to enter into a prolonged worship of Satan, involving satanic ceremonies.

The Process Church of the Final Judgment is an english occult society dedicated to observing and aiding the end of the world by murder, violence and chaos, and converted to the proposition that they, the Process, shall survive the gore as the chosen people.³⁸ The black-caped, black-garbed Process arrived in Los Angeles in early 1968. One of their commandments was 'thou shalt kill'. They stayed in public view till a few days after Robert Kennedy's assassination. The Process was active in 1968 in the Santa Cruz Mountains, San Francisco, Los Angeles, New York, New Orleans, as well as their home base, London. Ever since 1969, according to one of his confederates, Manson had ranted in his murder lectures about the Process. He and some of his family began to wear black capes and black-dyed clothing like the Process.

Two other satanic cults which Sanders believes to have influenced Manson are The Solar Lodge of the *Ordo Templi Orientis*, a magical cult specializing in blood-drinking, in sadistic and sodomistic sex-magic and hatred of the blacks, and an obscure occult group called the Kirke Order of Dog Blood, devoted to the 'worship of evil'.

The existence of such cults is but one aspect of the recrudescence of interest in the demonic. They suggest that perhaps those who are seeking Satan have already found him. There is a revival of belief in demons, evil spirits tempting and misleading men, in some cases thought to be possessing them and more often believed to be infesting places, making them frightening. It is in this context that this author shares the view expressed in *The Month*:

It would seem that there is urgent need for new sacramental rites, both for alleged possession and for alleged infestation, which primarily demonstrate that the power and love of God are greater than any adverse power, *whatever it may be*, and which re-integrate afflicted souls into the normal life of the christian community assured of God's protecting care. This is not to say that there is no place for direct authoritative action dismissing the evil, but it is safer and wiser to be reticent about the precise nature of the evil there. There is also the gospel warning of the empty, dispossessed man whose last state was eight times worse than his first. Exorcism can only be a first step to rehabilitation.³⁹

³⁸ Sanders, *art. cit.*, p 109.

³⁹ See 'The Devilish Phenomenon', in *The Month* (May, 1974), p 563.

If, on the one hand, we cannot have certitude about an authentically diabolical influence in a particular case, on the other hand we cannot rule out the possibility of such an influence. Prayers for deliverance from evil, whatever the evil may be, have marked christian worship from the beginning; they are for man's benefit. Such prayers, when seeking deliverance from alleged possession or from alleged infestation, need not be based on a certitude of an evil spirit's presence; the possibility of such a presence should suffice. In any case, the evil is a reality, whatever its full explanation.

A particular case of possession and exorcism

An italian exorcist informed me that his peasant origins were an affront to the devils he had exorcized. The proud devils generally insisted that the Pope or at least a Cardinal perform the exorcism.

The same exorcist held that it would be risky for an individual to attempt an exorcism. He explained that it is Christ who conquers Satan; hence, the exorcist must have the authorization of the Church, of the Body of Christ, for the performance of the exorcism. He is also accompanied by other devout christians who pray with him during the exorcism, for wherever two or three are gathered in Christ's name there is a special efficacy to their prayers.

The italian exorcist found performing exorcisms a most difficult and exhausting task. After his last exorcism, he coughed up blood for a month. His throat was raw after prolonged shouting at the demon.

The voice of the demon, he stated, came from all parts of the room, much like stereo. The body of one possessed person was as white as a sheet of paper and his eyes were like balls of fire.

The exorcist prayed that there would be no harm done to himself and to the possessed person. As a result of this prayer, a man whose head smashed a church pew was not harmed by a blow that might have killed him; similarly, another man, hurtled by a demonic force from the top of an altar to the pavement far below him, was also unharmed.

The exorcist produced a photo of a goat's head scorched upon the wall of the bedroom of the possessed person whom he had exorcized. He explained that at the end of the exorcism a flame leapt across the room, accompanied by a sound like a thunderclap, and scorched this image which indicated the departure of the demon.

The exorcist had taped some of his exorcisms. One involved a

young man purportedly possessed by the spirit of a damned soul, of a man named 'Matteo' who had lived at the time of St Philip Neri. This spirit did not wish to reveal itself, and did so only after the exorcist's insistence that he do so in the name of God and Christ. His voice was that of an old man in the body of a young adolescent.

When the exorcist asked Matteo what was the main obstacle to the damnation of souls, Matteo replied 'grace', 'the divine mercy'. Asked whether the Madonna had any role in the prevention of personal damnation, the voice replied that she had been created for that purpose. Given the context, these responses were quite remarkable. The dialogue between the exorcist and the voice ('Matteo') revealed violent battle between two spirits: it is by no means a tranquil exchange of view and information. Even those who listened to the tape without understanding Italian were deeply impressed by the violence of the exchanges.