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Theology, Exorcism and the Amplification of Deviancy

by Irving Hexham

Dr. Hexham, a graduate of the University of Lancaster and now Lecturer in Bishop Lonsdale College, Derby, was moved to compose the following paper by the letter signed by sixty-five Anglican theologians some time ago warning the General Synod of the Church of England against giving official recognition to the practice of exorcism. [Dr. Hexham will take up an appointment in the autumn as Assistant Professor of the Philosophy of Religion in Regent College, Vancouver.]

AFTER a "red alert" Captain Kirk of the starship *Enterprise* discovers that members of his crew have been "taken over" by disembodied beings and that the future of humanity is endangered. But it is a situation he has faced many times before and with the aid of Mr. Spock's analytic brain he is able to restore order, overcome the aliens, and free his companions from their non-human captors. The theme is simple and a popular one in science fiction yet it is reminiscent of Norse folktales and Christian mythology. It is also one which needs to be kept in mind during any discussion of exorcism because it is an indication that structures of plausibility exist which are capable of giving apparently outdated beliefs a scientific legitimation.

The decision of sixty-five academic theologians in May 1975 to advise the General Synod of the Church of England against giving official recognition to the practice of exorcism would be considered with this in mind. The academics based their case against exorcism on its alleged mediaeval origins and basis in a pre-scientific outlook which, they say, is no longer acceptable.¹ But it this if true why did they feel they needed to remind members of the General Synod of the fact? Surely the Synod contains reasonable, intelligent, and well educated men who may be assumed to know the difference between scientific and unscientific ideas.

No doubt the theologians would reply that their message was intended to warn members of the Synod against the dangerous influence of a fundamentalist fringe who hang on to primitive beliefs which are at odds with modern science. This group, they would claim, is prepared to defend exorcism because it believes in demons and in doing so threatens to bring ridicule upon the entire Church. This may be true but what would the theologians say to the viewers

¹ *The Times*, 15/5/ 1975.

of *Star-Trek* or to Sir Fred Hoyle, who entertained the notion of disembodied personalities entering human bodies in his novel *Fifth Planet*?²

An obvious answer is that when Hoyle writes science fiction he is writing "fiction" and when television viewers tune into *Star-Trek* they distinguish between scientific possibilities and fantasy. But do they? When Hoyle writes his stories does he abandon his scientific training simply to tell a good yarn or is he attempting to project future possibilities on the basis of our present knowledge? The fact is that, whether disembodied entities, referred to in religious terminology as "demons", exist or not, a large number of people have been conditioned to consider the possibility and see no necessary clash between it and a scientific outlook.

Most of the literature on the subject comes in the form of science fiction and pseudo-scientific books like Lyall Watson's *Supernature*³ and Colin Wilson's *The Occult*,⁴ but the popularity of these views can be seen by a quick visit to any bookshop. Of course the present interest in the occult may only prove that it has a great entertainment value and certainly does not prove that anyone really takes it seriously.⁵ Nevertheless even though it is part of the entertainment industry it is hard to escape the feeling that an interest is taken in the subject which goes beyond a desire simply to be entertained.

Unfortunately very few empirical studies have been carried out into this area of personal belief. Those that have been done are largely outdated and frequently the product of a crude religious sociology which asked questions like "Do you believe in a personal devil?", thus placing the whole exercise within the framework of traditional Christianity and inviting answers which reflect an orthodox Christian frame of reference. However, a few recent studies have been undertaken that avoid this danger and show a growing interest in the occult and a willingness to believe in supernatural explanations.⁶ A French survey in 1963 revealed that only 30 per cent. of the population admitted to a belief in astrology. But in 1971 a similar survey discovered that 60 per cent. of Frenchmen were prepared to say that they believed in astrology.⁷ In America a similar growth in occult beliefs has been recorded.⁸

2 Fred Hoyle, *Fifth Planet* (London, 1963).

3 Lyall Watson, *Supernature* (London, 1971).

4 Colin Wilson, *The Occult* (London, 1973).

5 *New Society*, Christina Larnar, "Is all Witchcraft Witchcraft?", 10/10/1974.

6 *The American Journal of Sociology*, Edward A. Tiryakian, "Towards the Sociology of Esoteric Culture", No. 78 (November 1972), pp. 491-512.

7 Edward A. Tiryakian (ed.), *On the Margin of the Visible* (New York, 1974), Claude Fischler, "Astrology and French Society", pp. 281-293.

8 Tiryakian (1974), Marcello Truzzi, "Witchcraft and Satanism", pp. 215-222.

All of this is a long way from proving that demons exist or that non-corporate beings are capable of influencing human affairs but it does bring us a step nearer to the acceptance of such beliefs. A number of psychological experiments exist which indicate grounds for a minimum acceptance of telepathy.⁹ If it is possible to transfer messages through inter-personal contact surely it is possible to communicate an intense emotion in the same way? If so, it may be equally possible either to harm or assist other persons by causing physical changes in their behaviour through telepathic contact.¹⁰

Under conditions where plausibility structures exist for belief in demons and witchcraft there is ample evidence for the recognition of the reality of occult activity.¹¹ Whether or not the results attained by the use of a curse or the identification of demon possession can be attributed to hyper-suggestibility is an open question. What our present evidence shows is that very strange things can occur given the right conditions. It would be foolish to dismiss all such cases as psychological disorders in need of medical treatment as long as some doubt exists about the validity of this course of action.¹²

Once this is accepted, the rôle of the academics in warning the Synod against recognition of exorcism becomes increasingly questionable. In a situation where we cannot deny the possibility that non-corporate beings might exist, it would be wiser to remain highly sceptical about reported cases of possession while keeping an open mind. This leads to important questions about the action of the theologians who wrote to the Synod. Why did they categorically deny the possibility of non-human interference in human affairs? What effect will their denial have on people who believe themselves to be under demonic influences? And what action ought the Synod to have taken under these circumstances?

A possible answer to the first question is that the signatories were concerned to assert their belief in the rationality of theology. Theology must be, for them, as open to historical and scientific criticism as any other discipline. It must be able to take its place in the modern university and not be seen defending relics from the Middle Ages. This concern of the theologians in asserting the intellectual acceptability of Christianity is no doubt well meant and sincere but it overlooks the important consideration that what constitutes "rationality" is not itself self-evident.¹³ There is no fixed body of knowledge

⁹ H. J. Eysenck, *Sense and Nonsense in Psychology* (Harmondsworth, 1970), pp. 106-141.

¹⁰ *Witchcraft and Healing*, Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh (1969), F. B. Welbourn, "Healing as a Psychosomatic Event", pp. 13-28.

¹¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937).

¹² John Charles Cooper, *Religion in the Age of Aquarius* (Philadelphia, 1971).

¹³ Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Rationality* (Oxford, 1970).

which we may term "science". Scientific knowledge is an ever-expanding store of information. Thus, as Robert Horton has argued, witchcraft may be as rational as modern science within a social situation where witchcraft beliefs are a given part of human knowledge.¹⁴

In taking their stand on exorcism the theologians concerned claimed to be advising the Synod of the Church of England against giving official sanction to a practice which fell into disuse after the Reformation and the scientific revolution. This may well be historically true but it overlooks the significant point that society is a dynamic series of relationships and not a static abstraction. If exorcism was largely abandoned at one point in time due to a change in western man's perception of his place in the universe, there is no reason why a further change may not recreate a need for this type of ritual. But the signatories of the letter to the Synod seem to have overlooked this possibility.¹⁵

Instead of accepting the contemporary evidence that for a variety of reasons interest in the occult and a belief in the possibility of non-human intervention in man's affairs have arisen in modern society, the signatories are busily defining social reality in terms of that version of rationality which is acceptable in their own social situation.¹⁶ The result of their action is that, instead of communicating with many people who are confused by the current upsurge in occult beliefs, they are in fact helping to alienate such people from the Church. Instead of condemning exorcism in terms of scientific progress, the creation of a dynamic theology which proclaimed Christ's triumph over the powers of evil and His ability to liberate the tormented soul would be a more useful contribution in a situation where occult beliefs are increasingly acceptable.

In this situation the suggestion that the Church of England should recognize and attempt to regulate the practice of exorcism seems both more Christian (in that it displays a real care for the needs of others) and acceptable in terms of established theories of deviancy. Whatever else belief in possession may be, it must be seen as an aspect of deviant behaviour. This is true because, while many people may be willing to concede the possibility of possession, only a very small minority either claim to be possessed or come into contact with those who do.

Once this is realized, the rôle of the academic theologian in response to the possessed can be seen as analogous to that of the

¹⁴ Wilson (1970), Robert Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science", pp. 131-171.

¹⁵ Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Harmondsworth, 1974).

¹⁶ Peter L. Berger, *The Social Reality of Religion* (Harmondsworth, 1973).

policeman in relation to the marihuana smoker. By rejecting the possibility of possession in terms of science the theologian is not going to convince the person who believes himself possessed or persuade him to see a psychiatrist, rather he is in danger of creating conditions for the amplification of deviancy. Thus once it is established knowledge that the Church of England regards people who think they are under demonic influence as "nuts" then these people will seek help elsewhere rather than risk exposing themselves to the ridicule of a priest.¹⁷

The signatories of the letter on exorcism also create an image of irrational fundamentalist Bible-bashers who excel in creating a morbid interest in exorcism.¹⁸ In doing this they disregard the possibility that, while people who acquire demonic-type beliefs may eventually find sanctuary in fundamentalist groups, the origins of their beliefs lie in a vast network of ideas which have little or nothing to do with fundamentalism.¹⁹ The fundamentalist is in fact probably closer to the traditional role of the diviner in many African societies than anything else and provides relief for the distressed by taking their problem seriously. As anthropologists have shown, diviners help to restore order after chaos has disrupted the individual's social environment. So too the exorcist is better understood as a restorer of order rather than as a creator of chaos.²⁰

The problem is, of course, that in the tragic case of the Bradford exorcism, the attempted ritual healing led to murder and not restoration of health. But to reject the ritual function of exorcism because of this tragedy is to overlook the fact that by their own admission the people involved in the Bradford case were carrying out their first exorcism and were not trained to perform the rite. This observation ought to reinforce the argument for regulating the practice of exorcism rather than abandoning it to obscure groups whose social circumstances lead them to recognize a need which they are incapable of adequately meeting.

To drive exorcism from the Church of England would be to encourage its growth among fringe sects which would see in the Church's anti-supernatural attitude further proof of its apostasy. In this way the academics who signed the letter to the Synod can be seen as supporting a policy which would contribute to the creation of alternative religious groups implicitly opposed to the use of

¹⁷ Stanley Cohen (ed.), *Images of Deviance* (Harmondsworth, 1971), Jock Young, "The role of the police as amplifiers of deviancy . . .", pp. 27-59.

¹⁸ *The Church of England Newspaper*, 16/5/1975.

¹⁹ F. B. Welbourn, *East African Rebels* (London, 1961), pp. 31-76.

²⁰ Max Marwick, ed., *Witchcraft and Sorcery* (Harmondsworth, 1970), E. E. Evans-Pritchard, "Witchcraft amongst the Azande", pp. 27-37.

scientific medicine.²¹ Thus the action of the theologians can be seen as creating a situation which is exactly the opposite of the one they would like to see exist. To avoid these dangers the Synod would, therefore, be advised to reject the advice of the signatories and create recognized channels for the ritual cleansing of those who consider themselves "possessed". To this end the advice of psychiatrists and social workers could be sought and ways devised of caring for individuals after the performance of exorcism. The alternative to exorcism within the established Church is not an increase in rationality but the growth of sectarian groups which thrive on the demonic.

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²¹ Bryan R. Wilson (ed.), *Patterns of Sectarianism* (London, 1969).