

Burbank Leader

In Theory: Can people be possessed?

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***In Theory Question:** A group of Catholic bishops gathered in Baltimore last week to examine what scripture and canon law have to say about exorcism. According to CNN's Belief Blog, bishops will look at what the Bible says, "paying careful attention to how Jesus responded to evil spirits or demons in the New Testament," and clarify the rules to provide "a pastoral response with people who may or may not be having demonic activity," said Bishop Thomas Paprocki of Illinois, adding that priests and bishops need to use a great deal of pastoral discernment when dealing with someone requesting exorcism. "Is it a mental disease that can be diagnosed, or is it demonic activity, or even is the event both?" Paprocki asked.*

What do you think? Does possession have a basis in reality? Do you think people can really be possessed, or is it all just hogwash, made up by those not taking their medication? What are your faith's formal teachings on the subject of exorcism and possession? And have you ever been witness to an exorcism or participated in one?

Answer:

While I don't want to be critical of the beliefs and practices of another religious group, I find it difficult, as a trained pastoral counselor and minister, to understand the rationale for exorcism in the Catholic or any other church.

While in biblical times people may have believed that aberrant behavior was caused by demons or by the work of Satan, we now understand that such conduct is the result of emotional or chemical imbalances, genetic factors or various types of mental illness, not the invasion of a person's body by evil forces.

That being said, such behavior is often difficult to diagnose and treat, and it is understandable that people would turn to members of the clergy for relief. However, these men and women owe it to members of the congregations they serve to help them find legitimate techniques for relieving their suffering, rather than encouraging them to fall prey to fear and superstition. I believe that it is irresponsible for a person who has been called to provide spiritual comfort to encourage a belief in something that is so patently false.

I am certainly not saying that there is no evil in the world, but one of the sources of my religious tradition is: "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness that create and uphold life." For me, that message of hope is much more powerful than the belief that our lives must be rescued from evil through the rituals of an exorcist.

**The Rev. Betty Stapleford
Unitarian Universalist Church of the Verdugo Hills,
La Crescenta**

Here's an atheist with something to confess: Fun and stimulating though it is, I worry about how long I can get away with writing for "In Theory" when, week after week, more fresh stuff that I don't believe in is revealed. Add to the list this week, demons, exorcisable or not.

Plus, once again, our task is to report on my faith's formal teaching on a given issue. Atheism does have a vast literature, leaders, and institutions, but even if we had churches, I would be singing in the congregation, and in the church basement helping with the good food and fellowship. I would not be in the pulpit.

So buckle up for an ex-Lutheran opining on exorcism without a license.

I am not so naïve as to deny the existence in us of bad thoughts leading to evil deeds, along with the good and loving. (I believe that this human psychology projected into the external world is religion, Sigmund Freud's words.) And I think we must be extremely careful not to toss around the word "hogwash" lightly, not with W's memoirs on the bestseller list and Sarah Palin's latest book due out tomorrow as I write this.

The Conference of Catholic Bishops seems to be approaching the matter of exorcism with care and reason. CNN's Belief Blog reports that the devils and evil spirits (which Bishop Thomas Paprocki describes as "supernatural") are to be first treated by a physician or psychologist.

(Why not a psychoanalyst, I wonder? Its inventor, Freud again, appreciated myth and respected religious healing: "I don't think our cures can compare to those at Lourdes.")

Apparently only after a physical or mental illness is ruled out is an exorcism approved, which seems to happen somewhere between rarely and never. This begs the question of whether they merit news coverage.

It is interesting to reflect that the Roman Catholic Church, an all-too human institution with its share of evil thoughts acted out in deeds, is the denomination offering exorcisms. Please do not mistake my critical perspective for disrespect of anyone's religion, but we all must face the court of public opinion if not of criminal justice.

Roberta Medford

Atheist,

Montrose

Bravo! Bravo! Finally, an article where I see the ideal integration of theology and psychology in its true form.

First, yes I do believe that there can be possession of a human by an evil spirit. However, my stance as a minister and psychotherapist and where my ministry, education and experience have led my view is that it *is* often mental illness and/or organic causes, and these must be ruled out by a medical and/or mental-health diagnosis. I say, "and/or" because there are co-morbidities in this life. Someone could have bipolar disorder and then get a brain tumor — both affecting behavior and thought process independently.

My faith is that there can be oppression of a Christian by demons and possession of non-believers. I have been witness to, and prayed for, people who were delivered from oppression and it was a very dramatic, including vomiting. These individuals felt that whatever was tormenting them "lifted," or left. I find Paprocki's quote on exorcism, "Is it a mental disease that can be diagnosed, or is it demonic activity, or even is the event both?" to be right on the mark.

The Rev. Kimberlie Zakarian

La Vie Counseling Center,

Pasadena

It's funny that this question should be asked this week. As I was Googling around looking for a more sumptuous way of preparing my bird for this past Sunday's Thanksgiving preliminary at our church, I ran across a site of anti-turkey vegetarians, full of celebrity spokespersons. One such was actress Linda Blair, the child star of the most notable film about this topic, "The Exorcist."

No turkey on Thanksgiving? I thought perhaps she really was demon-possessed. I jest, but most people had their first introduction to today's topic via that movie. Not only were they scared witless, they came away with the impression that exorcism is all about splashing holy water on the possessed and chanting Latin phrases at them, then expecting a pea-soup backlash and owl-like spinning of heads. Like anything Hollywood, it was over the top, and the truth of it all got away.

Christianity is a supernatural religion and we do believe in a spirit world. We also understand that not all of that realm is godly, anymore than this one is. The Bible reports of Jesus that "people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed, and he healed them" (Matthew 4:24 New International Version). Note that spiritual possession is legitimized and not confused with other physical ailments. Yet the Bible doesn't record theatrical rituals in dealing with these. In fact, most Evangelical Christians would not automatically presume satanic possession when someone is having problems, but if all Earthly avenues of obtaining relief prove useless, then prayer is always appropriate. What we have to remember is that this is God's world, and he does the cleansing, not us.

Is the devil at work in our midst? Assuredly. Perhaps his activity is more pronounced in far-away cultures that practice dark arts as a general rule, but look around; we're going pagan fast, and I can only guarantee you'll never need exorcising if you've placed your soul into God's all-protective possession.

Have you?

Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church,

Montrose

I believe that evil is present in our world in many forms. It is present in the darkness of child abuse, the fuzzy ethical spaces of war, the justification of torture, the insidious perpetuation of racism, and the normalization of greed and selfishness. One can be affected by evil — without being "possessed" — and, therefore, make choices that lead to pain and brokenness. And pain and brokenness can play a part in diagnosable mental illness.

When we baptize new members into the United Methodist Church, the vows include the clear intention to renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of sin. Moreover, one is invited to accept the freedom and power that God gives us to resist evil, injustice and oppression — in whatever forms they present themselves.

Our beliefs do not preclude possession, though American United Methodist Church clergy do not typically receive exorcism training. The United Methodist Church extends throughout the world, however, reaching into

many countries where interactions with the supernatural are differently experienced and understood, so I cannot speak for all of us.

Our founder John Wesley warned of the deceptive nature of evil. Evil will take away your joy in the Lord, he said, by telling you that you aren't worthy, that you have made too many mistakes to be forgiven. Resist by not giving up on yourself or on God. Know that you are made right with God just by asking to be made right.

With the healing and strengthening power of Christ in our lives, we should indeed engage in the work of expelling the darkness from ourselves and from our world.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church,

Montrose

There was a time when I would have dismissed the whole idea as superstition — primitive language used to describe what we now have a fuller vocabulary of mental health to define. But the older I get, the less fun I make of the concept. For I have seen addicts spew poisonous, horrible insults at people they love, all the while with a helpless look in their eyes, not wanting to be the person who says such things. I've seen people on the brink of some great good, suddenly sucked backward from it into the abyss; and I've known people who self-destruct for no reason, just when a full life seemed close at hand.

I don't know what to call it. I don't believe in an embodied devil. But sometimes it seems that there's "something" out there that doesn't want good to win, a force counter to, and destructive of, life and all its abundance.

In the Bible, Paul says: "I do not understand my own actions. ... For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me" (Romans 7:15-20).

On a small scale, we can smile about it — such as eating doughnuts while on a diet. On a bigger scale, it's not so funny. To be sabotaged from within, preventing yourself from thriving, or even destroying the best parts of your life, that's not so fun.

To know what you need to do for your own good, and not be able to do it; to feel prevented from doing it, as if by a malicious inner enemy — it's easy to understand where the language of possession came from.

I can't pretend to understand it. But I'm not ready to dismiss the concept. And frankly I've always been secretly glad to imagine that some Roman Catholic priest somewhere knows what he's doing, and is ready with a big old cross in hand to do battle if need be.

Fight on, brothers!

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church,

La Canada Flintridge

The United Church of Christ has no "official" position on possession, as far as I know. Also, I have never participated in any sort of exorcism. So the idea of the existence of demons is a tough one for me, and I don't really believe in them. Having said that, however, I must also, both as a believer and a person who embraces 21st-century science, leave open the possibility that I could be wrong.

In Shakespeare's "Hamlet," there is the marvelous line that goes something like this: "There is more to the universe than what is contained in your philosophy, Horatio." All of us, believers and nonbelievers alike, must not close our minds to the possibility of there being something new under the sun, in spite of what the book of Ecclesiastes seems to say (Ecclesiastes 1:9).

My own personal belief is that when we read of demon possession, or accounts of people with "an unclean spirit" in the Bible, what we are seeing is the way those in the ancient world dealt with mental illness. King Saul may have suffered from such a thing as schizophrenia or some other affliction of the mind, and so did those, in my opinion, whom Jesus is reported to have cured. So is there evil in the world and mental illness? Most definitely. But are "demons" the cause? Probably not.

The Rev. C. L. "Skip" Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church,

La Cañada Flintridge

Silent Unity, the 24-hour prayer ministry of Unity School of Christianity (Unity) responds to prayer requests by individuals who believe that they are under "psychic attack" or believe that they are "possessed by an evil spirit" by reminding the caller that he or she is a child of God, created in love and light, free to enjoy all of the beauty of the kingdom of heaven, as joint-heir to the kingdom with our Elder Brother Jesus Christ, here and now.

God is the One Power and One Presence, Absolute Good. Absolute Good, Infinite Intelligence or Divine Love has not created an evil or adversarial power that would oppose itself or bring harm to its creation, mankind.

That which would appear as an evil spirit that has possessed someone is error consciousness and must be denied as having not power or reality in spirit.

We have free will to express the divinity within us or to create false, shadowy, destructive thought forms (entities) and to give them a sense of "life," or existence, by misguided belief in their power and reality.

Spiritual prayer treatments to "cast out such demons" would be to claim our unity with the One Power and One Presence, the Truth of our Being and to deny the appearance of any such destructive state of mind.

Thought is creative. Let us put our thought on God, the True Light of our Being and on the Christ consciousness, turning away from the false appearances of possessions or demons.

The Rev. Jeri Linn,

Unity Church of the Valley,

Montrose

The Bible affirms the reality of demons, of demonic possession and of exorcism, or the casting out of demons.

Demons are angels, now fallen and unholy, that rebelled against God along with Satan. Revelation 12:9 describes how "Satan ... and his angels" will be thrown down before the return and rule of Jesus Christ. The Bible records as historical fact how Jesus interacted with demons and cast them out of the unfortunate, tortured people they possessed. Jesus' sovereignty over these evil spirit beings was demonstrated in every one of these encounters. When he cast them out, they obeyed. I've never seen or participated in an exorcism, and I believe that people can suffer from mental illness and drug abuse that looks like demonic possession. But we have every biblical indication that demonic possession occurs to this day.

Jesus commanded the apostles to "heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons" (Matthew 10:8). The New Testament records how they did these things, but outside of the Gospels these commands aren't emphasized. Our emphasis is to preach the good news that Jesus Christ died for our sins, and that anyone who receives this truth is set free by Jesus Christ from the "domain of darkness." Cults and false religions are called "doctrines of demons." Those who turn to the truth are freed from their deception.

Jesus Christ told the apostle Paul to preach the Gospel to all people "to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, in order that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me" (Acts 26:18).

So freedom from demonic possession/oppression isn't a matter of ritual or ceremony. It's found by believing in, and receiving, Jesus Christ as one's personal lord, and standing firm in the truth and the promises of his word, the Bible.

Pastor Jon Barta

Valley Baptist Church,

Burbank

The New Testament has recorded in it a number of instances where individuals were possessed by "unclean" spirits, and Jesus Christ casted those spirits out (e.g., Matthew 9:32; Matthew 12:22; Mark 1:24; Mark 5:7; Luke 8:30; and Acts 19:15).

He also gave power to his disciples to cast out such "unclean" spirits (e.g., Matthew 10:1; Mark 16:17; Luke 10:17; and Acts 5:16).

The fact that "unclean" spirits have the power to possess individuals on this Earth did not stop with the conclusion of the New Testament or the passing of Jesus Christ's disciples. I don't believe, however, that many people become possessed by such spirits, as one has to invite them in to become possessed.

Have I come in contacted with a possessed person? The answer is yes. Have I also seen an "unclean" spirit cast out in the name of Jesus Christ? The answer, again, is yes.

Unfortunately, in this day and age, the media, and Hollywood in particular, have painted a false picture of possessed people and the process of casting out "unclean" spirits – the "Exorcist" movies are an example.

Further, a medically deranged person can be confused with a person who is possessed. A friend of mine was

diagnosed some years ago as manic depressive and schizophrenic. This condition grew worse rather quickly. When he first started down this medical path, it was unnerving to talk with him. I learned quickly that this was a medical condition, not some type of possession, and that medicine and treatment helped.

It is unwise to dabble in the occult or invite the wrong spirit into your home or your life. This message is especially important for our youth, given the evil influences that exist in our society today.

May we not forget our focus, which should be to follow Jesus Christ, who said: "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

Rick Callister,

Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,

La Canada II Ward

The Bible contains several stories of people who were challenged or possessed by external "forces." The book of Genesis relates how Jacob wrestled all night with a "mysterious man" who tried but failed to "overcome" him; although victorious in the struggle, Jacob was negatively affected and limped for the rest of his life. The Talmud, which was compiled in the second century AD, also describes some rather chilling occurrences of individuals who were possessed by strange powers and underwent attempts at healing.

All of this leads me to believe that there are indeed "powers" out there, both good and bad, that we don't fully comprehend. What these forces really are - and whether and how they can "seize" a person - is one of the many mysteries of the complex world we live in.

Of greater concern to me is how so many people get carried away with the sensationalism of all this, and in the process lose touch with reality. Frankly, I feel it is counterproductive to spend too much time worrying or thinking about demonic possession. Getting caught up in the extremes of the unknown (and ultimately unknowable) behooves nobody. Instead, we should focus on what facts we do know, and what steps we can take to positively affect the world around us.

I would also caution religious leaders who are approached by the family of someone who seems "possessed," and urge them to tread very carefully.

As a rabbi, I have been contacted several times about such situations, and I feel that in reality these people are invariably experiencing severe mental problems and should be immediately referred to a trained psychiatrist. A responsible clergyman would not try to heal a broken leg with a religious ritual; similarly, he should not try to cure a severe psychological issue but instead defer to those who are clinically trained to deal with such matters. The role of the clergy in these situations is to point those seeking help toward medical professionals who can truly assist them, and to provide spiritual guidance and assistance to help them get through difficult times.

Rabbi Simcha Backman
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