



Mastering the devil: A sociological analysis of the practice of a Catholic exorcist

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Abstract

This study takes the documented growth in the ministry of exorcism within the Catholic Church as a significant challenge to some accounts of secularization. After clarifying how, according to Catholic doctrine, the devil can operate in people's lives, this study offers a sociological interpretation of exorcism. This interpretation is illustrated and tested by a sociological analysis of data collected, over a period of 10 years, by a well-established Catholic priest in Italy who himself was well trained and well grounded in philosophical analysis. This sociological case study offers fresh insights into the contemporary social significance of exorcism and provides challenges for future research. In the analysis of the data, it was discovered that only 5% of the initial consultations lead to a ritual of exorcism and that a *rapprochement* with rituals of deliverance is found for the large majority of the cases.

Keywords

Catholic teaching, deliverance, devil, exorcism, secularization, sociology

Introduction

Satan, Lucifer, Baal, Moloch, Leviathan, Belfagor, Chernobog, Mammon, Vitra, Azazel, Loki, Iblis, Mara and Angra Mainyu are only a few of the names that followers of various religions and holders of differing religious beliefs have given to the devil historically,

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and that appear in their sacred texts (Van der Toorn et al., 1999). To protect themselves from the devil, people have used the most varied practices. Although the ritual of exorcism is a practice found in many religions, social scientists have, so far, given little attention to this ritual in the contemporary western world (some exceptions being Amiotte-Suchet, 2016; Cuneo, 2001; De Certeau, 2005; Goodman, 1988, 2005; Hunt, 1998; Huxley, 1971; Lewis, 1971, 2009; Talamonti, 2005, 2008). Sociologists of religion, considering the figure of the demon to be a legacy of the superstitious and obscurantist past, have probably forgotten this issue, believing it to be outdated.

Actually, in recent years, interest in the occult world and in the rituals that release individuals from demonic possession has increased, becoming more and more widespread among broad segments of the population (Baker, 2008; Giordan and Possamai, 2016; McCloud, 2015) and thus justifying a renewed interest on the part of certain religious institutions. For example, in the US, Gallup polls have shown that the percentage of the population that believes in the devil increased from 55% in 1990 to 70% in 2004. Close to 59% of the sample of 1200 people surveyed in the 1998 Southern Focus Poll answered in the affirmative to the question: 'Do you believe that people on this Earth are sometimes possessed by the Devil?' (Rice, 2003). In the second wave of the Baylor Religion Survey (2007), 53.3% of people surveyed answered in the affirmative, or strongly in the affirmative, the question: 'Is it possible to be possessed?' At the same time, in Italy, according to the Association of Catholic Psychiatrists and Psychologists, half a million people per year undergo a ritual of exorcism (Baglio, 2009: 7).

In the Catholic ambit, belief in the devil, like many other traditional religious beliefs, has been rationalized during the last decades to the point where it has nearly disappeared from the scope of theological deliberation. At the same time, however, in people's everyday lives, this belief has spread considerably, so as to force religious authorities to restore the profession of exorcism that had virtually disappeared. In this context, the figure of the exorcist has undergone a true professionalization process, through the foundation of an international organization of exorcists and the provision of training courses (Giordan and Possamai, 2016).

The aim of this article is to offer a sociological account of this phenomenon in the western world in late modernity. This article focuses specifically on exorcism, as defined and practised within Catholicism, and not on broader cases of witchcraft or possession (e.g. Cohen, 2007; Favret-Saada, 1991; Hirst, 1982). After clarifying what we mean by the 'devil' and after noting how, according to Catholic doctrine, the devil can operate in people's lives, we give a sociological analysis of data collected, during a period of nearly 10 years, by a well-established Catholic priest in Italy. This sociological case study is the very first undertaken of the practice of an exorcist, who over the 10-year period has kept note of his activities in a Word document of more than 200,000 words. Its analysis provides a grounding to expand our sociological understanding of this phenomenon. It discovers an increase of a ministry of deliverance by this Catholic priest, and to explore the reason behind this, a discussion in light of other current Christian practices is presented. In other research, Amiotte-Suchet (2016) makes reference to the journal of an exorcist he had been in contact with but did not explore this at length. Further comparison with this research is presented at the end of this article.

For this article, rather than the theological definition of exorcism, we follow the social definition used by Sluhovsky (2007: 35–36), that ‘exorcism is defined as a curing technique against evil spirits that have taken over a possessed person, an animal, or an object’. This definition is in line with the work of sociologists of religion, who tend to use a methodological agnostic approach when conducting research. This means, for example, that we do not analyse the veracity of these claims of possession from a theological perspective. We are studying what people do with or against this belief, and how this belief affects people.

More specifically, our research method follows what Garret (1974) has called a phenomenological noumenalist approach. The approach followed within this research admits subjective reality as an independent variable in social analysis and focuses its research on the consequences of belief and behaviour generated by religious experiences. This school has its roots in the work of Rudolf Otto (1936), who focused his research on the non-rational aspect of the religious dimension. Being both theologian and scientist, his purpose was to embrace the scientific paradigm and the religious interpretation of the world. He sought to determine the kind of rationality that is relevant to religious study and found in Kant the pertinent pair of noumenon and phenomenon. The phenomenological noumenalist school accepts the noumenal as irreducible experience and as producing effects at the individual and social levels. It is also worth noting from the work of the anthropologist Goodman (1988: 107) that demonic possession is not just about scary stories but can sometimes involve some actual and disastrous physical and psychological changes.

The fluidity of the belief in the devil: The Catholic tradition

The reappearance within the religious field (e.g. Amorth, 1999) of the practice of exorcism forces the religious authorities themselves to broker a careful and delicate balance between not considering it simply a superstitious belief of the past and not overemphasizing the effectiveness of the action of the devil in people’s lives; considering the devil as the god of evil would be a heresy, but denying the devil’s existence would seem to go against the traditional doctrine. A rationalization process therefore begins, with the theologians trying to negotiate between the dictates of the most advanced theological research, which is more and more reluctant to attribute a prominent role to the devil, and the so-called ‘popular religiosity’ (Balducci, 1991), which records the daily workings of Satan. This is a negotiation process involving not only the theological domain (Caspani, 2008), but also the medical domain, since the boundaries between psychic disease and demonic action are not at all clear; they are very unstable and porous, and often the two aspects overlap and become confused (Caretta and Petrini, 1999; Sodi, 2003). The relationship between health and salvation is an issue very well known to sociologists of religion, but it takes on an even more challenging relevance in the context of the rite of exorcism.

In the process of the social construction of the notion of the devil, and in defining the margins of credibility of his actions, as well as in defining the practice of exorcism, the role played by religious authorities is obviously strategic: within Catholicism such a process (which has lasted for centuries) shows how the outlines of these concepts are

fluid and flexible, capable of adapting to the needs of different historic periods (Cini Tassinaro, 1984).

It is interesting to note that the existence of the devil has never been explicitly defined in the official documents of the Church – as though such a belief was taken for granted and it was unnecessary to define dogmatically the harmful effects of devilish action. The absence of a precise doctrinal definition concerning the existence of the devil has then left it open to the people themselves to question the devil's existence, and, consequently, to believe or not to believe. This omission has left believers free also to build their own imagery surrounding the devil, thus filling in the 'institutional' void.

Which features, then, are attributed to the devil in the Catholic tradition, either popular or institutional? According to the Catholic doctrine the devil is a being created by God – the first of the angels, who, however, refuted dependency on God and, jealously, wanted to take the place of God (Pagels, 1995). To believers in the devil's existence, this figure is essential to the history of salvation, because the whole mission of Jesus Christ would be incomprehensible if the very existence of Satan were denied. In the Gospels, in fact, several episodes are narrated in which Jesus casts out demons from people possessed by the devil, who shows up at different times in the forms of demonic obsession, of madness or hysteria, and at times as a physical illness. Jesus himself, as recounted in the Gospel of Matthew (Chapter 4, verse 10), was tempted by the devil while he was in the Judean desert, and responded to his offers, warning him, "Go away, Satan!" For it is written: "The Lord your God you will worship, Him alone you will worship". And then the devil left Him.' In this case Satan tempts man with power, with the desire to become as God, as the serpent did in the Garden of Eden (Burani, 2009; Laurentin, 1995).

In spite of such scriptural authority, the existence of the devil and the influence of the devil in people's daily lives has been called into question in recent decades by the theologians themselves, who, even if they do not actually affirm his non-existence, prefer to speak about him in terms of popular religiosity, suggesting that a belief in such a phenomenon is often included in magic and superstitious thinking that sooner or later will be outdated.

Significantly, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in a secularized context of general disenchantment with religion, Pope Paul VI felt the need to warn the faithful and society at large about the diminishing belief in the devil. In a Church that was being confronted by the modern era, through the implementation of the Council Vatican II, Paul VI felt it necessary to reiterate the least modern aspect of religious belief, the presence of the devil. In a speech delivered in 1972, addressing the faithful gathered in St Peter's Square, the Pope compared the devil's activity in people's lives to that of a 'hidden enemy who spreads errors and misfortunes in human history'. Adding (quoting St Paul) that men are fighting 'against the rulers of the cosmic dark world, against the evil spirits wandering in space' (Paul VI, 1972: 145).

While affirming his existence, the actions of the Catholic Church have always been careful not to overemphasize the power of the devil, in order to avoid giving space and legitimacy to the many Satanic sects who worship Satan as if he were a god (Cantelmi and Cacace, 2007; Introvigne, 1994, 2010): he is not the 'god of evil', the counterpart of the 'god of good', but rather a creature of God, that therefore cannot be worshipped as a god. For example, in 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council declared that only God is the true

origin of all things, and that the devil is only a divine creature who has become evil (Lavatori, 2007).

Case study

In 2015, while conducting an interview with an exorcist, we were informed that this Catholic priest had been performing activities associated with exorcism for close to 10 years. When the time came to retire after 40 years of teaching philosophy he had been requested by his bishop to become the exorcist of his diocese, one of the most important and populated dioceses in Italy. His case is of particular interest because his rational approach led him to look with some suspicion and disenchantment at many phenomena associated with Satanism and possession, and subsequently to practise his role as exorcist with an attitude that we could define as more 'scientific' than 'fideistic' (see below). He showed us a Word document in which he kept information on everyone who made contact with him, what his assessments were, and the outcomes of their visits. His detailed document dealt not only with a theological assessment but with some socio-demographic data as well. The document was not created to be analysed sociologically, but, nevertheless, it did provide some significant insights in this practice. This is the first time that such a large amount of data on this phenomenon has been obtained in the field of sociology and religious studies. The research in this field usually involves theological analysis and court case analysis (in cases where the exorcism has gone wrong) but never the exorcist's own data file. The large file is close to 200,000 words in length. We asked for all names to be removed. The data were then coded and analysed quantitatively. This exorcist tends to receive people on a Saturday morning in a room adjacent to a church. If he thinks that the case warrants an exorcism, he will then schedule them usually on a Wednesday or Friday. The ritual is performed in the same room. He uses a heavy metal chair, one that needs two people to carry or one person to drag it, which is placed in the middle of the room. For the ritual, he uses the Latin version rather than the vernacular one as he claims that the former version is harsher (and more vulgar) towards to demon. The translation is too tame for his taste. The ritual tends to last for just under an hour and he gets the help of other people, usually five or six per session. We were able to witness these rituals. These helpers join the priest in some liturgies and mainly help to hold the 'possessed' down in case he or she starts to convulse in the chair. They will apply their hands to steady the person in the chair.

In his position as exorcist, our interviewee provided consultations in 1075 different cases. These cases involved both people who came on their own for consultation concerning their own problems or on behalf of others ($n = 802$; 74.6% of cases), and people accompanied by one person or more ($n = 272$; 25.4% of cases). These consultations do not include other possible sessions conducted, such as visits by the exorcist to the home of the clients for blessings, or communication over the phone or by email, or the various rituals performed. These are thus meetings/consultations with clients to hear their problems, to discuss possible steps to take and to provide recommendations.

Of the total number of clients, 648 (60%) came for only one visit, 215 (20%) came twice, 97 (9%) came three times, and the remaining 11% came more than three times. As shown in Table 1, one person had 26 consultations.

Table 1. Number of consultations.

Number of visits	Frequency	Percentage
1	648	60.3
2	215	20.0
3	97	9.0
4	41	3.8
5	26	2.4
6	19	1.8
7	5	0.5
8	9	0.8
9	4	0.4
10	2	0.2
11	1	0.1
15	2	0.2
17	1	0.1
26	1	0.1
Missing information	4	0.4
Total	1075	100.0

From these 1075 cases, only 55 rituals of exorcism were performed, that is, in only 5.1% of the cases recorded. Focusing on these 55 cases of exorcized people, we can see that they are mostly men (60% of cases). Two patients are less than 20 years old; 5 patients are young people aged from 20 to 29 years and as many are adults/seniors (60 and older); 56% are aged between 40 and 49 years; 12% are 30–39 years old; and 11% are between 50 and 59 years old.

The exorcized people mostly belong to the working class and lower middle class; there are only six cases of professionals/graduates (Giordan and Possamai, 2016). While for 14 cases a single ritual was sufficient, others required more – in the most extreme case the ritual was conducted 354 times (see Table 2). This reflects the argument made by Amorth (1992), that only a few cases have to be treated through a ritual of exorcism. Indeed, Muchembled (2000) quotes Amorth, who claimed to have dealt with 50,000 cases, of which only 84 were, according to his assessment, authentic.

Actually liberation does not always occur. In 40% of the 55 cases of exorcism (22 people) the patient appears to have recovered, freed from possession, and does not need any more exorcisms, even if this does not necessarily mean that the disease, depression, misfortune or the need for psychiatric drugs is over, and it is possible to have relapses. Meanwhile, 25% (14 people) of the cases continue to be subjected to exorcisms, either because liberation has not occurred or because of a relapse. In 22% of cases (12 people) the patient leaves never to be seen again by the exorcist or, in most situations, it is the exorcist himself who withdraws from the case, considering his own efforts useless either because of the family context or because he does not find in the patient the true will to set him or herself free, or because he finds the patient's situation too ambiguous and intricate. For the remaining cases it is not possible to determine from the document what the outcome of the exorcism is.

Table 2. Exorcism rituals performed.

Number of times	Frequency	Percentage
0	1020	94.9
1	14	1.3
2	5	0.5
3	5	0.5
4	3	0.3
5	1	0.1
6	2	0.2
7	1	0.1
8	1	0.1
9	1	0.1
10	1	0.1
11	1	0.1
12	2	0.2
17	2	0.2
19	2	0.2
20	1	0.1
23	1	0.1
35	1	0.1
36	1	0.1
40	1	0.1
42	1	0.1
45	1	0.1
49	1	0.1
64	1	0.1
74	1	0.1
108	1	0.1
112	1	0.1
144	1	0.1
354	1	0.1
Total	1075	100.0

Analysing in depth the notes that the exorcist writes on the four patients who have received over the last 10 years the highest number of rituals of exorcism (A: a 50 year old male, 108 exorcisms; B: a 48 year old male, 112 exorcisms; C: a woman of 51 years, 144 exorcisms; D: a 41 year old male, 354 exorcisms), we note that there are some shared characteristics among these people.

A first common element among these cases is, in the words written by the exorcist, that they have had ‘suspicious experiences’: these can be séances, or having taken part in other esoteric rituals following the instructions of ‘do it yourself’ books ; among these ‘suspicious experiences’ the exorcist also includes a visit to magicians, clairvoyants, fortune tellers, the practice of yoga or oriental meditation sessions.

Another common element is the ‘abhorrence of the sacred’: all these people, when they pray or come into contact with the holy water, feel sick, vomit or faint. As noted by

the exorcist, moreover, all four clients are also being treated by a psychiatrist, and in the notebook that we have analysed, the drugs and dosages that the patients take are described in precise detail: they are almost always anxiolytics and antidepressants.

None of these four cases has been resolved, and they all continue to receive the rituals of exorcism.

The reason that leads A to consult an exorcist is that he believes himself to be the victim of a curse, and this is ruining both his work (he has a firm that is now in crisis) and his health (severe headaches and skin problems). Three years before beginning to attend the exorcist, A claims to have converted through participation in a pilgrimage to Medjugorje; the strange thing is that it is only since that pilgrimage that the problems seem to have started. The exorcist is in possession of some videos recorded by surveillance cameras at the patient's factory, where a very bright light floods the building at night. For this reason, the exorcist, in addition to exorcizing A, made a ritual of exorcism even at his home and at the workplace.

B, employed at a bank, is sent to our exorcist by another exorcist from a neighbouring diocese, who has tended B for years but was not able to solve the case. As written by our exorcist, B 'is not a simple patient: it is a confused case, he lives his entire life with an attitude of ambivalence and it is difficult to understand what is due to the devil and what is due to depression. Many disorders that he experiences may be down to the withdrawal symptoms from drugs.'

C, woman and lawyer, consults the exorcist for the first time at the age of 42 because she suspects she is the victim of evil inflicted by a sister-in-law who participates in an esoteric sect. During a rite of exorcism, she says she has been a member of a secret society in the past. As noted by the exorcist, after a ritual of exorcism, C 'is hit by a very high fever and vomits animal skin with hair, sticks, bones, dust'. The next day, during mass, she cannot open her mouth to receive the Eucharist.

The most complex case is D, a 41 year old man who in almost 10 years has been exorcized 354 times, and in one of the last rituals, according to what is written in the notebook, claims to 'have exceeded the limits of endurance'. The physical ailments that have afflicted him since he was 18 years old, a result both of a car accident as well as, as he himself says, some séances in which he had participated for fun, do not allow him to hold down a steady job. Among the 'suspicious experiences' that the exorcist lists, in addition to attending pranotherapists, there is the practice of yoga; the latter is considered so dangerous by the exorcist that, at the end of one of the rituals, he gives D a booklet titled *Beware of Yoga*. During the rites of exorcism, D alternates between moments of aggression towards the exorcist, and moments of 'mystical experience' in which he feels 'a sense of love and openness to others, the ability to read minds, and he sees a child hovered over by a black bat with white eyes'. D recognizes himself in this child.

During the interview, the exorcist stated that he refused to perform the ritual of exorcism without being certain that the possession was genuine. He told us about practices in which other Catholic exorcists would perform the ritual without being certain that the people involved were actually possessed. He even described a scene in which some rituals were performed in public in a small town centre, accompanied by an orchestra and singing. While it is not the point here to analyse the different professional practices of exorcism, we can claim in this article that the information provided by this particular

exorcist reflects a more legal-rational form of authority and practice, rather than charismatic. We are making reference here to Weber's (1996) classic ideal types of authority, and, of course, both the legal-rational and charismatic types include traditional authority. We are thus claiming that the exorcist presented in this case study is more in line with an institutional interpretation of his religion than a popular one. The data collected from another type of exorcist could have provided a different type of insight.

Table 3 lists all the many problems that the clients made reference to. Evil influences, occultism and Satanism, and paranormal phenomena were given as the reason for the visit in 604 cases; that is, 56% of all the cases were religious or magical in nature. The rest of the consultations tended to be for family, health or other personal problems.

The analysis of these data shows that for this particular exorcist, a large number of people would attend a consultation but only a small proportion of consultations would lead to a 'classical' ritual of exorcism. Thus, although belief in the devil is on the increase and the number of professionals in the field of exorcism is growing (Giordan and Possamai, 2016), this does not mean that Catholic exorcism rituals are being conducted on a large scale.

In 140 cases (13%) (see Table 4), the exorcist recommended that the client seek a psychologist, and in 5 cases (0.5%) some sort of medical service. In the rest of the cases, the exorcist recommended the practice of other rituals, such as blessings ($n = 206$; 19.2% of cases), confession ($n = 16$; 1.5%), some religious homework ($n = 500$; 46.5%), prayer ($n = 188$; 17.5%) and rituals of liberation ($n = 142$; 13.2%).

It is clear from this specific case that rituals of exorcism are the least likely outcome of these visits. Although the exorcist recommends for some patients a visit to a medical doctor and/or a psychologist, we can see from the above suggestions of other types of religious practices. The next section explores this finding.

Exorcism and deliverance

In 1993 Gabriel Amorth co-founded the International Association of Exorcists for Roman Catholic priest exorcists. By the year 2000, the association claimed to have 200 members (Collins, 2009). In the 1999 translation of his best-selling book, Amorth (1999: 15) admits to wanting to bring back an interest in exorcism 'which was found in times past among Catholics but is now found only among Protestants'. He confirms his claim later in his book by stating that 'as in the study and dissemination of the Bible, Catholics are lagging behind some Protestant denominations. I will never tire of repeating this: rationalism and materialism have polluted a segment of theologians' (Amorth, 1999: 173). His aim is thus to contribute to re-establishing the pastoral practice of exorcism in the Catholic Church (Amorth, 1999: 174). However, as claimed by an insider, exorcism is usually used for cases of full possession (Blai, 2014) and it is rare. Amorth (1999: 34) even claims that 'while possessions are still relatively rare today, we exorcists run into a great number of people who have been struck by the devil in health, jobs, or relationships'.

As we have seen in the case study above, Amorth (1999: 184) also believes that exorcists should take care of every type of Satanic intervention: 'demonic oppression (much more numerous than full possession), obsession, infestation of houses, and other activity that appears to benefit from our prayers'. Amorth also makes reference to his Church's

Table 3. Reason for the visit.

Reason	Frequency	Percentage	Explanation
Evil influences	187	17.4	Suspicion or knowledge of being affected by evil influences, the evil eye, evil spells or curses.
Occultism and Satanism	205	19.1	Involvement with occult arts, alternative spiritualities, Satanic sects and rituals, folk/alternative healing practices, and also freemasonry.
Paranormal phenomena	212	19.7	Paranormal phenomena and activities including: haunted houses; possession; sensing the presence of the devil or of a demonic force, usually accompanied by a variety of unexplained and unpleasant 'physical' occurrences, like doors slamming shut, water flooding, hordes of insects invading, noises, the disappearance and reappearance of things, being touched, strange smells and so on. This category also included medium and psychic powers (possessed by a client or by someone connected with the case), and mystical experiences, visions, lucid dreams and hearing voices.
Crime/justice/tax	10	0.9	Problems concerning crime, the justice system, tax evasion and other forms of corruption and dishonesty.
Drug addiction	25	2.3	Addiction to drugs, medication and/or alcoholism.
Economics/work	97	9.0	Problems and hardship concerning economic activities.
Family problem	217	20.2	Problems with family relations; tensions and conflict among relatives and very close friends; and over inheritance and family property.
Marriage relationship	275	25.6	Crises in a couple's relationship, such as: adultery, lack of sexual intercourse, loss of romance, etc.
Medical problem	196	18.2	Serious illnesses, diet/eating problems, anorexia, etc.
Psychological/emotional issues	377	35.1	Socializing difficulties, sense of emptiness, stress, etc.
Sexual issues	48	4.5	Aberrant sexuality and sexual practices or problems having sex.
Misfortunes	56	5.2	An array of hardships that seriously effect people.
Other	285	26.5	Anything that cannot be slotted above, including loss of faith, wanting to receive a blessing, asking for an opinion.

inability to provide a ministry of deliverance. The significance, we read, of the increase in the number of professionals of exorcism is not necessarily that it provides the *Roman Ritual*, but that it keeps step with Protestantism in addressing a gap in the ministry that some Protestant groups appear also to have filled.

Table 4. Outcome of spiritual/physical assessment.

Outcome of visits	Frequency	Percentage	Explanation
Ritual of exorcism	55	5.1	
Ritual of blessing	206	19.2	Blessings of various types, including the use of holy water, salts and oil.
Ritual of confession	16	1.5	Confession
Ritual (homework)	500	46.5	Homework given to the clients and other people who are involved in the case, along the lines of some exercises in catechism.
Ritual (prayer)	188	17.5	Prayers for the clients to follow (including the Rosary and prayers with a religious icon), or prayers offered by the clergyman, or both.
Ritual of liberation	142	13.2	Rite of liberation
Recommendation to a psychologist	140	13.0	Recommendation not just to a psychologist or psychiatrist, but also to a marriage counsellor, when appropriate.
Recommendation to medical services	5	0.5	Any recommendation for medical intervention other than psychological or psychiatric help.
Other recommendations	420	39.1	Some kind of recommendation other than those listed above – often not clearly indicated in the notes; perhaps simply encouragement to go on with life, to be strong and patient. Sometimes, the client does not come back, and the case is dropped.

According to Hunt (1998), for neo-Pentecostals, ‘low level’ rituals to expel devil spirits are a rather common and mundane activity. According to this group, Christians cannot be possessed, and thus do not need the *Roman Ritual*, but can nevertheless be oppressed by a demon. While exorcism involves a ritual to expel a demon from a person, the deliverance ministry is more ‘charismatic’, involving less formal rituals aimed at alleviating some form of ‘demonization’ (Collins, 2009). Those who require these rituals are seen as ‘demonized’ and not ‘possessed’. The growth and appeal of the deliverance ministry which developed from the beginning of the 20th century underwent a further expansion in the early 1960s through the work of the Charismatic Renewal (Hunt, 1998: 216). It should be noted that the theology and practice of the ministry of deliverance is very diverse, and we refer to the work of Theron (1996) and Collins (2009) for more information and analysis. Further, although the Anglican and Catholic Churches did not embrace this ministry straight away, some individuals took an interest in these informal rituals (Hunt, 1998: 217). However, before we proceed with the argument that, as a group, the Anglican and Catholic Churches have started integrating a deliverance ministry to follow this Pentecostal Charismatic Renewal, history reminds us that some apostate Catholic priests did practise these forms of deliverance and exorcism, a case in point being that of Abbot Julio and his thick book of rituals of exorcism (or deliverance) pertaining to anything the demon can affect. This former priest was well known in the esoteric milieu and claimed in 1908 (l’Abbé Julio, 2014 [1908]: 22, 25) that Roman Catholics no longer had

faith in the virtue of benedictions and the power of exorcism; they no longer knew ‘these magnificent prayers from the Church’.

In Milner’s (2002) work, we discover how the Church of England, later, only renewed its interest in exorcism and deliverance because of the renewed interest of the Pentecostals and Charismatics. The Church of England has put some mechanisms in place to feed into this renewed interest, while at the same time bureaucratizing exorcism and encouraging self-restraint, especially with regard to the touching of the body during the ritual.

Pentecostal and Charismatic encounters with the devil are more frequent and are more spontaneously dealt with. The emphasis is on ‘signs and wonders’ and on untrained people with ‘healing gifts’ as well as on clergy being able to remove the devil. The spontaneous and joyous noise of these activities contrast with the step by step, very careful, highly collaborative, and seldom needed exorcism procedures advocated by the Church of England. In dealing with demons, the Church of England moves away from charisma toward rationality. (Milner, 2002: 265)

Around the time that Paul VI got rid of the order of exorcists within the Catholic Church (Muchembled, 2000: 303), the Catholic Charismatic Renewal was developing – in the USA in 1967, and internationally in the 1970s (Csordas, 2007). This is a movement that synthesizes elements of Catholicism and Pentecostalism. One of its leaders was Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens, who wrote a book published by Pauline Editions in 1982, with a foreword by Cardinal Ratzinger. Amorth (1999: 173) quotes a useful passage:

At the beginning, many Catholics tied to the renewal movement discovered the practice of deliverance among Christians of other traditions, belonging mainly to the Free Churches or Pentecostals. The books that they read, and still read, for the most part come from these denominations. Among their literature there is an enormous wealth of information on the devil and his acolytes, on witchcraft and its methodology, and so forth. In the Catholic Church, this field has been left almost fallow. Our directives for specific pastoral response are inadequate for our times.

Amorth (1999: 186–187) then criticizes this cardinal for not regarding exorcism as a sacrament – however this is not the point of this article. In the quoted statement we can see a strong link between renewed interest in exorcism and the importation of a deliverance ministry into the Catholic Church through the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. This is also indirectly observed in Csordas’s (2007) article.

Collins (2009: 184–185) concludes his book with the following passage:

... the renewed popularity of sacramental exorcism during the latter decades of the 20th century is an established fact. In the UK the main developments took place during the 1970s following the publication in 1972 of an ecumenical report commissioned by the Bishop of Exeter. This report seems to have galvanised and lent profile to a gentle Anglican form of sacramental exorcism roughly in parallel to the much more significant growth of Charismatic deliverance ... the picture among Roman Catholics is somewhat different. Prior to the 1990s it seems that exorcism was largely confined to clandestine, unauthorised rituals hidden away from the church hierarchy, or to anti-establishment figures who had long since stopped caring about the official legitimacy of their actions. It was only during the 1990s that Roman Catholic enthusiastic

sacramental exorcism became confident to emerge from the shadows. Books were published and priest-exorcists were appointed.

Collins (2009: 185) then argues that the reason that the Catholic Church took 20 years longer than the Anglican Church to sanction exorcism was its rigid bureaucracy.

The Neocatechumenal Way and Renewal in the Spirit, two movements of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal, for example, have their own rituals that can be connected with the rituals of deliverance. As already mentioned, their aim is to bring together Catholicism and new instances of Pentecostalism. For this reason, the Catholic hierarchy has always regarded their rituals with suspicion, especially because these groups initially seemed to be too critical of the Church institution, and because their ritual systems, following the spread of the ritual forms characteristic of Pentecostalism, were too fervent, too active and engaging compared with the more classical and ordinary (and in a way, more orderly) ones to which the average Catholic is accustomed (D'Amato, 2009).

The points of contact between the charismatic Catholics' rites of liberation and prayers of deliverance are many and varied, but the aspect that we are most interested in is the centrality of the power of the Holy Spirit, especially in the Renewal in the Spirit prayers of liberation. In this rite, the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is invoked with songs, prayers and the laying on of hands, is manifested through extraordinary events to those assembled and to the person being initiated. This person is often overwhelmed by the force and falls down, as if fainting after fighting against the forces of evil (Contiero, 2012).

The process of negotiation and transformation between Protestant Pentecostalism and Renewal in the Spirit concerning the Catholic ritual of deliverance centres around the distinction between 'effusion of the Holy Spirit' and 'baptism in the Holy Spirit'. The latter expression is generally used by Protestants to describe the transformation generated in them by divine intervention. However, this expression is too ambiguous for the Catholic Church, because it may be suggestive of a sort of super-baptism, or of a baptism perfecting or completing the one consecrated with water, which would then end up being only a preparatory rite. It is for this reason that the original expression has been replaced by Catholics with the term 'effusion of the Holy Spirit'. The expression is meant to describe a new and special intervention by the Holy Spirit: 'new' in comparison to the previous interventions and 'special' for the way it occurs and for the fruits it bears for the individual receiving it (Favale, 1982).

The exorcist we interviewed justifies the distinction between the ritual of exorcism on one side and the blessing rituals and rituals of liberation on the other side by explaining the difference between 'minor exorcism' and 'solemn exorcism'. The former is what is used in the ritual of baptism of children, or in adult baptism, and could be defined as a form of milder and less drastic exorcism. The solemn exorcism, however, corresponds to the traditional formula of exorcism, of which the Catholic Church, according to the interviewed exorcist's words, would hold the monopoly.

As is clear from the data that we have analysed in the previous section, the solemn ritual of exorcism is a minimal part of his activities compared to the blessing rituals and those of liberation. This is explained by the exorcist as the greater flexibility that is offered by the 'minor exorcism' and by the rituals of blessing. As we have already seen,

many people turn out to be not really possessed by the devil in the exorcist's notes, but only disturbed by it. They therefore do not require a 'solemn exorcism'. For them the ritual of exorcism may even be harmful, because it could lead them to believe they are actually possessed by the devil. This could even further complicate their well-being.

These rituals of blessing and liberation, the exorcist underlines, cannot be compared to the rituals of deliverance of the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements, although he admits that they have some similarities. According to him, the biggest difference lies in who leads the ritual, which can often look like a 'devout wizard'. This refers more to the feelings, emotions and the credulity of the people rather than to their faith in God's power.

In the eyes of the same exorcist, however, the difference between the Catholic ritual of the 'minor exorcism' and the Pentecostal ritual of deliverance is not clear or well defined, and according to his words 'there may well be some overlap', because the two rituals fulfil the same needs for people. However, the way in which he describes the risks that are on both the Catholic and the Pentecostal side, be it liberation or deliverance rituals, is surprisingly clear: 'certain answers to the suffering because of the devil more closely resemble theatrical performances than real moments of conversion, and everything seems to be from the consumer perspective, where everything is measured according the demand of the people, and the will of God is no longer taken into account'.

Discussion and conclusion

This article has provided a sociological examination of the specific case study of a Catholic exorcist in a western country in late modernity. Using the data provided by this priest, we discovered that more than 1000 patients visited this religious expert over a 10-year period, but only 5% of them qualify for a ritual of exorcism. Amiotte-Suchet (2016) recently published the account of an exorcist in France. He drew a difference between the exorcist who is more of a psychotherapist and those who are more inclined to engage with the devil. The priest in his case study only performed one ritual of exorcism and he regretted it. Overall, he refers his patients to medical experts or performs rituals that tend to be more of a deliverance nature. Our case is quite different in the sense that there is a strong screening with regard to performing rituals of exorcism (the psychotherapeutic approach) but they do happen for what are seen as legitimate cases (in this sense there is a specific engagement with the devil that goes beyond giving counselling and pastoral care).

Rituals of exorcism have already been theorized as, for example, a ritual of transformation bringing the patient back to a Christian life (Talamonti, 2008) or a way to control a patient's non-ordinary experiences (Goodman, 2005). What this case reveals that has not yet been described in the literature, is that beyond the theological discussions and cultural differences, the rituals of blessing and rituals of liberation were found to be practised much more often than rituals of exorcism. Whereas Talamonti (2008) studied rituals of exorcism and Amiotte-Suchet (2016) rituals of what could be broadly described as therapeutic, this is the first case in which we find both. While being about using terms specific to a religious group, we discovered that these Catholic rituals had some links with rituals of deliverance. Through these rituals, it is not clear if the Catholic Church is

countering the recent ‘religious products’ offered by Charismatic Protestant groups, or offering a needed product in this religious market.

Brunkhorst (2011) claims that in our current capitalist world, many religions are following on the heels of the tract of Protestant sects. This observation is furthered by Roy (2008), who writes about the Protestantization of religion to explain this phenomenon. As the French sociologist argues, while Islam and Buddhism have been ‘Protestantized’, Christianity has also been ‘Buddhinized’ (e.g. through engagement with the practice of meditation, or Christian yoga in which ‘Yahwey’ is used instead of Eastern mantras [Einstein, 2008]). This homogenization process is called in this perspective the Protestantization of religion, as religions, through being standardized more and more, are becoming closer to the traits of this religion heavily ingrained in US culture. Protestant groups are, of course, very diversified and this concept makes reference to a growing trend, rather than to the end of a process.

Gauthier et al. (2013: 16) have recently summarized this point well:

If the contents of belief appear to be diverse and heterogeneous, the modes of religious belief and practice have perhaps never been so homogeneous. There is no longer a deep cultural difference between a Christian and a Jew, let alone a Protestant and a Catholic, but rather something like a difference in lifestyle and life ethics – and networks of association. The turnaround is complete since the times analysed by Max Weber: it is no longer the different Christian cultures that shape capitalism – it is consumer culture that shapes Christianity (and religion in general).

As we have noticed a *rapprochement* between these different Christian groups with regard to practices of exorcism and deliverance, it is tempting to speak about the Protestantization of exorcism.

Author note

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Résumé

Ce travail montre que l'essor des pratiques d'exorcisme au sein de l'Église catholique constitue un défi important au processus de sécularisation. Après avoir précisé la doctrine de l'Église catholique en matière d'interventions du diable dans la vie personnelle, ce travail propose une interprétation sociologique de l'exorcisme. Cette explication repose sur une analyse sociologique des données recueillies pendant dix ans en Italie par un prêtre catholique, possédant de solides connaissances en matière d'analyse philosophique. L'examen de ces données révèle que 5 % des consultations préalables conduisent à des pratiques exorcistes, qui s'apparentent dans la plupart des cas à des rituels de délivrance. Cette étude de cas sociologique ouvre de nouvelles perspectives pour la compréhension de l'importance sociale contemporaine de l'exorcisme et pose un certain nombre de défis pour les projets de recherche à l'avenir.

Mots clés

Exorcisme, sécularisation, enseignement catholique, diable, délivrance, Église catholique

Resumen

Este estudio considera el crecimiento documentado en el ministerio de exorcismo dentro de la Iglesia Católica como un desafío significativo a algunos relatos de la secularización. Después de aclarar cómo, según la doctrina católica, el diablo puede operar en la vida de las personas, este estudio ofrece una interpretación sociológica del exorcismo. Dicha interpretación es ilustrada y probada por un análisis sociológico de los datos recopilados durante un período de diez años por un sacerdote católico bien establecido en Italia, que estaba bien formado y bien fundamentado en el análisis filosófico. En el análisis de los datos, descubrimos que sólo el 5% de las consultas iniciales llevan a un ritual de exorcismo y que existe un acercamiento con los rituales de liberación para la gran mayoría de los casos. Este estudio de caso sociológico ofrece nuevas ideas sobre el significado social contemporáneo del exorcismo y proporciona desafíos para la investigación futura.

Palabras clave

Exorcismo, secularización, enseñanza católica, diablo, liberación, Iglesia Católica