

DEMONS AND EXORCISMS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC MIND-SET:
PROBING THE WESTERN DEMONOLOGICAL MENTALITY

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a general overview of Roman Catholic demonology and exorcism traditions. The cultural aspects, traditions, and belief structures comprising the collective mentality of early and then Catholic Christianity are examined. In approaching the phenomena this paper sets out to address, it is deemed necessary to demythologize demonology and exorcisms utilizing a qualitatively grounded research method that reflects upon and reveals, by way of comparison, the central aspects of these twin phenomena within the Roman Catholic doctrine.

Keywords: mentalities, imaginary, religion, demonology, exorcism, Christianity.

INTRODUCTION**

In the Hebrew tradition God afflicted an individual with a demon as punishment. And only God could remove the demon. What is reflected in the early Christian Testaments deviates from this tradition: demons inhabit individuals for unknown reasons, from unstated sources and are driven out, at first, by Jesus and subsequently by his mother Mary and disciples. Thus, from the earliest days of Christianity demons and their exorcism have played a role in Christianity. This paper examines that role and the way demons and exorcisms are conceptualized through the centuries in Catholic Christianity.

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The exploration of cultural imagery is a challenging task. The collective imagination is difficult to approach due to the antiquity of written records and in many instances the lack of written records. Although an indirect approach, making use of oral histories, is possible, the methodological challenge remains delicate. Charting collective mentalities and exploring the imagery of past societies, be it in terms of demonology, magic, witchcraft, or exorcism, is more or less approximate and does not depend upon the number of sources utilized or upon the authors' vocabulary. (Muchembled, 2002: 224) Thus, a combination of indirect and direct methods (consulting written texts) is used to arrive at an understanding of how the collective mind-set of people across the ages imagined demons, possession and exorcism. Jacques Le Goff has pointed out that the imaginary is made out of images and visual representations, while historical sources encapsulate, at their core, the essence of the "imaginary". As products of the imaginary, literary and artistic works can lead to the creation of a history of one image or another. Regarding the images of demons and their exorcism, it has to be acknowledged that "the imagery is different when it comes to us in written form rather than in records of words spoken or monuments or images". (Le Goff, 1988: 2) Without doubt demonological imagery, in the collective mind-set, has been represented and perceived very differently from the period of the primitive Church and early Christianity to current times.

Few ideas have captured human imagination through the centuries as much as have the belief in demons, their possession of people and attempts at exorcism of these demons. To fully understand why these beliefs persist, it is necessary to understand the frame of mind of the early Christian believers.

THE DEMONOLOGICAL FRAME OF MIND DURING EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Underpinning both ancient and modern Christian conceptions of demons, possession and exorcism lay the exorcisms performed by Jesus. The episodes are well-known, such as, the temptation of Jesus by the Devil for forty days is described in rich details in the pages of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. Although Jesus, due to His divine nature, could have rejected the Devil from the very beginning, He nevertheless allowed the Devil to remain nearby and even dialogued with him. The gospels report that the two had several discussions during the forty days, and that Jesus successfully resisted the Devil's temptations. The events that consecrated Jesus as an exorcist followed these temptations in the wilderness, that is to say, publically performed exorcisms.

Some miracles performed by Jesus, as described in the New Testament, refer to casting out demons or devils from people believed to be possessed. Both the Orthodox and the Catholic renditions of the Bible, despite their differences, present in similar fashion the events of these exorcisms. An example suffices to highlight

these similarities. Both Orthodox and Catholic Scriptures, in the *Gospel of Matthew* (Mathew 9: 32–34), depict the same scene, only the wording differs slightly: “After they had gone away, a demoniac who was mute was brought to him. And when the demon had been cast out, the one who had been mute spoke; and the crowds were amazed and said, ‘Never has anything like this been seen in Israel’. But the Pharisees said, ‘By the ruler of the demons he casts out the demons’”¹. The final case of demonic possession which Jesus encountered unfolded during the very time of the Last Supper. According to the Gospels, Judas had been possessed by the Devil. But Jesus did not exorcise Judas. On the contrary, He spoke to him with kindness, telling Judas, “Friend, do what you came to do”. In this act perhaps Jesus wished to provide a lesson and an example to the other apostles about everything He had taught them to that moment. (Papini, 2009: 88) The exorcisms performed by Jesus are mentioned in three of the four Gospels. In the *Gospel of John* there is no remark in this sense, although it is hardly imaginable that John was not aware of the exorcisms performed by Jesus, given the fact that roughly a quarter of Jesus’s miracles mentioned by the New Testament refer strictly to exorcisms. (Valdez, 2006)

Reading the New Testament reveals how exorcisms were performed at that time. In many ways, the exorcist’s procedure during the early Christianity appears described over simplistically. The command addressed to the demon or demons to be cast out was enough to perform a successful exorcism. Jesus and his apostles performed exorcisms and according to testamentary sources, anyone could perform exorcisms without needing approval from religious authorities. (Branîște and Branîște, 2001) During this period, there was no ritual structure nor specific prayers designed to cast out demons.

In addition to the writings of the New Testament with direct reference to exorcisms, other texts have been discovered that, from a Roman Catholic theological point of view, are outside of the scope of official Church doctrine. This is the case of the *Apocrypha* (*i.e.*, the apocryphal gospels and other writings of unknown authorship or doubtful authenticity). One of the most important collections of apocryphal writings was compiled by Mario Erbetta (1966), an Italian monk who, in addition to old Greek and Latin, was also familiar with several oriental languages such as Coptic, Syriac, Arabic, and Armenian languages. (*Evanghelii apocrife*, 2007: 13) Erbetta wrote the following definition of apocryphal writings: “the apocryphal of the New Testament are books not included in the canon, but which through their title as well as through other means, claim or suggest a canonical authority, while their literary genre imitates or transforms new testamentary forms and types” (*Evanghelii apocrife*, 2007: 14 – the author’s translation). These apocryphal writings, as they appear for instance in the 2nd century The *Infancy Gospel of Thomas* shed light upon, and reveal a plethora of

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all biblical quotations are from *The Bible*, New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition – NRSVCE (2008).

lesser known details of Jesus' and his mother's lives. These are writings which fit into the pseudoepigraphical literary genre, as the narration is given by a famous person from a previous epoch. Authentic historical elements introduce a doctrinal syncretism into which pagan elements and superstitions, developed within popular Christianity, are inserted. (Buzalic, 2010: 149)

These *Apocrypha* works are teeming with a rich demonology, as Evil is personalized from a "devil" conceived of as a fallen angel and God's opponent who is transformed into the "Devil" as a *sui generis*, autonomous entity. This principle of evil evolved into a personalized Devil who at first accomplishes distractive missions, together with other rebel angels, and later becomes the main suspect and simultaneously the culprit for the cases of demonic possessions in Christianity. The leader of these fallen angels is distinguished as having a more clarified status, in the end receiving his own identity under the names of "Satan", "Belzebuth", or "Lucifer". (Buzalic, 2010: 149)

Apocryphal writings also contain episodes of demonic exorcism. The Arabic gospel of Jesus's childhood describes exorcisms which detail the way in which they were performed. Mary, Jesus's mother, is placed in the role of the exorcist, who through her sheer presence near the sight of a possessed person succeeded in casting out the demons. Even the manifestation of an emotion of compassion determined a demon to run away. The story is related in the episode of the "possessed woman", in the *Arabic Infancy Gospel*: "And when the Lady Mary saw her, she pitied her; and upon this Satan immediately left her, and fled away in the form of a young man, saying: Woe to me from thee, Mary, and from thy son". (Arabic Infancy Gospel: 14) Another episode from the same gospel relates just as unusual an exorcism: "And the son of the priest, his usual disease having come upon him, entered the hospital, and there came upon Joseph and the Lady Mary, from whom all others had fled. The Lady Mary had washed the cloths of the Lord Christ, and had spread them over some wood. That demoniac boy, therefore, came and took one of the cloths, and put it on his head. Then the demons, fleeing in the shape of ravens and serpents, began to go forth out of his mouth. The boy, being immediately healed at the command of the Lord Christ, began to praise God, and then to give thanks to the Lord who had healed him. And when his father saw him restored to health, 'My son, said he, what has happened to thee and by what means hast thou been healed?' The son answered: 'When the demons had thrown me on the ground, I went into the hospital, and there I found an august woman with a boy, whose newly-washed cloths she had thrown upon some wood: one of these I took up and put upon my head, and the demons left me and fled'". (Arabic Infancy Gospel: 11)

These two accounts illustrate a kind of exorcism which is different from that performed by Jesus, who exorcized demons by ordering them to be cast away. But in these accounts of exorcism an indirect, wordless, action drew away the demons. One can note that these first exorcisms, recounted during the times of early

Christianity, cannot be found in the neo-testamentary, “canonical”, writings, either Orthodox or Catholic. Even so, a simple reading of these writings be it even by persons lacking formal certification in Roman Catholic or Orthodox theology, cannot but confirm or endorse the “official” aspects of the Orthodox and Roman Catholic dogmas. That is to say, the fervour with which relics are received and venerated by the faithful for their healing powers is well known in both churches. Like the possessed boy in the story who placed a cloth on his head and cast out the demons, so it is that relics are believed to perform such acts.

Another aspect to which we need to refer is the image of the Devil, the main suspect and simultaneously the culprit for the cases of demonic possessions during early Christianity. Neither the New Testament nor the apocryphal literatures provide us with a physical image of the devil. These texts do not attach a face to the idea of the devil. It is not until the imagination of the Middle Ages and afterwards, during the post-medieval period, that visual representations of the demonic evil appear.

THE DEVIL AND EXORCISM IN MEDIEVAL AND MODERN IMAGERY

The initial imagery of demons, the Devil, possession and exorcism was rather primitive. And thus interaction with the Devil was rather simplistic, as it occurred either through simple dialogues or through attempts to cast him away as a result of positive emotional communication. (*i.e.*, such as the pity and compassion felt by the Virgin Mary) In time exorcism became formalized rituals under the purview of the clergy.

Beginning in the 3rd century A.D., exorcisms were performed by persons ordained to carry out these tasks by way of *hirotésie*. After the 4th century A.D., exorcist priests officially became professional exorcists, a tradition that has been maintained within the Roman Catholic Church, but not in the Orthodox tradition. After Constantine’s conversion to Christianity in 313 A.D., measures were taken against paganism. In 325 Constantine personally lead the Council of Nicaea, while the Church thrived throughout the Empire. Simultaneously, new superstitions emerged, along with new adorers of Satan, while the fathers of the early Church seemed to have foreseen the situation. Tertullian, for instance, denounced some forms of the cult of the Persian god Mithra, in which he recognized “the deceits of the Devil who imitates some divide realities” (Duquesne, 2009: 55) Origen, likewise, points out in his work *Contra Celsum* “the various demons upon the earth, to whom different localities have been assigned, each one bears a name appropriate to the several dialects of place and country”. (Origen, *Contra Celsum*: XXIV)

The perception of exorcism changed with the beginning of the medieval period. The emergence of “the other religion”, *i.e.* popular religion, in which believers deviated from the canonical practice imposed by the church, creates the expectation of an immediate divine presence in the world. A *psychology of miracles* is born, a particular frame of mind engrained in the popular religion which survived basically unchanged to the present day. This popular religion, nascent during early Middle Ages, is characterized by magical patterns of thought and behaviour expressed in various superstitions referring to certain days of the week, people, and animals that were associated with harmful outcomes. Part and parcel to these “popular religions” were incantations and exorcisms practiced in sacred or damned places. (Nicoară and Nicoară, 1996)

The documentary records surviving from the Middle Ages are so overwhelmingly rich with examples of these “popular religions” that some scholars turn away from them, considering them unreliable. (Papini, 2009: 99) Along general lines, a theological and cultural model of Antiquity perpetuated itself at least until the beginning of the medieval times. Latin and Byzantine authors patterned their thought upon the same ancient culture, as both Christian theology and spiritual literature have drawn on the same legacy of Christian ancient tradition. Alongside these superstitions grew another idea of evil in the world. Famous authors of the Middle Ages, from Gregory the Great in the West to John of Damascus in the East, have articulated a “philosophy of evil”. Gregory the Great concluded, starting from the prologue of the *Book of Job* that demons act only with God’s permission, while the power of the rebellious angels is also made possible by divinity. (Buzalic, 2010: 228) Moreover, Gregory attempted to give a divine interpretation of natural disasters, asserting that when calamity struck it was God’s punishment of sinful people, and not the work of the devil. Placing divine punishment and human sinfulness at the root of epidemics that ravaged the medieval world, Gregory thus tried to counter the popular explanation embraced by the masses which considered Satan as responsible for these calamities. As Nikos Matsoukas emphasized, “the conception according to which Satan was the cause of the outbreak of plagues, which was sowing a paralyzing fear among people, was determining most people to resort to typical or improvised exorcisms”. (Matsoukas, 2002: 138)

The year 1054 was a milestone in the changing conceptions of exorcism. The Great Schism between the West and East determined the emergence of new approaches towards the cases of demonic possessions, foreshadowing the articulation of new imaginary structures concerning demons and exorcisms. Roman Catholic theology viewed demonic possession as the outcome of the departure from the canonical principle of good Christian practice. Anyone who deviated from official religious practice could be suspected of being possessed or in contact with demons or Satan himself. The list of characteristics that could suggest the presence of demons (*i.e.*, the demonic possessive symptomatology) was slowly established.

In 1580 Jean Bodin wrote the infamous handbook for hunting down witchcraft. Guy Patin's allegation that Bodin wrote the handbook only to demonstrate that he believed in witchcraft, is an example that cannot raise too many questions since it is impossible to either confirm or reject his accusation. The famous *Rituale Romanum* was in use by Catholic exorcists by 1614. (Catholic Church, 2004)

During the famous witch trials of the second half of the 1500's, inquisitors strongly believed in the idea of contracting with the Devil. In 1584, a case of witchcraft made waves in Baden-Baden, in which the judge had tried to find out if a pact had been signed between the accused and the Devil, and if so, had she signed with her own blood or with ink. (Duquesne, 2009: 137) Countless times, judges pronounced the accused as guilty. This was the case with N. Remy, who sentenced to the stake between two and three thousand "witches" between 1576 and 1606. In the same period, the zealous activity of Archbishops Carlo and Federico Borromeo led to the systematic persecution of Devil's allies in the Lombardy's Alps. Moreover, in 1645, in Essex, two witch-hunters, inquisitors J. Stearne and M. Hopkins extensively used torture, considered to be the best method of extracting information, to force confessions. In general, torture or the threat of torture greatly increased the number of people accused of witchcraft. The confession made in 1631 by Jesuit priest F. Spree is indicative in this sense. Torture, he deplored, "has brought to the surface unprecedented malefic drives, but not only in Germany, but in all nations resorting to it. If we haven't yet confessed we are all witches, this is because we haven't yet been tortured". (Delumeau, 1986: 316–317) One thing is beyond doubt, namely that under torture or even under the threat of torture, any confession can be easily extracted. In England, torture was less put to use in comparison to continental Europe, but there were nevertheless situations when people presented themselves out of their free will and denounced themselves to judges. There were also cases in which people confessed incredible relationship with the bad spirits. Perhaps the most intriguing category is represented by those who, denying the most compelling of evidence, were stubbornly confessing crimes they did not commit. These spontaneous confessions were accepted by the judges only if they were put down in writing and translated in their familiar language, *i.e.* the language of demonology. In this regard the declaration of an enlightened inquisitor is illustrative. Alonso de Salazar y Frias tried to demystify witchcraft in the Basque country by signalling the importance of collective psychology of sermons in influencing people's demonological imagination. He claimed that people can fall prey to credulity by listening to the sermons delivered by monks such as was the case in Olagiie, near Pamplona, even if the confessions referring to nocturnal gatherings and witches flying through the air were provoked by the edict of pardon issued in 1611. (Delumeau, 1986: 317–318)

A *cause célèbre* of demonic possession, as revealed by the documents of the time, occurred at Loudun, France, in the year 1633. The demons invasion of the abbey where the poor Ursuline nuns were living gained instant fame due to the

newly introduced ritual of exorcism. In contrast to previous times, at Loudun the exorcisms were put to show in the public square, visible to everyone who wanted to take part in the spectacle. (Duquesne, 2009: 142) The history of this exorcism reveals other interesting aspects, shedding light upon the political and religious stakes of the affair, as well as pointing to the possible existence of collective psychic disorders. (Duquesne, 2009: 143) The one called to exorcise the nuns of Loudun was Father Jean-Joseph Surin. He was a devoted Jesuit, a professional exorcist who rose to the occasion. His only problem was that the Devil turned against him, according to the letter he sent to Father d'Attichy, a fellow Jesuit from Rennes, dated May 3rd, 1635 (Papini, 2009: 95) The Infernal Devilish Trinity, made out of Leviathan, Lucifer, and Belzebuth troubled father Surin, who confessed that "I have very little freedom of action. When I desire to talk, I am forced to remain silent; I cannot take part to the communion; at the table I cannot lift a bite to my mouth; during confession I forget suddenly all of my sins; and I feel the devil hovering over me as if he is at home. When I wake up, he is already here; at the morning prayer, he cast away the thought from my head as he wishes; when my heart starts to open up, he fills it with anger; he puts me to sleep when I desire to remain awake; and in public, speaking through the mouth of that possessed woman, *he brags that he is my master, and I cannot argue against...*". (Papini, 2009: 96 – the author's translation) Probably because, impelled by the demons, as well as based on what he had written in his letter to Father d'Attichy, Father Surin jumped from the window and broke a leg. Papini considers this a clear example of demonic possession. Adopting a more sceptical stance than Papini, it may be suggested that even the departure of the demons a couple decades later cannot constitute solid proof that in the case of Father Surin one is dealing with a categorical case of demonic possession. The French historian Michel de Certeau, himself a Jesuit scholar as well as a Catholic theologian, investigated the curious case of Loudun and advanced his own interpretation. De Certeau pictured the image of a society that expels its anxieties caused by these events to the "theatre of the possessed and the exorcists", suggesting that it is possible that the imagination of those who believe in demonic possession create similar effects as in the case of Loudun. (Nicoară, 1995)

In line with the medieval Catholic collective mind-set, the Devil benefited during these times as people made offerings in attempts to appease him or even to subdue him for their own purposes. There is even the image of men entering into a contract with the Devil as materialized in the form of a document signed by both parties involved. "Henri Estienne, a 16th century typesetter, humanist, and encyclopaedic scholar, relates the case of a woman who lit up a candle for the Archangel Michael, then lit up a candle for the devil accompanying her: to the saint, to do her will; to the devil, not to do her harm: double duality, as one could put it". (Duquesne, 2009: 106) The witchcraft trials, sermons, and catechisms of the 16th century tried to induce, deep in the collective mind-set, the difference

between God and Satan, between saints and demons. Fear of some dangers persisted, while the proclivity towards certain practices and rites, deviant to the ecclesiastical canon, had pressed this form of witchcraft labelled as “pagan” towards clandestine status. (Delumeau, 1986: 106) In reality, it is a false clandestine status, since the ecclesiastical power came to more or less accept these magic behaviours and rites which predated Christianity. The Church kept the right to condemn these practices and did so only when the Church lost its control. This magical thinking which is engrained in the medieval western Church is well suggested in a writing re-issued in 1779 in Venice. In this volume there are to be found more than one hundred “absolutions, benedictions, conjurations, and exorcisms” all of them referring exclusively to material life: blessings of herds, wine, bread, oil, and also exorcisms against worms, rats, snakes, and every varmint animals. (Delumeau, 1986: 107)

The image of magicians provides an interesting problem, since their ultimate aim was to capture one or more demons in order to subject them into their servitude. These ambitions can be considered remnants of an older period of magical thinking, (Papini, 2009: 130) one which pre-existed Christianity. On the other hand, the problem of witches and of the possessed is of a different nature. Curiously, all images of the Devil portraying him as servant to man present the former in a rather positive light, as a trustworthy companion. Various dramatic creations offer the image of Satan as subject to human will, for a limited amount of time. Famous figures or ordinary mortals try to tempt the tempter. The pact is signed by both parties almost always with the blood of the mortals and necessarily there has to be at least one witness to the transaction. Such pacts are witnessed in *The Devil's Slave* published by Antonio Mira de Amescua in 1612 to the much more celebrated Goethe's *Faust*. (Papini, 2009: 131) Christopher Marlowe, in his *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, is among those who revealed to us the exact content of the contract:

“*Mephistopheles*: Faustus, I swear by hell and Lucifer to effect all promises between us made. *Faustus*: Then hear me read them: On these conditions following. First, that Faustus may be a spirit in form and substance. Secondly, that Mephistopheles shall be his servant, and at his command. Thirdly, that Mephistopheles shall do for him and bring him whatsoever [he desires]. Fourthly, that he shall be in his chamber or house invisible. Lastly, that he shall appear to the said John Faustus, at all times, and in what form or shape whatsoever he pleases. I, John Faustus, of Wittenberg, Doctor, by these presents do give both body and soul to Lucifer, Prince of the East, and his minister, Mephistopheles; and furthermore grant unto them, that twenty-four years being expired, the articles above written inviolate, full power to fetch or carry the said John Faustus, body and soul, flesh, blood, or goods, into their habitation wheresoever. By me, John Faustus.”

With the curtailment of the witchcraft trials during the 18th century, the judicial records, which could offer us a better image of the profile of the cultural

imagery, suffer a contraction. A more salient collective mind-set of the elites takes shape, as the one pertaining to the popular masses is more and more lost in the background. In this context, there are situations in which authors prefer to self-censor in order to avoid unpleasant consequences. Authors learn to conceal things or situations, without exposing their own stand on the issue as previously noted about Guy Patin's allegation that Jean Bodin wrote the infamous handbook for hunting down witchcraft only to demonstrate that he believed in witchcraft.

In his book, *A History of the Devil from the Middle Ages to the present*, Robert Muchembled mentions that the literary scholar Daniel Mornet discovered an important collection of books in French private libraries between 1750s and 1780s, of which most titles treated occult sciences and magic. Mornet hypothesized from his discovery that most lawyers, physicians, and notaries (the owners of these private book collections) believed in the Devil. This conclusion, which also implies that some forms of adorations existed, is hazardous to say the least. Methodological caution should prevail when approaching such delicate questions. In the case of the book collections compiled by the privileged classes, it has to be taken into consideration that many books were bought only for the sake of adding them to the collection, without the slightest interest in reading them. We also have to consider such purchases as investments into cultural capital which could be bequeathed. The topics of demons, witchcraft, and exorcisms also encounters periods when they are out of cultural interest. The literary mentioning of the Devil is at its peak between 1720 and 1739, a period considered to be the epoch of the great demonological polemics. The projection of the Devil in the collective memory passed through periods when it was of utmost interest, but also through times when the Devil was a subject of less interest. In this sense, during the 1740s the mentioning of the Devil in the literature drops sharply, with 248 mentions in 30 titles, while 22 authors do not even refer to him. During the 1760s, the fascination with the demonical will again gain full momentum, with 623 mentions in 49 titles. (Muchembled, 2002: 227) *Devil upon Two Sticks* (Le Diable Boiteux) published in 1707 by Alain Rene Lesage portrays the demon, Asmodeu, as a prisoner in a magical jar. Let loose by a student, the Asmodeu takes the latter with him into the heavens, somewhere over Madrid, and shows him the interiors of the houses by lifting the rooftops of the buildings. Asmodeu desires to show his gratefulness for being released from the jar and thus wants to marry the student to a rich girl, which will eventually lead to a curious fashion of conjuring up other demons. This story illustrates an evolution in attitudes towards demons, as miracles would be re-invented. The demon kept captive inside of a jar foreshadows the literary image of the genie in a bottle. Unleashed by someone, the genie puts himself in the service of his liberator, even if the genie is nevertheless capable of all kinds of bad jokes, only to try to tempt him into signing a devilish pact that will send his liberator into hell. Lesage's vision is followed by the story of Antoine, count of Hamilton, in which a witch wishes his monstrous son to marry the daughter of her sibling, "an honest

magician". Eventually, she changes her plan and plots a malign marriage between herself and the pretender of her nephew. The author set the stage for the never-ending battle between good and evil, but without referring to either to the Devil or to any satanical pact. Nevertheless, the words used by the author ("cursed", "infernal" and "ethereal" addressed to the witch) suggest the connection to magic and witchcraft. At the end the battle is won by the good magician, and it turns out that they were not siblings. Hamilton's story suggests a type of exorcism that was apparently attributed especially to the educated categories that were somewhat ambivalent in their attitudes and beliefs concerning witchcraft around the 1720s.

Another aspect of the religious mind-set of medieval Catholic Christianity is that of the attitude towards the clergy. There was contempt for the higher clergy which did not generalize to the lower order priests. The increased secularism and privilege of the higher clergy and the extreme de-classification of the lower clergy can account for this. A latent hatred of the privileged clergy could always be felt among the people living with the routine of a completely externalized and rigid religion devoid of a truly spiritual ideal. The degeneration of the clergy did the rest. Higher social classes as well as the lower ones have made jokes for centuries about the figure of the libertine monk and that of the fat and lazy friar. The more a preacher loudly condemned the sins of his own order, the more he was listened to by people. Immediately after the preacher unleashed his charges against priests, Bernardino of Siena said, the listeners instantly forget everything else, as there is no better way of keeping their attention awake when people are sleepy, too hot or too cold. (Huizinga, 1993: 282–284) Therefore, the clergy had great interest in diverting attention from itself towards a "theatre" of the possessed and the exorcists, and especially towards a "witch-hunt" by pointing the finger towards the enemy of the Church, *i.e.* the Devil as well as towards his possible accomplices. In relation to cases involving witches, what remains unclear is why the Church resorted to the radical solution of torture and burning at the stake rather than exorcism of the demons as method of fighting the Devil. One possible answer can be provided by the material interest of the Church. That is to say, in cases of exorcism, the possessed person would retain her property and wealth, whereas if the witch was tried and burned at the stakes, her material wealth would be divided between the local Church and the inquisitor who handled her trial. Therefore, there may have been a material interest in the Church's preference for the radical solution of burning at the stake over the "softer" solution of exorcism.

Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, within the Catholic realm, a cosmic battle was being fought by the Church against the Devil. The appearance of satanic cults, within which the dark forces were conjured and adored, lead to papal encyclicals and synod decisions regulating responses to Satanic worship and exorcism. The technique of exorcism was designed in such a manner as to be deployed with maximal efficiency. A diagnostic of demonic possession was needed, and for this to occur, the Church needed the help of the medical profession

and of the newly created craft of psychology. However, this collaboration between the Church and the medical profession occurred only during the late 19th century, when psychology as a field of study and therapeutic technique took shape in Central and Western Europe. A clear diagnosis was needed in order to establish if it is mental disorder or demonic possession, while the suspicion was grounded upon the fundamental principle according to which “In primis, ne facile credat, aliquem a daemonio obsessum esse” [At first, we should not believe easily someone who says that he or she is possessed by demons]. (Matsoukas, 2002: 140) A Western theology of demonology and exorcism thus gradually took shape, offering us the picture of a blending between narratives and visual representations within the frameworks set by theological interpretation. (Matsoukas, 2002: 140)

MODERNITY AND THE RECESSION OF DEMONOLOGY

In the aftermath of the “scientific revolution” started in the 16th century generated by the great discoveries of Copernicus and Galilei in astronomy, deeply furthered by breakthroughs of Descartes, Newton, and Darwin in later centuries, a decline of the demonic theme became evident by the middle of the 19th century. With this moment in time, public attention focused more on the dark side of human personality than upon the Devil. The fight between the secular scientists and the traditional Church which opposed the desacralizing of life through science trapped ordinary people between the Church, which labelled them as non-believers, or scientists who saw them as naïve and superstitious.

The polemic generated around the question of hypnotism, at the end of the 19th century, is indicative of the cultural tension between the two opposing sides. The work published in 1899 by Charles Helot under the title *Le Diable et l'Hypnotisme* clearly states that at the basis of hypnotism there can be nothing else than a demon. Ernest Florent Parmentier claimed in his book *La Sorcellerie devant les temps modernes*, that until recently the agents of the Devil talked through the mouths of witches, and now it is believed that spirits talk through the mouth of the medium. He considered the second possibility to be reasonable, due to the activity of certain psychic forces. This is only one of the countless polemics generated between believers and rationalists, many of them ending up in courthouses, where cases of witchcraft were judged. (Muchembled, 2002: 260) By 1892, the courts were already reluctant to take legal action against hypnotism, although many considered it to belong to the class of diabolic practices. The mentality had changed in the direction of perceiving these practices as somewhere between charlatanism and medicine than as having to do with the Devil. (Muchembled, 2002: 260)

At the fin de siècle, the Roman Catholic Church becomes the target of a violent anticlerical offensive, for which the soothsayers, among others, are blamed.

As a reaction, the Roman Curia accuses the Devil once again, by diabolizing the spiritualist movement and using a “pastoral of fear” as it had successfully done during the previous centuries. In 1891, Abbot Brulon wrote that the Devil has nothing to do with the stories concocted by the soothsayers, and instead accepted some of the hypotheses advanced by the psychiatry of the time regarding the role of the unconscious in cases of demonic possession. This is a time when Satan gets his fair share of publicity in sermons and newspaper articles from the Catholic press. Infernal images become more and more frequent, while a literature of dreadfulness takes definite shape. In the *Catechisme en images*, published in Paris, in 1908, Satan thrones over the Infernal realm, holding a fork in his hand, while the damned are pushed towards the brink of a gigantic and tall wall from which the demons throw down their victims, reminiscent of many Medieval paintings. In the Inferno, various diseases correspond to specific sins: a turkey cock eats off the body of the vainglorious, who are forced by a demon to kneel in the front of the master of the underworld; a toad forces the avarice to walk under the burden of a huge moneybag; a goat deals with the lewd; enviers are bitten by snakes; a pig surveys the insatiable who are condemned to eternal hunger and thirst; a lion rules over the angry ones, who lacerate each other encouraged by little devils; a turtle guards the lazy ones, who are tied to beds of ember and are being stung by horrible scorpions. (Duquesne, 2009: 187–188)

Belief in Satan had to overcome new obstacles everywhere. This is a period when a new idea gains credit, which places the eternal battle between Good and Evil in the human soul. Man’s consciousness becomes the new battleground over which the cosmic war between the two opposing principles is now being fought. This radical new idea was advanced by Sigmund Freud, the Austrian neurologist, considered by Catholic theologians to be, together with Friedrich Nietzsche, “a master of suspicion”. A convinced atheist, Freud did not refrain from studying religion, which he assimilates in his diagnosis of “obsessive neurosis”. This is the path that led him to his understanding of demonic possessions. After reading *Malleus Maleficarum*, the infamous 14th century handbook of demonology, Freud came to the conclusion that the demon actually represents repressed desires and drives, especially those of sexual nature. Moreover, demonic possession could be explained in terms of the repression of one’s frustrated desires. The stories with witches are in fact echoes of a perverse infantile sexuality; while the witches’ broomstick is, according to Freud, “probably the Great Lord Penis”. (Freud, 1950 [1892–1899]: 242) The following quote captures the essence of Freud’s thoughts on this subject: “For us, demons are bad, forbidden desires, emerging out of repressed and rejected drives; We simply project in the outer world the image that the Middle Ages has created out of these psychic creations; and we leave them develop within the inner life of the sick, in which these images establish themselves”. Against this backdrop the fierce and bitter polemic between the Church and psychoanalysis is easily understood, especially considering the fact that by internalizing Evil, some people believed that the Devil resided within their inner selves. (Duquesne, 2009: 189–190)

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the image of the demon and of demonic possessions in Western culture recedes into an imagery which becomes accessible to all social classes. Satan and his accomplices start to infiltrate in everything man now imagines or concocts. An early example is provided by the cinema, a machine of creating or recreating life. Technology, trickeries, and illusions allow for displaying on screen what the book can only suggest. This change, which was already apparent during the 19th century, became abundantly clear in moving pictures. The cinema does not abandon the Devil, or perhaps, the Devil did not renounce the cinema. The Devil now becomes a movie star. A suggestive example is the moving picture directed by Ken Russel, *The Devils*, inspired from the story of the Loudun's possessed nuns, which brings into sharp focus the political stakes of the affair as well as the details of the ritual of exorcism. A richer imagination is shown by Roman Polanski, who directed in 1969 the moving picture *Rosemary's Baby*, in which a young woman becomes the victim of a satanic sect. After she gave birth, the sect takes the child away from her, who is considered to be the outcome of the mother's copulation with Satan. Another iconic movie for the genre in case is, without doubt, William Friedkin's *The Exorcist* which hit the screens in 1973. These movies reflect the shift which occurred in Western demonological imagery, Satan is not what he once was. He is no longer the snake tempting Eve nor a dragon or monster from the Medieval period. Satan became subtler, as he is now detected even in the field of publicity as a symbol of force and cleverness. He cleans and unclogs pipes, and to benefit for all this, one should only buy a "little devil". Moreover, introduced in the beverage market were alcoholic drinks advertised as "dangerous", bearing names such as "Satan" or "Lucifer". Some bag carriers could be named "devils", and toys as "diabolos". Devils are also entertaining: they now amuse spectators at the circus, while the internet is populated with devils under every imaginable guise. Satan has changed his visual identity. In one way, he had lost the religious dimension when Baudelaire, among others, has invoked "the beauty of the devil, or better said, his charming grace and youthful dare". (Dequesne, 2009: 194–198) In his much celebrated *Flowers of Evil* (*Fleurs du mal*), Baudelaire goes so far as to write a poem entitled "The Litany of Satan" in which the poet arduously conjures the "wisest and fairest of the Angels" to have "pity on my long despair!" Baudelaire's fascination with the Devil is also evident in his famous saying, that the Devil uses the cleverest trick in trying to convince us that he does not exist.

The image of evil as an individual and psychological phenomenon sharpened during the mid-20th century. The existence of the Devil has been called into question more and more forcing the papacy to re-assert his existence. The doctrine of Devil's existence was re-affirmed by Pope Paul VI in 1972, by Pope John Paul II in 1984 and 1998, and by the Roman Catholic Church's Catechism published in 1992. All these are indicative of the will of the Church to cling to a topic as important as it is controversial. At the same time, too much insistence on the reality

of Satan is not desired. This is why religious authorities and theologians have navigated with great caution between these dangers, all the more so as the number of requests for an exorcism has increased, in a society where individuals are ever more interested in carefully monitoring themselves. Despite the fact that Paul VI had suppressed the order of exorcists in 1972, the function has not disappeared. A new exorcism ritual has been developed by the Catholic Church and introduced as official in January 1999. Until then, the temporary framework concerning performing exorcisms had been in place since 1991. This ritual protocol recommended the involvement of physicians and psychologists in the process of exorcism, but with the utmost discretion. Gabriele Amorth, an exorcist from the diocese of Rome, re-asserts the existence of the Devil and the necessity of addressing the problem with caution and care. He also confesses that he personally had only 84 cases of authentic demonic possession out of the 50 000 cases that were brought to his attention. The role of the exorcist in the Catholic Church is significant and is, in part, continued by the Church in order to provide the faithful with a credible alternative to charm breakers or fortune tellers who would abuse the faithful's credulity and force them to pay for the services offered to them. It is an argument that reveals the deep commitment towards a practice of conjuring that symbolizes the traditional image of evil.

In 1989, a survey conducted in France by a journalist working at the news magazine *Le Nouvel Observateur* revealed that the fight between the exorcists and the charlatans is far from being equally sided. According to the data collected by the French fiscal authority, 40 000 fortune tellers are visited by 10 million people each year. They were charging fees varying between 200 and 1000 Francs per session. There were also some 30 000 healers or sorcerers, not including practitioners of the growing field of alternative medicine. Moreover, the TV show "Media Medium" hosted by Didier Derlich and broadcasted by RTL was being followed by over 2 000 viewers before being suspended on March 31st, 1989. In 1985 alone, 540 000 copies of printed materials were issued for those interested in the horoscopes, out of which 170 000 were copies of the publication *Horoscope*. Around that time, in France there were 49 000 physicians, 38 000 priests, and 4 300 psychoanalysts. It is ironic that exorcists account for only a dozen professionals scattered all across the dioceses of the Hexagon. Father Lambey, the head of French exorcists in 1977, observed that the irrational had made spectacular advances since 1955, the year he entered priesthood. He stated that he received up to three "cursed" people per week, as compared to twenty per year in the past. Those approaching him were asking to cure them of impotency, emotional stress after being abandoned by their spouse, or curing cows which dried out of milk. People were certain that someone else had put a curse on them. Many of these individuals sought the help of the priest only after they could no longer pay the fees of fortune tellers. These stories only highlight the survival of the old magic mentality. When personal efforts fail, an intermediary becomes necessary, and when

the “best” of these fails too, the last resort is the exorcist of the diocese. This situation is not limited to peasants from rural areas. Urban dwellers, who have become the majority of population in modern societies, are just as impressed by the irrational.

Depending on the number of those who believe or not in the existence of the Devil, or in other entities pertaining to occult practices, sociologists have noticed that a strong religious integration prevents the adhesion to everything related to the irrational. This is probably why the Catholic Church has recently chosen to revitalize the belief in the reality of the Devil, in its attempt to regain the souls who find themselves tempted by all sorts of esoteric doctrines. (Muchembled, 2002: 290–293) Revitalizing the old bond between the fear of the Devil and the love of God, the Church struggles to keep its flock from fleeing towards alternative belief-systems and ritual practices.

The belief in the phenomena of possession, and generally in irrational phenomena, seems to be widespread in apparently educated milieus, as in the urban areas, for instance. A survey conducted in France, an importance fief of Catholicism, in 1981, on a sample of 2,500 respondents, revealed that 23% of the upper classes believed in sorceries, while 24% of the students from Montpellier, responded that they believe in the existence of the Devil – an answer rather specific to the rural area than to the university educated urban France. When a case of demonic possession is associated with sorcery and Satanism, mass media takes care to stress with amazement that it happened in Paris or another major urban settlement, considering that a large metropole should be the centre of absolute rationalism. Nevertheless, satanic sects, which worried the exorcists when they first gathered in France in 2006, seem to attract young persons from urban environment, sometimes linked to neo-Nazi movements. Highly interesting are the results of research conducted by ethnographer and psychoanalyst Jeanne Favret Saada, who during the 1960s spent 30 months in the region of Bocage-Mayenne for the purpose of studying sorcery practices. Over her extended research, she gathered a large number of accounts, but the Devil or his agents did not appear once. Without entering into too much detail, suffice it to mention that the scenario followed a typical pattern. The process usually started with people accounting in magical terms the troubles they faced, although these problems may be of strictly natural causes. They tended to believe they were the victims of sorceries even though the difficult situation they found themselves in had nothing to do with magical practices. The victim of the situation sought the help of the only person who could help, the “charm-breaker” who happens to be the local priest. Nothing close to a witches Sabbath could be found in the field. The answers provided by the first locals interviewed by the researcher were negative: “There are no charms anymore”, “Charms are stories for the old times”, “Go out there and meet them, they are backward people”. Out there does not necessary mean a remote village. “Backward” people probably exist everywhere, and the proof of this is represented by the esoteric books that fill the shelves of urban libraries and bookshops. The presence of the Devil seems to have been diluted, as if humans could do without him, but, they do not seem to manage without the supernatural and the irrational. (Duquesne, 2009: 202–206)

The belief in demons, witchcraft, the Devil, possession and exorcism migrated to the American continent with the first European settlers early in the 1600's. These beliefs have been a part of protestant Christianity in America since the earliest settlers arrived. Historically, the most notable incidents of witchcraft and possessions in North America occurred in and near Salem, Massachusetts from February, 1692 until March 1693. (Hutchinson, 1936) That belief continues into modern times. Recent surveys conducted in the Western world have shown that it is not Europeans who are most fascinated with demons, but Americans. Fifty-seven per cent of Americans believe in the existence of the Devil (*Figure no. 1*) and 51% believe in the possibility of demonic possession. (*Figure no. 2*)

As the wave of secularization has swept across Western Europe, German society seems to be the most affected by it in terms of intensity of believing in demonic possession. One public opinion poll conducted in 1983 revealed that only 14% of the German respondents believed in hell, while only 8% of them believed that the Devil is a real, existing entity. (Goodman, 1988: 125) A more recent study conducted in German society has shown that magical thinking has further decreased in the Western mind-set. As the data presented in the table below shows, only a small per cent of German respondents believe that good luck charms do bring good luck or that fortune tellers can foresee the future. Along similar lines, very few of the respondents trust in the healing powers some faith healers claim to possess and in the idea that a person's star sign at birth can affect the course of that persons' future. Data show that the great majority of German respondents turn out to be rather sceptical of good luck charms, fortune telling, faith healing, and horoscope.

Table no. 1

Magical thinking in German society, N=1.595

Intensity of belief	Good luck charm (%)	Fortune telling (%)	Faith healing (%)	Horoscope (%)
Definitely true	6,7	4,0	5,4	4,8
Probably true	22,8	14,5	22,6	19,8
Probably false	28,5	26,0	24,7	27,6
Definitely false	42,0	55,0	47,3	47,8
Total	100	100	100	100

Source: GESIS – Leibniz Institute for the Social Sciences,

ALLBUS/GGSS 2008 (German General Social Survey 2008). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne.

ZA4600 Data file Version 2.1.0, doi:10.4232/1.12345.

<https://dbk.gesis.org/DBKSearch/SDESC2.asp?no=4600&tab=3&db=E&dab=0>

(last accessed 19 November 2015)³

Another survey conducted in 2013 on British and American societies, has shown a widening gap being established between two very different cultures. The results of this opinion poll are detailed in the figures below⁴.

³ The survey was conducted between March and August 2008, using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) on two stage disproportionate random sample in western Germany (incl. West Berlin) and eastern Germany (incl. East Berlin).

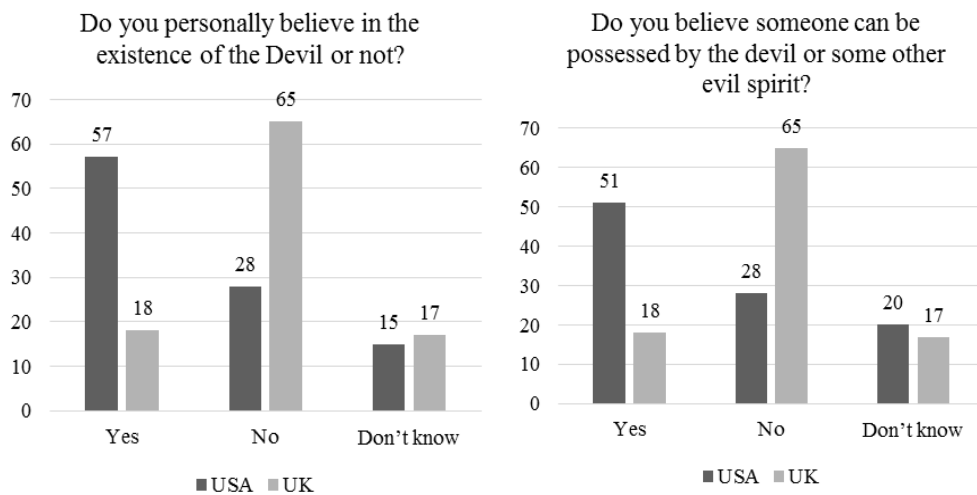


Figure no. 1 – The reality of demonic existence.

Figure no. 2 – The possibility of demonic possession.

Source: YouGov.uk 2013 opinion poll: Beliefs about the Devil and Possession.

<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/09/27/18-brits-believe-possession-devil-and-half-america/>
(last accessed 19 November 2015)

The data clearly show that Americans believe in larger numbers in the existence of the Devil (*Figure no. 1*), in the possibility of demonic possession (*Figure no. 2*), as well as the frequency of this type of possession (*Figure no. 3*) than people in the United Kingdom. For instance, 57% of Americans believe that the Devil exists, as opposed to only 18% of British people who believe the same. Along the same lines, more than half of Americans (51%) believe in the possibility of demonic possession, while their British counterparts are much more sceptical (only 18% of them do believe that the devil can possess a human being). These results are consistent with other public opinion polls, which show the very large popularity enjoyed by demonic beliefs in the United States. One year earlier, another poll conducted in the U.S. by Public Policy Polling (October 2012) pointed out that 63% of Americans aged between 18 and 29 years old “believe in the notion that invisible, non-corporeal entities called ‘demons’ can take partial or total control of human beings” (Wilson, 2013). We can safely conclude from these results and the long history of belief in demonic possession that the Devil has crossed the Atlantic, and settled comfortably into American popular imagery.

⁴ The survey was conducted in September 2013, on a total sample of 2,919 adult subjects, out of which 1,919 respondents were British and 1,000 American. The margin of error is 3% for a 95% confidence interval. The numbers in the figures represent per cent (%).

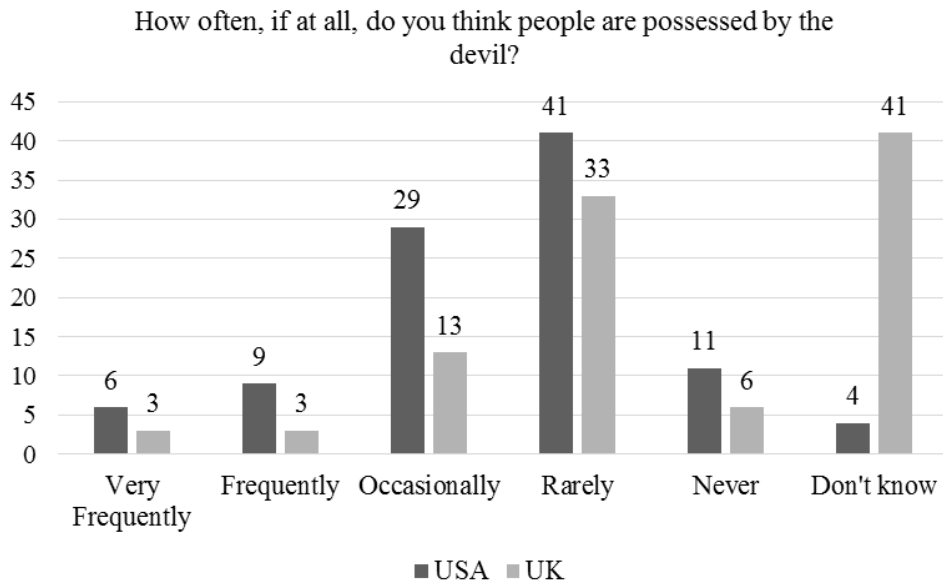


Figure no. 3 – The frequency of demonic possession.

Source: YouGov.uk 2013 opinion poll: Beliefs about the Devil and Possession.

<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2013/09/27/18-brits-believe-possession-devil-and-half-america/>
(last accessed 19 November 2015)

CONCLUSION

The paper has explored the ebbs and flow of the Western demonological imagination from the time of Jesus to the present. It has been shown that the demonological frame of mind is a constitutive part of the Christian worldview, in which an eternal battle of cosmic proportions is being fought between the Devil and his agents on the one side and the Church on the other side. How this battle has been framed in the minds of Christians over the past twenty centuries has changed several times. The response to the existence of the Devil, demons and possession has changed with the evolution of human understanding of these phenomena. However, Catholic demonological conception remained grounded upon the paradigmatic acts of exorcism performed by Jesus himself, as related in the new-testamentary sources. Soon after Jesus' crucifixion another, more indirect type of exorcism appeared in the Christian culture, as exemplified by the acts of Virgin Mary and the emergence of holy relics. Later an exorcist profession was established within the Church, which during the Middle Ages reached its peak of

influence, as expressed by the great witch-hunts conducted by the Inquisition. With modernity, the Western obsession with the Devil and the fascination with the obscure and the occult take different shape, as the importance of the Devil recedes in the cultural imagination in Western society. Despite recent statements of the Roman Catholic Church that the Devil does exist, secularization has decreased the influence of the Church in everyday life and has altered traditional beliefs about evil and its source. If we are to accept Baudelaire's statement that the Devils' cleverest trick is to make people believe that he does not exist, then perhaps his trick has been successful.

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