People all over the world believe in various human interactions with spirits, including the reality of possession. Some people believe this can be beneficial for individuals and communities, and others think it is strictly a product of evil. There appears to be a somewhat distinct divide between the more traditional African form of possession and the Eurasian demonic variety, but the boundaries are also porous. Although both forms share some common traits, the main difference seems to stem from the individual’s and the community’s beliefs about the afterlife and the spirit world. The physical signs that accompany possessions indicate that it is a physiological process that produces an altered state of consciousness. Even if cases of demonic possession are purely a matter of brain activity, ritual exorcism often relieves symptoms and should be taken seriously as a form of holistic treatment. Regardless of the actual causes, spirit possession seems to involve a form of magic that actually works.

Linguist and anthropologist Felicitas Goodman identifies two major forms of spirit possession. The African variety is found in African and Amerindian populations. It is an older tradition and often presents possession as something to be desired. The possessing spirits can be animals, dead people, or supernatural entities. Spirits usually have no personality, and evil entities are rare. Temporary possession can be understood as a way to gain something, such as power. In Afro-Caribbean traditional
religions, shamans use alters to seek possession by ancestors.¹ As James Bielo points out, shamans invoke “spiritual assistance,” as their “authority is grounded in the ability to commune with the spirits, in having special access to or grasp on sacred truths.”² We see a similar process take place in rituals performed by a Vodoun priest in New York.³ The religion from Benin made its way to the US via slaves from the Caribbean. Several mediator gods, which are normally invisible and must take human form through possession, are invoked by special symbols called vé-vé. Members of the group seek possession as part of their worship practice and as a means for protection in daily life.

Eurasian possession is quite different. It is found mainly in Europe and Asia, including East Asia. Eurasian possession involves malevolent beings with distinct personalities who hate humanity and want to destroy those whom they possess. These “demons” often hate the dominant religion of the area, prophesy, and provide their opinions about theological issues. The two types of possession do show some regional and communal overlap. For example, Pentecostal Holy Spirit possession has roots in Vodoun and mimics the positive, personality-less power gained from spirits. The Greek Orthodox Christian Kostilides invoke possession by St. Constantine during fire-walking ceremonies called the Anastenaria.⁴ Nancy Caciola points out that

⁴ Bielo, *Anthropology of Religion*, 119-120.
mediumship can also be a type of controlled spirit possession. In communities of the African possession variety, people can still be plagued by harmful spirits. Some entities, such as the Japanese Kami Kitsune, can straddle the two types by providing assistance or attacking a victim depending on the circumstance. In all situations, spirits can enter uninvited if a path has been set for them.

Demonic possession is the most extreme and dangerous form of spirit possession. This is commonly found in Christianity, but it is also present in Indian and Chinese traditions. Catholic exorcists distinguish between mental disorders, spirit oppression, and demonic possession. In other words, exorcists carefully determine whether a person requires an exorcism, needs medical attention, or should simply become more spiritually involved to be delivered from an attached presence. As Gabriele Amorth—who performed over 50,000 exorcisms—explains, “It is essential not to confuse demonic possession with ordinary illness” since physical symptoms often overlap. That said, many of the markers associated with demonic possession seem to resemble Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) and are found in religious altered states of consciousness (RASC).

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Signs of demonic possession include emotional symptoms such as depression, hallucinations, aggression, and violence. Physical symptoms include revulsion to holy symbols and places, glossolalia (speaking in tongues), extreme strength, foul odors, changes in speech patterns, pain, trembling, eating disorders, issues with sleep, and other manifestations. Exorcists claim that major signs of full possession are negative reactions to sacraments and sacred objects, eyes rolled back in the head, contortions of the face and body, unusual anger and strength, and speaking in strange voices or foreign languages. According to Father Gary Thomas, demons come in “gangs.” “There’s never just one.”

Interestingly, the Catholic Church seems to be coming full circle to recognize the difference between demons and spirits of the dead. The medieval Church tolerated a wide range of beliefs about the afterlife but tried to enforce the more modern idea of purely demonic possession. According to Caciola, the ancient world and even Biblical accounts presented spirit possession as the work of the dead. In Europe people tended to hold on to these traditional beliefs and resisted the clergy’s insistence that daimones where strictly demonic or diabolical. According to the Church, it was impossible for the dead to possess the living, but the people possessed consistently identified the possessing spirits as recently dead members of the community or known

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9 Brandreth, “An Interview;” Oleksiuk, “Real Exorcist.”

10 Oleksiuk, “Real Exorcist.”


12 Caciola, *Afterlives*, 304.

criminals. Possessions often happened after someone came into contact with a dead body, even those of animals.\textsuperscript{14} Some Clergy now admit to the existence of disembodied spirits of the dead who can oppress the living,\textsuperscript{15} and Anneliese Michel, one of the most famous possession cases in history, claimed to be possessed by both demons and the dead.\textsuperscript{16}

According to Goodman, “In medical terms, one might speculate that Anneliese’s experience represents something like malfunctioning of certain systems.”\textsuperscript{17} Goodman analyzed possession cases in terms of the trance state produced during a RASC and the glossolalia that emerges from it. Goodman describes the RASC as the fourth state of consciousness, the other three being ordinary wakefulness, dreaming, and sleep without dreaming.\textsuperscript{18} The RASC is found in almost every culture and is often “the central feature of its ceremonial observances.”\textsuperscript{19} It can produce facial distortions, a rigid body, dilated pupils, trembling, failure to respond to external stimuli, and other symptoms found in possession cases.\textsuperscript{20} Goodman notes that there are similar utterances in several cultures during the RASC that match glossolalia. They are different from regular speech in that they “obey very stringent neurophysiological

\begin{enumerate}
\item Caciola, \textit{Afterlives}, Ch. 7.
\item Oleksiuk, “Real Exorcist;” Betty, “Demonic Possession,” 17.
\item Goodman, \textit{The Exorcism of Anneliese}, 210.
\item Goodman, \textit{The Exorcism of Anneliese}, 210.
\item Goodman, \textit{The Exorcism of Anneliese}, 211.
\end{enumerate}
laws” that differ from those found in ordinary consciousness. The speech is comprised of rhythmical vocalizations “like scanned poetry.” The speech is also typically produced through the false vocal folds or as a combination of false folds and normal speech used simultaneously. People in the agitated trance state of possession often use excessive profanity similar to coprolalia (Tourette Syndrome). Of note, this kind of swearing is controlled in subcortical structures of the brain, but normal speech comes from the cerebral cortex.

In the case of Anneliese, her speech while possessed matched speech produced during the RASC trance. Her speech lasted 3-4 seconds, often in 7 second phrases. She also pronounced words incorrectly and used fillers like “oh” and “ah” to fit the pattern. It was impossible for her demons to ask questions because the required interrogative intonation could not be produced in this state. Furthermore, Anneliese routinely uttered long, monotone groans similar to those produced by people who have been knocked unconscious. Aside from her speech, she also showed other signs typical of demonic possession, such as visions (including of dead relatives), extreme overheating, superhuman strength, eating disorders, and a foul stench. Plus, she was


25 Planet Weird, “Rare, Unedited Recordings of the 67 Exorcisms of Anneliese Michel, the Real Emily Rose.” YouTube video, 92:43 mins (Published July 27, 2016). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29fpnF1DWoQ.
devoutly religious and had a history of illness and seizures.\textsuperscript{26} Goodman describes other cases extremely similar to that of Anneliese, including the possession of a Mayan preteen named Marci. The key difference between the two girls is that Anneliese was aware of what was happening around her yet could not control her body, but Marci was completely unaware of what took place during the time of her possession.\textsuperscript{27} Both responded well to exorcisms.

Goodman describes exorcism as a ritual manipulation of the brain.\textsuperscript{28} Exorcists ‘expel demons’ using holy water, sacraments, and divine authority. They engage in discussions with the demons and go to “battle” for the soul of the person in distress, which comprises a combination of physical and mental manipulation. The rites usually work for at least a time, but multiple exorcisms are sometime required. Eurasian spirits can return with more power and in greater numbers. In the case of Anneliese, ritual exorcism temporarily returned control of her body.\textsuperscript{29} She experienced bouts of relief and her demons finally left, but she eventually died from starvation and dehydration after succumbing to a new, unnamed entity.\textsuperscript{30}

Exorcisms are not reserved for the Christian realm. Indian exorcists expel \textit{bhuts}, which act similar to Christianity’s demons, and Chinese accounts also require “divine

\textsuperscript{26} Goodman, \textit{How About Demons?}, 115-118.

\textsuperscript{27} Goodman, \textit{How About Demons?}, 113. Caciola (\textit{Afterlives}, 316) also describes a Cistercian nun who presented the same symptoms.

\textsuperscript{28} Goodman, \textit{The Exorcism of Anneliese}, 226.

\textsuperscript{29} Goodman, \textit{How About Demons?}, 126.

\textsuperscript{30} Goodman, \textit{How About Demons?}, 121.
assistance” from Taoist priests. Exorcism is actually common all over the world. According to Goodman, “Exorcism works, [when] other strategies do not.” It can even work for nonbelievers.

Why does exorcism help, though? The evidence suggests that possession stems from a combination of human physiology and an individual’s belief. William Samarin proposed that glossolalia is a type of religious language that is “provided by the Christian movement itself.” Of course there are people who fake the phenomenon, but Goodman points out that it shares many cross-cultural features that make it “a human universal.” As opposed to channeled speech, which can be faked with disguised accents, speech consistent with the actual trance state serves as an instrument to express pulsing brain activity and is “nearly impossible” to imitate unless in a RASC. Goodman also suggests that the stench that exudes from the possessed person indicates a biochemical process taking place. In Anneliese’s case, the smell subsided after exorcism. This seems reminiscent of the pungent smell dogs

33 Goodman, How About Demons?, 125.
37 Goodman, The Exorcism of Anneliese, 216.
can give off when they feel threatened. It appears immediately as the hair on their back stands up, and it disappears almost as quickly as it arrives. All of these factors indicate that something about human biology is taking place in cases of possession. Goodman says some people with sensitive nervous systems are ultra-sensitive to “special” places; shamans and mystics use this to their advantage. The RASC is usually euphoric, such as in Holy Ghost inspiration, and — though everyone has the ability to enter the trance state — perception of it is “culturally patterned.” The RASC can seem hyper-real to those who experience it, which makes the rarer negative version found in demonic possession especially terrifying.

An individual’s belief system seems to greatly influence how she experiences the RASC. As Carl Olson explains, spirit possession often reflects social status; it can involve sympathetic spirits to support a person’s beliefs or intruding spirits that cause problems for the person possessed. In other words, possession can serve as a “self-induced mechanism for psychic release or a mental healing.” It can also be a method to remember an idealized past. Alan Dundes describes vampire myths as “personal narratives [that] become the property of an entire community,” means for connecting with “family dynamics,” and a way to deal with repressed feelings of fear.

40 Goodman, The Exorcism of Anneliese, 221.
41 Goodman, The Exorcism of Anneliese, 220.
42 Goodman, The Exorcism of Anneliese, 221.
guilt, or sexuality.⁴⁵ All of these seem to fit spirit possession as well. In medieval times family members were the ones to identify possessing ghosts, choosing experience over the authority of priests who claimed them to be demons. Caciola interprets this as a sign of relief for collective anxiety about a person’s violent death.⁴⁶ In African possession, dealing with spirits appears to be an outlet that mediates both individual and communal desires, goals, and worries. Demonic possession, on the other hand, seems to be a sort of psychic break down or cry for help on the individual level.

Exorcists insist that demonic possession results from opening some kind of doorway via obsessions, dealings in the occult, sexual assaults, or curses.⁴⁷ If such is the case, then a negative RASC could stem from feelings of guilt. According to Caciola, “reluctant girls on the brink of sexual initiation become victims of possession states,”⁴⁸ and exorcists claim that women are more open to possession than men. For example, Marci’s possession occurred at age 12 after her stepfather tried to ‘rent’ her as a sex partner to an old man.⁴⁹ Goodman suggests that possession can serve as an outlet for power, especially for women who feel abused, unheard, or powerless.⁵⁰

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⁴⁷ Brandreth, “An Interview;” Oleksiuk, “Real Exorcist.”

⁴⁸ Caciola, *Afterlives*, 333.


All of this evidence leads to the conclusion that possession is real in some sense and that exorcism works to relieve both physiological and emotional symptoms. According to Goodman, the existence of the RASC induced trance is an observable fact. Furthermore, she suggests that certain rituals may be able to “switch brain maps” between the RASC and normal consciousness. Anneliese lost the ability to do this before she died, as demonstrated by the non-RASC screams she produced during her final days. It is possible that this was a result of her medication. In her last session she repeated “The demon has nothing to say.” For Goodman, diagnosis and treatment should be determined by what actually works, not “by the prevailing attitudes, the paradigm concerning the nature of reality.” Of course most people would argue that exorcism should be reserved for the most extreme cases, if ever a consideration at all. When deemed necessary, thought, a combination of medical professionals and exorcists might produce better results than either alone.

Although it seems that demonic possession stems from a mixture of physical and emotional ailments, there are some aspects that are hard to explain. For some reason, possessions tend to occur in 40-day cycles, but this might simply be an unknown natural biorhythm. The possessed also tend to refer to themselves as “we,”

52 Goodman, How About Demons?, 81.
54 Goodman, How About Demons?, 125.
and often do not remember the experience.\textsuperscript{56} This is a bit hard to explain. Why do they take on so many personalities? What about the clergy’s claims of possessed people speaking fluently in foreign languages they had no way of knowing or of people literally levitating, as claimed “in many cultures in every age down to the present?”\textsuperscript{57} Perhaps these can be explained by false memories due to the traumatic experience. The extreme strength is harder to handle. The frail, sickly Anneliese was apparently able to explode an apple in the palm of her hand and toss people around like ragdolls.\textsuperscript{58} She claimed to have watched everything take place from a “hole” within herself.\textsuperscript{59} How is it that she could lose complete control yet be fully aware at the same time? These are interesting questions that warrant continued study.

Francis MacNutt, a former Catholic priest, wonders how it is that exorcism works if, as most psychiatrists suggest, possession is simply DID; Not only are the possessed distinctly aware of a foreign presence, but it is also unclear how a fragment of a person’s own identity could be effectively exorcised.\textsuperscript{60} Why do people foam at the mouth, convulse, and vomit when confronted with religious language and artifacts? These are signs of seizures, but they occur in response to very specific stimuli. Anneliese was said to have epilepsy, but her autopsy showed no signs of temporal lobe

\textsuperscript{56} Betty, “Demonic Possession,” 18.

\textsuperscript{57} Betty, “Demonic Possession,” 26.; Oleksiuk, “Real Exorcist.”

\textsuperscript{58} Goodman, \textit{How About Demons?}, 118.

\textsuperscript{59} Goodman, \textit{How About Demons?}, 121.

\textsuperscript{60} Betty, “Demonic Possession,” 26.
damage. Finally, there’s the phenomenon of prediction. Marci’s demons would depart for a time and promise to arrive at 5 am the next morning. They arrived each day as the town clock struck the hour. One day Marci’s demons pronounced that they would leave for good in half an hour; they did so and never returned. Anneliese, too, predicted when her demons would be expelled, and they were cast out successfully until a new unnamed one took her over. Most disturbingly, she predicted that “all will be well” on July 1, 1976 and died on that very day.

Stafford Betty asks which is easier to believe, that a person’s mind can manifest such symptoms or that something else is at work. He suggests,

[T]here is mounting evidence today that evil spirits do oppress and occasionally even possess the unwary, the weak, the unprepared, the unlucky, or the targeted [by] more or less intelligent beings, insensible to us, with a will of their own who seem to bother or oppress us or, in rare cases, possess our bodies outright, and with whom we can relate in a variety of ways.

In my opinion, it is easier to believe that the human body simply possesses unexpected capabilities, especially in times of extreme distress. We can effectively describe how the brain looks during RASC, and we can look to other animals for similar stress responses. We can explain emotional states via individual and communal beliefs. We are not quite sure why these things occur, but what is less clear is how an

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immaterial being could at all affect us physically or how it could exist in a disembodied state. 66 I am by no means suggesting that such a thing is impossible, but I do find it improbable, considering the evidence. That said, exorcism does seem to be a service that can help people who believe themselves to be afflicted by demons. As Betty points out, there are instances in which exorcism was the only cure. 67 For Dundes, no myth, legend, or folktale is universal; 68 however, spirit possession appears to be one of the most widespread and common religious beliefs. It seems to have the power to heal and to destroy. According to Goodman, “Anthropologists are convinced that behavior must be studied holistically.” 69 Perhaps we should not discount rituals for possession or exorcism as valuable additions to our toolbox of holistic healing.

Bibliography


66 Betty points out that, much like ESP, failure to comprehend how possession works is a key component to why people do not accept it as a viable explanation (“Demonic Possession,” 26).


68 Dundes, The Vampire, 161.


