

Conceptualizing “Demonic Possession” Today: Jettisoning Traditional Christian Interpretations

Jerome Wilczynski, PsyD

Clinical Psychologist & Director, Counseling Center, Roosevelt University, Chicago, IL, USA

Abstract

The author evaluates the traditional Christian understanding of “demonic possession,” which necessitates an exploration of the “paranormal” phenomena that reportedly occur with the condition. After explaining how the symptoms of “possession” can be accounted for, the author shows the DSM-5 nomenclature provides appropriate diagnostic categories for this dissociative and/or conversion condition, and that the psychological literature allows one to conceptualize “demonic possession” in a meaningful way. The author then reveals a way to bring together a modern religious and psychological understanding of “demonic possession” that jettisons traditional Christian interpretations, as well as offers concluding commentary on the findings.

Keywords: demons, evil spirits, demonic possession, paranormal, parapsychological, Christian understanding, psychological understanding, DSM-5, DID with Possession-form Identities, Conversion Disorder, dissociative disorders

Introduction

The literature investigating what is often referred to as “demonic possession” in traditional Christian parlance is substantial, and investigators have put forth scientific explanations for the condition (e.g., Oesterreich, 1930/2015; Lhermitte, 1963/2013; Cortés & Gatti, 1975; Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1997; Klass, 2003; Thomason, 2008; Stephenson, 2009; Huskinson, 2010; Howell, 2011; McNamara, 2011b). Even so, investigators sideline reports of “paranormal” symptoms, such as extrasensory perception (ESP), because they are at

a loss to explain this scientifically (McNamara, 2011b; Ross, 1997). The present article, after providing the current state of popular beliefs regarding demonic possession, evaluates the formal Christian understanding of the condition; sheds light upon the veracity of paranormal reports among the cases; points out the proper diagnostic categories for, and correlative ways to psychologically understand, demonic possession; presents a way to bring together a modern religious and psychological understanding of the condition which jettisons traditional Christian interpretations; and, finally, concludes by offering commentary on the findings.

Popular Beliefs Regarding Demonic Possession

The beliefs among people that unseen spiritual beings can take possession, to varying degrees, of human bodies and/or minds for good or evil purposes has been well documented in the literature (e.g., Oesterreich, 1930/2015; Bourguignon, 1976/1991; Suryani & Jensen, 1993; Klass, 2003; Lewis, 2003; Cohen, 2007; Thomason, 2008; Stephenson, 2009; Hegeman, 2010; Schmidt & Huskinson, 2010; McNamara, 2011a, 2011b; Levack, 2013). In fact, Howell (2011) cites literature stating that “at least 50% of ... 488 non-Western cultures” (p. 39) have some belief in spirit possession. Although it is not uncommon for people to believe that different types of spirits can possess a person, for example, the spirits of ancestors (Somer, 2004; Cohen, 2007; Thomason, 2008), animals or various gods (Woods, 2009b), the present investigation focuses solely on the Christian notion of possession by evil spirits or “demons.” This is referred to as demonic possession within Western Christian societies (Levack, 2013). Attention focuses here because Western mental health clinicians likely know that nearly all psychiatric illnesses were conceptualized as demonic possession until about 1700 of the Common Era (see Thomason, 2008). Because of this history, most clinicians probably think possession is a vestige of the past. That assumption, however, would be wrong.

Even though possession essentially disappears among societies that no longer find it to have any religious value (Ross, 1997; Woods, 2009b), belief in demonic possession—and the engagement of religious rituals called exorcisms to rid people of demons—is currently enjoying a resurgence throughout Europe (Young, 2016). In Italy alone, over 500,000 people receive exorcisms annually (Baglio, 2009). And although Cuneo (2001) reports that prior to the 1970s, belief in

demonic possession was almost non-existent in the United States, the popular portrayals of possession emerging in the 70s—such as Malachi Martin’s book *Hostage to the Devil* and William Peter Blatty’s book and movie *The Exorcist*—activated public fear about the topic. As a result, many Americans started to believe they were possessed—claiming lust, anger, resentment, addiction, and other problems were caused by “demons” afflicting them. Ministries of exorcism cropped up as a way to help (Cuneo, 2001).

The 1980s and after saw continued interest in the United States as M. Scott Peck released books on demonic possession, and other tales of possessions by Ed and Lorraine Warren kept fear and curiosity engaged (Collins, 2009; Cuneo, 2001). All this led Cuneo (2001) and Thomason (2008) to declare that demonology is alive and well in North America today. They certainly seem to be right, as Shermer (2014) reveals that 41% of Americans believe in diabolical possession. When we combine this information with the statistics reported above about non-Western beliefs and what is happening across Europe, it is fair to say popular belief in demonic possession is far from a vestige of the past.

Traditional Christian Beliefs and Evaluation

Popular belief in demonic possession among the “common folk” is one thing, but formal religious beliefs are another. Woods (2009b) notes that most mainline Protestant denominations have jettisoned belief in demonic possession since the Enlightenment, with its understanding of the causes of mental and physical illness. This largely remains true among Protestants in the United States today, the exceptions being Pentecostal and other fundamentalist Christian sects (Collins, 2009; Woods, 2009b). Collins (2009) reveals that belief in spirit possession flourishes among these groups because they tend to view the human person as a stage upon which the divine and demonic act out a cosmic battle between good and evil. Woods (2009b) states the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches officially continue to believe that demonic possession may occur, but it happens so rarely that it is of little to no concern for the clergy or lay people.

Belief in demonic possession and exorcism within Christianity is rooted in Jesus’ portrayal as an exorcist in the New Testament. As McGill (2015) notes, this should not surprise us, as biblical scholars state Jesus was born into a worldview that saw sin and sickness as being caused by demonic influence. Even so, in biblical times, people did not

define demons clearly at all. In fact, it is rather difficult to view demons as distinct personal beings in the New Testament (McGill, 2015).

Biblical demons represent the idea that evil has tremendous power in the world. So much so, that it is the source of all human misery (McGill, 2015). Even so, the demonic is so ambiguous in the New Testament, so lacking of any real personality, that Cortés and Gatti (1975) state “the expression ‘possessed by demons’ could probably be more accurately translated as ‘afflicted by harmful forces,’ ‘by strange, unknown powers,’ or even ‘afflicted by evil spirits,’ understanding ‘spirits’ in the same way as when we affirm: ‘I am in bad spirits today’” (p. 15). Such being the case, it is not difficult to understand why leading New Testament scholars assert that what Jesus and the biblical world called demonic possession, we would call various physical or mental illnesses today (Senior, 1992; Brown, 1994; Meier, 1994; Boring & Craddock, 2004; Harrington, 2010; Käsemann, 2010). In so doing, scholars are not devaluing Jesus’ exorcisms. On the contrary, Jesus saw people suffering and genuinely sought to heal them, but he could do so in the only language available at the time (Meier, 1994). As a corollary to all this, Harrington (2010) states “a twenty-first-century Jesus would view the situation very differently; he would not be an exorcist” (p. 24).

Understanding all this can help modern people appreciate why some Christian scholars propose conceptualizing the “power of evil” in non-personal terms today. As Boring and Craddock (2004) state, when one appreciates the biblical worldview, they can understand why many modern theologians “have found the New Testament’s imagery for the demonic power of evil to be valuable when taken seriously but not literally” (p. 129). Instead of personifying this power of evil as “the devil” or Satan, Boring and Craddock (2004) suggest “we might now label this as ‘systemic evil’ or picture it as a vast, impersonal, computer-like network of evil in which our lives are enmeshed and that influences us quite apart from our wills” (p. 129). While all this makes sense, it raises an important question: What about the stories of Satan and the demons as fallen angels?

Defining what “the devil” and demons actually are did not begin to take clear form within Christianity until the early church fathers took up the topic in the subsequent centuries to the New Testament period. Figures like Origen and Augustine patched together biblical and non-biblical material to create the story Christians know today: Satan is a fallen angel (Russell, 1981; Forsyth, 1987; Kelly, 2004, 2006). Even

though Satan's essence was decided at this point in Christian history, debate continued about the demons' status until Augustine brought the arguments to a close: Demons are fallen angels as well (Russell, 1981). Be that as it may, the best theological argument for why the angels "fell" basically invalidates the entire concept.

As Woods (2009a) relates, the best explanation for the fall of the angels was conceived of by Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century of the Common Era. His conceptualizations squared with the declarations of church councils that Satan and demons are forever damned because they are unable to repent of their sin (Russell, 1984). Aquinas argued that angels, possessing no form other than a mind, instantaneously grasp information; they do not reason toward knowledge or possess the ability to deliberate as humans do. Because of this, angels are not able to change their minds. Since this implies angels are unable to sin because they should not be able to know things wrongly, Aquinas argued God offered them a choice that bypassed their nature; the outcome of this one-time choice would either fix them—because of their inability to change their minds—in their reliance on God for salvation, or cause them to desire to be the source of their own salvation. Satan and the demons chose to rely on themselves instead of God's grace, thereby forever fixing them in their state of sin (Russell, 1984; Woods, 2009a).

Since the Christian tradition "wed itself" to the notion that fallen angels are permanently fixed in their sinful state (Russell, 1984), there is a glaring problem with this conceptualization which essentially invalidates the entire notion of fallen angels. As Spoto (1998) astutely observes, this idea is impossible to square with the Christian belief that Jesus revealed God to be unimaginable love and mercy. How is it possible that such a God would create beings incapable of redemption? This is simply unthinkable if God really is who Jesus revealed God to be (Spoto, 1998). Given this state of affairs, it should come as no surprise that well-respected Christian theologians and scholars—such as Schillebeeckx (1980); Haag (cited in Küng, 1984/2002), Küng (1984/2002, 2010), Spoto (1998), Boring and Craddock (2004), Kelly (2004), Käsemann (2010), and Ward (2012)—have jettisoned belief in a personal devil and demons. Even so, not everyone is following suit.

As mentioned above, Pentecostals and some fundamentalist Christian sects continue to affirm the existence of evil spirits and possession (Collins, 2009; Woods, 2009b). And McGill (2015) states the Roman Catholic Church continues to formally teach that demons

exist as personal beings and that possession is possible. The reason for this may be, as Young (2016) observes, the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, in dogmatically coming out against the idea that evil is uncreated, referred to the devil and demons as personal beings. Therefore, the Catholic hierarchy may feel bound to accept the way a church council in the 13th century worded its declarations, regardless of whether there are modern arguments for discarding it.

All of the above notwithstanding, as Woods (2009b) notes, in the years following the New Testament period, beliefs around possession tended to wane. The possessed at this time—those that were considered to be mentally “disturbed”—were simply cordoned off from the rest of the faithful; they were prayed for, but exorcisms were not performed. In the Middle Ages, demonic possession was thought to be widespread and rituals of exorcism grew to astonishing lengths. The Catholic Church, attempting to rein in the practice of exorcism, reformed the rite in 1614; it was then that the criteria for determining demonic possession were standardized. These criteria remain to this day, as they continue to appear in the revised Catholic rite of exorcism (Woods, 2009b).

Woods (2009b) notes the Catholic criteria state that a diagnosis of demonic possession may only be rendered if the person’s symptoms cannot be accounted for by physical and/or mental illness. This is true, as the current rite of exorcism, titled *Exorcisms and Related Supplications*, published by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) in 2017, refers exorcists on this matter to paragraph 1673 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Illness, especially psychological illness, is a very different matter ... Therefore, before an exorcism is performed, it is important to ascertain that one is dealing with the presence of the Evil One, and not an illness” (Catholic Church, 1995, p. 466). Such criteria render highly suspect Pentecostal and fundamentalist Christian ideas, reported by Cuneo (2001), that demons cause addictions and common human problems with lust, anger, and so forth. While some may suggest such fundamentalist ideas harken back to the writings of the early desert Christian “monks” who believed, as Stewart (2005) notes, that demons were associated with human problems such as “fornication, anger, avarice, [and] pride” (p. 12), we need to keep in mind that modern monk-scholars of this literature suggest that when people read these stories today, they should conceive of the demons as personifications of inner psychological struggles—externalized as a way to cope with them—

rather than as actual spiritual beings (see Steindl-Rast & Loudon, 1982; Stewart, 2011). All this jibes with Catholic thinking that has endured since 1614: Demonic possession is indicated by the presence of paranormal phenomena among the afflicted, not symptoms explainable by known naturalistic or scientific means.

The official Catholic criteria, as stated in the current rite of exorcism, for assessing whether a person is demonically possessed are: “Speaking or understanding a number of words in an unknown language; making known distant and hidden events; [and,] showing strength beyond the nature of the individual’s age or condition” (USCCB, 2017, p. 6). When these signs are accompanied by “a vehement aversion to God, ... the Word of God, ... and to sacred images” (p. 6), it is all the more decisive that a person is possessed. Additional literature, spanning centuries, also depicts demoniacs seized by convulsions, experiencing contortions of the body (Levack, 2013) and face, as well as voice alterations which cause them to seem as if they are someone other than themselves (Putnam, 1989). Other reports find them to be able to “speak” from their stomachs and even “vomit up” objects such as pins (Lhermitte, 1963/2013). Occasionally, levitation is reported (Levack, 2013).

Assessing all such claims from literature centuries old proves to be a challenge because we know church historians of old wrote their narratives by adding to them what they thought was evidence for divine providence among human affairs (Levack, 2013). It is therefore reasonable to assume that religious historians enhanced stories of possession and exorcism to demonstrate “God victoriously subduing evil in the world.” This is a safe assumption as we know that hagiographers of the early desert monks embellished stories of “demonic attacks” on the hermits—turning inner psychological struggles into physical onslaughts—in order to paint the desert dwellers as heroic icons of Christian virtue (Russell, 1981; Harmless, 2004; Brakke, 2006). So we should read all such ancient accounts with a skeptical eye when details seem to defy the possible, such as people levitating. But we are not limited to our suspicions regarding ancient sources. We have analyses by medical, psychological, and religious experts that shed some light on claims that paranormal phenomena occur in cases of demonic possession.

With regard to speaking an unknown language, it is worthwhile to note that the Catholic criteria say the person may speak “a number of words in an unknown language” (USCCB, 2017, p. 6), not that the

person can actually speak the language. Such an “ability” is easily explained, as Kelly (2004) shows. He interviewed the Catholic priests that performed the exorcisms on the boy (not a girl) in the actual case the book and movie *The Exorcist* is based on. The boy was only able to say the Latin word “Dominus,” which he repeatedly heard in the exorcism rituals prayed over him (Kelly, 2004). Further to this point, Cortés and Gatti (1975) cite literature that states for those unable to consciously recall studying another language, investigation generally reveals “they had spoken the language during childhood, or that they had heard it spoken and ... unconsciously familiarized themselves with [it]” (p. 191). It is precisely this type of analysis that can also explain how a person can seem to understand a language without being able to speak it. For all these reasons, Levack (2013) states contemporary assessors are rightfully skeptical that any of these linguistic abilities require a paranormal designation.

With respect to assessing the veracity of ESP phenomena, such as demoniacs revealing information unknown to them, it is telling that Cuneo (2001), in attending over 50 exorcisms in the United States, never once encountered a situation that required a paranormal explanation. While that attests for the exorcisms Cuneo witnessed, there have been many more exorcisms in history beyond those witnessed by him. Does that mean we should uncritically accept reports of clairvoyance and ESP among demonic possession cases when we read or hear about them? Is there an alternative way to explain what seems to be clairvoyance or ESP?

What may be occurring in demonic possession cases is what Hyman (2014) refers to as “cold reading.” This is the technique “psychics” use to make guesses about people and situations. Like all of us, the possessed take in information that is directly and indirectly provided to them by those they interact with. When the information they state is accurately or relatively accurately surmised without having been explicitly revealed to them, demoniacs—like psychics—seem to be clairvoyant, yet this skill requires no paranormal ability whatsoever. It simply requires keen observation skills; and, as Hyman (2014) states, it is highly convincing. While it is impossible to know if this explains every instance of purported ESP abilities among the demon possessed, all such future investigations into the veracity of these claims must rule-out this explanation before gullibility turns reports into “fact.”

In evaluating whether the possessed can levitate, we actually have direct evidence to refute such claims. Cuneo (2001) noted that

occasionally among the exorcisms he observed, exorcists were convinced they saw levitation. But Cuneo saw nothing of the sort, baffling the team of exorcists. From these types of experiences, he concluded: “People tend to be so keyed up during an exorcism ... that they easily convince themselves they’re seeing, hearing, or feeling things that simply aren’t there” (Cuneo, 2001, p. 275). To combat misperceptions, Kelly (2004) suggests no longer relying on “the testimony of observers. Scientific methods of investigation and recording are available; it is to be hoped that any further claims ... will be corroborated by this kind of evidence” (p. 89). To this point, and further validating Cuneo’s conclusion, Collins (2009) noted that M. Scott Peck admitted that the types of phenomena he was convinced he saw during exorcisms—such as the possessed resembling a writhing snake—“were not picked up by the video recordings” (pp. 168-169). It seems we may conclude from all this that claims the possessed are able to levitate—or, for that matter, that they have ESP abilities—should be viewed with serious skepticism, unless such claims are substantiated via scientifically controlled assessments and video recordings.

While some people seem to embellish stories to garner publicity, as Cuneo (2001) relates about Ed and Lorraine Warren, and others fabricate possession stories wholesale, as Woods (2005) charges Malachi Martin to have done, it seems prudent to state unequivocally that I think most people involved with demonic possession cases are in no way consciously enhancing the details of their perceptions for the retelling. To this point, Kelly (2004) reports that the primary priest-exorcist involved in the actual case *The Exorcist* is based on was not surprised stories about the case became increasingly embellished to the point of the fantastic with each retelling; “for he recognized a strong myth-making tendency even in himself. If he did not record the events of each session of exorcism as soon as possible after it occurred, he ... found the details changing in his mind, becoming more ‘impressive’” (p. 95). One such example related to this case is, how in actuality, the boy spit out the Communion host placed on his tongue; but in later retellings by the exorcist’s brother, who was also a priest, this morphed into the host flying around the room (Kelly, 2004). It would seem situations like exorcisms—where people believe they are confronting the forces of evil—are ripe for humanity’s myth-making tendency to wreak havoc with their perception of events. This is what seems to be going on when people are convinced they have witnessed paranormal

phenomena in these cases. It is an apparent trick of the mind; it is not consciously produced.

Before leaving the topic of paranormal phenomena in these cases, it is worth pointing out that in neither of the two most sensational cases within the last 70 years, those serving as the bases for the movies *The Exorcist* and *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, did anything paranormal occur. Kelly (2004) provides an analysis of *The Exorcist* case based on his interviews with the priests involved; they never witnessed anything requiring a paranormal explanation—all such reports were merely told to them and went uncorroborated. Opsasnick (2007) interviewed friends of the boy the case centered around. The interviews revealed the boy to be an emotionally volatile prankster who enjoyed scaring his mother and grandmother by playing on their superstitions; things got out of hand, however, when he ended up with priests, inexperienced in exorcism, praying over him. Far from turning up anything paranormal (Opsasnick, 2007), the investigation essentially explained the uncorroborated aspects mentioned by Kelly. Duffey (2011) published a book about the case the movie *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is based on. The first two chapters analyze the actual case material, revealing a medically and psychiatrically ill girl. Here, too, nothing paranormal occurred (Duffey, 2011). None of this should be surprising, however, given the analyses of the present article.

Returning to the Catholic criteria for diagnosing possession, demonstrating strength beyond what one would expect from a demoniac is not difficult to explain at all. As Cortés and Gatti (1975) note: “Many people have shown under hypnosis, or during attacks of hysteria and epilepsy, such a physical [sic] strength or have performed actions of such a nature in moments of great excitement that many would have thought them to be suprahuman” (p. 191). This same phenomenon is evidenced in cases of dissociative identity disorder (DID) or what used to be called multiple personality disorder (Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1997). Some alter personalities “are capable of feats of strength that other alters cannot duplicate” (Putnam, 1989, p. 119). Ross (1997) notes that hostile alters can even require more than one person to physically restrain, sometimes requiring strap restraints and sedation, if they are improperly engaged therapeutically. The bottom line here is that the Catholic criteria related to unusual levels of strength can be explained without taking recourse to demonic influence.

Evinced an aversion to God, scripture and sacred images is also entirely explainable. Levack (2013) notes that Catholic and Protestant

demoniacs throughout history have followed “scripts” whereby a religious drama is played out. “Catholic demoniacs often demonstrated a horror of ... relics, crucifixes, and other [sacred objects] Protestants, however, considered ... sacred ... the Word of God. Protestant demoniacs, therefore, reacted negatively to the ... reading of bibles; not so much to the physical books themselves, but to the Word they embodied” (Levack, 2013, p. 158). Assuming, tongue-in-cheek, that demonic spirits transcend human religious denominations and are therefore not Catholic or Protestant, this finding suggests demoniacs are responding to what their respective Christian denominations taught them is holy; there is no need to posit that responding to religious stimuli of one sort or another has anything to do with the influence of evil spirits. On the contrary, the history seems to point away from such an interpretation.

Convulsions and contortions of the body are also explainable. In his neuropsychiatric evaluation of demoniacs and assessment of the most famous cases in history, Lhermitte (1963/2013) was able to explain these symptoms; seemingly impossible configurations of the body, when not related to epilepsy, are part of conversion disorder. The current Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) in 2013 states Conversion Disorder may involve “psychogenic seizures.” In this condition, a person evidences the symptoms of seizures, and all manner of limb posturing, without the brain abnormalities found in epilepsy. They are called psychogenic because the person—entirely without conscious volition—seems to be converting psychological conflicts into a physiological reaction that mimics an epileptic fit (APA, 2013). Howell (2011) describes how these types of psychogenic convulsions were viewed as cases of demonic possession throughout history. All this reveals that these symptoms have a naturalistic explanation requiring no demonic causation.

Lhermitte (1963/2013) also explains how demoniacs are able to appear as if they are vomiting up objects when this amounts to no more than a sleight-of-hand “magic trick” requiring only gullible observers to turn it into “fact.” This, of course, need not involve conscious deception on the part of the demoniac; people are able to do things in trance states for which they are unaware in their lucid moments (APA, 2013). At other times, what seems to be at work, as in Baglio’s (2009) book, are the overactive imaginations of exorcists or those observing exorcisms. If people’s minds can cause them to see levitation where

there is none, the mind can certainly make one see objects that are not really there. Either way, sleight-of-hand magic tricks or misperceptions by onlookers, there is an explanation not requiring the influence of unseen spiritual beings.

Regarding “speaking from one’s stomach,” Lhermitte (1963/2013) explains “it is possible that while keeping the mouth shut an articulate sound may cause the lining of the trachea to vibrate and give the illusion of a thoracic or abdominal voice” (p. 43). Here, again, the only additional ingredient necessary to interpret such sounds as a person speaking from his or her stomach is an active imagination, or, if gripped by fear during an exorcism, one’s mind may cause them to misinterpret what they perceive.

The last aspects, facial and voice changes, are also seen in DID (Putnam, 1989). Putnam (1989) states in DID “marked facial changes may occur, including changes in jaw position (e.g., protrusion), rearrangement of facial folds and creases, widening of the eyes, and dilation of the pupils” (p. 20). Similar changes can occur with the person’s voice (Putnam, 1989; APA, 2013). There is no need to go further on this criteria. As Howell (2011) notes, DID is explainable via naturalistic means. Positing a supernatural influence is entirely unnecessary. Even so, there is reason to delve deeper regarding DID.

The research on DID shows that in 28.6% of the cases, demon alters exist (Ross, 1997). In fact, they commonly call “themselves demons and names like Satan or Devil” (Howell, 2011, p. 215). Moreover, Ross (1997) cites literature showing that the religious criteria for diagnosing demonic possession is the same as the criteria for DID. He states that he has worked with many such demon alters and has seen nothing that has ever required a religious explanation over a psychiatric one (Ross, 1997). And this is not surprising, as the appropriate diagnosis in the DSM-5 system for persons that appear to have been “‘taken over’ by a demon” (APA, 2013, p. 293) is DID with Possession-form Identities. All this means we cannot escape the conclusion that there is no way to reach a diagnosis of demonic possession given the criteria stated above by the USCCB (2017), because medical and psychiatric illnesses must be ruled-out as explanatory of the symptoms before the religious diagnosis can even be considered (Woods, 2009b). So where does this leave the situation?

Woods (2009b) points out that when naturalistic explanations are satisfactory for diagnosing a person’s demonic possession symptoms, such a condition is, religiously speaking, referred to as

pseudo or false possession. It should be no surprise to find out that Woods (2009b) states such conditions involve people misattributing neurophysiological stimuli and various forms of altered states of consciousness to demons. But he also sees among pseudo-possession cases another possible explanation, that of “cinematic neurosis” (Woods, 2009b).

As applies to our topic, cinematic neurosis describes situations whereby highly suggestible people are influenced toward imitative behavior after being exposed to what they believe are realistic portrayals of demonic possession in books, movies and news media (Woods, 2009b). Additionally, we know that instances of demonic possession and corresponding exorcism practices increase during periods of religious and social upheavals throughout history (Young, 2016). Combined with misdiagnosing pseudo-possession as true possession, Woods (2009b) concludes that cinematic neurosis, combined with social and political upheavals, likely account for the sudden surge of possessions that began in the 1970s and still hold sway today. This conclusion makes sense, as the staggering numbers of exorcisms reported above that occur annually in Europe did not begin to skyrocket until Gabriele Amorth, a Catholic priest in Rome, published a sensational book on possession and exorcism in 1990 (Young, 2016). It therefore seems rather easy to induce patterns of imitative behavior when lurid descriptions of possession are provided by persons many hold in high esteem.

McGill (2015) notes that some within the Roman Catholic hierarchy are clearly aware that using paranormal phenomena to diagnose demonic possession is unhelpful given the type of information revealed in the present article. In fact, the current rite of Catholic exorcism acknowledges that the signs by which possession can be diagnosed may not indicate the presence of the demonic because the symptoms can have a naturalistic causality. Even those considered to be more decisive for rendering a possession diagnosis—aversion to God and sacred things (USCCB, 2017)—have been found suspect by the present investigation, as they, too, can be explained naturalistically (Levack, 2013). Given all this, some Catholic hierarchs propose evil spirits influence people via entirely naturalistic means; a synergy of influence exists between humans and evils spirits without any laws of nature being violated in the process (McGill, 2015). In other words, evil spirits only work by way of influencing life processes

that are entirely explainable by scientific means, and they do so in ways that are totally undetectable.

Assertions such as these, however, are entirely unprovable. If one cannot detect the influence of an evil spirit by any means whatsoever, we are dealing with an assertion that cannot be proven or disproven. While this position certainly supports the idea that nothing paranormal happens in these cases, as demons only work in concert with scientifically explainable phenomena, it leaves us with no way to religiously diagnose demonic possession because only medically and psychologically explainable symptoms are left to observe. And this leaves Christians with the very broad notion that literally any human problem may involve demonic spirits—from struggles with lust, anger and resentment, to mental and physical illnesses. Without paranormal symptoms to distinguish mere influence from possession, Christians are left with no reliable way to specifically diagnose possession. It seems one cannot escape the conclusion that the concept of demonic possession has run aground; we are far adrift from the traditional Christian view that an individual's personality has been usurped by an external demonic spirit.

Conceptualizing Demonic Possession Psychologically

Relating the long historical progression from religiously conceived demonic possession to modern-day DID or related dissociative and/or conversion disorders cannot be gone into here. Ross (1997) and Howell (2011) provide reviews which are essential reading to fully understand how we got from there, to here. Hegeman (2010) has an excellent analysis of the similarities and differences between DID and religiously endorsed possession phenomena which are deliberately cultivated, as in Santeria. When possession is a sought after religious experience, it is considered positive and something to be encouraged. DID, on the other hand, is considered an unwanted, negative pathological state (Klass, 2003; Hegeman, 2010). The DSM-5 criteria for diagnosing DID with Possession-form Identities rightfully excludes the exhibiting of possession-form identities which are culturally or religiously sanctioned. It is only when negative possession experiences occur, as in possession by a demon, which disrupt the life and functioning of a person, that the diagnosis should be rendered (APA, 2013).

According to Howell (2011), the research shows that DID is commonly brought about by traumatic experiences in childhood; while

these are usually of a severe type, such as physical or sexual abuse, it can also result from situations not involving maltreatment. For example, DID can develop from a child enduring chronic illness with extended hospitalizations separating them from their parents, or DID can develop from a child's experience of serious parental illness. The decisive factor is the way a child experiences the circumstances (Howell, 2011). To deal with these situations, a child's personality may "fragment." The various internal states or fragmented "parts" represent various experiences that are too overwhelming for the child to deal with; they are segregated from each other in order to maintain peace-of-mind (Hegeman, 2010). When a child grows up in a religious environment with a belief in demonic possession, they may develop demon parts that hold the negative feelings related to whatever they experienced (Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1997). The ability to dissociate or divide and/or cordon-off aspects of one's awareness into facets that may or may not be totally conscious is the psychological mechanism at the root of DID; although we all have this ability (Howell, 2011; McNamara, 2011b), in DID the dissociation is taken to an extreme level (Howell, 2011).

Even though it is now widely accepted that cases of DID throughout history were religiously diagnosed as demonic possession before the psychological nature of the condition was identified (Ellenberger, 1970; Kluft, 1991; Ross, 1997; Howell, 2011), the fact that people with DID tend to experience long-standing disruption to the continuity of their daily lives due to personality oscillation raises an important observation and question. Some demoniacs evidence histories consistent with having been very high-functioning until stricken by possession (McNamara, 2011a). How are we to account for this circumscribed experience of possession?

Ross (1997) explains that this type of demonic possession can arise when a person is unable to consciously cope with past behavior that causes them tremendous upset. The case of "Achille" is a good example. He was treated by famed hypnotist Pierre Janet in the late 1800s (Ross, 1997).

Achille lived an entirely normal life until he had an extramarital affair while away on a business trip (Ross, 1997). He was so racked with guilt over this that "he rapidly fell into a depression, which progressed to a state of demon possession, with the devil assuming executive control [of Achille]" (Ross, 1997, p. 19). Janet was able to resolve Achille's possession through hypnosis. Achille's normal personality

was able to come forward only after Janet hypnotically had Achille's wife appear to him and forgive him the transgression (Ross, 1997).

Variations on this type of circumscribed life situation leading to a state of demonic possession are, of course, possible. Some people may be so disturbed by events they feel powerless to change within the social milieu of their lives that they unconsciously manifest a "demonic personality" as a way to bring an end to such situations. The demon often reveals the social conflict during rituals of exorcism, thereby allowing for changes to be made to the situation which resolves the possession (Davies, 2014; McNamara, 2011b).

Howell (2011) states experiences such as these revealed to Janet that "vehement emotions' evoked by trauma can [become] separated from ordinary consciousness, operating subconsciously and autonomously" (Howell, 2011, p. 42). Janet called these volatile thoughts, organized around a strong emotion, "fixed ideas." Carl Jung observed the same and referred to fixed ideas as "complexes." Jung conceived of complexes as forming when a memory is so traumatic that it splinters off, forming a mini-personality of sorts within the unconscious mind (Howell, 2011). For Achille, the memory of what he did was so abhorrent to him that it manifested as the devil, slowly taking over his normal personality when he found himself in the presence of his wife, unable to deal consciously with his infidelity (Ross, 1997). It is in ways such as this that we may conceptualize how a person can become possessed without a long-standing history of disruption to their daily living, that is, from circumscribed life events. But Jung also alerts us to another important element that has implications for how present-day mental health clinicians should properly diagnose a possessed person using DSM-5 criteria.

This important facet is found in Jung's definition regarding demonic possession. Jung states, in the past "people did not 'psychologise' [sic] disturbing complexes as we do, but regarded them as beings in their own right, that is, as demons" (as cited in Stephenson, 2009, p. 113); today we would say demonic possession is "a peculiar state of mind characterized by the fact that certain psychic contents, the so-called complexes, take over the control of the total personality In certain of these states ego-consciousness is present, in others it is eclipsed" (p. 30). The important aspect here relates to whether a person is aware of what is happening (has ego-consciousness) when the demonic complex seizes control of the personality or whether they are unaware of what happens during the manifestation. The DSM-5

criteria for Possession-form DID state there is significant disruption in a person's ability to recall what happens when possessed. But if they report being possessed with an intact memory for what occurs during this state, the proper DSM-5 diagnosis is Other Specified Dissociative Disorder with Chronic and Recurrent Syndromes of Mixed Dissociative Symptoms (APA, 2013). In other words, the diagnosis one should render is based on whether significant memory impairment accompanies the possessed states.

Clinicians need not concern themselves with the recurrent nature of the criteria in both of the aforementioned DSM-5 diagnoses as it is highly unlikely that a person or their family would seek any sort of assistance for a "negative possession" that occurs in a seemingly spontaneous way and that resolves just as quickly as it manifests without any intervention. However, should such a case ever present in a clinician's consulting room, the DSM-5 provides the diagnostic category of Unspecified Dissociative Disorder for just such a situation (APA, 2013).

All this correlates with the literature on possession. Putnam (1989) and Ross (1997) relate that when a person is aware of what the demon is doing and saying, this is called lucid possession; when a person has amnesia for what transpires, it is called somnambulistic possession. This also demonstrates that the present-day American diagnostic criteria have finally caught up with the main of the psychological and certain anthropological literature that has been asserting the mechanism of action in possession is dissociation (e.g., Ellenberger, 1970; Kluft, 1991; Suryani & Jensen, 1993; Ross, 1997; Klass, 2003; Howell, 2011). In other words, we now have consistency between what the literature has been stating for some time and the current American-based diagnostic nomenclature for demonic possession.

All of the above information shows that American mental health clinicians have clear diagnostic categories for demonic possession today. When a person evidences "demonic personalities," the appropriate diagnoses are DID with Possession-form Identities; Other Specified Dissociative Disorder with Chronic and Recurrent Syndromes of Mixed Dissociative Symptoms; or Unspecified Dissociative Disorder depending upon the degree of memory impairment that accompanies the negative, unwanted possession experience and the degree to which the person's life is disrupted by the possession. An accompanying diagnosis of Conversion Disorder is also

required if the person evidences abnormal body posturing and/or psychogenic seizures. Also, the above analyses show that we may conceptualize what is happening in demonic possession from a psychological perspective.

Bringing the Religious and Psychological Together

It is possible to bring together the religious and psychological analyses provided above in a coherent way. Grün (2001) and Moore (2009) offer a contemporary way to do this. They view demons as religious metaphors for the psychological issues that beset people. When a person's "inner demons" control their perceptions and/or hinder their behavior, the person is metaphorically possessed (Grün, 2001; Moore, 2009). Additionally, Moore (2009) makes it clear that these struggles with metaphoric demons can, in the minds of the psychologically compromised, take on the impression that the demons are actual entities. This meshes with the dissociative processes discussed above, where traumatic memories can manifest as "demonic identities" within one's mind (e.g., Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1997; Hegeman, 2010; Howell, 2011).

Because this perspective does not conceive of evil spirits in a literal sense, it is able to conceptualize demonic possession as a religious and psychological metaphor. This is how the views of Grün (2001) and Moore (2009) differ from those that contend demons are actual spiritual beings and conflate their influence with all manner of human problems (Cuneo, 2001; Collins, 2009; McGill, 2015). As such, this non-literal modern perspective is able to successfully join the religious and psychological views provided in the present article, and it does so without taking recourse to traditional Christian interpretations.

Concluding Commentary

While I agree with Kelly (2004) that it is impossible to prove evil spirits do not exist because, by definition, they evade all naturalistic means of detection, I nevertheless find myself in agreement with Spoto (1998): The existence of evil spirits as permanently damned creatures of God is an idea that is just too difficult to square with a Christian view of God as loving and merciful beyond measure; how is it possible that such a benevolent deity would create beings incapable of redemption? So I must declare, as a Christian, that I find the religious argument for their ontological status (see Russell, 1984; Woods, 2009a) to be deeply flawed. A religious concept this at odds with the nature of the Christian

God cannot be given my assent. I am willing to admit that I could be wrong, but the arguments are not convincing to me as a person with a Master's degree in Systematic Theology and New Testament. Be that as it may, what about the paranormal phenomena among cases of demonic possession? Do they have any evidential value to consider?

Not really. As we have seen, the work of Cuneo (2001), Kelly (2004) and Collins (2009) has shown that observations of the possessed are highly susceptible to unconscious distortion or embellishment, even to the point of people being convinced they are witnessing things that are not happening. This tells me there is a strong case to be made for doubting the veracity of reports that paranormal phenomena occur in cases of demonic possession. It therefore strikes me as prudent to remain skeptical of anecdotal reports of the paranormal among these cases until, as Kelly (2004) asserts, they are substantiated by scientifically controlled assessments and video recordings. And even if that burden of proof is met in the future, McGill (2015) rightly notes there is absolutely no reason to assume parapsychological phenomena such as ESP, clairvoyance, and others, are related to evil spirits; if such phenomena exist, they exist within the natural order and have a scientific causality.

The strongest evidence for concluding we are dealing with a dissociative psychological condition when a person evidences a "demonic identity" that usurps their normal personality is how explanatory the symptoms are both medically and psychologically. As we saw above, well-respected experts in their respective fields (e.g., Lhermitte, 1963/2013; Cortés & Gatti, 1975; Putnam, 1989; Ross, 1997; Cuneo, 2001; Woods, 2009b; Howell, 2011; Levack, 2013) are able to explain the symptoms of demoniacs. And as Woods (2009b) notes, when the symptoms have a naturalistic explanation the condition is called pseudo or false possession, not true possession. Since the present investigation has found naturalistic explanations for the symptoms, I think it is difficult to escape the conclusion that cases of demonic possession throughout history were in all likelihood cases of Possession-form DID (Ellenberger, 1970; Kluft, 1991; Ross, 1997; Howell, 2011) or related dissociative and/or conversion disorders (Ross, 1997; Howell, 2011). Mental health clinicians are certainly free to believe this condition involves the undetectable influence of evil spirits; but, if one chooses to believe that, it is incumbent upon them to admit they are overlaying the condition with an interpretation for which there is no persuasive evidence. So, where does this leave us?

All of the above demonstrates that there is a scientific way to understand what is happening when a person's normal personality is usurped by a demonic one. There is no need to resort to religious conceptualizations, even though I realize that many people consider such ideas to be meaningful for a variety of reasons, that is, religiously and/or culturally. It is therefore important, when working clinically with such cases, to respect the beliefs of the individuals involved. Even so, that does not mean one should too readily suggest clerical exorcisms as a remedy. As Putnam (1989) notes, exorcisms tend to provide only temporary symptom relief; they seem to work in proportion to a demoniac's belief they will help (McNamara, 2011b); and, exorcisms can even reinforce possession belief, thereby worsening the condition (see Young, 2016). All this underscores the importance of maintaining good clinical judgment and finesse when working with these cases. Since my interest here has been conceptualizing the Christian notion of demonic possession from a psychological point of view, it is beyond the scope of the present article to delve deeper into working with these cases therapeutically.

In the end, I think all of the above shows that the arguments and evidence for a traditional Christian interpretation of demonic possession are so weak that a modern way to understand the condition is needed. As was shown, Grün (2001) and Moore (2009) provide an ideal way to conceptualize the situation. What I like about their approach is it encompasses more than just situations involving Possession-form DID or related dissociative and/or conversion disorders. They also address how people in general are affected by their metaphorical inner demons, and how a person can be considered possessed when their psychological issues interfere with or control their behavior (Grün, 2001; Moore, 2009). To me, this approach honors the religious and psychological dimensions of the issues involved, and it achieves this in a thoroughly modern way.

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