



Exorcism!

Driving Out the Nonsense

Belief in demonic possession is getting a new propaganda boost. Not only has the 1973 horror movie *The Exorcist* been re-released, but the “true story” that inspired it is chronicled in a reissued book and a made-for-TV movie, both titled *Possessed* (Allen 2000). However, a year-long investigation by a Maryland writer (Opsasnik 2000), together with my own analysis of events chronicled in the exorcising priest’s diary, belie the claim that a teenage boy was possessed by Satan in 1949.

Psychology Versus Possession

Belief in spirit possession flourishes in times and places where there is ignorance about mental states. Citing biblical examples, the medieval Church taught that demons were able to take control of an individual, and by the sixteenth century demonic behavior had become relatively stereotypical. It manifested itself by convulsions, prodigious strength, insensitivity to pain, temporary blindness or deafness, clairvoyance, and other abnormal characteristics. Some early notions of possession may have been fomented by three brain disorders: epilepsy, migraine, and Tourette’s syndrome (Beyerstein 1988). Psychiatric historians have long attrib-

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uted demonic manifestations to such aberrant mental conditions as schizophrenia and hysteria, noting that—as mental illness began to be recognized as such after the seventeenth century—there was a consequent decline in demonic superstitions (Baker 1992, 192). In 1999 the Vatican did update its 1614 guidelines for expelling demons, urging exorcists to avoid mistaking psychiatric illness for possession (“Vatican” 1999).

In many cases, however, supposed demonic possession can be a learned role that fulfills certain important functions for those claiming it. In his book *Hidden Memories: Voices and Visions from Within*, psychologist Robert A. Baker (1992) notes that possession was sometimes feigned by nuns to act out sexual frustrations, protest restrictions, escape unpleasant duties, attract attention and sympathy, and fulfill other useful functions.

Many devout claimants of stigmata, inedia, and other powers, have also exhibited alleged demonic possession. For example, at Loudon, France, a prioress, Sister Jeanne des Anges (1602–1665), was part of a contagious outbreak of writhing, convulsing nuns. Jeanne herself exhibited stigmatic designs and lettering on her skin. A bloody cross “appeared” on her forehead, and the names of Jesus, Mary, and others were found on her hand—always clustered on her left hand, just as

expected if a right-handed person were marking them. She went on tour as a “walking relic” and was exhibited in Paris to credulous thousands. There were a few skeptics, but Cardinal Richelieu rejected having Jeanne tested by having her hand enclosed in a sealed glove. He felt that would amount to testing God (Nickell 1998, 230–231). Interestingly enough, while I was researching and writing this article I was called to southern Ontario on a case of dubious possession that also involved stigmata.

Possession can be childishly simple to fake. For example, an exorcism broadcast by ABC’s *20/20* in 1991 featured a sixteen-year-old girl who, her family claimed, was possessed by ten separate demonic entities. However, to skeptics her alleged possession seemed to be indistinguishable from poor acting. She even stole glances at the camera before affecting convulsions and other “demonic” behavior (Nickell 1998).

Of course a person with a strong impulse to feign diabolic possession may indeed be mentally disturbed. Although the teenager in the *20/20* episode reportedly improved after the exorcism, it was also pointed out that she continued “on medication” (“Exorcism” 1991). To add to the complexity, the revised Vatican guidelines also urge, appropriately, against believing a person is possessed who is merely “the victim of one’s own imagination” (“Vatican” 1999).

With less modern enlightenment, however, the guidelines also reflect Pope John Paul II's efforts to convince doubters that the devil actually exists. In various homilies John Paul has denounced Satan as a "cosmic liar and murderer." A Vatican official who presented the revised rite stated, "The existence of the devil isn't an opinion, something to take or leave as you wish. Anyone who says he doesn't exist wouldn't have the fullness of the Catholic faith" ("Vatican" 1999).

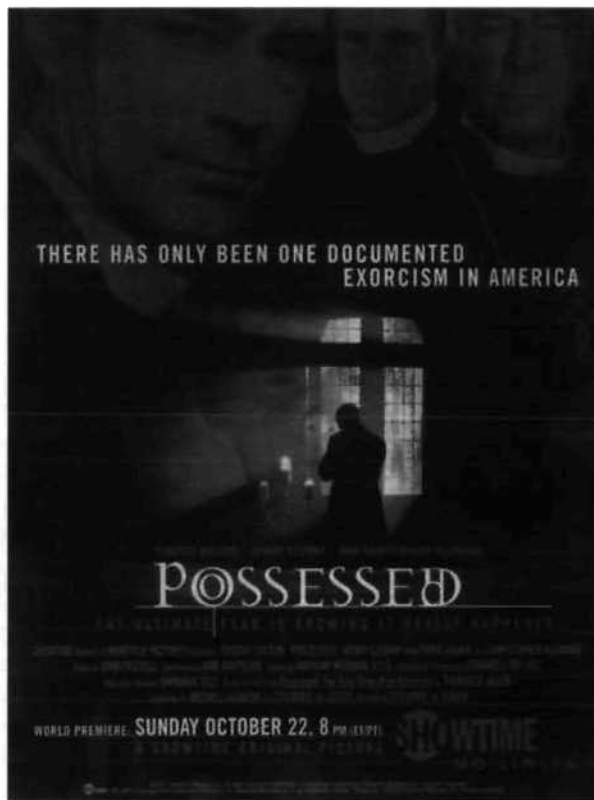
Unchallenged by the new exorcism guidelines is the acceptance of such alleged signs of possession as demonstrating supernatural physical force and speaking in unknown tongues. In the case broadcast by *20/20*, the teenage girl did exhibit "tongues" (known as *glossolalia* [Nickell 1998, 103–109]), but it was unimpressive; she merely chanted: "Sanka dali. Booga, booga." She did struggle against the restraining clerics, one of whom claimed that, had she not been held down, she would have been levitating! At that point a group of magicians, psychologists, and other skeptics with whom I was watching the video gleefully encouraged, "Let her go! Let her go!" (Nickell 1995)

"True Story"

Demonstrating prodigious strength, speaking in an unknown language, and exhibiting other allegedly diabolical feats supposedly characterize the "true story" behind *The Exorcist*. The 1973 horror movie—starring Linda Blair as the devil-plagued victim—was based on the 1971 bestselling novel of that title by William Peter Blatty. The movie, reports one writer, "somehow reached deep into the subconscious and stirred up nameless fears." Some moviegoers vomited or fainted, while others left trembling, and there were "so many outbreaks of hysteria that, at some theaters, nurses and ambulances were on call." Indeed, "Many sought therapy to rid themselves of fears they could not

explain. Psychiatrists were writing about cases of 'cinematic neurosis'" (Allen 2000, viii–ix).

Blatty had heard about the exorcism performed in 1949 and, almost two decades later, had written to the exorcist to inquire about it. However the priest, Father William S. Bowdern, declined to assist Blatty because he had been



directed by the archbishop to keep it secret. He did tell Blatty—then a student at Washington's Georgetown University, a Jesuit institution—about the diary an assisting priest had kept of the disturbing events (Allen 2000, ix–x).

The diary—written by Father Raymond J. Bishop—consisted of an original 26-page, single-spaced typescript and three carbon copies, one of which was eventually provided to Thomas B. Allen, author of *Possessed*, and included as an appendix to the 2000 edition of the book. The copy came from Father Walter Halloran, who had also assisted with the exorcism. Halloran verified the authenticity of the diary and stated that it had been read and approved by Bowdern (Allen 2000, 243, 301).

The diary opens with a "Background of the Case." The boy, an only child identified as "R," was born in 1935 and raised an Evangelical Lutheran like his mother; his father was baptized a Catholic but had had "no instruction or practice" in the faith. The family's Cottage City, Maryland, home included the maternal grandmother who had been a "practicing Catholic until the age of fourteen years" (Bishop 1949, 245).

On January 15, 1949, R and his grandmother heard odd "dripping" and scratching noises in her bedroom, where a picture of Jesus shook "as if the wall back of it had been bumped." The effects lasted ten days but were attributed to a rodent. Then R began to say he could hear the scratching when others could not. Soon a noise as of "squeaking shoes"—or, one wonders, could it have been bedsprings?—became audible and "was heard only at night when the boy went to bed." On the sixth evening the scratching noise resumed, and R's mother and grandmother lay with him on his bed, whereupon they "heard something coming toward them similar to the rhythm of marching feet and the beat of drums." The sound

seemed to "travel the length of the mattress and back again" repeatedly (Bishop 1949, 246). Was R tapping his toes against the bed's footboard?

Poltergeists and Ouija Spirits

At this point the case was exhibiting features often attributed to a *poltergeist* (or "noisy spirit"). Poltergeist phenomena typically involve disturbances—noises, movement of objects, or, rarely, serious effects like outbreaks of fire—typically centering around a disturbed person, usually a child. Believers often attribute the occurrences to "psychokinetic energy" or other mystical force imagined to be produced from the repressed hostilities of the pubescent child. Skeptics can agree with all but the mystical part, observing that one does not explain an

unknown by invoking another. Skeptics have a simpler explanation, attributing the effects to the cunning tricks of a naughty youth or occasionally a disturbed adult. When such cases have been properly investigated—by magicians and detectives using hidden cam-

people thought they saw and what actually happened were not precisely the same." Experience shows that even "reliable witnesses" are capable of being deceived. As one confessed "poltergeist"—an eleven-year-old girl—observed: "I didn't throw all those

world's best-known spiritualistic mediums—had all been produced by trickery. Indeed, they had been caught in deceptions many times (Nickell 1999).

The Foxes and Davenports are not isolated examples. It should therefore not be surprising to learn that the case of R, which began as a seeming poltergeist outbreak, soon advanced to one of alleged spirit communication, before finally escalating to one of supposed diabolic possession.

R had been close to an aunt, who often visited from St. Louis. A devoted Spiritualist, she introduced R to the Ouija board. With their fingers on the planchette, they saw it move about the board's array of printed letters, numbers, and the words *yes* and *no* to spell out messages—she told him—from spirits of the dead. (Actually, as skeptics know, the planchette is moved not by spirits but by the sitters' involuntary—or voluntary!—muscular control [Nickell 1995, 58].) She also told R and his mother how, "lacking a Ouija board, spirits could try to get through to this world by rapping on walls" (Allen 2000, 2).

R had played with the Ouija board by himself. Then began the outbreak of noises, and eleven days later he was devastated by his aunt's death in St. Louis. He returned to the Ouija board, spending hours at the practice and "almost certainly" used it to try to reach his beloved aunt (Allen 2000, 2–6). As R, his mother, and grandmother lay in R's bed and listened to the drumming sound, his mother asked aloud whether this was the aunt's spirit. If so, she added, "Knock three times" (thus adopting a practice of the Fox Sisters). Thereupon, the diary records that the three felt "waves of air" striking them and heard distinct knocks followed by "claw scratchings on the mattress."

Possession?

Then, for approximately four continuous nights, markings appeared on the teenager's body, after which the claw-like scratches took the form of printed words. Whenever the scratching noise was ignored the mattress began to shake, at times violently, and at one

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eras, lie detectors, tracer powders (dusted on objects likely to be involved), and other techniques—they usually turn out to be the pranks of young or immature mischief-makers.

Consider some of the "other manifestations" associated with R in the early part of the case, as recorded in the diary:

An orange and a pear flew across the entire room where R was standing. The kitchen table was upset without any movement on the part of R. Milk and food were thrown off the table and stove. The bread-board was thrown on to the floor. Outside the kitchen a coat on its hanger flew across the room; a comb flew violently through the air and extinguished blessed candles; a Bible was thrown directly at the feet of R, but did not injure him in any way. While the family was visiting a friend in Boonesboro, Maryland, the rocker in which R was seated spun completely around through no effort on the part of the boy. R's desk at school moved about on the floor similar to the plate on a Ouija board. R did not continue his attendance out of embarrassment [Bishop 1949, 248].

It is well to consider here the sage advice of the late investigator and magician Milbourne Christopher not to accept statements of what actually happened from the suspected "poltergeist." Regarding one such case Christopher (1970, 149–160) pointed out that all that was necessary to see the events not as paranormal occurrences but as deliberate deceptions was to "suppose that what the boy said was not true, that he was in one room when he said he was in another in some instances. Also let us suppose that what

things. People just imagined some of them" (Christopher 1970, 149). In the case of R, we must realize that the previously described events (the flying fruit, etc.) were not witnessed by Father Bishop, who reported them in his diary as background to the case, and so were necessarily second-hand or worse.

It was indeed trickery that was behind the poltergeist-like disturbances of 1848 that launched modern spiritualism. As the Fox Sisters confessed decades later, their pretended spirit contact began as the pranks of "very mischievous children" who, Margaret Fox explained, began their shenanigans "to terrify our dear mother, who was a very good woman and very easily frightened" and who "did not suspect us of being capable of a trick because we were so young." The schoolgirls threw slippers at a disliked brother-in-law, shook the dinner table, and produced noises by bumping the floor with an apple on a string and by knocking on the bedstead (Nickell 1995).

The Fox Sisters were followed in 1854 by the Davenport Brothers, schoolboys Ira and William, who were the focus of cutery that danced about the family's kitchen table, and other odd events. Ira sometimes claimed that, when alone, spirits had whisked him to distant spots. Soon the boys advanced to spirit-rapped messages, "trance" writing and speaking, and other "spirit manifestations." In his old age, Ira confessed to magician/paranormal investigator Harry Houdini that the brothers' spirit communication—which launched and maintained their careers as two of the

time the coverlet was pulled loose (Bishop 1949, 246–247).

R's parents were becoming frantic. They had watched their son become unruly, even threatening to run away, and he seemed to be "on the verge of violence" (Allen 2000, 57). They sought help from a physician, who merely found the boy "somewhat high-strung," then from a psychologist, whose opinions went unrecorded. A psychiatrist found R to be "normal," but "declared that he did not believe the phenomena." A Spiritualist and two Lutheran ministers were consulted (Bishop 1949, 248). One of the latter eventually advised the parents, "You have to see a Catholic priest. The Catholics know about things like this" (Allen 2000, 24).

A young priest was called in, but the boy's condition was worsening and R was admitted to a Jesuit hospital, some time between February 27 and March 6. The priest, Father E. Albert Hughes, prepared for an exorcism as seeming poltergeist and demonic outbreaks intensified. Reportedly, the nuns "couldn't keep the bed still," scratches appeared on R's chest, and he began to curse in "a strange language." A later source said it was Aramaic, but a still later "well-documented record" failed to mention "any such language competence" (Allen 2000, 36). The attempted exorcism reportedly ended abruptly when the boy, who had slipped a hand free and worked loose a piece of bedspring, slashed Hughes's arm from the shoulder to the wrist, a wound requiring over a hundred stitches (Allen 2000, 37).

One investigator, however, doubts whether this attack—or even this first exorcism—ever occurred, having searched in vain for corroborative evidence (Opsasnik 2000). In any event the parents considered making a temporary move to St. Louis, where relatives lived. When this possibility was discussed the word "Louis" appeared across R's ribs; when the question arose as to when, "Saturday" was seen plainly on his hip; and when the duration was considered, "3 weeks" appeared on his chest. The possibility that R was producing the markings was dismissed on the grounds that his mother "was keeping him under

close supervision," but they might have been done previously and only revealed as appropriate, or he might have produced them as he feigned being "doubled up" and screaming in pain.

According to the diary, "The markings could not have been done by the boy for the added reason that on one occasion there was writing on his back" (Bishop 1949, 247). Such naïve thinking is the reason "poltergeists" are able to thrive. A determined youth, probably even without a wall mirror, could easily have managed such a feat—if it actually occurred. Although the scratched messages proliferated, they never again appeared on a difficult-to-reach portion of the boy's anatomy.

In St. Louis, there were more poltergeist-type effects, whereupon Father Bishop (the diarist) was drawn to the case. Bishop left a bottle of holy water in R's bedroom but later—while the boy claimed to have been dozing—it went sailing across the room. On another occasion R's parents found the way into his room blocked by a fifty-pound bookcase. A stool "fell over." Initially, Bishop and another priest, Father William Bowdern, believed R could have deliberately produced all of the phenomena that had thus far occurred in St. Louis, recognizing that stories of alleged incidents in Maryland were, while interesting, hearsay (Allen 2000, 61–76).

Eventually Bowdern changed his view and was instructed by Archbishop Joseph Ritter to perform an exorcism on the boy. Bowdern was accompanied by Father Bishop and Walter Halloran (mentioned earlier as providing a copy of the diary to author Allen), who was then a Jesuit student. Bowdern began the ritual of exorcism in R's room. Scratches began to appear on the boy's body, including the word "HELL" on his chest "in such a way that R could look down upon his chest and read the letters plainly." A "picture of the devil" also appeared on the boy's leg. "Evidently the exorcism prayers had stirred up the devil," the diary states, because, after a period of sleep R "began sparring" and "punching the pillow with more than ordinary force" (Bishop 1949, 255–257).

Soon Bowdern "believed deep in his soul that he was in combat with Satan" (Allen 2000, 117). R thrashed wildly; he spat in the faces of the priests and even his mother; he contorted and lashed out; he urinated. Reports the diary:

From 12:00 midnight on, it was necessary to hold R during his fights with the spirit. Two men were necessary to pin him down to the bed. R shouted threats of violence at them, but vulgar language was not used. R spit [*sic*] at his opponents many times. He used a strong arm whenever he could free himself, and his blows were beyond the ordinary strength of the boy [Bishop 1949, 258].

The exorcism continued on and off for days. At times R screamed "in diabolical, high-pitched voice"; he swung his fists, once breaking Halloran's nose; he sat up and sang (for example the "Blue Danube," "Old Rugged Cross," and "Swanee"); he cried; he spat; he cursed his father; he mimed masturbation; he bit his caretakers. On March 18, there seemed a crisis: as if attempting to vomit, R said, "He's going, he's going . . ." and "There he goes." He went limp and seemed back to normal. He said he had had a vision of a figure in a black robe and cowl walking away in a black cloud (Bishop 1949, 257–262).

However, after the priests left R claimed there were odd feelings in his stomach and cried out, "He's coming back! He's coming back!" Soon the tantrums and routine of exorcism continued. R seemed even more violent, hurling vulgarities, and he had spells of Satan-dictated writing and speech, for example: "In 10 days I will give a sign on his chest[:]; he will have to have it covered to show my power." R also wrote, "Dead bishop" (Bishop 1949, 262–269). Subsequently on April 1, between disturbances, the youth was baptized in the rectory.

During all this time the markings—the random scratches and words—continued to appear on R's body. When there was talk of his going to school there, the boy grimaced and opened his shirt to reveal the scratched words, "No school" (Allen 2000, 46), a seemingly childish concern for truly diabolic

forces. (The diary mentions only that "No" appeared on the boy's wrists.)

Reportedly, on one occasion R was observed using one of his fingernails (which were quite long) to scratch the words "HELL" and "CHRIST" on his chest. It is unclear whether or not he realized he was being observed at the time. Earlier, the priests reportedly "saw a new scratch slowly moving down his leg" (Allen 2000, 180). This sounds mysterious until we consider that the boy could have made a quick scratch just before the priests looked—which they did because he suddenly "yelped"—and what they observed was merely the aftereffect of the scratch, the skin's developing response to the superficial injury. (I have produced just such an effect on myself experimentally, observed by SI's Ben Radford.)

On April 4, the family decided to return to their Maryland home due to the father's need to work and also to relieve the strain on the Missouri relatives. But after five days R was sent back to St. Louis and admitted to a hospital run by an order of monks. He was put in a security room which had bars on its single window and straps on the bed. During the days the teenager studied the catechism and was taken on outings, but at night the "possession" continued. There were failed attempts to give him Holy Communion, "the devil" at one point saying (according to the diary), that he would not permit it (Bishop 1949, 282).

On April 18, R again announced "He's gone!" This time, he said, he had a vision of "a very beautiful man wearing a white robe and holding a fiery sword." With it the figure (presumably Jesus) drove the devil into a pit. There were no further episodes and Father Bishop (1949, 291) recorded that on August 19, 1951, R and his parents visited the Brothers who had cared for him. "R, now 16, is a fine young man," he wrote. "His father and mother also became Catholic, having received their first Holy Communion on Christmas Day, 1950."

Aftermath

Was R possessed? Or did superstition mask a troubled youth's problems and invite elaborate role-playing? Interest-

ingly, Archbishop Ritter appointed a Jesuit philosophy professor to investigate the matter. According to a reportedly informed source, the investigator concluded that R "was not the victim of diabolical possession" (Allen 2000, 234). Without wishing to make a categorical judgment, Halloran states that R did not exhibit prodigious strength, showing nothing more than what could be summoned by an agitated teenager. As to speaking in Latin, Halloran thought that was nothing more than the boy's having heard repetitious Latin phrases from the exorcising priest. (Or one occasion "the devil reportedly spoke school kids' 'pig Latin'")

Nothing that was reliably reported in the case was beyond the abilities of a teenager to produce. The tantrums, "trances," moved furniture, hurled objects, automatic writing, superficial scratches, and other phenomena were just the kinds of things someone of R's age could accomplish, just as others have done before and since. Indeed, the elements of "poltergeist phenomena," "spirit communication," and "demonic possession"—taken both separately and, especially, together, as one progressed to the other—suggest nothing so much as role-playing involving trickery. So does the stereotypical storybook portrayal of "the devil" throughout.

Writer Mark Opsasnik (2000) investigated the case, tracing the family's home to Cottage City, Maryland (not Mount Rainier as once thought), and talked to R's neighbors and childhood friends. The boy had been a very clever trickster, who had pulled pranks to frighten his mother and to fool children in the neighborhood. "There was no possession," Opsasnik told the *Washington Post*. "The kid was just a prankster" (Saulny 2000).

Of course, the fact that the boy wanted to engage in such extreme antics over a period of three months does suggest he was emotionally disturbed. Teenagers typically have problems, and R seemed to have trouble adjusting—to school, his sexual awareness, and other concerns. To an extent, of course, he was challenging authority

as part of his self-development, and he was no doubt enjoying the attention. But there is simply no credible evidence to suggest the boy was possessed by demons or evil spirits.

A Catholic scholar, the Rev. Richard McBrien, who formerly chaired Notre Dame's theology department, states that he is "exceedingly skeptical" of all alleged possession cases. He told the *Philadelphia Daily News* (which also interviewed me for a critical look at the subject), "Whenever I see reports of exorcisms, I never believe them." He has concluded that "... in olden times, long before there was a discipline known as psychiatry and long before medical advances ... what caused possession was really forms of mental or physical illness (Adamson 2000). Elsewhere McBrien (1991) has said that the practice of exorcism—and by inference a belief in demon possession—"holds the faith up to ridicule." Let us hope that the enlightened view, rather than the occult one, prevails.

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