

Medical Misinformation and Exorcisms: Treatment or Torture?

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Term Paper

This paper addresses the use of exorcisms as medical misinformation. It touches on what an exorcism is, how they are used, and their effectiveness, ultimately asking imperative questions. While they prove to be dangerous and ineffective, how can this be superstitious practice be addressed with cultural empathy and religious freedom?

Introduction

An exorcism is the force expulsion of an evil spirit/s from a person or place. Exorcisms have been used for thousands of years and many different world religions have the idea of exorcisms in them. For example, the Gutor ceremony in Tibetan Buddhism where ceremonial dancers exorcise evil spirits to start the new year with purity.¹ In Hinduism, some spells in the Atharva Veda are for casting out demons.² In Islam, *jinn* is the possession of evil spirits. When possessed, these jinn may cause an individual to speak indecipherable words and give them superhuman strength, similar to cases cited in Catholicism and Christianity.³ In ancient Mesopotamia, many afflictions were thought to come from spirits entering or attaching to someone's body. Assyrian tablets reference prayers to gods and direct challenges of demons and it is believed ancient Babylonian priest performed rituals that involved destroying images of demons. In Persia, evidence of exorcisms using prayer date back to 600 BCE.⁴ It is evident that exorcisms are found across many major religions and many cultures and date back thousands of years. While this is true, this paper will focus on exorcisms in western culture and specifically Catholicism. This paper will discuss exorcisms, their use, and result. Exorcisms are an outdated

¹ "Tibetan Festivals: Gutor," Kotan. <http://www.kotan.org/tibet/festivals.html#gutor>

² "Exorcism," New World Encyclopedia. 9 August 2017.
https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Exorcism#Exorcism_in_Hinduism

³ Ibid.

⁴ Holloway, April, "Demonic Possession and the Ancient Practice of Exorcism," Ancient Origins. 10 January 2014 <https://www.ancient-origins.net/news-mysterious-phenomena-unexplained-phenomena/ancient-practice-exorcism-rise-again-001211>

treatment and should be considered medical misinformation, only to be used (if used at all) with the individual's express wish to do so and executed by officially trained individuals.

Exorcism: Definition and Practice

Google dictionary defines an exorcism as “the expulsion or attempted expulsion of a supposed evil spirit from a person or place.”⁵ Catholic Herald, a Roman-Catholic newspaper defines an exorcism as “a form of prayer that the church uses against the power of the devil.”⁶ Other sources define an exorcism as the curing of demonic possession⁷ or expulsion, driving out, or warding off of demons or evil spirits.⁸ For this paper, an exorcism will be defined as the expulsion of evil spirits or demons from a person, place, or thing.

Symptoms of an exorcism are suicidal tendencies, changes in personality, use of different voice, lack of control over oneself, speaking or understanding languages the individual does not know, supernatural knowledge (knowing things they have no earthly method of knowing), superhuman strength, and a violent aversion to God and other sacred objects. Many of these symptoms such as suicidal tendencies, change in personality, use of a different voice, lack of control over oneself, and a violent aversion to sacred objects can be normal symptoms in people with certain illnesses such as mental disorders like schizophrenia or mood disorders. These could even manifest in healthy individuals due to stressful circumstances. Even symptoms like superhuman strength can be explained. Studies find that some people can lift “6 or 7 times their

⁵ Google, “Exorcism.”

<https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+an+exorcism&oq=what+is+an+exorcism&aqs=chrome.69i59j0l5.2310j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

⁶ Catholic News Service, “FAQs: What is an Exorcism?” 25 October 2017.

<https://catholicherald.co.uk/commentandblogs/2017/10/25/faqs-what-is-an-exorcism/>

⁷ Layton, Julia, “How Exorcism Works.” How Stuff Works. <https://science.howstuffworks.com/science-vs-myth/afterlife/exorcism.htm>

⁸ Knight, Kevin, “Exorcism,” New Advent. <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05709a.htm>

body weight.” For example, stories of bouts of superhuman strength have been seen in the news when an individual lifts a car just enough to rescue their loved one.⁹

In the Roman Catholic Church, there are three different types of exorcisms: baptismal exorcism, simple exorcism, and real exorcism. Baptismal exorcism is a blessing done to infants before a baptism. A simple exorcism is a blessing done to rid a place or thing of “evil influence.”¹⁰ Real exorcisms involve performing the Rite of Exorcism (this will be explained more in depth later) to rid an individual of “diabolical possession” (the type of exorcism this paper is referring to).¹¹ These can only be done by professionally trained and officially recognized catholic priest only after sanctioned by the church. Non-Catholic exorcisms (not sanctioned by the Catholic Church) are referred to as prayers of deliverance. Prayers of deliverance can be done by any believer at any time. They have no sanctioned rules, guides, or structures.

Only ordained catholic priests can become exorcist and to become an official exorcist one must complete extensive training. There are very few official exorcists, estimating about 150 to 300 worldwide with only 11 in the United States. Most training to be an exorcist usually comes from experience as there is not a specialized area of study for exorcism in seminary school, although they do learn about the devil and manifestations of evil.¹²

Before the Catholic church conducts an exorcism, a case must be investigated. Priests must rule out other options, such as mental illness and other disorders. Many cases reviewed by the church are cited as cases of mental illness or other ailments. In the investigation, psychiatrists

⁹ Holohan, Meghan. “How do People Find the Superhuman Strength to Lift Cars?” NBC News 3 August 2012. <https://www.nbcnews.com/healthmain/how-do-people-find-superhuman-strength-lift-cars-921457>

¹⁰ Layton, Julia. “How Exorcisms Work.”

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

are used to determine if the individual is experiencing symptoms from mental illness. Moreover, the individual must go through a medical examination and a “church-approved” paranormal expert may be consulted. For the church, only about 1 out of 5,000 cases are legitimate, while untrained exorcists can find thousands of cases.¹³ If the case seems valid, then it is presented to the church and must be approved before an exorcism can begin. Once approved, selected exorcist will begin an exorcism which can take from a few hours to weeks.

When conducting an exorcism, a priest will use the Roman Catholic rite of exorcism. It is the official document detailing the steps of an exorcism and prayers used when conducting one. While the Vatican revised the rite of exorcism in January of 1999, it was originally written in 1614. This book is often read in Latin, containing verses and passages from the bible used to implore the evil entity to leave and to ask God to free the victim.

“I cast you out, unclean spirit, along with every Satanic power of the enemy, every specter from hell, and all your fell companions; in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Begone and stay far from this creature of God. For it is He who commands you, He who flung you headlong from the heights of heaven into the depths of hell. It is He who commands you, He who once stilled the sea and the wind and the storm.”¹⁴

While reciting these prayers, the priest will sprinkle holy water, lay hands on the possessed, make a sign of the cross, and touch the possessed with sacred objects at specific moments. If an exorcism is successful, then the individual can resume their normal life. If it is unsuccessful then the individual remains possessed.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ “Rite of Exorcism” January 1999. Accs. Catholic Online.
<https://www.catholic.org/prayers/prayer.php?p=683>

Exorcisms and Prayers of Deliverance: Outcome

Many famous exorcism-based Hollywood films are based of real-life exorcisms. *The Exorcist* is based off the case of Ronald Doe, a 14 year old boy in Cottage City, Maryland.¹⁵ The film, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, is based off the exorcism of Anneliese Michel in Germany.¹⁶ Emma Schmidt was another individual who went through a Catholic exorcism, similar to Emily Rose and Roland Doe, though not as famous.¹⁷ Many exorcisms, especially those not sanctioned by the Catholic church, resulted in death, some of these cases being that of Maricia Irina, Terrance Cottrell, Kristy Bamu, and Michael Taylor.

Roland Doe's case took place in Maryland in the 1940's, being about 14 at the time. Doe experienced strange phenomenon like hearing scratching from the walls and floors, inexplicable dripping of water, and spontaneous movements of his mattress. After consulting doctors and other medical professionals, his parents turned to the help of a priest, at the suggestion of their local Lutheran minister. Eventually, priest observed Doe's behavior. He would act normal and calm during the day then at night, once in bed, he would exhibit wild behavior like screaming and wild outburst. He would also enter a "trance-like state and start making sounds in a guttural voice." They also reported flying objects. About a week later, in the hospital, Doe woke up with seizures, then went into a trance-like state. The priest proceeded to "shout at Satan" and command him to go in the name of St. Michael. After a few minutes, Doe woke up and said,

¹⁵ DeLong, William. "The True story of Roland Doe that Inspired 'The Exorcist,'" 26 October 2017. All That's Interesting. <https://allthatsinteresting.com/roland-doe-the-exorcist-true-story>

¹⁶ "The Exorcism of Emily Rose" Chasing the Frog <http://www.chasingthefrog.com/reelfaces/emilyrose.php>

¹⁷ The Lineup Staff, "9 Disturbing Cases of Real-Life Exorcism and Possession." 21 September 2018 The Lineup

“he’s gone.” He went on to live a normal life with no more documented instances of strange occurrences.¹⁸

While this story had a positive ending the same cannot be said for Anneliese Michel. Michel started experiencing strange symptoms at around 17 years old. She would experience epileptic seizures (diagnosed), “devilish hallucinations” when praying, and hear voices. She was soon diagnosed with depression and was considering suicide, according to the court. Since the doctors were not helping, her parents turned to the help of exorcists. Michel was convinced she was possessed by several demons, such as Lucifer, Judas Iscariot, Nero, and Cain. Michel did disturbing things like licking her urine off the floor, barking like a dog, and eating flies and spiders. Michel went through 67 exorcisms over 10 months. During her final exorcism she weighed only 68 pounds, having starved to get the demon out of her. It was believed that she had pneumonia and her knees were broken from continuous genuflections, being unable to move without assistance. She died in July of 1976, her cause of death being dehydration and malnutrition. Her last words were to her mother saying, “Mother, I’m afraid.” Looking back at this case, mental health professionals believed Michel had schizophrenia, now an easily treatable disease.¹⁹

Terrance Cottrell was an 8 year old boy with autism who was suffocated to death during an exorcism at a prayer service with his mother in 2004. The pastor and others at the service were attempting to free him from the spirit he was under (autism), instead they killed him.²⁰

Kristy Bamu was killed when visiting his sister, who attempted to exorcise a spirit from him in 2010. His sister and her boyfriend used knives, sticks, metal bars, bottles, ceramic floor tiles, and

¹⁸ “The Exorcist,” All That’s Interesting

¹⁹ “The Exorcism of Emily Rose” Chasing the Frog

²⁰ Flock, Jeff. “Autistic Boy’s Death at Church Ruled Homicide.” 26 August 2003. CNN

a hammer and chisel on Bamu to exorcise the evil from him.²¹ Around 2005, Maricica Irina Cornici, a nun, moved to a monastery with her brother. A few months later, she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Once returning to the Monastery from the hospital, the nuns and priest chained her to the cross and attempted to exorcise an evil spirit from her. She was left in a locked room for three days then given bread and tea. She was so weak, they called an ambulance to take her to the hospital, but she died before making it there.²² These cases are a handful of many. While few have a happy ending, many end in unnecessary death. Each of these cases were avoidable and those who died did not have to endure what they did.

Freedom of Religion and Freedom to Exorcise?

Exorcisms are an outdated and misinformed treatment, yet still popular, evident in the cases of Terrance Cottrell, Maricica irina Cornici, and Kristy Bamu, exorcisms still happen to this day, whether sanctioned by the church and done by a trained priest or not but do we have the authority to tell people they can or cannot attempt to exorcise people if it is their religious right? This is similar to ideas of anti-vaccinators with individuals taking other people's lives into their own hands. Science and research prove the effectiveness of vaccines. It is explicit that it is more beneficial to be vaccinated than not to avoid bringing back previously eradicated diseases and to fight off common diseases. However, the same cannot be said of exorcisms. Can evil spirits and God be proven real through research? Can they be proven false? Does someone's personal beliefs supersede medical research?

²¹ "Witchcraft Murder: Couple Jailed for Kristy Bamu Killing." 5 March 2012. BBC

²² Smith, Craig S. "A Casualty on Romania's Road Back From Atheism," 3 July 2005. The New York Times.

These questions are extremely difficult to answer as beliefs, ideologies, and opinions cannot be proven true or falsified. No one can tell another what to believe, even if it is best for them. Though we cannot tell individuals to not do an exorcism at their own discretion, the dangers of it need to be addressed. If an individual absolutely wants to do an exorcism, it is best to encourage people to do an exorcism only with the official sanctioning of the church and use of trained priest in order to avoid casualties and only if they have exhausted all other resources (medical doctors, psychologist, etc). Moreover, churches both major and local should touch on the topic and the dangers it can pose as education is the best treatment for ignorance. This is a very tricky topic, and more research is necessary to address it. Academic research on this topic would be beneficial not only to the historical community, but the sociological and anthropological community as well.

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