

Exorcism: A Sign of the Times?

Philosophy is odious and obscure;
Both law and physics are petty wits;
Divinity is basest of the three, Unpleasant, harsh, contemptible and vile,
Tis magic, magic that has ravish'd me,
Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*

Shakespeare aptly said that there are still many things between heaven and earth of which the world has never dreamed. The demonic is one of these "things" between heaven and earth. One of the most surprising and rather disturbing aspects of our time is the renewed interest in the demonic. The bizarre and the weird attract the sensation seekers. Many missionaries often report having witnessed evidences of the supernatural powers of the demonic in foreign lands. Only recently the North American public has been confronted directly with the open display of these powers on a wide scale. The late book, *The Honorary Consul*, of the well known author Graham Greene propounds the idea that God is evil as well as good. A leading character in the book, Fr. Leon Rivas, a revolutionary ex-priest says: "I believe in the evil of God, but I believe in His goodness too. He made us in His image ... and so our evil is His evil too. How could I love God if He were not like me? Divided like me. Tempted like me?" In this view, God is involved in a struggle against Himself, a struggle which man shares: "Every evil act of ours strengthens His night-side, and every good one helps His day-side, We belong to Him and He to us."

The supernatural horror movie, *The Exorcist*, is a topic of debate and controversy, Several North American critics have named this film one of the ten best in 1973. According to the Hollywood value system this movie has impressive credentials. It was directed by a man who won an Oscar in March, 1973, By some estimates it also went approximately 100 percent over its budget. Its production cost was between \$11 and \$14 million. For such a cost you would that a top notch master has been produced. This is not so! *Time* magazine calls the film "vile and brutalizing," This must be true as fainting and vomiting are common wherever the movie is shown. Yet there are long lineups to see it. What makes this movie different? A young girl is possessed by a demon. To depict the actions of this demon gruesome and vulgar scenes are enacted. Two priests try to exorcise this evil spirit from the body of the girl. As they are characterized with cliches, the priests do not appear as strong men of faith. *Time* comments that director William Friedkin and William Peter Blatty, who wrote the novel on which the story is based, "seem to care nothing for their characters as people, only as victims-props to be abused, hurled about the room, beaten and, in one case brutally murdered,"

Several years ago the author of a study on the devil could conclude rather skeptically, "It would seem best to act as though evil spirits did not exist, until such time as their existence is forced upon us," More recently he apparently felt that that time had arrived,

publishing an essay, "Death of the Devil?" The demonic is indeed making its appearance.

The film, *The Exorcist*, is not an isolated happening, and it is not a compliment to the spirit of our times. It is the sign of the night falling over our post-Christian Western culture, As Christianity has virtually lost its influence and surrendered nearly every area of life to the secularists, a spiritual no-man's land, you find people searching for meaning and spiritual satisfaction. As a result, we see the Christian religion being replaced with movements ranging from Eastern mysticism to the occult.

Notorious in itself and typical of what is taking place today is the Church of Satan in San Francisco, Founded by Anton Szandor La Vey, in April 1966, it now claims over 10,000 members, To his great delight he has been called America's "Black Pope" and he gives weekly lectures. He describes his faith as follows:

"We hold Satan as a symbolic, personal savior who takes care of mundane, fleshly, carnal things. God exists as a universal force, a balancing force in nature, but he is too impersonal to care whether we live or die. The sons, such as Jesus, take care of the spiritual aspect, but the devil takes care of the carnal side of man."

He believes that "there is a demon inside man. It must be exercised, not exorcised." Selfishness is sacred for him. "Have you seen the devil?" someone asked him, "Yes," he answered, "every time I shave!"

The modern American author, W.B. Seabrook, alleges that he has seen Black Masses in New York, Lyon, Paris and London. A Presbyterian minister in Ayrshire, Scotland, found in 1964 that Black Masses were being held in a ruined 17th century church. Among the evidence were a mutilated Bible, a broken chalice, and an upside-down cross chalked over the altar. In Paris there is an occult church with the name or title "We Worship the Prince of the World," The church has sister congregations in Switzerland and one in Rome. In order to become a member of this church one has to subscribe oneself to the devil.

Occultism is born out of despair and hunger for power. Satanist Sybil Leek herself admits: "Among my acquaintances are witches from all over the world. I do not know one whose first idea is a desire to serve humanity to the best of her ability." The flirtation with the demonic is expressed in rock names, album titles and song numbers. One group calls itself the Black Sabbath, and the Rolling Stones entitled their album "Their Satanic Majesties" and named a song "Sympathy to the Devil." With some it is merely going along with the fads of our times, with others it is on a more serious level.

Occult groups of all kinds form a powerful and influential segment of modern religious faith. A group called Morris Cerullo World Evangelism Inc. in San Diego, claims that at least ten million Americans dabble in the occult arts, traditionally associated with the devil, and even blood drinking orgies. The group itself operates an anti-occult mobile

unit in a effort to turn people away from Satanism. Rev. Festo Kivengere, an Anglican Evangelist in Uganda, who has been on a speaking tour in the U.S. observed that this new interest in the occult is "a trend toward the kind of religion that most of my people were converted from." Mr. Kivengere was raised an animist and became a Christian at a later age.

Many theologians have demythologized Satan. How chilling to note that the secular world is dabbling with Satan and related beliefs and practices, while modernist theologians deny the existence of the devil and the demonic. Rev. Ernest Marshall Howse, former Moderator of the United Church of Canada, wrote about the demonic and exorcism "that the entire concept of little devils popping in and out of hapless human victims is an indefensible superstition. Plenty of mystery is still left in the universe, plenty of scope to explore the helpful possibilities of psychosomatic medicine. The people of our time have no need to condone in any way the dark and senseless concepts of the exorcists." Harvey Cox writes in the *Secular City* that the very idea of the demonic is the opposite of the New Testament faith. Rudolf Bultmann writes in a famous sentence: "It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless and to avail ourselves of modern and surgical discoveries, and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits."

How do many theologians account for the demonic in Scriptures? It has become almost a common place in much modern New Testament criticism to regard demonic possession as some form of insanity or epilepsy. Secularization has led many to believe in a universe where the unseen is no longer real. The universe has become closed.

This way of thinking has not come on the scene overnight. Since the time of the enlightenment, a system of thought developed in the eighteenth century, angels and demons have become figures which are to be placed in the land of the fairy tales. The theology of the nineteenth century, which was a product of the Enlightenment, helped to make the devil disappear. Schleiermacher (1768-1834) wrote that to believe in the kingdom of Satan would destroy the joy of living, and threaten our security.

Many theologians all over the world are now of the conviction that the Bible cannot be understood by contemporary men. The "ancient Easter life and world view" must be unwrapped. Numerous current theologies approach the Bible from the basis of philosophical existentialism. It is understandable, therefore, that all that is not approved by modern secular man is regarded as unimportant, as mere wrappings.

And so they've voted the devil out,
And of course the devil has gone;
But simple people would like know
Who carries his business on!

Many believe that Jesus accommodated Himself to the thinking of His age. Jesus was a man of His time. He was "time-bound." When He spoke about devils and exorcised them, He was just accepting the current beliefs of His day. It is alleged that our Lord

simply adapted Himself to regular beliefs and terminology without committing Himself to the existence or non-existence of phenomena described or the falsity of current belief. Hugh Martin writes:

"Undoubtedly our Lord does personify elsewhere the power of evil in accordance with the belief of His time. Many people in these days dismiss all that being due to the fact that the limitation of our Lord's human life did not free Him from the acceptance of mistaken ideas. Others hold that Jesus was using the 'popular mode of thought in His teaching, without endorsing it . . . The present writer finds it impossible to be dogmatic. The conception of a personal Devil is not essential to Christian thought, and raises as many philosophical and religious problems as it professes to solve" (Hugh Martin. *The Parables of the Gospels*. p.76).

Some believe that the thoughts about the demonic reflect the teachings of the early church. "The popular belief in demon-possession gave form to the conceptions of those who had nervous diseases, so that they expressed themselves in language proper only to those who were actually possessed. Jesus is no believer in Christian Science: he calls sickness "sickness" and health "health"; but he regards all disease as a proof of the working of the evil one" (A. Harnack. *Wesen des Christenums*. p.38).

This accommodation theory goes directly against the thought of Scripture and the very nature of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. For Jesus, the devil was a reality and His purpose in coming to this world was to break the power of the devil. "For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil" (I John 3:8). One can be absolutely sure that as the perfect son of God, Jesus had an accurate understanding of human nature and the human situation. He never attributed every disease to the work of demons. In the gospels, Jesus makes a clear distinction between healing the sick and the casting out of devils (Matt. 10:8; 4:24; 8:17; 10:1; Luke 13:32; Mark 1:3.°). The demoniacs in the New Testament were not ordinary sick people though epilepsy or dumbness did occur. Scriptures present demons as possessing power over human bodies to cause dumbness (Matt. 12:22), insanity (Luke 8:26-36), suicidal mania (Mark 9:22). Jesus recognized Satanic agency in these cases of possession and rejoiced in the casting out of evil spirits as a sign of Satan's downfall. The Scriptural facts render it impossible to interpret the narratives of demonic possession as popular descriptions of abnormal physical or mental conditions. Therefore we have no right either to describe every illness to Satan or to say that Jesus was "time-bound" in His diagnosis of diseases.

Our world is not a closed world. Both the Old and the New Testaments make it abundantly clear that evil spirits do exist and have access to this world. The Bible emphasizes that we must accept the reality of demonic powers. It pictures them as playing an important role in the background of history. The Bible, though not strange, of course, to the life and thought and speech of the Eastern world, has not made it its own. It speaks its own thoughts. It is God's revelation. Christ's coming to this world can only have meaning in the light of the spiritual battle against Satan. If there is no Satan then

there is no need for redemption. If there is no fall into sin then there is no need for the cross.

Satan is described in the Bible as a fallen angel. In the New Testament you'll find two clear references to the fall of the devil (2 Pet. 2:4 and Rev. 12:7-9). When Lucifer rebelled and introduced sin into this previously sinless universe he drew with him a great number of lower celestial beings (Matt. 25:41). These fallen angels have chosen evil as their element. They "enjoy" evil. They are left in their evil state.

The devil is highly intelligent and the best informed of all creatures. Therefore, when the Bible speaks of Satan it is not in a long explanation but with great alarm (Jam. 4:7). Satan's thoughts are not altogether known to us (Matt. 13:28ff; 2 Cor. 2:11). We cannot see clearly his plan of attack, but what we do discern throughout Scripture is the intense struggle between "the seed of the serpent with his demonic hordes" and "the seed of the woman, the virgin born Redeemer -"(Gen.3:15).

The Israelites were aware of the demonic. As a nation it was surrounded by pagan nations which manifested the whole gamut of demonological practices and beliefs which clashed with Israel's monotheistic faith. At times demonic terminology is applied to pagan deities (Deut. 32:17). Moses warned Israel against the danger of occultism as the nation prepared to enter Canaan where demon energized practices flourished (Deut. 18:10-12).

Satan's power is described as terrible. His goal is to make this world loose from God. The nations of the world must be brought under anti-Christian control.

Little consideration has been given in modern theology to demonology. It is almost unbelievable that the subject "Satan" has been treated for that matter so lightly in theological thinking while Scriptures has so much to say about it.

Though we talk about demon possession, the word itself does not appear in the Bible. Apparently it originated with the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus in the first century A.D. and then passed on into ecclesiastical language. The New Testament frequently mentions demoniacs. They are said to "have a spirit," "a demon," "demons" or an "unclean spirit." Demoniacs are subject to period of attacks by one or more inhabiting demons, who derange them physically and mentally during the seizure (Luke 13:16). Merrill F. Unger defines demon possession and influence as follows:

In demon influence, evil spirits exert power over a person short of actual possession. Such influence may vary from mild harassment to extreme subjection when body and mind become dominated and held in slavery by spirit agents. Christians, as well as non-Christians, can be so influenced. They may be oppressed, vexed, depressed, hindered, and bound by demons. Although severe demon influence resembles demon possession, it is never the same. In demon possession one or more evil spirits dwell in a person's body as their house and take complete possession of it at times. In this condition the personality and

consciousness of the victim are completely "blacked out," and the personality of the demon takes full control. He thinks, speaks and acts through the body of the possessed, which he absolutely dominates and uses as if it were his own". (Marrill F. Unger. Demons in the World Today p.113)

Demons have spiritual knowledge of the person of Jesus Christ and the significance of His coming. The devils which inhabit people do recognize Jesus as their Great Opponent (Mark 1:24; 5:1 - 20). They are never mentioned in Scriptures as objects of God's love though they are His creatures. Sin is their natural abode. There is no restoration. Demons share in the cunning and deception of Satan and carry on to work with great effort to blind the mind of unbelievers. (2 Cor. 4:4). Sometimes people are given over to Satan. (I Cor. 5: 4,5; I Tim.1:20). Satan tries to hinder the work of the gospel outreach (I Thess. 2:18).

The New Testament knows the kingdom of evil spirits (Matt. 12: 26; Mark 3:24). They form the antithesis to Christ and His Kingdom. Satan, as the head of the kingdom of darkness, has under him many demons differentiated in ranks and classes (I Cor. 15:21; Eph. 6:12) and their place of habitation is the "bottomless pit" (Rev. 9:11). Though Satan and his demons oppose the mighty mission of Jesus Christ among men, they know very well that it will lead to their own undoing (Mark 5:1-10).

Satan is very powerful and needs to be feared. But his power is limited as he is a created being (Jam.2: 19). There seems to have been permitted a special activity of Satan's temptations and demonic possessions in the New Testament times so that Christ's power might be demonstrated. The devil cannot conquer. Christ has all the power in heaven and upon earth (Matt. 28:18). Even the most dismal of human tragedies are under God's control. God told Satan that he was limited in the testing of his servant Job. God said: "Only spare his life." The very fact that Satan could not touch Job's life is an indication of that border beyond which he was not able to go. The power of Satan over humanity is still subordinated to God's providence. God is sovereign and in perfect control over the universe. His plans will prevail despite Satan's opposition. The contestants in the great spiritual battle are unequal. There is no indecision regarding its outcome since God's decision history has already been made through Christ conquering the evil one on the cross. The victory already won by Christ is the Christian's comfort and hope. But Dr. Berkouwer rightly warns: "Any demonology that takes lightly this "subordination" of the demons to God can only fail to appreciate the Biblical message. It can only bring confusion to the Church" (Dr. G.C. Berkouwer. *Studies in Dogmatics*. "Sin." p. 121).

The reality of demon possession cannot be limited to Christ's days and the apostolic era. The hellish work of Satan is seen today. Christ's death and resurrection were the turning point in history, yet the evil powers continue their work. Though in our twentieth century culture we find it embarrassing to speak of the devil and his role in history, we cannot ignore the subject.

In the background of today's problems we must see the demonic. Paul says that in the background of a quarrel the devil is at work (2 Cor. 2:10f.). The fallen angels try to influence the course of history. They are pictured as powers behind the curtains of the stage of world history as well in our personal lives. Therefore, the prayer: "Deliver us from the evil one." Twentieth century man shows appearance of the demonic through his restlessness and desperation.

The demonic is seen in the anti-Christian ideologies. The great struggle is "not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (Eph. 6:12). If we do not wish to see the demonic influence in these matters, to whom can we ascribe the depth of evil? You see this influence in dictatorships. Each dictatorship outlines a demonic pattern. In their book, *The Morning of Magicians*, Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier reached these conclusions: Hitler is a "demoniac," National Socialism "the St. Vitus Dance of the twentieth century," and genocide human sacrifice. The demonic seems to be present wherever power is exalted over compassion.

How did the Lord and the early church oppose the demonic forces? Jesus expelled demons and the apostles did this in the Lord's name. Jesus expelled, or using another phrase, exorcised demons by a word of power and stated that this act was a sign of the coming of God's kingdom. Exorcism does not put an end to Satan's power but it is a guarantee and the symbol of Christ's definitive victory. Peter typifies the work of our Lord here on earth as follows: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him" (Acts 10:30).

Exorcism is not only practiced by Christians. The Jews of Jesus day were under pagan influence when they exorcised demons (Matt. 12:15-29). Jewish exorcists attempted to imitate, for example, the apostle Paul, and adjured an evil spirit in the name of Jesus. The demon was not expelled (Acts 19:13-17). Our Lord's method is in clear contrast to Jewish and pagan exorcism. An omnipotent Lord, He merely spoke and the demons obeyed. All who were possessed recognized Jesus Christ as Lord and confessed His power (Matt. 8:16). Only in communion with Christ is the power of darkness exposed in all its impotence. We can only appeal to God's salvation and redemption for He alone is able to cast out the evil spirits. Mission fields today provide many examples of deliverance from demon possession in the mighty name of Jesus (cf. *Demon Experiences in Many Lands. Strange Occurrences in Mission Fields of the World.* Moody Press, 1960). Thanks be to God for sending His son, Jesus Christ to the world, which remains God's world, to cleanse, to purify, to recreate it, so that man may have dominion over it again as king.

What of the exorcism by paganism? Such expulsions do not represent a division in the Satanic kingdom nor instances of Satan casting himself out, but Satanic collaboration to extend his empire of evil (cf. Matt. 12:25; Acts 19: 13-17).

What must we do now as a church in our evil times? Can we just bemoan what is happening and leave it at that? As ambassadors of Jesus Christ we are sent into the world with the gospel of liberation! The work of the early church is an ongoing work. Casting out demons, binding the forces of the demonic and liberating victims from Satanic enslavement are continuing needs and not just activities regulated to the ministry of Christ and the early church. The Church is called to withstand the evil forces (cf. Matt. 6:13; Eph. 6:12; Rom. 16: 20). We should not give Satan the opportunity to enter any room in our spiritual house. "Resist the devil, and he will flee from you" (Jam. 4:7). The apostle Peter urges us to be watchful (I Peter 5:8). We should know our enemy and his tactics (2 Cor. 2:11). But the summons to battle is also a call to faith in the victory of Christ. The fight is on, yet in Christ we are already more than conquerors (Rom. 8:37).

The Bible predicts a tremendous upsurge of the demonic in the last days. At the end of time the activity of the demonic shall intensify. There will be a loosening of Satan. We see this already today in the rapid increase of modern secular paganism (Matt. 23; 2 11 Thess. 2: 1-12). As a Church we should heed the words of our Lord: "Surely I come quickly. Amen." And pray: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus" (Rev. 22:20).

Johan D. Tangelder
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