

# Ethnopsychiatry of the Devil: Demonic Possession as a Cultural Language for Subjective Suffering in Contemporary Italy

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## Abstract

*The aim of this article is to present a theoretical and historical reading, in dialogue with the propositions of ethnopsychiatry/ethnops psychoanalysis, on the uses of the ritual of exorcism and possession as possible languages to manage human suffering, particularly in contemporary Italian society. We will first analyze what motivations incite people to seek an exorcist and verify the conflicts and similarities between the cultural and medical languages used to deal with the subjective suffering of those who seek help through exorcistic rituals. This data will be verified and discussed based on the investigations made during our doctoral research, especially through some case studies conducted by researchers in sociology, anthropology and psychiatry. In this way, we will present how the ritual of exorcism is constructed based on the participation of all those involved, promoting a cultural language to deal with subjective pain different from the paths proposed in psychiatric manuals such as the DSM. We are not interested in the veracity of the ritual and the effectiveness of its therapeutic functions but in the manner they are handled and conveyed as a solution to many social and subjective problems.*

*Keywords:* ethnopsychiatry, possession, exorcism, mental health, Italy

## Introduction: Why an Ethnopsychiatry of the Devil?

**O**ur aim in this paper is to identify and analyze how the grammars of diabolical possession and exorcism are structured in today's Italian society as cultural languages for dealing with the suffering of living, ultimately to promote a theoretical and historical analysis of this phenomenon in dialogue with Italian ethnopsychiatry/ethnops psychoanalysis.<sup>2</sup> We will use as central documents the publications written by Italian exorcists, especially between the years 1980–2000, as well as some data collected during the ethnography we conducted in 2017 in the annual "Course on the exorcism minister and the liberation prayer" at the *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum* (Field notebook 2017).<sup>3</sup> However, the focus of our analysis will be theoretically oriented and based on the books published by exorcists, as well as on case studies in psychiatric and sociological fields.

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The use of the term “ethnopsychanalysis/ethnopsychiatry” refers not only to the studies of Georges Devereux (1981) but to its unfolding in the current methodologies elaborated by Italian anthropologists and ethnopsychiatrists (Beneduce 2002, 2007; Taliani 2008, 2017; Coppo 2005; Beneduce and Taliani 2001; Beneduce and Martelli 2005), with special attention paid to the initial studies of the “Italian ethnoclinic”<sup>4</sup> formulated by Ernesto de Martino (1908-1965, 2010, 2012, 2013). In this sense, an “ethnopsychiatry of the devil” aims to investigate other grammars used to classify and treat subjective sufferings, distancing itself, in some cases, from the nosography<sup>5</sup> of the DSM (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*), for example.

We will use the term “subjective suffering” precisely because it can express forms of psychic suffering not linked to the classification of mental disorders promoted by the DSM or WHO’s documents (*World Health Organization*). The terms ethnopsychanalysis and ethnopsychiatry, which will not be discussed in this article, refer to the authors mentioned above. This variation of the former and latter is less important for this paper, as Devereux prioritized ethnopsychanalysis at the beginning of its investigations. Later, he began to use the term “ethnopsychiatry,” which today is more common (Barros and Bairrão 2010).

The important thing to consider here is the theoretical-methodological principle that these ethnoclinic approaches provide, which refers to the attempt to de-hierarchize nosographic practices and therapeutic measures to deal with different types of subjective suffering. However, we do not want to state that this “diabolical grammar” is really effective in the treatment of mental disorders or other forms of distress. Alternatively, we can affirm that they are paths to cultural languages for existential pain in the contemporary Italian context, even if these forms are not the only ones existing and being used by the population.

We recognize that there is extensive discussion about ritual efficacy and about exorcism and possession as languages for social and subjective pain (Goodman 1988; Cohen 2007; Lambek 2016; Favret-Saada 1991; Crapanzano 2004). However, in this article, we will prioritize the theoretical approach developed by Ernesto De Martino and its unfoldings in contemporary Italian ethnopsychiatry.

We will first analyze what motivations incite people to seek an exorcist, considering as our object of study contemporary Italian society. We will later verify the conflicts and similarities between the cultural and medical languages used to deal with the subjective suffering of those seeking help from exorcism rituals. This data will be verified and discussed based on the investigations made during our doctoral research, especially through some case studies conducted by researchers in sociology, anthropology, and psychiatry. From this, we will present how the ritual of exorcism is constructed based on the participation of all those involved, promoting a cultural language to deal with subjective pain different from the paths proposed in psychiatric manuals such as the DSM.

### Looking for an Exorcist: Mental Disorders and Other Cultural Languages for Subjective Suffering

In the ritual practice of many Italian priests, exorcism ended up taking other forms and being performed in different ways. In this sense, “believing” is not about a set of documents or doctrines but about the investment of the subject in a position, the act (or rite) itself (De Certeau 1998). However, we think it is important to introduce this topic with some canonical considerations. Besides the New Ritual of Exorcisms (approved in 1998), we have the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), which, in its 1999 version, lists in one of the chapters some guidelines for the regulation of exorcism. Item referring to exorcism in the 1999 edition is the 1673. The item 1673 is found in article one, within the second section of the CCC, called “The Seven Sacraments of the Church - Chapter Four: Other Liturgical Celebrations.” Exorcism is understood as a sacramental, which in the Catechism’s definition takes on the following characteristics:

1673: When the Church asks publicly and authoritatively in the name of Jesus Christ that a person or object be protected against the power of the Evil One and withdrawn from his dominion, it is called exorcism. Jesus performed exorcisms and from him the Church has received the power and office of exorcizing. In a simple form, exorcism is performed at the celebration of Baptism. the solemn exorcism, called “a major exorcism,” can be performed only by a priest and with the permission of the bishop. the priest must proceed with prudence, strictly observing the rules established by the Church. Exorcism is directed at the expulsion of demons or to the liberation from demonic possession through the spiritual authority which Jesus entrusted to his Church. Illness, especially psychological illness, is a very different matter; treating this is the concern of medical science. 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. (Catechism of the Catholic Church 1999)

What those who seek help from an exorcist have in common is suffering, whether physical or mental, which might be understood as the result of demonic possession. This “diabolic interpretation” does not occur only through the discourse of exorcists but circulates in a specific manner in contemporary Italian history in different religious and cultural manifestations (Pires 2019, 2020). The victims of these situations of human pain do not seek the ritual of liberation just because this method has been imposed on them by a theological-political project of pastoral and narrative nature. They seek it because they really trust in the efficacy of the ritual. There is no imposed order in contemporary society that ensures the predominance of exorcism as a solution to personal problems. On the contrary, the tendency is to deny it, even among certain ecclesiastical groups (Pires 2020). In this sense, it is a process that is structured through different social actors, and not only from the intention of some priests to spread this theme and the ritual practice.

Those who seek exorcism, usually immersed in the Catholic cultural universe (Talamonti 2005), seek healing and relief for their existential issues or even problems that

manifest in their bodies and minds (Field notebook 2017). The Italian exorcist Gabriele Amorth (1925–2016) even reported that many people came from outside Italy to be assisted by local exorcists due to the lack of this ministry in European countries (Amorth 2014[1990], 174). However, the majority of those assisted were Italians. Because of this, our explanation refers specifically to the contemporary Italian situation, which may vary in other countries.

Although most of the exorcists analyzed in our research were somehow connected to Rome, they came from and worked in different parts of Italy. Thus, the perspective of characterizing southern Italy as magical and northern Italy as rationalist does not apply to our research. For example, at the founding meeting of the *International Association of Exorcists* in Rome in 1991, the following exorcists were present, all Italian and active in different regions: Gabriele Amorth (Rome), Fr. Silvino Battistoni (Rome), Giuseppe Capra (Turin), Antonio Di Monda (Benevento), Marcello Pellegrino Ernetti (Venice), Matteo La Grua (Palermo), Gennaro Lo Schiavo (Badia di Cava dei Tirreni, Salerno), Msgr. G. Battista Proia, (Rome), Raul Salvucci (Fermo, Ascoli Piceno), Msgr. Ferruccio Sutto (Pordenone), Father Ignazio Terzi (Rome), Father Leandro Tiveron (Modena) (Pires 2020).

The same can be said, based on the accounts of Amorth (2012/1992; 2010/2013; 2014/1990) and other exorcists such as Raul Salvucci (2016/1992), as well as through our ethnography (Field notebook 2017), that the people who sought exorcisms belonged to different sociocultural groups. The vast majority had an average education and, in some cases, a university degree. They belonged to different social classes, came from different parts of Italy (south, north, central region), and, in most cases, had a Catholic culture in their families. Before going to the exorcist, many of these people sought psychiatric or psychotherapeutic help or did it together with the priest. In this way, we can infer that the search for ritual help was not necessarily connected to the lack of mental health services or social and cultural status.

Amidst so many options available for resolving the suffering such people feel, exorcism remains a plausible and sought-after path, even though quantitatively, it seems low in demand. However, the search for exorcism does not exclude participation in other forms of therapy and treatment, such as visits to doctors and psychologists or magical or religious practices outside Catholicism (Field notebook 2017). Regardless of the particular motivations, we have subjects who, when participating in the ritual of expulsion of evil, share the same discourse: exorcists and victims create a diabolical narrative through their discourse and ritual performances.

The subjects who seek an exorcist have similar symptoms and complaints, which range from the perception of “supernatural” phenomena to problems in family and social relationships (Giordan & Possamai 2017). An issue much discussed by exorcists in their narratives, public speaking, and also in the annual course about exorcism at the *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum* (Field notebook 2017) is the difficulty and challenges in identifying a “true possession.” The symptoms presented by those seeking the ritual are similar to other mental disorders, such as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), Dissociative Trance Disorder (DTD), depression, and other clinical and personality disorders (APA 1994).

Some of the symptoms of depression indicated in DSM-IV<sup>6</sup> (Chapter I2, Mood Disorders, APA, 1994)<sup>7</sup> are often reported by exorcists and “exorcised people,” highlighting the proximity between mental disorder and symptoms of possession. Some examples are the loss of interest in external and social activities and depressed mood most of the time occurring almost every day; intense feelings of guilt and self-denial; fatigue and lack of energy almost every day; reduced ability to think and concentrate; recurring thoughts of death and suicide; psychomotor agitation or deceleration almost every day (Coppo 2005, 61–62). In order to be considered a case of depression, such symptoms must be combined and have a duration of weeks, compromising social life, labor, and other important areas. In relation to the complaints of the faithful who seek an exorcism, we always have more than one of these symptoms that last a considerable time in the life of these subjects.

The diagnosis of depression is also a cultural process (Coppo 2005) in which the symptoms are found within an explanatory category provided by the medical-psychological literature, considering the individual a part of the depressed collective. There is a process of identification and a shared language for suffering that is used by patients. In the case of the search for exorcism, the shared language comes from other cultural matrices, but it resembles a clinical case in its diagnostic procedures. A conversation between the faithful and the exorcist can result in many conclusions, one being: “you are possessed.” In clinical cases, the patients may be less active, as they cannot relate to the medical language, although they use the commonplace phrases that are popular. On the other hand, in Catholic exorcism, the “diabolical” language is shared by those involved in this ritual process, although it has different matrices.

What is understood as “depression” is constructed from a cultural (psychiatric-psychological) repertoire that names and offers healing solutions for this disorder. However, in other cultural modalities (other than “Western Culture”), outside of medical and psychological knowledge, it is possible to identify the same symptoms, complaints, and experiences of subjective suffering. Thus, other nomenclatures, languages, and repertoires of healing and diagnosis may be used, and they can also be effective, according to some recent investigations (Coppo 2005; Beneduce 2002, 2007; Taliani 2008, 2017; Schaffler 2013, 2017; Beneduce & Martelli 2005). Subjective suffering is connected to the culture of the person who suffers, being formed and manifested within and through cultural situations and languages. Therefore, the therapeutic processes can be varied and found even within these cultural systems, something that is, in a certain way, strange to psychoanalysis and Western psychiatry but validated by ethnopsychiatry/ethnopsychanalysis. Possession and exorcism within Catholicism, although belonging to the predominant religious culture in Italy, are examples of these other techniques of dealing with subjective pain. Hence, these techniques of the expulsion of “evil” and suffering diverge from traditional medical and psychological therapies.

### **Exorcism and Possession in the Demartinian Perspective: Loss of Presence, “De-historicization” and Cultural Re-integration**

The anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965) is considered a fundamental author, and his theoretical-methodological work is the basis of the constitution of Italian ethnopsychiatry. In his research, he was able to identify the curative efficacy, symptomatology, and nosographies that manifested in culturally different ways in the rituals of tarantism in Puglia (De Martino 2013a).

Ernesto de Martino perceives human history as a place of precariousness and contingency, where it is possible to live only on the basis of trust in a metahistory. He indicated not only a way to analyze religions (the *de-historicizing* rites) but elaborated a key interpretation for understanding human existence, a philosophical approach that was part of his path and intellectual choice. The concepts of “*crisi della presenza*” (crisis of presence) (De Martino 1953–1954, 16) and “*destorificazione del divenire*” (de-historification of becoming) are central to his theoretical elaboration. Presence is not something guaranteed in human life; it is a cultural and existential construction, and therefore, there is the risk of losing it (losing oneself, losing the ability to act in human history from one’s sociocultural values). De Martino argues that religious rites are capable of producing a “de-historification,” which is the ability to promote the “exit from human history” (a place of pain and problems), thus creating a protective reality in which these difficulties are banished.

The “diabolic possession” in Catholicism is presented in a complex way in Demartinian theory because the rite of exorcism does not only create a protective reality but also one of combat between good and evil, initiating a process of symbolic reconfiguration and possible healing at the end of this journey. In De Martino’s theory, there is always a risk of crisis and loss of presence, a process of de-historification (religious, ritual protective reality), and a return to history (a cultural reintegration), since leaving history would be a non-return to the social, a “physical and mental suicide” (De Martino 1953–1954, 21).

The exorcism induces a (religious) type of de-historification, since the person loses their presence and another speaks from their body: this occurs when the priest begins the ritual or when there is some sacred element displayed or performed (mass, crucifix, saints, relics, prayers). This state of possession and expulsion of evil during the exorcism would be close, in Demartinian terminology, to an “institutional de-historification,” since it is produced and limited to the ritual time in the attempt of cultural rescue of the sick and lost “presence.” On the other hand, the “*destorificazione irrelativa*” (irrelative de-historification) occurs in traumatic and critical moments of existence. This may cause, without the institutional and ritual apparatus, a “loss of self,” which is a loss of the ability to act in history according to its cultural values (De Martino 1993, 131).

In Catholic exorcism, the loss of the subject’s autonomy corresponds to a replacement by another (a “demon”) who speaks through the “possessed” from a specific linguistic-cultural repertoire shared by those who compose the ritual and have similar experiences in faith.



The same Demartinian definition of possession (in its pure form) is influenced by Janetian terminology and concepts: “[DE MARTINO:] the margin of autonomy of the presence narrows until it disappears” and “an aberrant and perverse second personality abruptly breaks in replacing the historical consciousness”; this state is followed by amnesia (De Martino 1993/1959, p. 102). (apud Talamonti 2001)

The symptoms of possession are similar to the disorders described by Sigmund Freud and Pierre Janet, authors with whom De Martino had considerable dialogue. However, for the Italian anthropologist, “true possession” cannot be reduced to a case of mental illness, although it is not a metaphysical phenomenon. According to De Martino, “the belief in possession is merely the popularized translation of a psychological truth.” (De Martino 1993, 57). Thereby, the religious rite would be able to alter the psychological and physical state of the person (*natura culturalmente condizionata/culturally conditioned nature*) (De Martino 2013, 268), producing another reality and, therefore, the equivocal of understanding it through categories that are foreign to the ritual language. Psychology would confirm, according to De Martino, a reality produced through mythical-ritual processes, from *de-historification* to *cultural reintegration*.

Exorcism is constructed as a “representative horizon” capable of understanding and incorporating the elements of human pain, which are also historical-cultural, transforming and modifying their meanings. The rite of exorcism begins with a conversation with the supposed possessed (Field notebook 2017): the exorcist tries to understand if it is a case of “true possession” or “demonic obsession,” if the person has been a victim of a curse or other forms of diabolical attacks, or even if the case is linked to a psychological disorder (Talamonti 2005). In this “investigative conversation,” the symbolic and linguistic apparatus of the rite is shared and constructed in a dialogue between exorcist and possessed. The subjective pain and the personal problem are slowly transformed into a defined evil that must be expelled.

The *sick presence* finds in the symbolic horizon of exorcism an explanation for its evil and a space in which the subject can rebel and free itself from its problems. During the ritual, the possessed person rebels against the sociocultural burden that oppresses him and causes him pain. The perversion of the bodily order in exorcism represents not only the Christian struggle between good and evil but also the conflict against culture and human history, which can be places of anguish and suffering. The rite is capable of transferring existential pain, trauma, weakness, and “loss of self” to a “supernatural evil.” This transference initiates a meta-history (an exit from sociocultural reality and the place of pain—*de-historification*) that is not entirely protective, as De Martino maintained, since during exorcism, a battle between “good and evil” is performed. However, the rite is protective to a certain extent because, although this “violent battle” exists, the pain of the “possessed” is transferred to another symbolic and linguistic modality, no longer belonging to that daily and existential one in which the individual witnessed in their life.

After the conclusion of the ritual, the individual comes out of the state of trance, regaining his autonomy, what De Martino called *reintegrazione culturale* (cultural rein-

tegration). In this way, exorcism is not only a technique of *de-historification* and *reintegration* of the sick presence but a procedure of expulsion of an “evil presence” that acts and causes torment to its victim.

For Ernesto De Martino (Altamura 1993, 39), culture could be the struggle against the radical crisis of the human being, that is, the risk of becoming mentally ill. Before going to the exorcist, many people seek help from other religious, psychological, and psychiatric practices (Field notebook 2017). The exorcist is not the only choice. This is why we state a difference between our interpretation and De Martino’s approach since many of his cases were situated in southern Italy where the sociocultural situation was different, marked by severe precariousness and with few horizons of choice and solutions for pain. Exorcism is still a discourse used, shared, and lived in Italian society, although it is not a common ritual. It is presented today as a way to face existential and spiritual dramas in a society that increasingly provides different possibilities of choice and cultural techniques that seek to guarantee the “healthy” presence of the individual in their history.

### **Constructing Demonic Possessions: Case Studies Between Mental Disorders and Cultural Languages**

According to the research conducted by Ferracuti, Sacco, and Lazzari in 1996, it was found that in Italy, *Dissociative Identity Disorder* (DID) is less common than DTD (*Dissociative Trance Disorder*), and both are similar in symptomatology (Ferracuti et al. 1996, 526). In DTD, there is a loss of subjective identity (and a replacement by a “diabolic entity”) and a state of unconsciousness that may occur during the “possessive” trances developed during religious rituals, for example. During one year of observation, the researchers witnessed 400 exorcism rituals involving 100 people. Only 16 people out of the 100 manifested the symptoms considered typical of “diabolic possession.” Ten of them accepted being a part of the psychiatric and psychological investigation of the above-mentioned research.

These ten people who went through procedures of exorcism, carried out by the Italian priest Gabriele Amorth in Rome, displayed an intense aversion to religiously sacred elements (like going to Mass or being close to a church). They had also witnessed “paranormal” phenomena (hearing voices, seeing “spirits”) and participated in cults interpreted by them as satanic. In most cases, previous contact with doctors and psychologists had not solved their symptoms and problems which according to them, were caused by the intervention of the “devil.”

Among the analyzed cases, most of the interviewees reported symptoms of depression (70%), physical abuse (40%), as well as high rates of somatic complaints and personality disorders. Among the paranormal experiences described, there is a predominance of the sensation of being possessed by the devil (100% of the cases), participation in sects (70%), premonitions (60%), contact with ghosts (50%), dreams with premonitions (50%), contact with spirits (40%), and other less recurrent cases (Ferracuti et al. 1996, 532). Thus, even before beginning the ritual treatment proposed by the exorcist, these individuals had already been in contact and were immersed in a



cultural environment of supernatural and diabolic discourse and interpretations.

The DSM IV itself already contained a clinical explanation for the phenomena of possession, called *Dissociative Trance Disorder*. Although episodes of memory loss and involuntary trances are placed in such a category, the DSM does not consider them an illness if such events occur within the cultural and religious context developed by the subjects in the form of a ritual. If “cultural possession” does not bring any harm to individuals and occurs in a momentary and circumscribed manner, it is not categorized as a mental disorder by the DSM IV (APA 1994/1952). However, if the trance occurs at other times, with loss of memory, personal identity, and the ability to act voluntarily, the manual then considers the event as a clinical case. The limits, as we can observe, are tenuous, showing us that psychiatric literature and much earlier psychoanalytical productions (Freud 2011/1923) had already provided an explanation for what exorcists intend to call “diabolical possession.” The “game of truth” to define who is right produces tension. It creates a power dispute between a scientific-social discourse that tries to “symptomize” the possession and the other that tries to prove its veracity through a theological-political language.

This methodological challenge is also present in our research since it is not possible to identify, without an accurate ethnography, whether the case presents a possession developed during the ritual, as we will analyze later, or if it incorporates a clinical symptomatology outside the rite and could be resolved by the medical-psychological field. These probabilities are considered by the DSM IV itself, which prioritizes a medical assessment of the situation. In any case, we can consider the possibility of the subject’s suffering going through these two dimensions and being “treated” by means of different languages: one of a ritual nature and the other of a medical-psychological perspective. It is not our goal, and it would be beyond our competence to identify the origin and cause of these symptoms. They are important because they allow us to identify some forms of human suffering, as well as different languages chosen by the subject, in order to solve and diagnose mental disturbances.

Giordan and Possamai (2017), besides noting some of the previous information from the 1996 research (Ferracuti et al. 1996), add other reasons for the search for an exorcist, emphasizing emotional, family, social, and affective problems. In this research, 1075 people were analyzed, and they were accompanied by an exorcist from an important Italian diocese.<sup>8</sup> Only 55 (5%) of them went through the solemn ritual of exorcism. In other cases, the exorcist recommended blessings, confessions, prayers (of liberation or other types), or even the search for a mental health professional (Giordan and Possamai 2017, 11). As this was a larger study, since the previous investigation only had ten people who had participated in the solemn exorcism, it was possible to identify a greater diversity of symptoms and motivations that the population has when seeking help from an exorcist.

According to Giordan and Possamai’s research (2017), among the 55 people who went through the exorcism, there was a greater presence of cases in the ages between 40 and 49 years (56%), 30 and 39 years (12%), and 50 and 59 years (11%). Only five individuals were between 20 and 29 years of age, which was the same number as those over 60. Unlike the literature on the subject, which lists many cases of female

possession, in this investigation, men made up the majority (60% of 55 cases) (Giordan and Possamai 2017, 6). Although this is a case study, it is possible to identify a certain tendency among those who believe the ritual of exorcism could be a solution to the cause of their problems. The “possessed” usually belong to the lower middle class and working class, which is somewhat opposed to the discourse of Gabriele Amorth (2012/1992, 2013/2010, 2014/1990). Amorth warned in his books that those who sought exorcism sessions pervaded all social classes and levels of formal education. Only six cases of exorcism were performed on graduate professionals, for example.

From this data, we can infer that the symbolic horizon of exorcism as a solution to some social and subjective life problems develops more easily among the elderly and those belonging to the working class. The cases cited in the books of the Italian exorcists (Amorth 2012/1992, 2013/2010, 2014/1990; Salvucci 2016/1992; Bamonte 2011/2006) differ from the social pattern presented by Giordan and Possamai (2017), which makes us question the exorcist’s interpretation or even the aforementioned research (Pires 2020). Although the hypothesis of social weakness and low formal education as factors that encourage the search for an exorcist should not be ruled out, there is no reason to believe there is a direct cause-and-effect relationship between these factors. Social and economic factors are only one of these elements since most Italians are immersed in cultural Catholicism and embrace existential, mental, physical, and social problems. However, there are some tendencies and similarities in the complaints and in the social and subjective experiences of those seeking an exorcist in Italy.

Some of the main reasons that motivate people to seek an exorcist are the incidence of psychological and emotional problems, such as the feeling of emptiness, difficulties in socializing, and stress (these represent 35.1% of the 1075 cases described by the exorcist); problems in marriage (25.6%), such as adultery, loss of romance and reduced sexual activity; problems in family relations and friendship (20.2%); experiences with “paranormal” phenomena (19.7%) such as possession, feeling the presence of demons and their forces, rumors and unknown voices, mystical experiences, visions, among others; participation in sects and occult rituals, “satanic groups,” spirituality and alternative healing practices (19.1%); suspicion or certainty of being affected by evil influences, a victim of “evil eye,” or spells and curses (17.4%) (Giordan & Possamai 2017, 10).

Although these are not statements from which we can draw a panorama of the situation in contemporary Italian society, since it is a case study, it is possible to verify that those who sought the exorcist had already used diabolic and magical languages and interpretations during their lives. These languages are capable of building a supernatural narrative about human pain and the cause of their problems. There is a predominance of problems in social relationships (friendship, family) and affective relationships (marriage), as well as the incidence of psychological symptoms common to depression and other forms of subjective suffering (feelings of emptiness, stress, difficulty in socializing).

In addition to these social problems of existence, there is a predominance of people who were, before the search for an exorcist, involved in rituals and religious activi-

ties that somehow encompassed the world of the occult and its experiences. A strong contribution to the circulation of these languages has been the charismatic Catholics. At this moment, we are less interested in the veracity of these findings and more interested in the people's perception of their experiences. This brings about a language capable of providing a "superhuman" and "diabolical" explanation of what they were facing. It is not, therefore, a diabolic interpretation provided and imposed only by the exorcist. There is a cooperation that seems to be one of the keys to understanding possession and exorcism in contemporary Italy (Pires 2020).

According to Sean McCloud's hypothesis (2015), the search for "magic" exorcisms and cures in the USA is part of a cultural pattern of neoliberal consumption in which the solutions to suffering are sought as though they were "therapeutic products." The author states that the capitalist consumerist economy reverberates in institutions, languages, practices, and daily interactions among individuals (work, affective relationships, religious choices) (McCloud 2015, 14). Thus, the widespread growth (narratives and media content) of exorcism as a form of "healing evil" and the intense social demand for quick solutions to subjective pain would be able, according to McCloud (2015), to sustain possession and exorcism as possible techniques to deal with these personal difficulties. The different kinds of therapeutic languages, besides circulating in society in different modalities (holistic, magical, psychological, and psychoanalytical), refer to the treatment of the individual of a *modern self* that would be the origin and the solution to the problems of body and mind.

We can, however, dispute McCloud's considerations not only by studying a country with a diverse historical-cultural background but by analyzing other elements of relief from suffering within the exorcist topic. Consumerist capitalism is present in Italy and in the European Union as a whole, although it develops in different manners in the United States. It is global, with historical variations of intensity. In the Italian case, we assume that besides the consumerist choice of exorcism as a possible solution, there is a "supernatural discourse" that circulates not only through narrative projects of the exorcists (Pires 2020, 2020a) but also through other cultural means<sup>9</sup> (literature, newspaper, magazines, religious and "magical" events). These practices were already circulating in the country, and they were appropriated by the population in different forms, including through secular exorcisms carried out outside the ecclesiastical sphere.<sup>10</sup> Catholic exorcism does not always occur momentarily and demands a journey of commitment and reintegration into religious life from the faithful. Thus, the ritual is a "solution" less linked to immediate consumerism and closer to a return to the institutional religious tradition.

It is in the sharing of these discourses that a narrative about exorcism and possession is built. It is a dialogic procedure that encompasses the participation not only of the exorcist, but also of the victims of the "demon." Both are active and promote an important role in this contemporary "diabolic ritual" that develops among those who are inserted, somehow, in the context of Catholic belief. The revival of exorcism, whether in its narrative or ritual dimension, would not occur without social support of this manner of "expelling evil." It is certainly not a causal explanation of supply and demand but a complex discursive network full of tension and dispute between different personal, theological and political intentions (Pires 2020, 2020a).

In one of the victim's accounts from Gabriele Amorth's book, we have the following statement: "I had an extremely strict father who watched my every move and was always short with me. The sum of all this grief and these humiliations he used to put me through made me jump like a spring into the street" (Amorth 2014/1990, 106). Traumatic situations in the affective and family fields are, again and again, reinterpreted in a "diabolical" way by both exorcists and those who seek them out. This subjectivity, divided by an event not symbolically overcome, moves to the conversation between exorcist and possessed and, later, to the ritual and pastoral space that occurs after the end of each session. This journey of the expulsion of evil (initial conversation, ritual deliverance, pastoral aid) provides a language to the distressing and disturbing experience and transference of individual pain into a larger battle between "good and evil." It is in this fabrication, agreed upon by those involved, that there can be a therapeutic relieving element. A fable with nothing to do with fiction or delirium is a narrative, linguistic, and ritual procedure that efficaciously affects the subject (Pires 2020).

In a statement addressed to the exorcist Raul Salvucci, reported in his 1992 book, a woman questions herself about her uncontrollable desire, providing space for the exorcist's diabolizing interpretation, as if she expected a "supernatural" explanation for a subjective force she could not deal with or name. The absence of a language to deal with desire finds comfort in the discourse on possession and the action of the demon elaborated through the cooperation between victim and exorcist:

"I have been fighting a heavy curse for a long time. I am a girl and, among so much evil, I was lucky enough to meet a good guy. He adores me and I love him too, but when we are together I feel an incredible coldness towards him and, in some moments, I feel tired or even repulsed to be near him. What is most incredible is that, in the office, I am close to a married man who is several years older than me. When we work together for business reasons, this relationship gives me a great sense of peace and relaxation. There is absolutely nothing between me and him, but when we are like this, I dream of being able to carry these very pleasant feelings to the time when I will be with my boyfriend. Instead, as soon as I meet him, everything disappears, it becomes only a burden and boredom to be near him. How can I explain all this and moreover I have so many problems: should I tell him clearly, should I leave him, what should I do?"

[The exorcist, Raul Salvucci:] This is what I set out above. It hits on what is most sacred and most cherished. In this case there is an even more evil, diabolical tactic. It attempts to ruin your righteous love and in the process tries to lead your co-worker to a wrong love, to destroy him and his family. [...] What to do with your boyfriend? You must fight with all your might and without fear in the right sense [...] Whenever Satan unleashes such a war, you must fight. (Salvucci 2016/1992, 144–45)

This transgression is cultural in the sense that it would be socially strange for a woman to assume her desire and leave her partner in search of her satisfaction. In the language of diabolical possession/obsession, it would be possible for her to think that the devil put this desire in her, which is not hers, but belongs to "another." Therefore,

the responsibility shifts to the evil entity, to the demonic action that embodies my subjective desire repressed by the shared culture (De Certeau 2000). In this narrative and ritualistic space, the desire shows itself and becomes plausible and realizable.

During the ritual, the “possessed” transgresses certain gender roles that still circulate in contemporary society. It is not only about being strong, animalistic, and anti-Catholic during the possession, but about transgressing culture in the sense of being able to express oneself, to be able to speak (recover the word), and to transfer subjective issues (desires, traumas, anguish) to another place (Pires 2020). There is, beyond the resolution of individual pain, a social and subjective demand for transgression and cultural rupture, and exorcism can be a symbolic horizon for that, even if it is not the choice of the great majority of Italian Catholics.

### Conclusion

As has been demonstrated from our theoretical analysis and some specific case studies, diabolical possession can be understood as a cultural language in which subjective symptoms find a “representative horizon” (De Martino 2010) capable of naming and managing psychic pain. However, it might promote tension with the medical language defined above all by Western psychiatric manuals such as the DSM. This circumstance is very instigating since the help of an exorcism is still sought amid advanced psychiatric research and drug society, among other clinical treatments as well.

This critique is not a claim that mental health manuals (DSM, WHO’s documents) should be discarded in favor of a culturally oriented treatment. However, with the knowledge that they cannot map the complexity of human mental suffering and forms of treatment into different historicities, we must take a more critical and attentive stance to other forms of suffering and paths of “healing.” Once again, we affirm that our goal was not to prove the veracity of the ritual of exorcism nor even to postulate that it is an effective treatment for some types of mental suffering. What was presented were other cultural pathways to deal with subjective pain and social problems. Thus, the hegemony of the medicalizing reading of rituals and languages used to understand and treat different types of human pain is evaluated in this paper.

In this sense, contemporary ethnopsychiatry and ethnopschoanalysis can be important in rethinking the nosographic pathways and culturally oriented treatments (Heinz & Ulrike 2010; Beneduce & Martelli 2005; Beneduce 2007; Taliani 2008; Baubet & Moro 2000; Devereux 1981). Ethnopsychiatry has contributed, in dialogue with anthropology, to the decolonization of hegemonic medical language undertaken by DSM and other medical manuals. There is a concern about not hierarchizing the languages used to deal with mental suffering, using them as “therapeutic tools” (Devereux 1981, 524) in different clinical, social, and subjective contexts. Thus, it is possible to think of the ritual context of exorcism—from the conversation with the priest to the solemn rite—as a space for transferring the subjective pain of those who suffer (Pires 2020).

We do not mean that “possession” is an effective therapeutic technique; however, it constitutes a possible alternative to human issues, becoming a language for several forms of human suffering. A possible ritual effectiveness can be considered not as a



result of a supernatural intervention but as a procedure of transferring inner pain to another (in this case, diabolic) grammar (Certeau 2000). Furthermore, exorcism (especially when people talk to exorcists and tell their stories) constitutes a “place of listening” to the complaints, demands, and sufferings of subjects who find some meaning in this diabolical narrative. In a certain way, the act of listening by the exorcist and this diabolical narrativity make more sense to some people who do not find a reasonable explanation for their pain in the medical field.

### Notes

- 1 Postdoctoral Researcher – Department of Medical Anthropology, Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum/Bulgarian Academy of Science. Grant #2015/02226-1, São Paulo Research Foundation (FAPESP). tiago.pires@iefem.bas.br | tiago\_pires@ymail.com
- 2 This article is related to my doctoral study (Pires 2020), in which I investigated the return of exorcism and possession as theological-political languages and narratives in contemporary Italy, specifically from the 1980s.
- 3 The *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum* is an educational and academic pontifical institute located in Rome, Italy. The Athenaeum is directed by the Congregation of the Legionaries of Christ. I was able to do this ethnography by means of an authorization from a bishop, indicated by a very close friend. However, it was not possible to conduct official interviews during my stay at the exorcism course, since I was there as a lay participant, not as a researcher. When I presented myself as a researcher to some exorcists, I felt a lot of resistance. Since this would hinder my research, I decided to remain anonymous and conduct conversations and observations instead of formal interviews. This was the reason why it was not possible to transcribe the exorcists’ speech directly.
- 4 The term “ethnoclinics” is used in my research as a set of psychoanalytic, psychiatric, and anthropological approaches that emerged in the mid-20th century in an attempt to understand the relationship between subjective suffering and culture, trying to identify possible cultural languages to cope with psychic pain and so-called mental disorders. Some of these approaches are transcultural or cultural psychiatry, ethnopsychiatry, ethnopsychanalysis, and ethnopsychology.
- 5 Nosography means the classification, organization, and description of mental diseases or disorders.
- 6 I reference the DSM IV, published in 1994, because this was the most recent version of the manual at the time the cited research was developed and because it was the first to include a more in-depth cultural discussion of religious rituals and trance states. My doctoral research was conducted based on documents published between 1980 and 2013, except for the ethnography done during the exorcism course (Field notebook 2017), explored briefly in the present text. This is the reason why DSM V (2013) has not been properly explored.
- 7 The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* was published in 1994 and revised in 2000. Its new edition, number V, was published in 2013. It describes the different categories of mental disorders and their diagnostic criteria.
- 8 The authors did not inform the name of the said exorcist. They only identified that he was an exorcist from an important Italian diocese (North Italy), and he had a high degree of

theological and philosophical instruction, following the institutional rules for carrying out the exorcism. It was deduced that at the time the priest was probably more than 60 years old. (Giordan & Possamai 2017, 5).

- 9 This is something that McCloud mentions when he discusses the literature (secular and evangelical) and the cases of “haunting” and “supernatural” phenomena conveyed by the American media. For further information, check the introduction of the aforementioned work. (McCloud 2015, 3–4).
- 10 This is similar to cases of exorcism performed by sorcerers and other characters of contemporary Italian religiosity.

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## Responses

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I enjoyed this article, and I am jealous that Dr. Pires was able to attend the exorcism course at the *Ateneo Pontificio Regina Apostolorum*. I teach at a public university where I have struggled to create a new major in religious studies. I designed a course on exorcism to get “butts in seats” for the growing program. Claims of demonic possession or the supernatural are notoriously challenging to analyze in a way that is both critical and considerate of the cultures from which these claims emerge. My students are often quick to curtail this analysis in one of two ways: either they conclude that these accounts prove demons are real (and usually that all the truth claims of their particular church must therefore be true as well) or they turn the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual 5* (often accessing it on a smart phone) in search of a list of symptoms that vaguely resembles behavior described in the case study. These two facile interpretations of either theologically-motivated credulity or medicalization rarely address the specific details of the case. The example reported by Raul Salvucci in this article is a perfect example: the woman’s ambivalent feelings about her boyfriend do not require a supernatural explanation, nor do they warrant a diagnosis of a “dissociative disorder.” Rather, this is an ordinary human problem and the language of the demonic provides a culturally specific way of talking about it with a professional. With data obtained

by researchers such as Giordan and Posamai, it seems increasingly apparent that most contemporary people who reach out to exorcists are seeking help for similarly quotidian issues.

Furthermore, there is evidence that exorcism has always been a way of addressing ordinary human problems. In the gospels, with the exception of the spectacular case of the Gerasene demoniac, most of the people Jesus exorcises are afflicted with mundane medical problems such as blindness and muteness (Matthew 12:22) or lameness (Luke 13:10–13). Historian Moshe Sluhovsky (2007) has suggested that in the Christian tradition, exorcism has traditionally been seen as a disease of the body, and only became a disease of the soul during the Counter-Reformation. Anthropologist Erika Bourguignon (1976) interpreted possession as a “diagnostic model” that cultures use to interpret specific problems. Elsewhere, Bourguignon (2004) has described possession as an “idiom of distress.” As Pires notes, it elicits a “place of listening” for the afflicted (p. 86).

This leads me to the only part of this article that gave me pause, which is the choice of the word “victim” in describing those who seek exorcism. In emic terms, these people are, of course, “victims” of demons. But in another sense, they often have agency in how they ask for and receive help with their problems. In fact, when victimization occurs in exorcism, it is often because afflicted people have accepted a subordinate position in constructing a diabolical narrative about their life. It is not uncommon for exorcists to shape narratives of possession in ways that aid a particular theological or political agenda. For example, Gabrielle Amorth famously argued that increased



demand for exorcisms was partly due the rise of yoga classes and Harry Potter novels (Squires 2011).

In closing, I would encourage anyone who enjoyed this article to seek out the Italian film *Il Demonio* (1963) by director Brunello Rondi. The film is based on De Martino's book *Sud e magia*. It opens with the lines, "The producer would like to thank professor Ernesto De Martino of the University of Cagliari whose funding made possible our ethnological studies in the south of Italy. This film is based on a recent and tragic true story. The rites, spells, and demonic possessions you will see are scientifically verifiable and are a fact of life in Italy, just as they are anywhere else in the world." *Il Demonio* follows a troubled peasant girl named Purificata who is beaten by her father, raped by a shepherd, molested by a *magico* (folk healer), subjected to an exorcism, and finally murdered. It is ambiguous whether actual supernatural events are taking place, Purificata is mad, or she has been driven to act this way by intolerant villagers. The film invites the viewer to think past the dichotomy of theological propositions or the medicalization of deviance and instead consider the move made by Pires that exorcism is "a language of human suffering."

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## Supernatural Solutions to Familial Suffering: A Response to Pires

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Contemporary Italy is not the contemporary United States. Roman Catholic exorcism is not evangelical Protestant deliverance ministry. Moreover, Catholic possession, evangelical demonic infestation, and reality television house hauntings are by no means the same things. Even so, Pires’s argument that the “diabolical grammar” of possession and exorcism offers—for some Italians—a “supernatural narrative about human pain” related to various troubled family relationships and individual psychological suffering sounds very familiar and persuasive (p. 82). I would suggest that Pires’s conclusion equally applies to what I have previously dubbed the “gothic therapeutic” of American Third Wave spiritual warfare as well as to the domestic dramas narrated in popular ghost reality television programs, stories that are increasingly ubiquitous in the last 25 years on American small screens (McCloud 2015, chap. 3; see also, 2020, 57–73). These religious and cultural movements have different histories, but they all seem to be harvesting from the same large amorphous field of contemporary supernatural practices and beliefs. I’ve already written at length elsewhere about Third Wave spiritual warfare, so here I will briefly focus on paranormal media.

Despite occasional scholarly assertions that we live in a disenchant-

ed world, American culture continues to be infused with supernatural entities such as ghosts, angels, and demons. Polls suggest that one-third and one-half of all Americans are either certain or think ghosts probably exist (Alfano 2009; Lyon 2005; Bader, Mencken & Baker 2017). An even larger number (68 percent) “completely” or “mostly” agree that angels and demons are active in the world (Heimlich 2009). One 2013 YouGov poll suggested that a majority of Americans believe that the devil and his evil spirits can possess people (Jagel 2013).

If we are to believe the polls and our conversations with friends and neighbors, we all live in a ghost reality television show now. Since the middle 2000s—and leaving out the hundreds of YouTube and TikTok channels dedicated to the paranormal—there have been over 65 ghost and haunting-related series on expanded American cable television (Lawrence 2022). A consistent trope in many series (for example, *The Dead Files*, *Ghost Brothers: Haunted Houseguests*, *The Holzer Files*, *Paranormal State*, and *Kindred Spirits*) features paranormal investigators coming to the homes of individuals to help them rid their dwelling of ghostly and sometimes demonic inhabitants. The clients tell the researchers about scary sights and sounds and interpersonal conflicts that they believe the specters are causing. “Our marriage has never been worse,” they tell the investigators, who then work to uncover the haunted histories that trouble familial relationships.<sup>1</sup>

In this brief response, one example of such supernatural domestic drama that coincides with Pires’s findings will suffice. In a 2009 episode of *Paranormal State* titled “Dead and Back,” we meet Vicki, a middle-aged Alabama woman

who lives in a little old white house. She is being physically harassed and mentally tormented in her home by a horrific lurking shadow man. She not only hears sounds and sees the figure but has been struck in the face and back by him. Interviews with Vicki's daughter reveal that this harassment is not location-based but rather an entity that has been following her into each house they rent. The first night's investigation—following the narrative trajectory of most episodes—yields sounds, feelings of dizziness, and a noisy old attic vent. However, when reviewing the night's videos the next day, the paranormal research team sees Vicki alone in her kitchen. She is speaking on the phone and mentions her deceased father. At that moment, she violently jerked as if she had been struck in the back.

The next day, the team brings in psychic Chip Coffey, who channels the tormenting spirit and confirms that it is Vicki's father, who died several years previously from a self-inflicted gunshot that may have been suicide. Moreover, Coffey reveals that in life, this hateful spirit was a violent and sexually abusive person who had targeted Vicki. Vicki listens emotionally to Coffey and confirms that she suspected that the entity might be her father, who she describes as a vicious alcoholic whom had sexually abused her when she was very young. She tells the team that she used to beg her mother to kill him.

With this horrific history spoken, the team works with Vicki to remove the entity from her house. Paranormal research team leader Ryan Buell tosses holy water into the air and yells, "I cast you out in the name of Jesus!" Simultaneously, Vicki and her daughter talk and yell at the spirit, with Vicki shouting at him, "I am your daughter you sick son of a bitch—

that should have never happened!" After these dramatic tear-filled scenes, Vicki and her daughter embrace and pray together, feeling that he has left the house.

Following the typical structure of most *Paranormal State* episodes, the next scene, announced by Buell's voice-over as "final director's log," sums up the investigation and ends with a suggestion that Vicki may finally find peace. However, the last scene, featuring the outside of the house, acts as a postscript, explaining through a written summation over the scene that "Though she still experiences a dark presence, Vicki no longer feels like a prisoner in her own home."

While different in important ways, the real suffering experienced by Vicki and the supernatural solution offered by the *Paranormal State* research team, mirrors Pires's findings about Italian exorcism in that the tropes of contemporary ghost reality television can provide some with a cultural language to describe and understand the "subjective suffering" experienced from familial traumas, past and present.

### Notes

- 1 For more about the connection between Third Wave spiritual warfare and ghost reality television, see Sean McCloud 2018, 137–49.

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