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Spirit-Possession, Exorcism and Social Context : an anthropological perspective with theological implications

MYRTLE S. LANGLEY

If the reader (of a theological journal!) is to understand, some pre-fatory remarks are called for. The writer's aims, assumptions and methods are consciously sociological and anthropological—not theological. The scope of this essay is to attempt to explore the relationship between ecstatic religion and its social context in cultures other than our own, and then in consequence to examine some of the implications for the Christian religion, past and present. A major assumption of the essay is that 'for those who believe in them, mystical powers are realities both of thought and experience' (Ioan Lewis);¹ in other words, I neither affirm nor deny the existential reality of the spirits or demons believed in. Necessary distinctions of terminology employed in the essay are those drawn between spirit-possession, spirit-mediumship and shamanism (Firth),² and between exorcism and domestication of the spirits. By spirit-possession I understand phenomena of abnormal personal behaviour interpreted as evidence that a spirit is controlling the person's actions and probably inhabiting his body (conversely, the same phenomena are interpreted as soul-loss in the idiom of other societies). Spirit-mediumship I take to be the use of such behaviour by members of society as a means of communication with entities in the spirit world. And shamanism applies to those phenomena where a person, either as a spirit medium or not, is regarded as controlling spirits, exercising his mastery over them in socially recognized ways. By exorcism I mean the expulsion of the spirits and a return by the possessed person to normal behaviour; while I understand domestication or accommodation to indicate the 'coming to terms with', the 'ability to live with', the 'control of' the spirits so that, apart from specified ritual occasions, normal behaviour is ensured.

1 Paradigms of possession in primal societies

a) *Malaysian séance*

The setting is the fishing village of Tawang in Kelantan, a state on the north-east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Metson, a depressed

housewife, is in trance, her possessing spirit being interrogated by a Malay *bomoh*, or shaman. The following evening she becomes the protagonist in a scatological comedy to mark the successful expulsion of the spirit.³

Like me, you may have viewed the filmed version of this drama, entitled *Malay Magic—Spirit Doctor of Kelantan*, shown recently in the BBC 'World About Us' series.

The Malay shaman has always played a role in maintaining stability in the community. And even in predominantly Muslim (90 per cent) Kelantan he continues to utilize his knowledge and communication with the spirit world despite the pressures from conservative imams. Until recently he was the only source of treatment for all kinds of maladies: as purveyor of herbal remedies he coped with anything from a broken leg to cholera; as magician he made and dispensed charms varying in potency from the simple love charm to the lethal manikin; as politician he presided over the spiritual cleansing of state, town and village, as well as propitiating the rain-gods and demons of sea and paddy-fields to ensure good harvests; but, most importantly, as spirit medium he treated those whose soul was weakened as a result of possession by disturbing spirits. It is on this latter role of 'barefoot psychiatrist' that he now concentrates as a result of westernization generally, but particularly the introduction of western medicine.

Main peteri is the name given to the Kelantanese shaman's séance. It is a complex ritual of exorcism, catharsis and group identification most commonly used for patients with sickness of soul. This sickness is caused by malevolent spirits upsetting the delicate humoral balance of the one possessed; soul-loss ensues. The aim of the séance is to exorcise the spirit, thus restoring the patient's soul. To achieve this, it is necessary for the shaman to go into trance and through his familiar spirit interrogate the spirit of the patient. Then, once he has determined the nature of the spirit and the cause of possession, he must send it back to its home. However, the patient does not remain passive but must actively desire the departure of the spirit. And so, the shaman continues to send the patient into trance so that the spirit can come out into the open and be effectively admonished. In this way there occurs a public materialization of the cause of illness and a public treatment.

So much for the drama, but to understand its efficacy it is necessary to look at its function, especially in relation to the social norms that govern rural Malay society in Kelantan.

As in many Islamic societies, Kelantan custom strongly discourages direct confrontation between individuals. Open hostility upsets the delicate fabric of the community, in particular the extended family. And as a result, there is undoubtedly much emotional repression in the society, especially within marriage. Moreover, a

wife's role is restricted both in the home and in the mosque. Her role within marriage is unstable. Kelantan has one of the highest divorce rates in the world, and although Islamic law recognizes the rights of alimony these are rarely given. And as it is not considered proper to initiate a direct confrontation, all the repressed anger, jealousy and indignation concomitant with an imminent divorce is transferred to the spirit world. In this neutral and socially acceptable realm, latent hostility can be acted out. By a displacing of the real causes of the illness into a third force, the drama can be revealed in a non-disruptive way. Admission of guilt can be publicly announced without loss of face; and in the cathartic release of emotions which happens within the trance state, repressed feelings can be brought to the surface, but without absolute accusation. Moreover, all the important members of the patient's family are present, and both in viewing the proceedings and in having paid for the costly ritual, they are reaffirming their desire to see her reintegrated. The *main peteri* provides the patient with a theatre in which she can at the same time act out her emotions and come to terms with her role in society. No blame is incurred since the illness is blamed on the spirit, and this helps diminish any sense of guilt that the patient might have in causing such an expensive affair to be held.

What the *main peteri* séance undoubtedly achieves is effective psychotherapy, especially in cases of illness caused by social stress. In the short term it is almost 90 per cent successful as a cure for the symptoms affecting the patient. It does not, however, any more than western psychiatric medicine, fundamentally alter the conditions that give rise to the illness in the first place.

To sum up for our purposes, Kelantanese women are subject to acute stress and deep insecurity associated with their lack of status in society. They are marginal personages, existing on the margins of society, victims of *marginality* and its concomitant illnesses.

b) *Somali protest movements*

Among the pastoral Somali in north-east Africa, spirit-possession occurs in a few well-defined contexts, two of which we shall consider briefly.⁴

The first case concerns frustrated love and passion and involves emotions which are not traditionally acknowledged. A young girl is jilted by her boy friend (who in private has agreed to marry her) and exhibits symptoms of extreme lassitude, withdrawal, or even more distinct signs of physical illness. Her condition is attributed to possession by the object of her affections, and so a Muslim holy man is brought in to exorcise the spirit.

Traditional society suppresses the open display of affection (except to God) so that direct acknowledgement of certain feelings between men and women is totally out of place. Moreover, it is only when a

formal engagement has been entered into that a suit can be filed for breach of promise. Hence illness, and the care and solicitude which it brings, at least offers some solace for the girl's wounded pride.⁵

The second concerns the hard-pressed wife, struggling to survive and feed her children in a harsh nomadic environment, and liable to some degree of neglect, real or imagined, on the part of her husband.

Somali society is Islamic, strongly patrilineal and male-dominated. As in other Muslim societies, the public cult is almost exclusively dominated by men who hold all the major positions of religious authority and prestige. Indeed, women are excluded from the mosque and their role in religion can be said to be that of passive spectators. But even more generally, in the Somali scheme of things women are reckoned to be weak and submissive creatures, despite the exacting nature of their nomadic life.

The Somali wife is subject to frequent, sudden and often prolonged absences by her husband as he follows his manly pastoral pursuits, to the jealousies and tensions of polygyny, and to the constant menace of the precariousness of marriage in a society where divorce is frequent and easily obtained by men. Her lot offers little stability or security. Let Ioan Lewis continue the story:

In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that many women's ailments, whether accompanied by definable physical symptoms or not, should so readily be interpreted by them as possession by *sar* spirits which demand luxurious clothes, perfume, and exotic dainties from their men-folk. These requests are voiced in no uncertain fashion by the spirits speaking through the lips of the affected women, and uttered with an authority which their passive receptacles can rarely achieve themselves. The spirits, of course, have their own language but this is readily interpreted (for a suitable fee) by female shamans who know how to handle them. It is only when such costly demands have been met, as well as all the expense involved in the mounting of a cathartic dance ('beating the *sar*') attended by other women and directed by the shaman, that the patient can be expected to recover. Even after such outlays, relief from the *sar* affliction may be only temporary.

Significantly, in some cases the onset of this spirit illness coincides with a husband's opening moves to marry an additional spouse; and in every example which I encountered, some grudge against her partner was borne by the woman involved. It scarcely requires any elaborate forensic technique to discover what is involved here; and, very properly, Somali men draw their own conclusions. What the women call *sar* possession, their husbands call malingering, and they interpret this affliction as yet another device in the repertoire of deceitful tricks which they consider women regularly employ against men. . . . Not surprisingly, *sar* spirits are said to hate men.⁶

And so it is evident that this characteristically female affliction operates amongst the Somali as a limited deterrent against the abuses of neglect and injury in a conjugal relationship which is heavily biased in favour of men. Concludes Lewis: 'When they are given little domestic security and are otherwise ill-protected from the pressures and exactions of men, women may thus resort to spirit pos-

session as a means both of airing their grievances obliquely, and of gaining some satisfaction.'

This sex-war view of the *sar* possession phenomenon is illustrated well by the following story, whether it be fact or fiction, as told by Lewis:

The wife of a well-to-do official was feeling out of sorts one morning and sitting morosely in his house, where there happened to be fifty pounds of ready cash belonging to her husband. An old woman who was a *sar* specialist came to visit her and soon convinced her that she was possessed by a *sar* spirit and would need to pay a lot of money for the mounting of a cathartic dance ceremony, if she were to recover. The wife readily fell in with the suggestion and the necessary *sar* expert was quickly engaged, food bought, and neighbouring women summoned to join in the party. When the husband returned for his lunch at midday he was amazed to find the door to his house tightly barred and to hear a great hubbub inside. The shaman ordered his wife not let him in, on pain of serious illness, and after knocking angrily for some time the husband lost patience and went away to eat his lunch in a tea-shop. When, in the evening, he finally got back from work, the party was over. His wife met him and explained that she had been suddenly taken ill, *sar* possession had been diagnosed and, alas, she had had to spend all his money on the cure. The husband accepted this disturbing news with remarkable restraint.

On the following day, which was a holiday, however, while his wife was out shopping in the market, the husband took all her gold and silver jewellery and her cherished sewing-machine to a money-lender from whom he received a substantial advance. And with it he assembled a party of holy men and sheikhs and feasted them royally in his house. When his wife returned later in the day, she found the door firmly closed and heard sounds of exuberant hymn-singing within. After trying unsuccessfully to gain entry, she in turn went off puzzled to enquire from neighbours as to what was going on. When she finally returned home, she found her husband sitting quietly by himself and asked what had happened. 'Oh', said he, 'I was suddenly taken ill, and to recover I had to summon a group of holy men to say prayers and sing hymns on my behalf. Now, mercifully, I am better; but, unfortunately, since there was no ready cash in the house, I had to pawn all your jewels and even your sewing-machine in order to entertain my guests.' At these words, as can be imagined, the woman raised a loud lament; but after a short period of reflection her anger subsided as she perceived the reason for her husband's action. She promised fervently never again to 'beat the *sar*'. He in his turn undertook never again to entertain holy men at his wife's expense. With his wages he later redeemed her riches. And presumably, in fairy-tale fashion, they lived happily ever after.

Other writers, too, have written of the *sar* or *zar* cult: in Mecca in

Arabia; in other countries of the Middle East; in the Sudan; in Egypt and in Ethiopia.⁷ Their accounts serve only to reinforce Lewis's argument. According to William Sargant, commenting on north-east Africa and the Middle East generally, the atmosphere is full of *zars* 'which are good or evil spirits waiting to enter into a person.' Shamans may exorcise them or help their victims come to terms with them. The circumstances of entry or possession are very similar to the circumstances which can precipitate an anxiety neurosis, a depression, or even schizophrenia, in western cultures. *Zars* take possession after a person has committed a breach of moral law, or following child birth, or after some accident or severe physical illness.⁸ In Simon Messing's view, *zar* in Ethiopia is a catch-all for many psychological disturbances, varying from frustrated status ambition to actual mental illness. And since no patient is ever discharged as cured, the *zar* cult functions as a form of group therapy, chronic patients becoming devotees who form a close-knit social group in which they find security and recognition. Once his demands have been met, the *zar* spirit helps the patient to carry on his normal role in the community.⁹

In sum: as in Malaysia, so in north-east Africa and the Middle East, the phenomenon of possession and exorcism is associated with *marginality*. And, as Martin Ebon so aptly points out, it provides for those essentially marginal personages—oppressed women—a road to liberation. A certain prestige accrues to possession: 'the possessed person is able to be aggressive or prophetic, insulting or awe-inspiring, base or inspired.'¹⁰ Possession thus becomes a form of self-assertion, a means of compensation for a life of mediocrity.

c) Kenyan warriors' shaking

The Samburu of northern Kenya are pastoral nomads, with an age-set system whereby males pass through the three age-grades of boyhood, warriorhood and elderhood. Traditionally, the warriors, known by the Maasai term *moran*, were the younger unmarried men who, up to the age of thirty or thirty-five years of age, were principally engaged in protecting the people and their cattle from outside marauders. Nowadays, the warriors have virtually no military reason for continuing in existence, yet the structures remain and they can still be seen, with their ostentatious norms of behaviour, their plaited red-ochred hair and fashionable adornments, standing round in the townships or traversing the open country. Much general attention continues to be focused in their direction. It is in the interest of the elders ruling this tribal gerontocracy to maintain the *status quo*. And so the vehicles of enculturation continue to operate.¹¹

Arnold van Gennep, in his classic study on *rites de passage*, identified three stages to every rite: separation, transition (*marge* or *limen*)

and incorporation.¹² Samburu boys pass through a rite of initiation to mark their transition from boyhood to warriorhood. Samburu warriors in turn pass through a series of rites to mark the more gradual and less well-defined transition from warriorhood to elderhood, each rite signifying a phase in the promotion of the warrior towards elderhood. These rites have been analysed by both William Sargant and Paul Spencer in terms of Pavlovian, or behaviourist, psychology.¹³ It is their belief that the initial attitudes of people towards one another and towards ideologies may alter when they are subjected to abnormal mental stress and that these changes may remain after the causes of anxiety have been removed. Moreover, the changes are liable to be more permanent if the subject has a stable personality and if at first he seeks to oppose the change. Such mental stress as is here under consideration may be produced by fasting, ordeal, threats, prolonged social isolation, debilitation, or torture. Samburu initiation rites from boyhood to warriorhood and the subsequent lesser rites of progression to elderhood make use of several of these stress-inducing practices. And while under stress the initiands shiver, develop facial twitches, and shake. This may be viewed as a form of transmarginal breakdown. At times of anxiety or distress, higher nervous systems are strained beyond the limits of normal conditioned responses, suggestibility is increased, and, when this leads to a transmarginal breakdown (i.e. shaking), it may accompany either a change or intensification of sentiments, or a release of nervous energy (abreaction), or both. Both occur at the time of circumcision and initiation into warriorhood, but also and significantly nowadays during the period of warriorhood and transition to elderhood.

Today, the Samburu warrior is without a precise role; he is no longer a warrior defending society, yet no alternative role has been assigned to him. For up to fourteen years of his life he is in a state of social suspension between boyhood and elderhood. For example, he may have to stand aside while his girl friend is married off to an elder from a different clan and in frustration await his own marriage, perhaps fifteen years hence. In this vacuous or liminal state, warriors are prone to behaviour displaying various forms of anomie. They may engage in small incidents of aggressive behaviour which can lead only too easily into affrays between different clans. Or they may without warning engage in purposeless behaviour such as leaving home and failing to return for a period of several months. General ebullience of behaviour may be interspersed with periods of depression and euphoria. However, people generally recognize them to be under stress: there is high expectation of them from all parts of society, yet no purpose except that they should continue to be warriors. And it is in this context that Samburu warriors shiver and shake. In extreme instances this may develop into insensible shaking

in which warriors have to be held down by as many as five men at one time, to avoid hurting themselves and others. It also frequently acts as a trigger for shaking by others who up to this point have only been shivering. A description of shaking associated with dancing is given by William Sargant.¹⁴ Women begin the dancing, then the warriors follow suit, at first within their own groups but later with the women. As they repeatedly jump in the air, fall back on their heels and engage in rhythmic overbreathing with grunting expiration, they fall into states of trance or semi-trance.¹⁵

The reason for the Samburu warrior's susceptibility to trance is as follows. The period of warriorhood is one of duress; indeed, it can be said to be one long transitional or liminal stage between boyhood and elderhood. By circumcision the Samburu male is separated from boyhood and initiated into a long period of warriorhood, when he is denied marriage and barred from any position of leadership in society before he is finally incorporated into elderhood at the age of thirty or thirty-five. He is thus a marginal person on the margins of society; a liminal personage, betwixt and between, neither here nor there. And at such times dancing/shaking alleviates the resentment and hostility which naturally builds up against the elders and the customs and conventions imposed by a society on its youth. On waking from trance he is free of all fear and tension.¹⁶

Once again, the phenomenon of possession is associated with *marginality* and *liminality*. In the instance of Samburu warriors it becomes a means of release from fear and tension.

d) Afro-Christian possession cult

In the yard of a small house in the South Nyanza district of western Kenya, a large crowd has gathered. Many of them wear not only one but many rosaries around their neck, some so long they almost touch the ground. They are members of the Legio Maria of Africa Church congregated to witness the rite of exorcism.

An emaciated old woman comes forward in front of the house and kneels on a piece of sacking. She is accompanied by a small boy who kneels beside her. They are approached by a man who, in the manner of a Roman Catholic priest during the Mass, blesses a bottle of water with the sign of the cross, and is then surrounded by a small group of people under the supervision of a few young priests. The priests, standing in front of the woman, dangle rosaries in her face and start to pray, adjuring the spirit to depart: 'Evil spirit go away; evil spirit, please go away.' Next, one of the priests invokes the Holy Spirit and places his hand on the woman's head. A few minutes elapse and then she begins to cry aloud, jerking her torso in great spasms and throwing her head backwards. As her cries grow louder and louder the crowd gets more excited, thrusting rosaries into her face and adjuring

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the spirit to come out. Meanwhile the priest sprinkles the woman intermittently with holy water. As the fervour reaches a pitch the woman utters a loud cry, falls to the ground in a trance-like state, and remains lying flat on her back for several minutes. The priest is heard to comment that the spirit has taken her heart away.

Attention now shifts to the boy, but he fails to respond to the treatment; so the priest is forced to conclude either that he was not possessed at all or else that he was merely suffering from some illness.

The woman becomes the focus of attention once again as she begins to move and is helped to her feet, the priest declaring her to have been raised from the dead. However, another phase of the exorcism is about to begin and end in climax. The woman's cries become more frequent and she shouts out: 'He is on my ribs'; whereupon several of the onlookers move towards her and rub her ribs. In like manner her back, her chest and her hands are affected and treated. This is said to be typical of the way spirits move about inside a person.

The priest resumes his ministrations and after a further five or ten minutes the woman responds with loud cries and violent spasms. Dialogue ensues:

OLD WOMAN: 'You are chasing us from our home. Why are you chasing us out?'

ONLOOKER: 'How many of you are there?'

OLD WOMAN: 'We are two.'

ONLOOKER: 'This is not your home.'

OLD WOMAN: 'Where shall we go?'

PRIEST: 'Go to hell.'

OLD WOMAN: 'You are chasing us away, but we must come back again.'

PRIEST: 'What kind of things are remaining?'

OLD WOMAN: 'We have nowhere to go. Let us go. Let us go.'

The success of the exorcism is almost ensured and everybody begins to relax. Finally, the spirits signal their departure by bidding goodbye, and the old woman gets to her feet, shakes herself and jumps several times into the air.

Audrey Wipper, from whom this account is adapted, comments on the striking resemblance of the rite to the traditional.¹⁷ Marie-France Perrin Jassy, writing on the Luo of North Mara, Tanzania, notes the fundamental similarity of all techniques of exorcism in the church. The traditional rite has been Christianized.¹⁸

Possession by spirits among the Luo is associated with skirmishes between the Luo and other peoples, in particular a possession of epidemic proportions after a battle in which many Lang'o people were slaughtered, their corpses lying unburied in the fields. Presumably,

the spirits of these dead set out to possess the Luo, thus exerting their revenge.¹⁹

The founding of the Legio Maria of Africa Church is associated with widespread fear and outbreaks of epidemics, including Lang'o spirit-possession in the early 1960s. In 1960, Kenya experienced one of the worst droughts in her history, followed by heavy rains and floods in 1961. To the masses this situation appeared hopeless, and so they appealed to the supernatural; consequently many prophets emerged in South Nyanza from 1960-63. So writes the historian Bethwell Ogot.²⁰ He is supported by the social anthropologist Marie-France Perrin Jassy, who contends that at the time there was a general feeling of insecurity due to the rupture of traditional solidarities, the isolation of individuals in a society that was becoming more and more complex, and a frustration felt by the masses made marginal to an economic progress which they neither understood nor benefited from. Ogot comments further that the majority of the church's members were simple and poor people who had derived little benefit from the colonial experience in Kenya, and who believed that they were not likely to derive much benefit from the long-awaited political independence.

Of further significance for our purposes is Ogot's assertion that spirit-possession is a prerequisite for membership of the Legio Maria of Africa Church. The people who qualify to join the church are those who are initially possessed by evil spirits which are then exorcised. The vacated houses of the evil spirits in the body are then occupied by the Holy Spirit. The person thus becomes purified and transformed, but remains possessed. Just as in traditional society he would have left home and joined a community of the possessed at a diviner's house, so the new convert leaves home and relatives and joins the community of the faithful, where from time to time he becomes possessed by the Holy Spirit.²¹ Significantly, Ogot found that many of the leaders of Legio Maria had belonged to a traditional possession cult, *Jo-sepe*, before their conversion.

Marginality is obviously involved once again; so too is *liminality*, but on a larger scale. Victor Turner has taken the concept of liminality in a rite of passage and applied it to liminal periods of history, when old structures are passing away and a new social order has not yet taken shape.²² Western Kenya in the 1960s was such a period. To belong to that society was to be in transit, neither here nor there, without position or place. No doubt the Legio Maria of Africa Church and similar cults became movements of redefinition in a liminal period of history.²³

2 States, origins and techniques of possession

It is more than likely that states of 'possession' have been known to men from time immemorial. When possession takes place spon-

taneously it is believed to be due to the invasion of a person's body from outside by good or bad spirits, interpreted variously as God, Holy Spirit or angels, Satan, *zars* or *juogi*, and innumerable other entities. Throughout history certain forms of madness and other abnormalities of behaviour have been interpreted in this way.²⁴

When possession is deliberately induced, it is believed to put a person in direct contact with divinity or some other supernatural entity and/or to enable him to become that entity's mouthpiece or medium. Spontaneous possession may be caused by a number of social factors, certain of which we noted earlier.

Possession may be deliberately induced by progressively relaxing or progressively exciting a person's nervous system: through fasting, controlled breathing and meditation; drugs; music; rhythmic dancing, singing, clapping, drumming and breathing; repetitive chanting of syllables, words and phrases; the stirring up of the emotions of fear and anger; and rites of exorcism and domestication of spirits. Moreover, it is useful to remind ourselves that belief in the existence of spirits encourages psychic experiences which are interpreted as possession by these spirits, and that the transcendental encounters experienced in turn confirm the validity of existing beliefs.²⁵

In behaviourist psychology, possession is interpreted in terms of suggestion and the development of multiple personalities in the self. It is believed to be the product of the same mental mechanisms as somnambulism or hypnotic states. As long ago as 1921 this was pointed out by T.K. Oesterreich in his classic book on *Possession*:

A state . . . in which the normal individuality is temporarily replaced by another and which leaves no memory on return to the normal, must be called, according to present terminology, one of somnambulism. Typical possession is nevertheless distinguished from ordinary somnambulistic states by its intense motor and emotional excitement, so much so that we might hesitate to take it for a form of somnambulism but for the fact that possession is so nearly related to the ordinary form of these states that it is impossible to avoid classing them together. . . . whatever the reader may think . . . the most important thing is to see clearly that we are dealing with a state in which the subject possesses a single personality and a defined character, even if this is not the erstwhile one. The subject retains the memory of these past states, but he can no longer be conscious that this other personality has normally been his. He considers himself as the new person, the 'demon', and envisages his former being as quite strange, as if it were another's: in this respect there is complete analogy with the ordinary somnambulistic variations in personality. . . . the statement that possession is a state in which side by side with the first personality a second has made its way into the consciousness is also very inaccurate. Much more simply, it is the first personality which has been replaced by a second. . . .

Side by side with the somnambulistic form of possession there exists another yet more interesting. It is distinguished by the fact that the patient does not lose consciousness of his usual personality, but retains it. In the midst of the terrible spectacle which he presents in the fit, he remains fully conscious of what is happening; he is the passive spectator of what takes place within him.²⁶

Possession is characterized by uncontrollable bodily agitation, foaming at the mouth, groaning and barking, writhing, speaking in tongues, lack of fear, insensitivity to pain, a trance state in which the subject may experience hallucinations or go on a 'trip'. There are of course various degrees of possession: in some societies illnesses may be seen as possession, while in others it is often only in the actual treatment of possession, whether by exorcism or domestication, that an actual state of full trance is induced.²⁷

3 Marginality, liminality and possession in Christian history

a) The ministry of Jesus

The story of the Gerasene demoniac, as recorded in St Mark's Gospel (5:1-20) is a familiar one. It is best interpreted as a classic instance of spirit possession and subsequent exorcism. Most commentators, however, while correctly noting the significance of the question 'What is your name?', fail to understand the answer, 'My name is Legion.' C.E.B. Cranfield, for instance, stops short at guessing that the man was conscious of being possessed by a whole host of demons, their name being suggested by his having seen a Roman legion on the march.²⁸ I must confess that the meaning eluded me until I began to reflect on some anthropological data. Herbert Loewe states that belief in possession reigned particularly in Galilee, whereas Palestine was immune from it.²⁹ Galilee was known as 'Galilee of the Nations', being notorious as a place where Jews intermingled with the 'pagan' inhabitants.³⁰ Gerasa (or Gadara) was in the region of the Decapolis, a state which, according to Duncan Derrett, changed hands more than once between the Romans and the Hebrew kings, and where Jewish religious colonization was begun but later abandoned due to political circumstances.³¹ On the basis of accounts by anthropologists of the existence of 'foreign' spirits in *marginal* areas such as the Decapolis, it appears to me obvious that the man was possessed by a foreign military spirit associated with the Roman legions. He is to be taken as a 'protester' and exhibitionist in the face of overwhelming threat. As the Kenya Luo were possessed by spirits of marauding invaders, the Central African Alur by the spirits of soldiers killed in the First World War, and the Ugandan Banyoro by modern spirits of change such as those of military tanks, aeroplanes, Europeanness and Polishness, so this man from Gerasa was possessed by the spirit of a foreign, threatening, invading power.³²

b) The Corinthian Church

In his magisterial work *Enthusiasm*, Ronald Knox pertinently remarks on Corinth's notoriety as 'the paradise of prostitutes' in a world of lax standards, correctly diagnoses the element of revolt in Corinthian Christianity, and, perhaps a little unconsciously, lists

several of the characteristics to be found in ecstatic religion worldwide. But he fails to understand why Paul should state so distinctly and unambiguously while at the same time advising caution: 'I speak in tongues more than you all' (1 Cor. 14:18).³³

Perhaps a clue is to be found in his first letter to the Corinthians. Here is the recognition that, while 'pagans', many Corinthians were irresistibly drawn towards 'dumb idols'. This is a direct allusion to the ecstasies engaged in by the cults—we have seen examples of such in western Kenya. And if in such a frenzy a Corinthian 'Christian' utters 'Jesus be cursed', it is manifestly not by the Spirit of God. It follows therefore that ecstasy alone is no criterion for the working of the Spirit, but itself requires such a criterion. This criterion is the *Kurios* acclamation: no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Not ecstasy, but the acclamation of Jesus as Lord is constitutive of the Christian church.³⁴

Taking due note of the social context, I wish to draw attention to two theological implications of Paul's handling of the Corinthian situation. It is significant that Paul does not attempt to suppress ecstasy but rather to apply the theological criterion of discernment of spirits and to exercise control.

c) *Montanism and Donatism*

Ioan Lewis identifies women's possession cults as thinly disguised protest movements directed against the dominant sex. They thus play a significant part in societies and cultures where women lack more obvious and direct means for forwarding their aims. To a considerable extent they protect women from the exactions of men. He also identifies peripheral possession cults as obliquely aggressive protest movements directed against rigidly stratified societies by the politically impotent, whether male or female.³⁵ Montanism can be said to contain elements of both and more. Lewis, moreover, quotes Ronald Knox's 'brilliant, if caustic, aside' that, in Christianity, 'from the Montanist movement onwards, the history of enthusiasm is largely a history of female emancipation, and it is not a reassuring one', approving the general interpretation but refusing to subscribe to the latter judgement.³⁶ Knox's analysis of Montanism is on the whole unconvincing and I offer instead the following observations as relevant to our analysis of the social context.

Montanus hailed from Phrygia, a centre of the mystery religions, and it can be deduced that he was a 'child of his surroundings'.³⁷ Eusebius relates how he 'would begin to be carried away by inspiration; there would be a sudden seizure, he would fall into a trance, and start raving in his speech. He would speak with strange tongues, too, and prophesy (or so it was called) in a manner quite contrary to that which has come down to us, by continuous tradition,

from earlier times.³⁸ Furthermore, if Jerome is to be believed, he was before his conversion a priest of Cybele. He gained two prominent women converts—the prophetesses Priscilla and Maximilla—whom Knox calls the forerunners of numerous *voyantes* (seers) and patronesses, among whom he numbers Wilhelmina of Milan and Selina, Countess of Huntingdon.³⁹ Of further relevance is Williston Walker's evaluation of Montanism as 'a reaction against the secular tendencies already at work in the church', 'a protest against the growing worldliness of the church at large'—in Lewis's terms a peripheral cult. Perhaps at first it was not a revitalization movement, as 'prophecy' remained the privilege of the few, but there are signs that it became so later.⁴⁰ And of even greater significance for our purposes is Hans Lietzmann's explanation of Montanist eschatological expectations: 'The severe distresses, occasioned by the wars of Marcus Aurelius and the dreadful years of epidemic, were really quite fitted to pass as heralds of the final age, and reveal the four apocalyptic horsemen riding over the earth.' Similar expectations were reported from other regions.⁴¹

Thus the social context of Montanism can be seen to yield evidences of *marginality* and *liminality*.

On Donatism, suffice it to say that the movement was bred and nurtured in the interface between colonizer and colonized, Latin and African, Christian and pagan.

Both movements were condemned and suppressed. And both in North Africa and Asia Minor, Christianity was weakened so that eventually it was eclipsed by Islam.

d) Medieval epidemics

Under this head may be included the medieval dancing mania called tarantism, which in the fifteenth century swept through Italy in the wake of the Black Death. This was the Italian version of the extraordinary epidemic which had earlier spread like a contagion through Germany, Holland and Belgium, where it had become associated with the names of St Vitus and St John the Baptist. By whatever name it was known, St Vitus' Dance or tarantism, its symptoms and the circumstances in which it occurred were generally the same. In times of privation and misery, the most abused members of society felt themselves seized by an irresistible urge to dance wildly until they reached a state of trance and collapsed exhausted—usually cured, if only temporarily. Although this 'dancing mania' was remarkably uniform in incidence wherever it occurred, it was not always or everywhere interpreted in the same way. In the Low Countries, for example, the malady was usually regarded as a form of demoniacal possession and was frequently treated by exorcism. In Italy, it was thought to be caused by the bite of the tarantula spider (although recent research has established the existence of two types of tarantula spider and,

paradoxically, the association of the harmless type with tarantism). Those suffering from the disease showed extreme sensitivity to music, to which they danced until they collapsed, exhausted. The malady persisted through the centuries with a marked predominance of female victims. It still survives today in an attenuated form in the more remote and backward villages of southern Italy. As practised here it is, in Lewis's words, 'a loosely Christianized peripheral cult practised mainly by peasant women.' Entry to the cult is achieved by succumbing to an illness for which the mythic tarantula is held responsible. Treatment consists of the use of cathartic dance rituals conducted traditionally in the patient's own home to the tune of the tarantella, but held increasingly today in St Paul's chapel at Galatine.⁴²

e) *Wesleyan and American revivalism*

John Wesley writes in his diary for 21 January 1739:

We were surprised in the evening, while I was expounding in the Minorities. A well-dressed, middle-aged woman suddenly cried out as in the agonies of death. She continued so to do for some time, with all the signs of sharpest anguish of the spirit. When she was a little recovered, I desired her to call upon me the next day. She then told me that about three years before she was under strong convictions of sin, and in such terror of mind that she had no comfort in anything, nor any rest day or night . . . A physician was sent for accordingly, who ordered her to be blooded, blistered and so on. But this did not heal her wounded spirit, so that she continued much as she was before; till the last night.⁴³

When in the middle of the eighteenth century the Evangelical Revival broke out in England, it was widely recognized that religion generally was in a state of spiritual lethargy: in the words of the historian, Lecky, 'a religious languor fell over England.' Europe was in the grip of the Enlightenment, and English religion fell victim to an arid rationalism and dry moralism. Men and women lived brutal and squalid lives in the disease-ridden slums of the new towns and villages, untouched by 'colourless essays on the moral virtues.'⁴⁴ Popular amusements were coarse, illiteracy widespread, the law savage in its enforcements, and the jails sinks of disease and iniquity. Moreover, England stood on the brink of the Industrial Revolution that was to transform her from a stable agricultural and commercial society into the world's first industrial nation. These social and economic changes, and the problems consequent upon them, propelled society into seeking redefinition, and it did so partly and significantly by means of religious enthusiasm.⁴⁵

Similar symptoms of *marginality* and *liminality* are to be found along America's western frontier in the nineteenth century. Kenneth Scott Latourette provides the following description of the first camp meetings:

About 1797, a religious awakening occurred in the south-central portion of Kentucky, south of the Green River. It came in connexion with the

preaching of a Presbyterian clergyman, James McGready, then in his later thirties. Although he was unprepossessing in appearance, his small piercing eyes, his coarse, tremulous voice charged with gravity, his intense earnestness, and his stern denunciation of sin had several years before made a remarkable impression in North Carolina. The opposition he aroused had forced him to move to the West. In the summer of 1799 the awakening south of the Green River broke out afresh at a meeting in which several clergymen, Presbyterian and Methodist, were taking part. Extreme emotional manifestations electrified the congregation. This was followed, in 1800, by what was sometimes regarded as the first of the camp-meetings. . . . Excitement mounted and fifty-five converts were counted. The movement spread like wildfire. . . . Physical expressions of the excitement were numerous and sometimes took bizarre forms. The groans and screams of those under conviction mingled with the shouts of those who had found release and joy. The fear of hell and damnation and the hopelessness of the lost would be succeeded by the bliss of assured salvation. The most common physical experience was 'falling.' About three thousand are said to have been prostrate at the Cane Ridge meeting. Some of the 'fallen' were insensible. Others were aware of what was happening about them but were powerless to move. Women and children were especially suggestible and were the most affected. Yet men were also among 'the slain'. As consciousness returned, some would rejoice in a confidence in forgiveness and the love of God and others would still be in the gloom of despair. A little later in the course of the revival, hundreds displayed convulsive physical contortions which were known as the 'jerks.' Frequently those who came to remonstrate or to ridicule were themselves sudden victims. Barking, running, jumping, and trances were common. In Ohio somewhat similar scenes were witnessed. Many of the more earnest and intelligent Christians were opposed to these exuberant extravagances and some of the meetings proceeded without them.⁴⁶

f) Pentecostalism and Third-World Christianity

I have witnessed scenes almost identical with those of the frontier in the African churches of Kenya and the Black churches of Britain. Christian Lalive d'Epinay has described Pentecostalism in Chile as 'the haven of the masses'.⁴⁷ Walter Hollenweger observes that the belief and practice of the Pentecostal movement provides help for people who live on the fringes of society.⁴⁸ It is not difficult to ascertain that the East African Revival broke out in what was then Ruanda-Urundi during the late 1920s and 1930s in the face of religious lethargy and against the background of severe famine.⁴⁹ Indeed, the year 1928 or thereabouts saw outbreaks of revival not only in East but in West and Southern Africa too. Factors of stress and change were no doubt involved.

The twentieth-century's classic Pentecostal churches trace their origins to the Los Angeles Revival at the beginning of the century, and more especially to the Azusa Street Mission. Other influences apart, it is surely not without significance that Afro-Americans played a major role in the early meetings: the first person to receive the baptism in the Spirit was an eight-year-old black boy. The *New York*

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American of 3 December 1906 reported:

Faith Gives Quaint Sect New Languages to Convert Africa. Votaries of Odd Religion Nightly see 'Miracles' in West Side Room. Led by Negro Elder. The leaders of this strange movement are for the most part Negroes.⁵⁰

g) *Neo-Pentecostalism*

It is not difficult to discern the signs of the times in relation to the contemporary neo-Pentecostal or charismatic movement in the historic or mainline churches within western Christianity. In general terms, the world has become a global village, mobile and plural, and has for some years been on the brink of the Computer, or Cybernetic Revolution, which may justly be termed the Second Industrial Revolution. Moreover, in the climate of scientific optimism embraced in the fifties and early sixties, religion went into decline. More specifically, in Britain the lower professional and middle classes, the clergy of the established church among them, became marginalized; their usefulness, and consequently their rewards and status, falling to new low levels. The people needed a new reason for living and the clergy needed a new role in society. The solution for both was to be found in the charismatic movement: for the former it was achieved through a new religious enthusiasm, and for the latter it was attained by assuming the role of charismatic leader. More specifically still, in the Roman Catholic Church (that bastion of staid religion) the Second Vatican Council plunged people and clergy alike into an abyss of insecurity and a crisis of identity. As with Anglicans and members of the Free churches, antidotes to both were to be found in the charismatic movement. After all, Ronald Knox's *Enthusiasm* was published in 1950! In short, a society in transition and a people on its margins were ready to be possessed.

I conclude with Ioan Lewis that 'such is the incidence of mental stress and illness in our contemporary culture, that we do well to ponder how so many beliefs and expressions, which we relegate to abnormal psychology, find in other cultures a secure and satisfying outlet in ecstatic religion.'⁵¹ We would also do well to ponder that in our own society marginal peoples are finding solace in religious enthusiasm. I am aware of the profound theological implications of these statements, and to explore them would extend this essay beyond both space and brief. Suffice it to remark that however necessary and beneficial it may be to alleviate symptoms, it is no substitute for getting to the root of the disease.

DR MYRTLE S. LANGLEY is Head of Practical Theology and Missiology at Trinity College, Bristol.

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NOTES

- 1 Raymond Firth, *Tikopia Ritual and Belief* (Allen & Unwin : London 1967) p 296; cf. his Huxley Lecture, *Essays on Social Organization and Values* (Athlone Press : London 1964) pp 247-8.
- 2 Lewis, op. cit., p 28.
- 3 Shown in the 'World About Us' series on Tuesday, 15 January 1980; cf. John-Paul Davidson, 'Barefoot Psychiatry: Traditional Therapy in Malaysia', in *RAIN*, No. 35, December 1979—I am summarizing with the author's permission.
- 4 Lewis, op. cit., pp 72-9; cf. his 'Spirit Possession in Northern Somaliland', in *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*, pp 188-219.
- 5 Lewis, op. cit., pp 72-4.
- 6 *ibid.*, pp 75-6.
- 7 Ebon, op. cit., pp 73-85; Simon D. Messing, 'Group Therapy and Social Status in the Zar Cult of Ethiopia', in *Magic, Witchcraft, and Curing*, pp 285-93; Sargant, *The Mind Possessed*, pp 137-40.
- 8 Sargant, loc. cit.
- 9 Messing, op. cit., pp 292-3.
- 10 Ebon, op. cit., p 73.
- 11 Paul Spencer, *The Samburu: A Study of Gerontocracy in a Nomadic Tribe* (R & KP : London 1965).
- 12 Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*. First published as *Les rites de passage*, 1908 and translated from the French by Monika B. Vizedom & Gabrielle L. Caffee, (R & KP : London & UCP : Chicago 1960).

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- 13 Sargant, *Battle for the Mind and The Mind Possessed*; Paul Spencer, 'The Function of Ritual in the Socialization of the Samburu Moran', in Philip Mayer (ed.), *Socialization: the Approach from Social Anthropology* (Tavistock : London 1970) pp 127-57.
- 14 Sargant, *The Mind Possessed*, pp 116-17.
- 15 Sargant describes a similar form of intensive rhythmic breathing in an Afro-Christian Setting in Trinidad (ibid., pp 117 & 157-65): African drumming, bell-ringing and rhythmic breathing are used as a means of 'bringing down the Holy Ghost'. Ioan Lewis describes a similar 'shaking' in an Indian Shaker Cult (Washington) where each seizure represents a manifestation of the Holy Spirit (op. cit., p 45).
- 16 Sargant, *The Mind Possessed*, p 118.
- 17 Audrey Wipper, 'The Syncretic Component of Legio Maria', a working paper delivered at the Conference on the Historical Study of African Religions, Nairobi, June 1974.
- 18 Perrin Jassy, op. cit.
- 19 H. O. Anyumba, 'Some Factors in the Dissemination of Juogi Beliefs among the Luo of Kenya up to 1962', paper delivered at the Conference on the Historical Study of African Religions, Nairobi, June 1974.
- 20 Bethwell A. Ogot, 'A Community of Their Own: A Study of the Search for a New Order by the Maria Legio of Africa Church', paper delivered at the Conference on the Historical Study of African Religions, Nairobi, June 1974.
- 21 Cf. Bengt Sundkler's parallels between the Zulu diviner and Christian prophet in his *Bantu Prophets in South Africa*, 2nd ed. (OUP : London 1961 [1948]) pp 350-53.
- 22 Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process* (R & KP : London 1969) cf. Aylward Shorter's chapter on 'Spirit Possession and Communities of Affliction' in his *East African Societies* (R & KP : London 1974) pp 94-101.
- 23 Simon Barrington-Ward, "'The Centre Cannot Hold. . .'" Spirit Possession as Redefinition', in Edward Fasholé-Luke, Richard Gray, Adrian Hastings & Godwin Tasie (eds), *Christianity in Independent Africa* (Rex Collings : London 1978) pp 455-70. The arguments of this section are reinforced by examples from societies too numerous to mention; only lack of space prevents me from mentioning them but they can be traced through the books listed in the bibliography.
- 24 Sargant, *The Mind Possessed*, p 44.
- 25 Lewis, op. cit., p 25.
- 26 Oesterreich, op. cit., pp 39-40.
- 27 Cf. Lewis, op. cit., pp 44-9.
- 28 C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St Mark* (CUP : Cambridge 1963) p 178.
- 29 Herbert Loewe in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. 4, (T. & T. Clark : Edinburgh 1915) p 613.
- 30 L. H. Grollenberg, *Atlas of the Bible* (Nelson : London 1956) p 150.
- 31 J. Duncan M. Derrett, 'Spirit-Possession and the Gerasene Demoniac', in *Man*, Vol. 14, No. 2, June 1979, pp 286-93.
- 32 Cf. Aidan Southall, 'Spirit Possession and Mediumship among the Alur' and John Beattie, 'Spirit Mediumship in Bunyoro', in *Spirit Mediumship and Society in Africa*, pp 232-72 & 159-70.
- 33 Knox, op. cit., pp 9-24.
- 34 Cf. the annotated *Jerusalem Bible* (DLT : London 1966) ad loc. and Hans Conzelmann, *I Corinthians* (Fortress Press : Philadelphia 1975 [1969]) also ad loc.
- 35 Lewis, op. cit., p 31.
- 36 ibid.
- 37 Knox, op. cit., pp 29-30.
- 38 Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, v16.
- 39 Knox, loc. cit.

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- 40 Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church* revised ed., (T. & T. Clark : Edinburgh 1963 [1918]) pp 55-6.
- 41 Hans Lietzmann, *A History of the Early Church, Vol. II: The Founding of the Church Universal* (Lutterworth : London 1961) pp 193-203, esp. p 196.
- 42 Adapted from Lewis, op. cit., pp 41-3, 89-92.
- 43 *The Journal of the Rev. John Wesley, A.M.*, std ed., ed. by Nehemiah Curnock, 8 vols, (Charles Kelly : London 1909-1916).
- 44 Walker, op. cit., pp 454-5; A. Skevington Wood, *The Burning Heart: John Wesley, Evangelist* (Paternoster : Exeter 1967) pp 9-16.
- 45 Walker, loc. cit.
- 46 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, Vol. 4, (Paternoster : Exeter 1971 [1941]) pp 192-3.
- 47 Christian Lalive d'Epinay, *Haven of the Masses: A Study of the Pentecostal Movement in Chile* (Lutterworth : London 1969).
- 48 Walter J: Hollenweger, *The Pentecostals* (SCM : London 1972 [1969]) p 457.
- 49 Myrtle Langley & Tom Kiggins, *A Serving People: A Textbook on the Church in East Africa* (OUP : Nairobi 1974) pp 192-203 & 290.
- 50 Quoted in Hollenweger, op. cit., p 23.
- 51 Lewis, op. cit., p 35.