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Trends. The Devil's in the Details: The Vatican and Exorcism

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The Vatican has issued a revision on the Roman Catholic ritual of exorcism. Through issuing the revision, the Church has reinforced some notion of Manichaeism as opposed to Manichaeism. The former refers to a belief in the existence of opposing forces of Good and Evil in the world, while the latter--stemming from the Persian prophet Manes and combining Zoroastrian, Christian, and Gnostic elements--also refers to a belief in the existence of opposing forces of Good and Evil but is a heresy, according to the Church.

Perhaps of most interest to political psychologists is the stipulation that priests seek professional medical assistance in cases that are termed difficult to differentiate between demonic possession and so-called "psychic illness." This stipulation--perhaps in an unwitting fashion--through its embracing of the medical for all mental health and abnormal psychological issues comes down on the side of the medical establishment in the Manichean struggle between the forces of darkness (physicians) and the forces of light (psychologists, social workers, counselors, etc.) No need for exorcism here: the devil wins.

More substantively, the revision on exorcism posits that indicators of genuine exorcism may include the use of unknown languages; extraordinary strength; the disclosure of hidden occurrences or events; and a very strong aversion to God, the Blessed Virgin, the saints, and various scared objects and images. The assessment problem for the medical profession is that there are alternative medical explanations for each of these criteria. So how does one differentiate among alternative explanations for each criterion? Is the devil in the details, or is the Devil affecting how details are chosen and interpreted? Perhaps, only God knows. In the meantime, phenomena that might be interpreted as vestigial or vibrant successors to exorcism--e.g., political trials wherein a political leader's fate rests with response to the trial's trials--remain all too prevalent. (See Al-Krenawi, A., & Graham, J.R. (1997). Spirit possession and exorcism in the treatment of a Bedouin psychiatric patient. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 25, 211-222; Bull, D.L., Ellason, J.W., & Ross, C.A. (1998). Exorcism revisited: Positive outcomes with dissociative identity disorder. *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, 26, 188-196; Presentation of new rite of exorcism. (January 26, 1998). Vatican Information Service, http://www.vatican.va/news_services; Tagliabue, J. (January 26, 1999). Vatican's revised exorcism rite affirms existence of devil. *The New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com>; Vlachos, I.O., Beratis, S., & Hartocollis, P. (1997). Magico-religious beliefs and psychosis. *Psychopathology*, 30, 93-99.) (Keywords: Catholicism, Exorcism, Heresy, Manichaeism.)