

# Diagnosing Demons and Healing Humans: The Pastoral Implications of a Holistic View of Evil and Collusion between Its Forms

by Alan Bernard McGill

New Testament scholarship has recognized a holistic view of evil on the part of biblical authors who invoked the motif of demons so as to capture the insidious manner in which evil infiltrates the human experience. This holistic perspective, wherein evil defies clear categorization, calls into question the existence of demons as disembodied persons, and reliance upon supernatural phenomena to serve as criteria for the diagnosis of demonic affliction.

The 1975 study *Christian Faith and Demonology*, however, sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, affirms the creaturely nature of demons, and the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, while speaking of demons largely by allusion to myth, suggests that they exist as free-willed, disembodied creatures.<sup>1</sup>

The contribution of the present paper is to argue that even if demons exist as distinct ontological beings, their agency may be vexingly intertwined with systems and structures, social and natural. Modern harmatologies and Catholic social thought have recognized that personal sin can be ambiguously entangled with social and systemic sin. If this is the case for human beings, it could be even more so the case for disembodied sinful beings, should they exist.

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Lacking embodiment, a pure spirit may be heavily reliant upon the manipulation and corruption of systems, structures, and processes in the social and the natural realms, so as to pursue its malevolent ends. The interplay of personal and social sin may suggest the possibility of collusion between demonic agency and other forms of evil.

Furthermore, if the distinction between the natural and supernatural is largely a question of perspective, reflecting the degree to which human knowledge and understanding has evolved in a given epoch, then it may be conceivable that the demonic could work in and through what we regard as natural. If this is the case, demonic evil may not always be distinguishable from other causes of misery and injustice.

<sup>1</sup> The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Christian Faith and Demonology* (Vatican: 1975), [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19750626\\_fede-cristiana-demonologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19750626_fede-cristiana-demonologia_en.html); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* English translation, U.S.A., 2nd edition. English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica*, 1997 no. 391-395, 2851-2852.

While focusing primarily upon Roman Catholicism, a tradition that has proposed criteria so as to distinguish demonic affliction from natural ailments, this paper seeks to prompt a broader discussion of the criteria that guide pastoral responses to those who interpret their suffering as a form of demonic molestation. Toward this end, the paper critiques the pastoral implications of a rigid dichotomy between health and spiritual well-being which became tragically apparent in the case of the alleged possession of Anneliese Michel.

## The Case of Anneliese Michel

“I am so torn apart, unintegrated . . . strung out between two poles”, lamented Anneliese Michel, who suffered and died, caught in an impasse between a world of science that regarded her as ill, and a world of religion that believed she was possessed by demons.<sup>2</sup> The case of Anneliese Michel, whose demise inspired the movie *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, raises a question as to how, or whether, communities of faith can distinguish demonic affliction from natural phenomena. Anneliese was born in 1952 in Leibfing, Bavaria, West Germany to a Catholic family.<sup>3</sup> Her mother, Anna, has previously given birth to another child, Martha, out of wedlock.<sup>4</sup> Martha died at the age of eight. John Duffey depicts Anna Michel as overly strict, forbidding her daughters to interact socially with boys.<sup>5</sup> The effects of this upbringing may have resulted in internal conflict for Anneliese when, while at college, she fell in love with a fellow student.<sup>6</sup>

In 1968, Anneliese began to suffer convulsions that her doctors at the Wurzburg psychiatric clinic diagnosed as symptomatic of grand mal epilepsy.<sup>7</sup> Anneliese claimed to experience demonic voices, apparitions, and physical oppression.<sup>8</sup> Her doctors subsequently diagnosed her with schizophrenia and dissociative personality.<sup>9</sup> In 1975, having twice refused the request, Bishop Josef Stangl, at the recommendation of Fr. Adolf Rodewyk, SJ, authorized an exorcism to be performed by Fathers Arnold Renz and Ernst Alt.<sup>10</sup> The two priests performed a concatenation of exorcisms over a ten-month period during which Anneliese appears to have gone without adequate food and basic medical care.<sup>11</sup>

Two analyses of the case conflict starkly in their interpretation of events. Felicitas Goodman suspects that Anneliese was a deeply sensitive and pious person who experienced a trance-like state of consciousness, and was misdiagnosed with epilepsy and schizophrenia.<sup>12</sup> Goodman hypothesizes that Anneliese’s epilepsy medication, Tegretol, impeded the efficacy of her exorcisms, and caused physical damage that led to her death.<sup>13</sup> John Duffey, on the other hand, argues that Anneliese was neurologically ill, that her alleged possession was a misdiagnosis, and that Anneliese died because of neglect on the part of her parents and exorcists.<sup>14</sup>

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2 Felicitas Goodman, *The Exorcism of Anneliese Michel* (New York: Wipf & Stock, 1981), 59, 221.

3 Goodman, 1; Scott Derrickson, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (Lakeshore Entertainment, 2005).

4 Goodman, 1, 59.

5 John Duffey, *Lessons Learned: The Anneliese Michel Exorcism: The Implementation of a Safe and Thorough Examination, Determination and Exorcism of Demonic Possession* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 4.

6 Goodman, 50-51.

7 Goodman, 52-53; Manfred Hauke, “The Theological Battle over the Rite of Exorcism, ‘Cinderella’ of the *New Rituale Romanum*,” *Antiphon* 10, no. 1 (2006): 32-69.

8 Goodman, 31; Taylor Reints, “The Exorcism of Anneliese Michel,” *Unexplained Mysteries*, <http://www.unexplained-mysteries.com/column.php?id=234361>.

9 Hauke, 47; Duffey, xvi, 6.

10 Goodman, 31.

11 Duffey, xvi.

12 Goodman, 209 ff.

13 Goodman, 245-248.

14 Duffey, 15, 44, 79, 93, 124, 140, 161.

The pastoral response to Anneliese's situation, on the part of the clergy and her parents, seemed to radically dichotomize her alleged demonic affliction and the medical conditions with which Anneliese had been diagnosed. Notably, no doctor was present during Anneliese's exorcisms.<sup>15</sup> Following her death in 1976, ostensibly from dehydration and starvation, Anneliese's parents and two Catholic priests, Fathers Renz and Alt, were charged with negligent homicide.<sup>16</sup>

Anneliese's trauma coincided with the ecclesial polarization that erupted during the initial aftermath of the Second Vatican Council. Goodman asserts that Anneliese "loathed" the reforms of the council.<sup>17</sup> On June 29, 1972, Pope Paul VI had lamented a perceived loss of faith and obedience in the postconciliar years, in his view, influenced by the "smoke of Satan" that he believed had infiltrated the Church.<sup>18</sup> In the same homily, the Holy Father chided scientists for undermining faith. Subsequently, on November 15, 1972, Pope Paul reaffirmed the Church's teaching that Satan is a creature rather than an abstract force.<sup>19</sup>

In 1975, a study commissioned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith argued that belief in the devil is an integral truth of the gospel intentionally imparted by Jesus, and not a cultural assumption on the part of Jesus or the New Testament authors.<sup>20</sup> While the study focused primarily upon the subject of Satan, it argued that the liturgy insists upon the existence of Satan, and demons more generally.<sup>21</sup> In that same year, apparently to some degree aware of postconciliar conflicts within the Church, Anneliese intimated that her death was to atone for the sins of "apostate priests" and wayward youth. Also, coinciding with the duration of Anneliese's ordeal, William Friedkin's 1973 movie *The Exorcist* was released in Germany, according to some observers, unleashing a wave of obsession with the demonic.<sup>22</sup>

### Diagnosing Possession

In 1979, the Catholic bishops of Germany appointed a commission to study the subjects of demonic possession and exorcism.<sup>23</sup> In 1983, the commission recommended that the Church's teaching on demons should be reformulated so as to avoid anthropomorphic assumptions.<sup>24</sup> Conceding that demonic possession is a possibility, the commission proposed that there are no criteria by which to distinguish it beyond all doubt from illness.<sup>25</sup> Manfred Probst and Klemens Richter characterize the commission's report as arguing that "the power of evil does not manifest itself beyond the concomitant causality of natural causes" so that "it is not possible to individuate specific signs of sickness or other phenomena that prove by themselves a state of being overwhelmed by the power of evil."<sup>26</sup> Hence the commission challenged the existence of distinctive criteria for diagnosing demonic activity.

15 Goodman, 95-96, 198.

16 Duffey, xiv; Huake, 46.

17 Goodman, 6.

18 Pope Paul VI, *Homily on the Feast of SS Peter and Paul* (Vatican, 1972). [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/paul\\_vi/homilies/1972/documents/hf\\_p-iv\\_hom\\_19720629\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/homilies/1972/documents/hf_p-iv_hom_19720629_it.html).

19 Pope Paul VI, "Deliver us from Evil," General Audience of November 15, 1972. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19750626\\_fede-cristiana-demonologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19750626_fede-cristiana-demonologia_en.html).

20 The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Christian Faith and Demonology* (Vatican, 1975) [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19750626\\_fede-cristiana-demonologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19750626_fede-cristiana-demonologia_en.html).

21 The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Christian Faith and Demonology*, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19750626\\_fede-cristiana-demonologia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19750626_fede-cristiana-demonologia_en.html)

22 The International Movie Database states that William Friedkin's 1973 movie *The Exorcist* was released in West Germany in 1974, coinciding with Anneliese's lethal ordeal. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0070047/releaseinfo>. Film writer Mark Kermode recounts reports of mass hysteria in West Germany occasioned by the movie's release. See Mark Kermode, "Devilish Deceptions," *Fear Magazine*, no. 24, December 1990, "The Exorcist Tribute Zone," <http://www.the-exorcist.co.uk/articles/deceptions.htm>.

23 Hauke, 38; Manfred Probst, Klemens Richter, *Exorzismus Oder Liturgie Zur Befreiung des Bösen* (Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2002), 66.

24 *Report of the Commission on Possession and Exorcism*, German Bishops' Conference (Bonn, 1983), summarized in Hauke, 37.

25 Hauke, 38.

26 Probst and Richter, 66; cf. Hauke, 38.

In 1999, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments published a revised rite of exorcism.<sup>27</sup> The 1999 rite provided for a deprecatory option whereby the exorcist offers prayers of supplication to God for the deliverance of the afflicted person, by implication downplaying anthropomorphic assumptions entailed by directly addressing demons. However, the criteria for the authorization of a major exorcism were not significantly updated.

Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estévez, who served as Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments when it published the 1999 edition of *The Rite of Exorcism*, cites the signs of possession as “speaking many words in unknown languages or understanding them; revealing distant or hidden things; displaying strength beyond one's condition, together with a vehement aversion to God, Our Lady, the saints, the cross and sacred images.”<sup>28</sup> The 1614 *Rite of Exorcism* had listed these same signs.<sup>29</sup>

Indicating some degree of openness to the insights of modernity, the 1964 edition of the *Ritual Romanum* acknowledges developments in modern psychiatry and medicine, counseling that the exorcist “should not believe too readily that a person is possessed by an evil spirit; but he ought to ascertain the signs by which a possessed person can be distinguished from one who is suffering from some illness, especially one of a psychological nature.”<sup>30</sup> While this injunction is commendable for the circumspection it advocates, it still implies the existence of criteria by which possession can be distinguished from psychological illness.

Cardinal Leon Joseph Suenens recognizes the need for updated criteria in relation to the grounds for the performance of exorcisms, suggesting that “it would be advisable to revise the criteria of the Roman Rite—which goes back to 1614—or at least those that enable us to recognize a genuine demonic possession. Today these criteria are inadequate. They should be nuanced and studied in conjunction with natural parapsychological phenomena, such as telepathy, etc., which are in no sense diabolical.”<sup>31</sup> Suenens recommends a sophisticated approach, informed by the insights of modernity, while noting that not all that is considered supernatural is diabolical.

With implications for the question as to whether possession can always be distinguished from “natural” maladies, Fordham sociologist Michael Cuneo's observation of some fifty exorcisms leads him to soberly report that he witnessed nothing that constituted unambiguous evidence of the demonic. “If something happened during an exorcism that defied rational explanation, that seemed to reek of supernatural evil, I was committed to reporting it . . . but nothing happened.”<sup>32</sup> Implying the possibility of group suggestion, Cuneo recalls, “Occasionally I found myself in a situation where I was the odd man out . . . Just about everyone else on hand would claim to have seen something extraordinary, and they'd be disappointed—confused and disappointed—that I hadn't seen it also.”<sup>33</sup> Granted, Cuneo may have been “unlucky” but his study raises the question as to whether demonic activity can be distinguished beyond question from natural phenomena.

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27 Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *The Rite of Exorcism: Rituale Romanum: Editio Prima Post Typicam Promulgata. Bibliotheca Ephemerides Liturgicae Subsidia: Instrumenta Liturgica Quarreriensia Supplementa 6*, (Rome: C.L.V.-Edizione Liturgiche, 1999).

28 Hauke, 38; Kramer von Reisswitz, Crista, “Exorcism Rite Reformed,” *Inside the Vatican* (Rome: Urbi et Orbi Communications). E-book, <http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=2824&camp>.

29 Pope Paul V, “The Rite of Exorcism,” *Rituale Romanum* (Vatican City, 1614).

30 The Holy Office, *The Roman Ritual*, Part XIII Exorcism (Vatican, 1964).

31 Leon Joseph Suenens, *Renewal and the Powers of Darkness* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 139.

32 Michael Cuneo, *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 274.

33 Cuneo, *American Exorcism*, 274-275.

## A Biblical Perspective on Evil

A survey of modern exegetical insights into New Testament references to demons reveals a holistic, Semitic perspective whereby the demonic is associated sickness and misery rather than a sensationalized realm of the supernatural. Raymond Brown observes that “some of the cases that the synoptic gospels describe as instances of demon possession seem to be instances of natural sickness. The symptoms described in Mark 9:17, 18 seem to be those of epilepsy, while the symptoms in Mark 5:4 seem to be those of dangerous insanity.”<sup>34</sup>

Richard Bell suggests that Jesus would have associated sickness with Satan. “Jesus, as a man of his time, grew up with a mythical view whereby Satan is viewed as the cause of illness. Jesus ‘received’ the myth of Satan about how death, illness and sin came into the world.”<sup>35</sup> Jesus may have been aware of the tradition reflected in Wisdom 2:24 that “through the devil’s envy death entered the world.”<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, Jesus may not have identified the snake in the Adamic myth with Satan, or been familiar with the related position that Satan’s role in the temptation of Adam and Eve facilitated the entrance of death into human history. As Henry Kelly notes, Justin Martyr, sometime after 130 AD, is the first on record to equate the snake in the Adamic narrative with Satan.<sup>37</sup>

Given this association of the demonic with sickness and death, James Dunn and Graham Twelftree view the exorcism narratives as indicative of the struggle between the power of God and the power of evil, which the authors regard as “unified” rather than categorized as natural or supernatural.<sup>38</sup> The identification of ailments with the power of evil reinforces Jesus’ rejection of the position that sickness is a punishment from God.<sup>39</sup> Dunn and Twelftree interpret New Testament references to demons as pointing to a broader power of evil, rather than disembodied spirits. “The absence of any fixed designation indicates that the New Testament writers had no clear conception of particular entities.”<sup>40</sup> The authors regard an understanding of demons as individual intelligences as a later-breaking development. “A clear conceptuality of demons, therefore, does not emerge from the gospel evidence.”<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Miguel De La Torre and Albert Hernandez note with regard to the New Testament, “The full concept of demons developed only later in the Christian faith tradition.”<sup>42</sup>

Donald Senior advises against the retrospective imposition of modern assumptions upon the biblical text. “Americans in recent years have become curious about the world of the occult . . . but we should be careful not to too easily equate Jesus’ exorcisms with our modern blend of superstition and fantasy.”<sup>43</sup> In contrast to the sensationalized imagery of exorcism, purveyed by Hollywood, complete with special effects, Senior notes the miserable banality of evil as confronted by Jesus: “The biblical mindset . . . acknowledged that the power of evil had nudged its way into daily life. In the biblical mind, sin and suffering and death are differing manifestations of the fundamental evil that afflicted the human world and set it in opposition to God.”<sup>44</sup> Significantly, Senior regards this as the “acknowledgement” of a reality, rather than a fanciful or misguided assertion. Indeed, it is a Hollywood perspective or, more generally, modern curiosity that Senior regards as superstitious and fantastical. Senior deglamorizes evil,

34 Raymond Brown, *An Introduction to New Testament Christology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 41.

35 Richard Bell, *Deliver Us from Evil* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 182.

36 Henry Ansgar Kelly, *Satan: A Biography* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 108.

37 Kelly, *Satan: A Biography*, 176-179; cf. Philip Almond, *The Devil: A New Biography* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014), 34.

38 James Dunn and Graham Twelftree, “Demon-Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament,” *The Churchman*, 215, [http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/094-03\\_210.pdf](http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/churchman/094-03_210.pdf).

39 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 192-193.

40 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 217.

41 N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 217.

42 Miguel De La Torre and Albert Hernandez, *The Quest for the Historical Satan* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 59.

43 Donald Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, 2nd ed. (Dayton: Pflaum, 1992), 107.

44 Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, 107.

identifying it with all-too-earthly realities. “To get some sense of what the bible means by such evil, one has only to think of the impact of such chronic expressions of evil in our world today as the problem of drugs or violence, or the inequalities that have left millions starving throughout the world, or homeless and despairing people on the streets of the world’s richest cities.”<sup>45</sup> Senior does not deny the possibility of phenomena that defy the ordinary, but emphasizes that the gospels document Jesus’ exorcisms as the liberation of the most marginalized and wretched of people as Jesus took his proclamation of the kingdom into the darkest of cesspits, beyond comfort zones, and beyond cultural boundaries.<sup>46</sup>

Daniel Harrington interprets the miracle accounts of the gospel as signs of the Kingdom of God overtaking creation.<sup>47</sup> The healing and exorcism accounts, in particular, illustrate Jesus’ authority over the murkiest corners of creation. The sacred authors were not, in Harrington’s view, asserting the occurrence of what today’s readers would regard as supernatural phenomena. Harrington recommends, “Those who preach and teach about Jesus’ miracles need to help people today to appreciate the inclusive and flexible approach of the Bible towards ‘signs and wonders’ as opposed to the Enlightenment idea of the miracle as the suspension of the laws of nature.”<sup>48</sup> Harrington’s remarks underscore that the miracle accounts were written in a world imagined to be governed not by “laws of nature,” but by God. Prior to the assertion of such laws of nature, that the rationalists would absolutism some sixteen hundred years later, the miraculous was conceived in terms of a mastery of creation that could reflect only the power of the creator. For Harrington, the miracles of Jesus assert the establishment of the Kingdom of God—not a metaphysical system that demands belief in supernatural demons as a truth of the faith.<sup>49</sup> On a similar note, Carroll Stuhlmueller suggests, with reference to Luke’s Gospel, that the author is more concerned with reinforcing the “good news of salvation” than “excessive preoccupation with a miracle.”<sup>50</sup>

Todd Klutz brings linguistic and sociostylistic analysis to bear upon the biblical text, noting the difficulties associated with the interpretation of the exorcism accounts in Luke-Acts.<sup>51</sup> Klutz decries the tendency to interpret ancient texts through the lens of highly loaded, modern assumptions.<sup>52</sup> In particular, Klutz notes “the evocation of essentially modern categories in relation to texts,” regretting the “tendency to use a particular set of abstract categories of classification—ideas such as ‘superstition,’ ‘magic,’ and ‘primitive mentality’—which, though employed in a spirit of scholarly analysis, carry a heavy load of ideological baggage that puts the interpreter in a position inimical to interpretative clarity.”<sup>53</sup> Klutz thus dispels any illusion that a modern perspective, rooted in categories alien to the text, is devoid of cultural assumptions, and inherently superior to that of the biblical authors.

### **Demons as Free-Willed Creatures**

While a strand of New Testament scholarship suggests that biblical references to demons may not have been intended to denote the existence of demons as free-willed, intelligent creatures, the Church’s current teachings on the subject broadly reinforce the position of the 1975 study *Christian Faith and Demonology*.<sup>54</sup> The 1992 *Catechism*

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45 Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, 107.

46 Senior, *Jesus: A Gospel Portrait*, 107.

47 Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1991), 187.

48 Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 187.

49 Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 187.

50 Carroll Stuhlmueller, “The Gospel According to Luke,” *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds. Raymond Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland Murphy (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1990), 115-164 at 132.

51 Todd Klutz, *The Exorcism Stories in Luke-Acts: A Sociostylistic Reading* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University, 2004), 6.

52 Klutz, *The Exorcism Stories in Luke-Acts*, 6.

53 Klutz, *The Exorcism Stories in Luke-Acts*, 6.

54 The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Christian Faith and Demonology*.

of the Catholic Church draws upon mythical language in its exposition on the subject of Satan and of demons.<sup>55</sup> However, the catechism ultimately affirms that demons exist as ontological beings, asserting that they cannot repent of their sin and be saved. This soteriological concern suggests that demons are free-willed beings rather than figurative motifs.<sup>56</sup> However, even if one were to insist on the ontological existence of demons as intelligent beings, developments in harmatology challenge the assumption that demonic activity is necessarily distinguishable from sickness and other causes of suffering.

### Recognizing the Interplay of Personal and Systemic Sin

The literature of liberation theology and other self-consciously contextual theologies has argued that sin exists in social structures as well as in the personal realm. Gustavo Gutiérrez acknowledges that “In the liberation approach sin is not considered as an individual, private, or merely interior reality—asserted just enough to necessitate a ‘spiritual’ redemption which does not challenge the order in which we live. Sin is regarded as a social, historical fact, the absence of brotherhood and love in relationships among men. . . . Sin is evident in oppressive structures, in the exploitation of man by man, in the domination and slavery of peoples, races and social classes.”<sup>57</sup> Similarly, Marjorie Suchocki acknowledges the personal and systemic dimensions of sin arguing that “Sin is both individual and systemic: individually, the human condition is radical alienation from one’s true relationship to self, nature, and God; systemically, this translates into structures of domination and subordination that are enforced by the group in power.”<sup>58</sup>

Catholic Social Teaching has also recognized the reality of social sin.<sup>59</sup> Pope St. John Paul II proposed that in order to gain insight into the evil that afflicts the world, it is necessary to acknowledge the existence of “structures of sin.” “Sin’ and ‘structures of sin’ are categories which are seldom applied to the situation of the contemporary world. However, one cannot easily gain a profound understanding of the reality that confronts us unless we give a name to the root of the evils which afflict us.”<sup>60</sup> Elsewhere, the holy father remarks, “The mystery of sin is composed of this twofold wound which the sinner opens in himself and in his relationship with his neighbor. Therefore one can speak of personal and social sin.”<sup>61</sup>

This leads to the question as to how social sin relates to personal sin. Gregory Baum posits that personal and social sin exist in a dialectical relationship.<sup>62</sup> Baum’s account may serve as a corrective to a longstanding tendency in the tradition to neglect the social dimension of sin. Pope St. John Paul II, on the other hand, insists that the reality of social sin does not remove all personal responsibility for personal sin. “Whenever the church speaks of situations of sin or when she condemns as social sins certain situations or the collective behavior of certain social groups, big or small, or even of whole nations and blocs of nations, she knows and she proclaims that such cases of social sin are the result of the accumulation and concentration of many personal sins.”<sup>63</sup> While the criteria of knowledge, freedom, and grave matter might be invoked to mitigate the responsibility of persons or even cultures for an objectively sinful act, the invocation of social sin does not in itself absolve personal responsibility.<sup>64</sup> John Paul II in es-

55 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 391-395, 2851-2852.

56 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 393.

57 Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1973), 175-176.

58 Marjorie Suchocki, “Original Sin Revisited,” *Process Studies* 20, no. 4 (1991): 233-243 at 233.

59 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All* (USCCB :Washington, 1996), no. 77.

60 Pope St. John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican: 1987), no. 36, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_30121987\\_sollicitudo-rei-socialis\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_30121987_sollicitudo-rei-socialis_en.html).

61 Pope St. John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, no. 15, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_02121984\\_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html).

62 Gregory Baum, *Essays in Critical Theology* (Kansas City: Sheed & Ward, 1994), 189.

63 St. John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance*, no. 16.

64 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no.1857-1859.

sence argues that the effects of personal sin can become apparent in and through social sin. This is consistent with the harmatology of Piet Schoonenberg who viewed personal sin as giving rise to an aggregate “sin of the world.”<sup>65</sup>

If, then, the personal sin of human persons is insidiously intertwined with the sin of the world, including systemic evil, could it not be the case that the sin of disembodied persons is also meshed with systems and structures, ranging from the social to the pathogenic? As reflected in the 1992 catechism, the tradition has tended to present the agency of demons in collective rather than individualistic terms as most evident in allusions to the mythical motif of the fall of the angels.<sup>66</sup> While the catechism suggests individual culpability on behalf of the angels involved, the trope of warfare or rebellion represents a form of social unrest. Further, it might be argued that the disembodied sinner, lacking the kind of physical agency usually available to an embodied person, depends upon the manipulation and corruption of the “natural” in order to pursue its ends. The causal factors underlying apparently natural or physical evil—a famine, for example—may be related to warfare, pollution, distributive injustice, and sins of omission. Similarly, a heart attack, stroke, or nervous breakdown could be related to persecution.<sup>67</sup> If allegations of demonic oppression are accompanied by substance abuse, domestic conflict, and depression, the question arises as to whether such factors provide sufficient evidence to discount demonic agency, represent a human response to the trauma of demonic activity, provide an entry point for the demonic, or constitute the very means through which the demonic functions. To borrow from the terminology of process theology, the subjective aims of a person, demonic or otherwise, may converge with the objective past so as to oppose divine aims.<sup>68</sup> Sinners, whether embodied or not, do not act within a vacuum. Even if we were to challenge New Testament scholarship that regards the motif of the demonic as invoking a holistic and rather undifferentiated model of evil, and insist instead upon the ontological existence of demons as intelligent supernatural beings, their agency may be bound up with other forms of evil, social and natural.

### A Possible Interplay of the Demonic and Illness

If demons exist as free-willed disembodied creatures, it may be no less credible to posit that they operate in and through illness than that their malice causes distinctly supernatural symptoms. Writing in the third century, Origen posited such an ambiguous interplay of the natural and demonic in the transmission of epilepsy and lunacy.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, it might be argued, a rigid distinction between natural and supernatural symptoms implies a dualism that is ultimately a question of perspective. What was perceived as yesteryear’s “supernatural” may be today’s “natural,” given an evolving understanding of natural causes. Once a phenomenon is scientifically explained, however, it need not cease to have religious significance. This line of reasoning has been invoked with reference to the divine but it may also hold implications for the demonic.

With reference to images of God, Dietrich Bonhoeffer laments, “How wrong it is to use God as a stop-gap explanation for the incompleteness of our knowledge. If in fact the frontiers of knowledge are being pushed further and further back (and that is bound to be the case), then God is being pushed back with them, and is therefore continually in retreat. We are to find God in what we know, not in what we don’t know.”<sup>70</sup> Demons and the devil can also be invoked as stop-gap explanations for a lack of knowledge, identified with the inexplicable. Alvin Platinga, however, identifies the demonic with natural evil and proposes that if God does not inflict natural disasters on the

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65 Piet Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1965), 203-208. Cf. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 152.

66 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 392.

67 William Miller, “Researching the Spiritual Dimensions of Alcohol and Other Drug Problems,” *Addiction* 93, no. 7, (1998): 979-990.

68 Paul Custodio Bube, “Process Theological Ethics” in *Handbook of Process Theology*, ed. Donna Bowman (Danvers: Chalice, 2006), 149-160 at 140.

69 Origen, “Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew,” *New Advent*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/101613.htm>.

70 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (New York: Touchstone, 1997), 311.

world, the agency of invisible free-willed entities may be at work, and such entities may be what the tradition has called demons.<sup>71</sup>

What Platinga allows for in relation to the suffering of the world, Cardinal Suenens surmises at the level of personal suffering, affirming the possibility of “recognizing in the ‘possessed’ subjects, cases of a psychic, parapsychological or psychopathological nature, while accepting the hypothesis that there, too, evil influences of a spiritual kind may play a role, concomitantly or separately, and contribute to the morbid behavior.”<sup>72</sup> Thus, Suenens allows for the possibility that demons might work through or alongside “natural” maladies. Suenens comments, “The fact that a phenomenon can be explained according to our scientific categories does not allow us to rule out an interpretation belonging to another order or level of reality.”<sup>73</sup>

There are indications of an endeavor within the international medical community to locate experiences of the demonic within a psychiatric framework. The World Health Organization has added “possession syndrome” to its official category of mental disorders, regarding it as a culture-bound syndrome, while the American Psychiatric Association recognizes possession as a kind of trance disorder.<sup>74</sup> Granted, both organizations adopt a phenomenological perspective, regarding allegations of demonic possession as reflecting personal or cultural convictions, without affirming the ontological existence of demonic intelligences. Nonetheless, identifying demonic possession as a psychiatric syndrome contributes towards a more holistic view of the demonic, recognizing its nuanced relationship with sickness.

### Charismatic Perspectives

Popular author and psychologist Scott Peck opines, “I used to think that that Multiple Personality Disorder and possession were completely different things, different diagnoses. Now, given my experiences, it is quite clear to me that both can be operative simultaneously.”<sup>75</sup> Peck’s change of heart in this regard was influenced in part by the writings of Malachi Martin, a former Jesuit priest who operated a ministry of exorcism without the approval of a Roman Catholic bishop.<sup>76</sup>

Cuneo observes that Peck’s acknowledgment of an ambiguous relationship between sickness and demonic affliction struck a chord with charismatic Christians.<sup>77</sup> Barbara Schlemmon, a pioneer of the Catholic charismatic movement in the US, regarded Jesus’ command to heal and to drive out demons as denoting that there can be a “demonic dimension to sickness.”<sup>78</sup>

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71 Alvin Platinga, “The Free Will Defense,” *The Analytic Theist* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 16-48.

72 Leon Joseph Suenens, *Renewal and the Powers of Darkness* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1983), 181.

73 Suenens, *Renewal and the Powers of Darkness*, 181.

74 “Highlights of Changes from DSM-IV-TR to DSM-V” (Arlington: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2013), 10, [www.dsm5.org/Documents/changes%20from%20dsm-iv-tr%20to%20dsm-5.pdf](http://www.dsm5.org/Documents/changes%20from%20dsm-iv-tr%20to%20dsm-5.pdf); “Trance and Possession Disorders,” in *The ICD-10 Classification of Mental and Behavioural Disorders Diagnostic Criteria for Research—2015 Version* (Geneva: The World Health Organization, 2014), F 44.3, <http://apps.who.int/classifications/icd10/browse/2015/en#/F44.3>; Stefano Ferracuti, Roberto Sacco, and Renato Lazzari, “Dissociative Trance Disorder: Clinical and Rorschach Findings in Ten Persons Reporting Demon Possession and Treated by Exorcism,” *Journal of Personality Assessment* 66, no. 3 (1996): 525-539; Colin Ross, “Possession Experiences in Dissociative Identity Disorder: A Preliminary Study,” *Journal of Trauma Dissociation* 12, no. 4 (2011): 393-400.

75 Scott Peck, *People of the Lie: The Hope for Healing Human Evil* (New York: Touchstone, 1983), 192.

76 Cuneo, 43-47; Malachi Martin, *Hostage to the Devil* (New York: Reader’s Digest, 1976), 12; During an interview with Art Bell on the radio program *Coast to Coast*, April 4, 5, 1997, Malachi Martin refers to demonic manifestation in the form of “ailments.” <http://www.coasttocoastam.com/guest/martin-malachi/5751>.

77 Cuneo, 142; Peck, 62, 135-136.

78 Cuneo, 98.

Gregory Boyd emphasizes that Jesus viewed sickness, not as a punishment from God, but as the “work of the enemy.”<sup>79</sup> Boyd suggests that from a New Testament perspective, “all sickness and disease was considered a form of satanic oppression.”<sup>80</sup> Michael Green notes that Lk 13:16 attributes a case of physical infirmity to the agency of Satan, while Mt 9:32 attributes an instance of dumbness to demonic activity.<sup>81</sup> Lk 9:42 associates epilepsy with demons, and Mt 12:22 credits blindness to their influence. While emphasizing that not all illness should be attributed to demonic activity, Green tells of encountering a man whose epilepsy “seems to be of the type brought about by the enemy.”<sup>82</sup>

David Pytches detects a holistic response to sickness on the part of Jesus, remarking that “Jesus did not divide man into two—a soul to be saved and a body to be left sick and unhealed.”<sup>83</sup> Pytches advocates that the Church should continue Jesus’ ministry of *sozo*, that is, a holistic deliverance of body, mind, and spirit.<sup>84</sup> Cuneo notes that Charismatics at times refer to lust, addiction, and anger as demons.<sup>85</sup> Such references seem to regard demons as something other than fallen, disembodied intelligences, and imply a broader understanding of the demonic. The author refers to a US priest, regarded as a pillar of the Catholic charismatic movement, wondering whether this priest regarded demons as a “metaphor for psychological or emotional sickness, or old-fashioned evil.”<sup>86</sup>

In citing these perspectives that posit an interplay of sickness, human sin, and demonic activity, a note of caution may be in order. It is one thing to identify sickness with that which is opposed to the Kingdom of God and to human life lived in abundance. It would be quite another to identify sick people as evil. To clumsily associate mentally ill people with the demonic could exacerbate their stigmatization and perpetuate social sin.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

Exegetes adopting the historical—critical method detect in the New Testament a holistic view of evil whereby the demonic may become manifest in and through illness. Such scholars have recognized the ability of this holistic perspective to identify the capacity of evil to infiltrate and corrode everyday life, a far cry from a sensationalized model of supernatural evil. This holistic view of evil may challenge the longstanding position of the magisterium that the symptoms of demonic affliction can be distinguished from those of natural ailments. A perspective associated with some charismatic Christians, including Catholic charismatics, in our time, may reflect the biblical association of sickness and the demonic.

The Church’s presentation of doctrine still insists that demons exist as free-willed creatures rather than only as mythical motifs. This need not, however, completely negate the holistic view of evil detected by New Testament scholarship.

The present work proposes that a recognition of the interplay between personal and social sin in the human realm raises a question as to whether the personal agency of demons, disembodied and hence incapable of the kind of physical agency enacted by humans, might collude with other forms of evil, including the social, systemic, and

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79 Gregory Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil: Constructing a Trinitarian Warfare Theodicy* (Downer’s Grove: Intervarsity, 2001), 36.

80 Boyd, *Satan and the Problem of Evil*, 37.

81 Michael Green, *I Believe in Satan’s Downfall* (Seven Oaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1981), 87.

82 Green, *I Believe in Satan’s Downfall*, 87.

83 David Pytches, *Come Holy Spirit*, 18, <http://www.resourcearm.net/articles/comeholyspirit.html>.

84 Pytches, *Come Holy Spirit*, 18.

85 Cuneo, 42.

86 Cuneo, 42.

87 Senior, 107.

natural. Without dismissing the possible existence of demons as intelligent entities, evil may be experienced in a holistic manner, having “nudged” its way into the personal, social, and physical dimensions of daily life.<sup>88</sup>

These ruminations may pave the way for future research on the relationship between faith-based health care and spiritual care. Could the biblical perspective identified by Senior, whereby “sin and suffering and death are differing manifestations of the fundamental evil that afflicted the human world,” offer a compelling basis for a more

holistic, and more explicitly spiritual approach to treatment?<sup>89</sup> This could mean, in some cases, unapologetically integrating pastoral care into treatment approaches as a matter of course rather than as an ancillary provision.

At parish level, a more holistic approach to sin, suffering, and evil would raise questions regarding the relationship between the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Sacrament of the Sick, and rites of deliverance, including the deprecatory form of exorcism. Along these lines, Jurgen Moltmann has argued for a rite of healing for the victims of sin.<sup>90</sup> The goal might be to help ensure that suffering people, like Anneliese Michel, no longer fall between the cracks in a dualistic worldview so as to lament, “I am so torn apart, unintegrated . . . strung out between two poles.”<sup>91</sup>

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88 Senior, 107.

89 Senior, 107.

90 Jurgen Moltmann’s Reformation Day Address at Emory University, 2011, <http://theologytalks.com/jurgen-moltmann-lecture-reformation-day>.

91 Goodman, 59, 221.