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***Exorcism in the High Middle Ages, Crisis and Transformation***

Approaching the topic of exorcism during the High Middle Ages, one might anticipate this period to embody the very pinnacle of the practice, abundant with evidence of expelling demonic forces from those afflicted. One might imagine an established rite of exorcism, perhaps akin to the rite later promulgated by the *Rituale Romanum* at the beginning of the 17th Century, or at least an early precursor to that later more refined rite, which was the first official rite of exorcism[[1]](#footnote-1) Certainly, as I approached the topic, I expected to encounter numerous manuscripts, papal writings, exorcism manuals, and ample historical evidence pointing to some customary and recognized practice. After all, what else could this era, often cast as the epitome of sophistication for the established church, offer? However, my research yielded unexpected results.

Exorcism faced a crisis at the beginning of the High Middle Ages. André Goddu’s analysis suggests the period spanning from the 11th to the 14th century was a 'period of difficulty' for the practice.[[2]](#footnote-2) In other words, it didn’t constitute a stable tradition with minor variations subject to nuanced debate; rather, the practice underwent a profound transformation. From 1,000 CE to 1,200 CE, there is a conspicuous absence of any settled framework regarding the banishment of demons. This absence wasn't merely observed but recognized as a problem that, by the end of the 14th Century, the Church establishment felt compelled to address, by promulgating standardized prayer books containing rites of exorcism. [[3]](#footnote-3)

In this paper, I will argue that exorcism during the High Middle Ages of the Latin West was in crisis in at least two significant ways. Firstly, drawing upon hagiographical sources, accounts of difficulty in expelling demons rose notably in the High Middle Ages. While this increase in difficulty associated with exorcism might imply that there was some rise in the perceived power of the demonic, Francis Young suggests that it points to a deeper issue—a crisis for both the perception and practice of exorcism itself.[[4]](#footnote-4) This second, more inscrutable aspect of the crisis is the focus of my analysis. Specifically, I have sought to trace broad developments in exorcism's function, theology, and liturgy.

Ultimately, I have argued the transformation of exorcism from the 11th to the 14th century entails a shift in exorcistic practice from spontaneous acts of popular piety at Saints' shrines to a standardized liturgical ritual sanctioned by the Church, firmly rooted in its ecclesiastical and priestly authority. Furthermore, while this shift centralized the power of the established church over expelling demonic forces, the emergence of a more regulated rite was precipitated by the desire to suppress ecstatic religious practices, particularly those of women.[[5]](#footnote-5) Departing from Late Antiquity, there came to be a clearer distinction between spiritual affliction and physical infirmity. Ultimately, these changes in theology and practice would lead to a liturgical renewal in exorcism at the tail end of the High Middle Ages.

During Late Antiquity, the practice of exorcism was regarded as succeeding directly from the practice described in the accounts found in the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles.[[6]](#footnote-6) The cases of exorcism found detailed in hagiographical texts of the High Middle Ages, which recount the lives of earlier saints in Late Antiquity, mirrored those in Christian Scripture.[[7]](#footnote-7) Expulsion of the demonic was often described as sudden and the result of an encounter with a Saint or some site associated with a saintly person.[[8]](#footnote-8) These accounts have been interpreted as a means of bolstering the cases for individual saints, establishing the case for their sainthood based on miraculous encounters associated with specific places, often occurring after the candidate for sainthood’s death.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Eventually, the responsibility of the church to exorcise the demonic evolved into the formal role of the Exorcist during Late Antiquity. Those designated as exorcists held a distinct office in the church, separate from the priesthood, yet often serving as a stepping-stone toward it. Office holders were equipped with a set book of prayers, which included prayers that command demonic forces to depart using vocative, direct address. The formalization of the Exorcist's role reflected the establishment of several rites of exorcism and established the Exorcist as a settled aspect of Christian ministry and church practice.[[10]](#footnote-10) In the context of Late Antiquity, demonic forces were often perceived as physically manifest entities, capable of entering the body through various orifices.[[11]](#footnote-11) Exorcism was understood as a physical act of expulsion, necessitating direct intervention to rid the individual of the malevolent presence. This understanding blurred the distinction between physical ailments and spiritual conditions.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In this period, however, exorcism was primarily associated with conversion, specifically away from indigenous European pagan religions to Christianity.[[13]](#footnote-13) With the success of Christianity in Europe, exorcism would find itself in need of a reimagined purpose to sustain its relevance, moving away from conversion towards addressing the spiritual challenges of the predominantly Christian society. By the High Middle Ages, as much of Europe converted to Christianity, the foundational rationale for the continuation of exorcism would require reworking.

While exorcism in Late Antiquity was rooted in early Christian writings, Exorcists occupied a distinct role within the church hierarchy, wielding prayers and divine authority to combat malevolent spiritual forces and charged with healing spiritual conditions that often manifested physically; To endure exorcism would need to pivot from a mere symbol of conversion if it was to remain part of Christian praxis. It would need to adapt to the new challenges of Christian society and would require theological development during the High Middle Ages if it was to survive.

Following the Christianization of Europe, there was a notable shift in the nature and practice of exorcistic rituals. As Christianity became more widespread, exorcistic prayers began to be more directed towards natural forces or difficult circumstances.[[14]](#footnote-14) This shift reflects what some historians have described as the trivialization of exorcism, where the focus shifted from expelling demonic entities to addressing everyday challenges such as agricultural problems, issues with farm animals, or adverse weather conditions.[[15]](#footnote-15) One could contend that this shift represents a weakening of the spiritual significance of exorcism, as it became more widely applied to everyday concerns rather than specifically targeting individuals believed to be spiritually afflicted, however, this perspective underestimates the rising importance of engagement with the natural world. It is plausible, and perhaps more accurate, to view this shift as an acknowledgment of spiritual warfare manifesting in various aspects of the natural world. In this interpretation, the scope of exorcism expanded beyond individual cases of possession to encompass broader societal and environmental challenges perceived as susceptible to demonic influence. Additionally, during this period, there is evidence of continued widespread amuletic use and the use of material sacred objects, such as holy water, in exorcism rituals targeted at the natural world.[[16]](#footnote-16) These practices were often employed as protective measures against malevolent forces or in response to threatening natural circumstances, which further underscores the rise in exorcism’s association with the prevention of environmental disasters believed to be demonic.

As Christianity spread throughout Europe during the High Middle Ages, the specific rites aimed at exorcising demons from individuals began to diminish. By the 12th Century, these rituals had largely vanished, leaving behind only remnants of exorcistic prayers similar to the baptismal rites of the Church.[[17]](#footnote-17) Thus, exorcism became predominantly associated with the sacrament of baptism, administered largely to infants by priests and bishops. The distinct office of the Exorcist, once prominent in Late Antiquity, became a mere formality in the process of ordaining priests.[[18]](#footnote-18) For centuries, the baptismal rite had included a minor exorcism and the use of blessed salt, employed to cast out demons before the administration of baptismal water. [[19]](#footnote-19) In the High Middle Ages, the practice of exorcism would become so closely intertwined with baptism, such that surviving exorcistic prayers outside of infant baptisms were simply direct adaptations of those used in the baptismal rite.[[20]](#footnote-20) This meant that the sole individual performing exorcisms over persons was the priest, primarily at the moment of baptism.

The transition from exorcism occurring in places associated with saints to a practice of adjuration, substantiated by the authority of the Church and its priestly office, signifies a significant shift in the function and administration of exorcistic rituals. Exorcism had once been tied to the lives of Saints and the places and shrines associated with them. The stories of instantaneous and miraculous healings attributed to visiting saint-related sites, which served to substantiate the sanctity of these individuals and the significance of also placed the possibility for spiritual healing within the realm of popular lay piety. However, popular lay piety would soon become an issue for the Catholic Church.

As Goddu contends, one reason for the crisis in exorcism during this period was the perceived failure of exorcism to achieve the same results as in previous generations.[[21]](#footnote-21) Stories of exorcisms during this era often depicted struggles, such as the account of Saint Francis and the Franciscan companion.[[22]](#footnote-22) The exorcism was achieved only after great difficulty and had to be retried to take full effect. These narratives highlighted the growing unease surrounding the efficacy of exorcism, as new challenges arose that did not neatly align with earlier experiences. These difficulties prompted a theological reevaluation of the practice, leading to a heightened emphasis on the "discernment of the spirits," a diagnostic approach derived from Saint John’s advice to test the spirits.[[23]](#footnote-23) This need to distinguish between good and evil spirits became particularly relevant with the emergence of claims of being possessed by holy spirits, especially among groups like the Beguines.[[24]](#footnote-24) While there was a historical tradition of demons being associated with prophecy,[[25]](#footnote-25) the concept of holy possession was a novel phenomenon.

Moreover, the rise of ecstatic spiritual practices, particularly among lay women, posed a challenge to the authority of the male-dominated hierarchical Church. Claims of direct communion with God threatened the Church's assertion of exclusive access to God through the administration of sacraments. As sacramental theology was strengthened, so was the theological justification for practices such as Indulgences and the Treasury of Merit, which could be viewed as means of mediating access to God through the official actions of the church hierarchy.

The convergence of these three trends—the perceived failure of exorcism, the surge in ecstatic popular piety, and the strengthening of sacramental theology—had profound theological implications for the understanding of exorcism. Goddu notes that scholar Arnold Angenendt suggests that these developments gave rise to a new theological category known as "sacramentals", to which exorcism was assigned.[[26]](#footnote-26) Unlike sacraments, which were believed to be invariably effective, sacramentals were seen as sometimes only partially effective.[[27]](#footnote-27) This shift in perspective underscored the need for a more careful and nuanced approach to spiritual healing, akin to the application of a remedy after critical assessment of a spiritual disease. Like medical treatment, exorcism might require multiple attempts for efficacy, highlighting the complex nature of spiritual healing and the discernment of spirits necessary in addressing the spiritually afflicted.

With the ascent of scholasticism, theological inquiry grew increasingly intricate. Applying the scholastic method of categorization to exorcism resulted in the advocacy for an almost therapeutic approach, complete with attendant investigative and diagnostic methodologies. On this Goddu writes the following:

The solution of high scholasticism was ingenious: demonic possession was interpreted as the exercise of demonic influence on a human being externally and internally. The power of the devil on the internal can be strengthened through sin, but exorcism protects one from this internal influence. The physical effects of demonic influence, however, may remain even after a successful exorcism. It is clear that by the late thirteenth century the earlier and especially biblical blending of healing with exorcism had undergone modification. Indeed, in the face of newly available Greek medical and philosophical texts which tended to naturalistic explanations of functional disorders.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Theologians, like Thomas Aquinas, began to differentiate between spiritual afflictions and purely physical ailments, drawing upon rediscovered medical and philosophical frameworks to understand the nature of disease.[[29]](#footnote-29) This trend underscores the interaction of theological and intellectual discoveries during the High Middle Ages, as theologians grappled with complex theological questions and sought to reconcile spiritual beliefs with the reemergence of ancient scientific and medical knowledge. Overall, the theological trends shed light on the broader crisis in exorcism during the High Middle Ages, accentuating the dynamic interplay between theological reflection, institutional authority, and societal anxieties surrounding claims of both holy and unholy spiritual possession.

Upon the recommendation of the scholastic theological inquiry of the 13th Century, the 14th Century could be seen as one of liturgical experimentation regarding the testing and expulsion of spirits deemed demonic. However, the transition to a more consolidated and formalized rite of exorcism wouldn’t take place until well after the period.[[30]](#footnote-30) As mentioned earlier, the rites of exorcism that survived this period were largely adapted from the baptismal rite. So as new sacramentaries were produced, they largely experimented with the language of the baptismal rite. However, as the need for the practice of exorcism rose in response to ecstatic expressions of popular piety, there seems to be a growing recognition of the need for a standardized and authoritative rite to address spiritual afflictions comprehensively, and so diocese and orders of monastic communities experimented. The absence of an authoritative rite of exorcism, as evidenced by the excision of dedicated exorcism rites in the sacramentaries of the period, is in itself interesting. However, as we exit the High Middle Ages, the movement from experimentation to a felt need for a formalized rite of exorcism reflects broader changes in liturgical understanding and practice within the Christian community, which would need to be consistent across the church and grounded in the authority of the Catholic Church.

In conclusion, the examination of exorcism during the High Middle Ages reveals a period of profound transformation and crisis within the practice of spiritual healing. From its origins in the Christianization of Europe to its institutionalization within the Church, exorcism underwent significant changes in function, theology, and liturgy. Initially rooted in place-based happenings associated with saints and sudden miraculous healings, exorcism evolved first into a practice that sought to defend against all ecological adversities, and later into a practice that aimed at eccentric forms of piety. This eventually would lead to a call for a standardized ritual, which coincided with the liturgical reforms on the Late Middle Ages. This transition reflected broader shifts in theological understanding, societal anxieties, and liturgical innovation during this period.

The central thesis of this paper posits that exorcism during the High Middle Ages faced a crisis marked by the need to adapt to new challenges of Christianization and theological developments. The crisis, initiated by the perceived failure of exorcism, grew into a complex analysis into the nature of spiritual affliction and the call for discernment in addressing spiritual activity. Similarly, the transition from experimentation in this area to the need for a universal and formalized rite of exorcism, despite the long absence of such a rite, has a lot to tell us about the period. This analysis of trends in exorcism reveals the dynamic interplay between theological reflection, liturgical practice, and societal anxieties during the High Middle Ages. As the Church grappled with changing theological paradigms and societal angst, exorcism eventually reemerged as a focal point for navigating spiritual challenges and affirming the authority of the Catholic Church. In light of these findings, its evident that exorcism during the High Middle Ages was not merely a static tradition but a dynamic and adaptive practice fundamentally shaped by theological, institutional, and cultural forces.

Ellis encouraged me to explore the use of amulets during this time and to clarify the difference between healing and exorcism, prompting me to deepen my research and analysis in these areas. I tried to bring those points up and found additional research to support those claims. Nelson's question about exorcism in the baptismal rite prompted me to investigate when exorcism truly became its own distinct ritual. Unfortunately, it really wasn’t until after the period that anything standard arrived. But his question helped shape my research.

1. Francis Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For analysis that charts the number and difficulty of exorcisms in Saint Lives, see André Goddu, “The Failure of Exorcism in the Middle Ages” in *Soziale Ordnungen im Selbstverständnis des* Mittelalters, ed. Albert Zimmermann (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1980), 544-548. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For and English analysis Florence Chave-Mahir’s work on liturgical frameworks for exorcism in the High Middle Ages, see Francis Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 37-73. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For a detailed account of gender and exorcism of this period, see Nancy Mandeville Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages.* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 40 41, muse.jhu.edu/book/68370. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eric Sorensen, *Possession and Exorcism in the New Testament and Early Christianity.* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 2002. 224-225. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. See, Luke 8:26-39 & Acts 16:16-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Marek Tamm, "Saints and the Demoniacs: Exorcistic Rites in Medieval Europe (11th - 13th Century),". *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore* 23-24/2003: 7-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid., 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Moshe Sluhovsky, “The Devil in the Convent.” *The American Historical Review* 107, no. 5 (2002): 1393. <https://doi.org/10.1086/532851>.; Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 229-231. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 69-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 231. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 237. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid,237. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 33.; John the Deacon, Epistle to Senarius 3 in Wilmart, A. (ed.), Auteurs Spirituels et Textes dévots du Moyen Âge latin (Paris: Etudes Augustiniennes, 1971), 171–5. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 234 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Goddu, “The Failure of Exorcism,” 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Forcén, Carlos Espí, and Fernando Espí Forcén. “Demonic Possessions and Mental Illness: Discussion of Selected Cases in Late Medieval Hagiographical Literature.” *Early Science and Medicine* 19, no. 3 (2014): 264–67. http://www.jstor.org/stable/24269375. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 237.; 1 John 4:1-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Newman, Barbara. “Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the Thirteenth Century.” *Speculum* 73, no. 3 (1998): 733–70. https://doi.org/10.2307/2887496. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Goddu, “The Failure of Exorcism,” 550. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 104 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Goddu, “The Failure of Exorcism,” 551. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Caciola, *Discerning Spirits,* 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)