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## Bollettino bibliografico: Schede

### Metodologia e varia

F. YOUNG, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, Palgrave Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, Palgrave MacMillan, Cambridge, Cambridge Theological Federation, 2016, € 76,99

For the eminent series Palgrave, Historical Studies in Witchcraft and Magic, Francis Young has written the first English book dedicated to the whole history of exorcism from the perspective of Church history, considering it as a crucial factor in Catholic Christianity. This book, edited by Palgrave MacMillan, advocates that since its origin, exorcism is not just a religious act, but also a political one: 'always involves an exercise of power' (p. 25). The author investigated both the periods when the use of exorcism was declining and periods of rebirth, illustrating how the development of theological, liturgical and legal grounds of exorcism proceeded hand-in-hand with the development of the Catholic Church, and concentrating on it rather than the physical phenomenon of possession. The practice of exorcism was promoted by different factors at different times, but it is possible to mark a *fil rouge* which has its roots in times of crisis, foremost due to division within the church and the fear of an external enemy. By following the chronological order, the author shows the continuity and discontinuity of some essential components of the politics of exorcism. The book begins by treating exorcism in the early Christian West (300-900 AD). Although the New Testament deals with the subject of exorcism, the author chose not to discuss it, because it lies beyond his stated aim of explaining the politics of exorcism within the Catholic Church. Exorcism was a defining feature of early Christianity, and it was established as part of the baptismal rite in Rome around 250, founding its liturgy on the *Traditio Apostolica*, which established a clear distinction between pre-baptismal exorcism and exorcism of the possessed. Protecting the candidate just *hic et nunc*, and not in a large spectrum of time, pre-baptismal exorcism cannot be regarded as a real exorcism but rather as an apotropaic act. Indeed, no liturgical rites of extra-baptismal have survived from the earliest centuries of the Church, probably because magical texts were rather used to ward off evil spirits. To complicate matters, even the ritual of pre-baptismal exorcism was reinterpreted in non-exorcist terms from the fourth century onwards by Latin Christian authors. The earliest references to exorcism outside the context of baptism are in apologetic literature. Exorcism's origins in the liturgy are first to be found in the Gregorian Sacramentary, and afterwards in the Gellone Sacramentary in the eighth century. The author offers a clear comparison of all the relevant documents, including the writings of John the Deacon, the Gelasian Sacramentary (in which we can find the earliest liturgies for exorcisms of demons) and the Ordo Romanus XI. The Middle Ages (900-1500) constitute a crisis' period for exorcism: the Catholic Church did not have a centralized government, now that the pagan threat had been resolved. Theologians mostly dealt with diabolic possession, but only in a speculative

way, approaching the problem of the Devil from a philosophical prospective, and the author carefully investigates the theological foundation from Thomas Aquinas to many other thinkers. During the Middle Ages we can observe the gradual decreasing meaning of pre-baptismal exorcism, in tandem with the growing Christianization of Western Europe, although the two developments are not directly linked. If previously exorcism had been a charismatic practice focused on the cult of the saints, in this period it was transformed into a liturgical rite invoking priestly authority.

In the sixteenth century, with the rise of Protestantism, witchcraft also began to represent a threat. On the Catholic side, we can observe a two-pronged approach: on the one hand the possessed were almost raised to the rank of the living saints, on the other hand they were tainted by witchcraft and the diabolic, so whether virtuous or sinful, the possessed remained a victim of the Devil. An important historical turning point is represented by liturgical reforms, chiefly by the 1614 *Rituale Romanum*. This new liturgy ignored the contemporary manuals on exorcism and instead was grounded on the ancient Gelasian Sacramentary and Ordo XI, turning exorcism into an exceptional practice defined and driven by the Canon. Much like the demonology developed by the inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger - the authors of *Malleus Maleficarum* - and also by Girolamo Menghi, the new ritual endorsed the assumption that a witch could have been responsible, but it emphasized that not all the possessions resulted from witchcraft: exorcism is a sort of 'negative miracle' (p. 119). By addressing the issue of the frequent cases of collective possessions - especially in convents and nunneries - the author points out that, compared to medieval exorcism, its early modern variant was characterized by a kind of skepticism. For this reason it raises the possibility of a therapeutic solution, and sometimes doctors come into play alongside exorcists. Exorcism thus seems to have failed: if the main purpose of this practice was to demonstrate the existence of possession, clear demonstrations were so difficult, that the Church could not do anything but object to exorcists, bringing exorcism into the decline in the eighteenth century. During the same period, exorcism was seeking to establish itself also beyond Europe, but, as the author underlines, the Catholic Church was more cautious in performing exorcism, even when dealing with spirits in rural areas would encourage religious conversions. Exorcism in these centuries has been very important, but with few exceptions, little attention has been paid to the liturgical and theological development of exorcism, and most of studies have focused on witchcraft and diabolic possession.

Then, the text takes into account the Age of Reason, in which attacks on exorcism came from several sides: within the Catholic world skepticism was inspired not by scientific rationalism, but by political opposition to those religion orders, such as Jesuits and Capuchins, who exploited exorcism for promoting their missions. Undoubtedly, the Enlightenment also had an impact, so that in the first years of the eighteenth century the Congregation of Index forbade all manuals of exorcism which based their liturgy on anything other than the *Rituale Romanum*. It seemed a challenge to exorcism, which didn't arrive just from enlightened regimes, but from within the Church itself: in 1774 pope Benedict XIV urged the Italian bishops to use the rite of exorcism with caution. However, the century of Romanticism and gothic literature still required exorcism at the grass-roots level. Bishops with a more conservative attitude also continued to be willing to tolerate the practice.

In the nineteenth century, a growing fear of Satanism was encouraged by pope Leo XIII, who promoted a new apocalyptic panic through the addition of decrees to the *Rituale Romanum*, but mostly by modifying the liturgy of exorcism. Leo personally wrote the exorcism against Satan and the apostate angels. Some features of his liturgy have been decisive: the apostate angels were referred to the guilty of secular Europe, and also the

rite of exorcism was directed against Satan as the enemy of the Church as an Institution, rather than of God and humankind.

In the twentieth century, the rise of psychology and psychiatry cast doubts on the real validity of exorcism. During the post-Vatican II era the Church's attitude to exorcism suggests a sort of emancipation from this practice. Yet, at the same time, the fear of Satanic conspiracies together with the preaching of contemporary exorcists as Gabriele Amorth and Josè Antonio Fortea - who opposed to the official demonology by introducing new approaches to this practice - could be considered as a reason of the rebirth of exorcism. Furthermore, the acknowledgment of parapsychology by Catholic demonology could be able to explain the revival of exorcism in contemporary ages: from this perspective not only was demonic possession able to conceal itself as mental illness, but in addition, a possessed person could be a victim of the occult powers of their psyche, making possible the growth of the «science of occult» (p. 207)

This analysis shows that, though marginalized for so long, exorcism is not dead at all. Although it is an effective summary of the entire history of exorcism within the Catholic Christianity, the author provides few new interpretations. Notwithstanding the hard work of devoting a complete book on the whole history of exorcism in Catholic Christianity, the author succeeded in bringing it to completion by accompanying the text with primary sources and by proposing actual philological comparisons of the documents. The cases submitted in support of his theses are framed in a substantial secondary bibliography which the author commands very well. Moreover, he always correlates exorcism with the practices which dealt with it, like magic, witchcraft, and its relationship with medicine.

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