Episode Book

EPISODE #5738

Exorcism: 7 Religions, 67 Rites, Zero Records

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SYNOPSIS

Exorcism comes from the Greek exorkismos — "binding by oath." It's a legal act, not a medical one, and it's older than any institution that codified it. This episode traces possession belief from the 63 documented dybbuk cases in Jewish tradition through medieval Europe, where possession was the only available concept for psychoses and epilepsy, to the modern bureaucratic machinery of screening procedures and bishop's permissions. Seven major traditions have codified rites — Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, Latter-day Saints, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism — and Sikhism explicitly rejects the whole framework. Along the way: the Earling, Iowa case of 1928, the Roland Doe case that inspired The Exorcist, and the criminal convictions that followed Anneliese Michel's death in 1976.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Hilbert's line from the charger episode. Underpowered chargers make a device act as if it's possessed. And the moment he said it, I thought, that's not a metaphor, that's the whole history of the idea.



Herman

It really is. "Something invisible got in and made it behave against its nature" is one of the oldest sentences humans have ever built.



Corn

And Daniel picked up the thread. Here's what he wrote in. He wants us to trace the history of human belief in demonic possession, because the idea has spawned countless horror movies, but regardless of what you think about religion or the paranormal, it's a ritual taken seriously by real institutions. He names the Catholic Church, and, with much less fanfare, certain adherents of Judaism. Then three questions. How many religions today actively promote possession as part of their dogma with defined rites for exorcism, and are there any estimates of how many exorcisms are performed under the auspices of various church groups every year.



Herman

Three clean questions with a very messy answer attached to the third one.



Corn

So let's trace this from the ancient world to the modern exorcist's office.



Herman

Start with the word, because it tells you what the ritual is. Exorcism comes from the Greek exorkismos, and it means binding by oath. The exorcist isn't negotiating, he isn't bargaining, he's putting the entity under oath and making it swear to leave.



Corn

That's a legal act, not a medical one.



Herman

That's the key to the whole thing. Possession was pre-modern medicine's explanation for what we now call psychosis, epilepsy, dissociation, Tourette's. Before you have a category called neurology, the category you have is "something got in."



Corn

So this is really about how humans explain the inexplicable.



Herman

And what happens when that explanation gets institutional power. Because it didn't stay folklore. It got codified. Rites, screening procedures, training courses, paperwork. The framework is ancient, but the machinery around it is modern and bureaucratic, and that's the tension of the whole episode.



Corn

Alright. Deep history first, then the survey, then the numbers.



Herman

This framework is older than any institution that codified it. Possession and exorcism show up across cultures independently. It's one of the small number of explanatory moves humans seem to reach for everywhere.



Corn

The Jewish version is the one Daniel flagged, and it's the one most people don't know. The dybbuk.



Herman

A dybbuk is the spirit of a dead person, and it's the traditional Jewish variant of possession. Always considered malevolent, never a friendly ghost hanging around the house, and always treated by exorcism.



Corn

How many cases are we actually talking about? Because "traditional folklore" usually means three stories and a rumor.



Herman

Better than that. A 1989 study looked at sixty-three documented dybbuk cases. Sixty-three, written down, over centuries. And the framing the authors used is the part that's stuck with me. They called it a culture-bound syndrome, and they described the exorcism itself as a working alliance between society and a selected group of deviants.



Corn

Say that again.



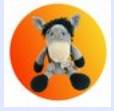
Herman

A working alliance. The community and the possessed person are cooperating in the ritual, whether either of them would describe it that way. The person gets an explanation for what's happening to them that isn't "you're broken." The community gets a way to reintegrate them instead of expelling them. It's a social technology.



Corn

Which is a much stranger and more interesting claim than "they were superstitious."



Herman

It's the first hint of the pattern we're going to see all episode. The ritual isn't only about the demon. It's about what the group does with a person it can't otherwise place.



Corn

Now take that into medieval Europe, where the stakes go up considerably.



Herman

There's a review from 1996, in a Norwegian medical journal, and the sentence I'd put on a wall is this. In medieval Europe, possession was the only available concept for a bundle of neuropsychiatric disorders. Dissociative states, psychoses, and epilepsy.



Corn

The only available concept.



Herman

The only one. There's no competing vocabulary. Astrology was there, humoral theory was there, but possession was the one that produced an intervention. If your neighbor is speaking in a voice that isn't hers and throwing furniture, you have exactly one tool in the toolbox, and it's a priest.



Corn

And the people burned as witches.



Herman

Many of them were, by any reasonable modern reading, visibly mentally disturbed. Which means the framework didn't just explain them. It condemned them.



Corn

That's the flip side of the working alliance. The same framework that reintegrates in one community executes in another.



Herman

Same belief, different institutions, very different outcomes. Which is worth sitting with, because it means the belief itself isn't the whole story. What matters is who's holding it.



Corn

And then medicine arrives, and the framework should collapse. It doesn't.



Herman

What it does instead is retreat and then come back wearing a lab coat. There's a lovely paper on Tourette's syndrome from 2012 that traces exactly this. First it's witchcraft and demonic possession. Then psychoanalysis gets hold of it, and it's reclassified as a masturbatory equivalent.



Corn

I'm sorry, a what?



Herman

A masturbatory equivalent. That was the psychoanalytic explanation. Then immunology. Then genetics.



Corn

So the same condition gets four completely different explanations over a hundred years, and the possession framework was just the first one out.



Herman

Every new paradigm replaces the last and speaks with total confidence while it does it. That should make all of us slightly humble about whatever we're confident about now.



Corn

And in every one of those transitions, someone with the old explanation is left standing there with a ritual and no diagnosis.



Herman

Which is why this never fully dies. The need it served didn't go away. It just got outcompeted in the clinic.



Corn

Then 1949 happens, and the whole thing goes Hollywood.



Herman

The case of Roland Doe. Psychiatrists and doctors couldn't explain his symptoms, so an exorcism was performed. That case became the chief inspiration for William Peter Blatty's novel The Exorcist, published in 1971, film in 1973.



Corn

And there's an earlier one that's even better documented. Earling, Iowa, 1928.



Herman

Emma Schmidt. A fourteen-day exorcism, and it's described as the most well-documented alleged possession in history. It's also a minor inspiration for the same film.



Corn

Fourteen days. That's not a ritual, that's a residency.



Herman

It's a good reminder that the length is part of the practice. This isn't a fifteen-minute procedure. It's an ordeal, and everyone involved is exhausted by the end.



Corn

Now the cases where this stops being fascinating and starts being a crime scene.



Herman

Anneliese Michel. Germany, 1975 into 1976. Sixty-seven exorcisms. She died weighing sixty-eight pounds. Two priests and her parents were convicted of negligent manslaughter.



Corn

Convicted. In a courtroom, by a modern state.



Herman

And then Romania in 2005, the Tanacu exorcism. A mentally ill nun died, and the priest was convicted. These aren't from the medieval period. The Michel case is within living memory for a lot of people.



Corn

What those cases have in common is that the medical system had already failed them before the exorcism got involved.



Herman

That's the pattern, and it's the thread that runs through the whole episode. The reason someone ends up in an exorcist's office is very often that the psychiatrist's office didn't have an answer.



Corn

Which sets up the survey. Because the interesting question isn't whether any religion does this. It's how many, and how differently.



Herman

Seven major traditions, at minimum, with codified possession beliefs and defined rites. And that spans well over half the world's population.



Corn

Start with Rome, since that's the one everyone knows from the movies.



Herman

Catholicism has what's called the Major Exorcism, in Section Eleven of the Rituale Romanum, the rite was revised in 1999. And the requirements are where the Hollywood picture falls apart. Ordained priests only. Express permission from the bishop. And medical and psychiatric screening before the rite is performed.



Corn

The Church itself treats most of these cases as psychiatric first.



Herman

The Church made that call first, long before the skeptics arrived. There's also a distinction people miss. Major exorcism is one thing. Minor exorcisms happen all the time, in baptismal rites, in the blessing of salt. And then there's deliverance ministry, which is a different category again.



Corn

Eastern Orthodoxy is the opposite approach.



Herman

Every Orthodox priest is trained and equipped to perform exorcisms, particularly in baptism. Exorcism prayers appear in every liturgical book. Saint Basil, Saint John Chrysostom. The theology is that the whole Church has the task of an exorcist.



Corn

Whereas in Rome you need a bishop's signature. In Constantinople, it's parish standard.



Herman

Lutheranism sits in a middle position. Pastoral handbooks going back to the sixteenth century describe possession symptoms in real detail. Knowledge of secrets, speaking unlearned languages, supernatural strength. And the handbook requires a physician consult before any major exorcism.



Corn

A physician consult. In the sixteenth century.



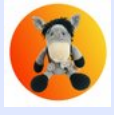
Herman

It's the same instinct you see in the Catholic screening rule. The religious institution is the one proposing a differential diagnosis.



Corn

Latter-day Saints.



Herman

Two methods. Anointing with oil and the laying on of hands, or raising the hand to the square and commanding in the name of Jesus. Only Melchizedek priesthood holders. And here's the detail that matters for Daniel's third question. Exorcisms are not recorded.



Corn

Deliberately not recorded.



Herman

Which is one of the reasons there's no real global number. It's not that nobody counted. It's that counting was never the point.



Corn

Islam.



Herman

Ruqya. Quranic recitation, often with a sheikh's hand on the head, frequently with Zamzam water and attar. It traces back to accounts of Muhammad and Jesus performing exorcisms, so it's woven into the tradition from the start rather than bolted on.



Corn

Hinduism.



Herman

Bhootas, pretas, pisachas. The Atharva Veda is the most exorcism-focused of the Vedas, and the means are mantra and yajna. There's a site in Rajasthan, the Mehandipur Balaji Temple, that's famous for this.



Corn

Buddhism.



Herman

Paritta recitation from the Pali Canon. The Atanatiya Sutta is regarded as particularly effective. And in the Tibetan tradition there's the Gutor festival, which drives out negativity and evil spirits at the end of the year.



Corn

Taoism.



Herman

Fashi ritual specialists. Fulu talismans, chanting, mudras. It varies a lot by sect and region, so it's harder to describe in one line than the others.



Corn

That's seven, and then Daniel's "much less fanfare" point is already covered by the dybbuk.



Herman

Right. Judaism is in there. It's just not organized the way the Catholic Church is. There's no Roman office, no international association. It's a folk and textual tradition, and it pops up when it pops up.



Corn

And there's a negative case worth naming, because it proves this isn't universal.



Herman

Sikhism. Explicitly does not believe in demonic possession. Exorcism is considered a violation of the Sikh Code of Conduct.



Corn

So this isn't something every religion drifts into. It's a choice some traditions make and others refuse.



Herman

Which means the "pre-modern medicine" explanation can't be the whole story either. If it were purely what you do before you have neurology, every tradition would have it. They don't.



Corn

On to the number, which is where this gets funny.



Herman

There is no central registry. The LDS Church doesn't record them. Most traditions don't publish counts. So anyone who gives you a clean global figure is guessing.



Corn

What's the best proxy?



Herman

The International Association of Exorcists. Founded 1994 in Rome by six priests, including Father Gabriele Amorth, and its statutes were approved by the Vatican in 2014. Around two hundred fifty members from thirty countries. All of them priests authorized by their bishops.



Corn

Two hundred fifty. That's smaller than a mid-sized high school.



Herman

And it's a floor, not a total. It's the institutional Catholic exorcist corps, the ones with the paperwork and the bishop's permission. There are plenty of people doing deliverance work who aren't in that number.



Corn

Poland for comparison.



Herman

A hundred fifty exorcists as of 2018. In one country.



Corn

So the Catholic institutional footprint globally is roughly the size of the Polish one plus a bit. That tells you something about how concentrated this is.



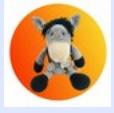
Herman

Then there's the trend line, which is the actual story. There's a figure from Malachi Martin's Hostage to the Devil, published 1976, of a fifty percent increase in exorcisms between the early sixties and the mid-seventies. And that spike is attributed largely to the media attention around The Exorcist.



Corn

The movie caused the demand.



Herman

That's the claim, and the timing is hard to argue with. And then by 2018 the demand was globally rising, and the Association of Exorcists itself was describing it as a pastoral emergency.



Corn

An emergency declared by the people doing the work.



Herman

The Vatican responded institutionally. It started holding an annual exorcist training course. And in 2019, it opened that course to non-Catholic Christians for the first time.



Corn

Which tells you where the growth is coming from.



Herman

Charismatic Christianity. That's the analysis from Andrew Chesnut, who studies this. The disproportionate share of exorcists are in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal. And the psychiatrist Richard Gallagher attributes the rise to two things happening at once. More people believing they're possessed, and a drift away from mainstream religion toward the occult.



Corn

People leaving the pew and picking up something else on the way out.



Herman

And here's the number that should stop everyone. Father Vincent Lampert, who is an exorcist, says only about one in five thousand people who believe they are possessed actually are.



Corn

One in five thousand.



Herman

By the Church's own estimate. So the overwhelming majority of people seeking an exorcism are not possessed by the definition of the institution they're asking for help.



Corn

Which means the interesting question isn't what they're possessed by. It's what they were looking for and didn't find somewhere else.



Herman

And the UK data points in the same direction. As of 2017, exorcisms were increasing there, mostly in charismatic and Pentecostal churches and in West African origin communities. And a Church of England think tank called Theos issued a warning about it. They said these were often performed on people with mental health problems, who then stopped taking their medication. They called it a well-meaning initiative with the potential for serious harm, and a possible form of psychological abuse.



Herman

It's a generous framing, and I think it's the right one. Nobody in that room is trying to hurt anybody. They're trying to help, and they're using the only tool they have.



Corn

The same sentence we said about medieval Europe. The only available concept.



Herman

And it's still true in twenty-first-century Britain.



Corn

So Daniel's third question, honestly answered, is that nobody knows.



Herman

Nobody knows. Tens of thousands of exorcisms and deliverance prayers are plausibly performed worldwide each year, but there's no institution that keeps comprehensive records, and some institutions deliberately don't. The honest answer to "how many" is that the number doesn't exist as a number.



Corn

And the more useful statistic is the ratio. Four thousand nine hundred ninety-nine out of five thousand people seeking this are not, by the Church's own reckoning, possessed.



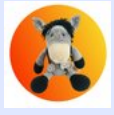
Herman

Which puts the whole phenomenon in a different light. It's a mental health service wearing vestments.



Hilbert

What do they do with the ones who aren't possessed?



Herman

That's the question the number raises and doesn't answer. What happens after the screening says no.



Hilbert

I ask because my wife's uncle did that job. Diocesan exorcist, assistant pastor, small diocese. He was not the man in the movies, he was a man with a caseload and a bad back.



Corn

A caseload.



Hilbert

Notes in a folder. He'd see people Tuesday evenings, mostly. And the folder was for the bishop. Every case needed a written report before anything got authorized, and the reports read like clinical files. Sleep, appetite, medication, family history, whether the person had been seen by a psychiatrist.



Herman

That matches what the rituals require, but hearing it as a Tuesday evening is different.



Hilbert

He had a card in his wallet. Laminated, held together with tape by the end. Three psychiatrists and a neurologist, with their numbers on it. He called them more than he called the bishop.



Corn

Did he believe he was dealing with demons?



Hilbert

He believed he was dealing with something real. But he was clear about which one of them carried the card. He said most of the people who came to him had been to a doctor already. Some of them had been to three.



Herman

That's the same pattern we keep circling. They arrive after the clinical route has run out.



Hilbert

He'd see someone for an hour, say the prayers if it came to that, and then send them to one of the four names on the card. That was most of the job. The ones he got stuck on were the ones where the psychiatrist said nothing was wrong.



Corn

Meaning the doctor found no diagnosis.



Hilbert

Meaning the person was told there was nothing wrong with them while they were tearing at their own arms. He couldn't do much with that either. But he didn't tell them nothing was wrong.



Herman

That's a real distinction. Absence of a diagnosis isn't the same as absence of suffering.



Hilbert

He didn't frame it that way. He said if a man is drowning, you don't argue about the water. The card was for later. First you get him out.



Corn

And what happened to the card, when he retired?



Hilbert

Passed it to the next man. Two of the four numbers still worked.



Herman

That detail does something the statistics can't. One in five thousand sounds like a filter that rejects almost everyone. But the man on the other side of the filter is trying to serve the four thousand nine hundred ninety-nine too. Most of his job is the referral, not the rite.



Corn

And that reframes the rise in demand entirely. If the typical person walking in isn't possessed, then the growth isn't a growth in possession. It's a growth in people who couldn't find help anywhere else.



Herman

Which connects to what Theos said in the UK. If the system that's supposed to catch those people is missing them, someone else will pick them up. It just won't be a psychiatrist who does it.



Corn

And the ritual that picks them up happens to be one that's thousands of years old and comes with an explanation that doesn't blame them.



Herman

That's the thing I keep landing on. The diagnosis tells you what's wrong with you. The possession framework tells you that you are not the problem, that something got in. For a lot of people, that's the first time anyone has said the second sentence to them.



Corn

One thing that didn't make it into the main run, and I think it's the sharpest detail we found. Not all possessions were treated the same way, and the difference tracked class.



Herman

The anthropological work on this is consistent. Possession among the powerful was often left alone. It was read as benevolent spirits upholding the social order. Possession among the powerless was read as anti-hegemonic and treated immediately.



Corn

So if you were important, it was a blessing. If you were not, it was a demon.



Herman

Same phenomenon, two institutions, two opposite verdicts. Exactly the medieval Europe problem again, just a different axis.



Corn

Which means when we ask why demand is rising now, we should be suspicious of any single answer. If possession was pre-modern medicine's explanation for mental illness, and the institutions that codified it now screen for psychiatric conditions before they'll do the rite, then what does it mean that demand is going up?



Herman

It means most of the people walking in are not asking a theological question. They're asking why they feel the way they feel, and they're asking someone who won't tell them nothing is wrong.



Corn

The Vatican opening its training course to non-Catholic Christians in 2019 says it plans to keep answering. The practice is adapting, not fading. And one in five thousand says almost everyone in the room is there for a reason that has nothing to do with demons.



Herman

So the question isn't what they're possessed by. It's what they were looking for and where they went when they couldn't find it.



Corn

That's a good place to land. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop for producing, and to Daniel for the prompt.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to keep the questions coming, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

The human-AI collaboration podcast. We'll be back soon.