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# Exorcism

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**Exorcism.** A ritual for delivering persons from satanic or demonic domination. It somewhat parallels deprogramming, popularized in the 1970s to free individuals from cult influences. Within the Roman Catholic tradition exorcism ("solemn exorcism") is restricted to priests with specialized training and commissioning; it is normally used for those who are possessed or dominated by demons. Deliverance ("simple exorcism") is for persons troubled by demonic influence in some area of their lives who earnestly desire to be freed. Deliverance requires only a simple prayer, such as "In the name of Jesus Christ, unholy spirit, I command you to depart from this creature of God" (Green, 1981), and may be practiced by all.

Demonic influence and mental illness have been considered opposing explanations for the same phenomena. With the rise of modern psychology and psychiatry, exorcism as an alternative to mental health treatment largely disappeared. The emergence in the late 1980s of dissociative identity disorder (formerly multiple personality disorder) as a common mental disorder sometimes associated with satanic ritual abuse renewed the controversy (Friesen, 1991) and strengthened the reemergence of exorcism in the United States.

While much discussion has emphasized the similarities in symptoms, mental illness and demonic influence are distinct phenomena that may occur

separately or together (Bufford, 1988). Satanic/demonic influence varies from minimal influence (e.g., Satan's temptations of Jesus, Matt. 4:1-11) through increasing control (e.g., Satan's influence on Ananias and Sapphira) to total domination (e.g., the Gadarene demoniac). Sometimes associated in Scripture with bizarre behavior, demonic influence more commonly accompanies positions of power and social influence such as among the magicians of Egypt, the astrologers and Chaldeans of Babylon, and the Pharisees of Jesus' day (John 8:44). Contemporary counterparts might include witchdoctors in Third-World countries and persons in government, education, and industry.

While some Christian professionals encourage exorcism, others are more cautious. Christian professionals must consider legal and ethical issues as well as practical issues of how best to aid persons afflicted with satanic/demonic influence. First, informed consent may be impossible for persons totally under demonic domination. Second, third-party payers probably will oppose exorcism as a religious rite. Third, most mental health professionals view exorcism as outside their disciplines and unethical or irresponsible. Referral to the religious community for exorcism is preferred. However, deliverance in the form of discreet silent prayer seems appropriate for mental health counseling.

At a practical level exorcism or deliverance alone is rarely adequate. Filling with the Holy Spirit and practicing godly disciplines are required to remain free from demonic influence (see Matt. 12:43-45). Personal commitment is essential (Anderson, 1991). Emotional or psychological healing, detoxification of traumatic experiences, and development of new patterns of living are normally needed.

To understand exorcism one must consider the classic evil triumvirate: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The world is the fallen created order, including goddess society and culture (cf. 1 John 2:15). The flesh includes fallen human impulses, bent toward evil (see Rom. 7). The devil is a personal agent of evil who, together with demons, uses the world and the flesh to involve humans in rebellion against God. Exorcism alone focuses too narrowly on the activity of the devil. Lasting change requires addressing the world and the flesh as well. Spiritual counsel and disciplines, along with mental health counseling, can aid in these areas. This may occur in conjunction with exorcism but more commonly with deliverance and perhaps apart from these. Exorcism seems overemphasized by some. Prayers of deliverance are often neglected; perhaps these should be normative among Christian counselors.

### References

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See DEMONIC INFLUENCE, SIN, AND PSYCHOPATHOLOGY.