

Intrusion and internalisation of the devil: Popular saints vs. the Fathers of the Church

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Summary

In early Christianity, and in the domain of Byzantium in particular, the devil's interference with man took two distinct forms which may be identified as <<intrusion>> and <<internalisation>>. The intruding form of the devil was presented in the hagiographies of popular saints, while the internalisation form was presented and elaborated upon by the Fathers of the Church. Intrusion was the most striking and characteristic demonic interference with man. It was an invasion of the body by demons or impure spirits that took possession of the person and caused madness and other illnesses. The internalisation form of demonic interference was more subtle and sinister, and although it was not causing mental illness it was affecting the minds of people by inflaming passions and interfering with judgement, thus leading to erroneous actions, contrary to the commands of God. The two forms of demonic interference that were compatible one with the other and might coexist, emerged from the power of the devil. Intrusion was probably more appealing to and understood by the crowds of the peasants addressed by the popular saints while internalisation was better understood by the educated and the town people addressed by the Fathers of the Church. The two forms of demonic interference have had a lasting effect on religious and spiritual thought and practice till modern times.

Summary

Au début du christianisme et principalement à l'époque byzantine, l'interférence du diable avec l'homme prenait deux formes distinctes pouvant être indentifiées comme "intrusion" et "internalisation". La forme de l'intrusion du diable est présentée dans les hagiographies des saints populaires, tandis que la forme de l'internalisation est présentée et élaborée par les Pères de l'Eglise. L'intrusion était l'interférence démoniaque la plus frappante et caractéristique; c'était une invasion du corps par les démons ou les esprits impurs qui prenaient possession de la personne et provoquaient la folie ou d'autres maladies. L'internalisation était une interférence plus subtile et menaçante, et surtout elle ne causait pas de maladies mentales, elle affectait la pensée des gens par des passions enflammées et de faux jugements, provoquant ainsi des actions allant à l'encontre des commandements de Dieu. Ces deux formes d'interférence démoniaque, qui étaient compatibles et pouvaient coexister, provenaient du pouvoir du diable; elles ont eu une influence de longue durée sur la religion et la pensée spirituelle jusqu'à la fin des temps modernes.

Introduction

The historical era examined in this study is that of early Byzantium, which extended from the proclamation of Christianity as the official

religion of the empire by Constantine in 313 AD to the death of Justinian in 565 AD. This was a period of expansion and consolidation of the eastern Roman empire (1). During this period, Christianity became the universally accepted ideology, which explained the creation and the working of the world, provided models for people's behaviour (2), and an image of heavenly

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rule which served as a model to rule the empire (3). The importance of religion in Byzantium, which was later labelled Byzantine theocracy, was exemplified by the continuing involvement of emperors and people in the arguments and civil strife (e.g. the Arian heresy and later on iconoclasm vs. iconolatry) regarding the interpretation of Christian dogmas (4).

At the level of popular culture in early Byzantium a coherent system of Christian beliefs had developed, which provided an explanation of man's place in the World. The World, according to these beliefs, was a battlefield between Good and Evil, that is, God and Satan, and their agents, angels and demons respectively, directly affecting man (5,6). Evil and demons along with God or gods had long existed in the cultures and religious beliefs among the Jews, Babylonians, Egyptians, and pagan Greeks but these beliefs lacked the coherence achieved early in the Christian era (7).

In Byzantium, the demonic power was present and interfering in every aspect of life. Demons caused diseases and misfortunes to individuals, to communities, and to the state, either by direct intervention or by controlling people's decisions (8). However, man was not left alone in the battlefield between Good and Evil. Popular saints who lived among the people, with the grace of God, fought demons and directed the faithful to stay on God's path (9,10,11). Furthermore, the Fathers of the Church, with their words, recorded in sermons and letters, helped the faithful to understand Christ's teaching and to use it as a guide for everyday life.

In this historical and cultural milieu the demonic interference with man took two distinct forms, which may be identified as «intrusion» and «internalisation».* The intruding form of the devil was presented in the hagiographies of popular saints while the internalisation form was presented and elaborated upon by the Fathers of the Church. Each of the two forms of demonic interference probably appealed to different social groups. The

idea of intruding demons was simple and coherent and likely appealed more to peasants living in the interior of the empire. The educational level of the peasants was probably low, most of them being illiterate (12). In this social milieu, popular saints, as true athletes of God, fought and expelled demons from their victims in the name of Jesus Christ. At the same time, through their miracles, they provided a powerful message about the godly origin and the mission of the new religion (13). These saints were busy, even if they were sitting at the top of a column as the stylites did, interacting with crowds of hopeless and helpless people besieging them and seeking help (14,15,16). In addition to expelling demons, the saints also provided spiritual guidance and advice and often performed roles equivalent to social workers and ombudsmen of our times (17).

The Fathers of the Church, who elaborated on the Christian dogmas (18) and dealt with the internalised form of the devil, addressed urban audiences and the educated. In their sermons and letters, among other important aspects of the new faith, the Fathers dealt with the sinister interference of the devil in the everyday life of people; they addressed temptation and other deceptive interventions by the devil, such as stirring emotions, inflaming passions, and blurring judgement or putting thoughts in the minds of people, particularly those trying to perfect themselves (e.g. monks). The devil's objective was to make them transgress the rules of God. The faithful were to be aware of the devil's deceptions and to be prepared to defend themselves.

Intrusion

The characteristics of the devil's intrusion, which appear to form the model present in the hagiographies of popular saints, were clearly spelled out in the incident of Jesus' meeting the demoniacs who came out of a cemetery in the land of the Gadarenes. According to the accounts of Matthew and Luke (19), the demons, through the mouth of the possessed, challenged Jesus,

who cast them out with a simple order and restored sanity to the hapless victims. This model of demonic interference prevailed and became the norm for possession and exorcism till modern times (20).

In Byzantium stories of people who had been invaded and possessed by demons, which were subsequently confronted and expelled by saints, were told many times in hagiographies of popular saints such as Daniel Stylite (21), Theodore of Sykeon (22), St Simeon Stylite the Younger (23), and others in early Byzantium. The present study will draw extensively from the hagiographies of the three saints. These saints were selected for the purpose of the study for two reasons. First, their lives and acts were represented in sufficient detail, and second, all three practised their ministries close to towns and villages, having become part of the local community life and culture. St Daniel Stylite (409-493 A.D.) spent the last 33 years of his life at the top of a pillar on the shores of the Bosphorus, not far from Constantinople, where he was visited by the sick, the poor, and by those in power, such as emperor Leo I, for consultation on matters of the empire. St Simeon Stylite the Younger (521-592 A.D.) was a native of Antiochia and practised his ministry at the top of a pillar high up on a mountain near his home town. St Theodore (died in 613 A.D.) was from Sykeon, a small town near Ancyra. He carried out his ministry in nearby regions of Asia Minor. Images of popular culture, as shown in the hagiographies, have been considered as valuable source of information on possession, illness and cures practised by the saints (24).

Demons invaded their victims under the command of the devil or Satan. The saints then cast them out with the power bestowed on them by God. Intruding demons might be violent, agitating their victims, or they might be quiet, even deaf and dumb. While being confronted by a saint, demons might talk defiantly and swear through the mouth of the possessed. Neverthe-

less, in the end, they would surrender to the saint's superior power and free the victims. A few examples will illustrate the characteristics of these encounters between saints and demons.

An old man was brought to St Symeon Stylite the Younger. He was driven by demons, and while having «satanic visions», he kept attacking people, tearing their clothes, and trying to choke them. He also tore his own clothes and ate his own flesh. Once, he grabbed a donkey and bit and cut its tongue, causing blood to pour from the animal's mouth. In front of the Saint, the «man with the demons» dwelling in him was «changed» as punishment for five days and nights. The Saint questioned the demons about why they dared to make the man commit such abominable acts. They replied, «We were sent to either burn or drown him ». The Saint proceeded to expel them in the name of Jesus Christ. The man, freed from the demons, put on his clothes and stood up humbly. The demons never dared to approach him again. The Saint also healed the donkey, whose tongue grew back (25).

A father brought his son, Peter, to St Theodore of Sykeon. Peter was suffering «in his heart». The cause of his sickness was not manifest. The Saint recognized the cause of the malady, made the sign of the cross over the face of the youth and struck him on his heart saying, «Do not hide yourself, unclean spirit, for your working is disclosed. The Lord Jesus Christ who knoweth secret things bids you come out of him». The demon immediately became restless and shouted, «I am coming out, iron-eater. I will not disobey you, for I cannot bear your threats. I cannot bear the fire which proceeds from your mouth and scorches me». Then the demons, loudly wailing, left the sufferer (26).

A twenty-year-old man was brought by his father to St Daniel Stylite. He had been afflicted by a «deaf and dumb» evil spirit. The Saint besought God and asked that the man be given a speedy healing. The demon was greatly

agitated and, having wrenched the young man from the grasp of those who were holding him, made him run towards the ladder leaning against the column of the Saint. The young man began to climb the ladder but before he had gone half way up, he was freed from the demon and came down cured (27).

The demonic attack and intrusion were indiscriminate and random. They were not the result of punishment by God for wrongdoing and had no similarities whatsoever to the behaviour of the Olympian gods, who might turn a mortal mad for personal reasons or revenge (e.g. Dionysos driving mad the daughters of Proitos, King of Argos) (28), or take sides in conflicts and wars, as shown in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (29). The random attack on people was illustrated by incidents described in the lives of saints. For example, one day St Simeon Salus (who lived in the second half of the sixth century and practised his ministry in Emessa, Syria) noticed a demon hiding around a corner in a busy street preparing to attack a passer-by. The Saint held back the traffic by throwing rocks at people until a dog passed by and the demon then attacked the dog (30). In another incident, from the life of St Theodore of Sykeon, demons attacked people, causing various kinds of maladies. These demons had emerged from a hole in the ground, which masons had opened by removing slabs. The saint chased the demons back into the ground and safely covered up the hole. Subsequently the plethora of demonic attacks on people ceased (31).

The random demonic intrusion is described in terms similar to sporadic occurrences of mental illness, characterized by delusions or delirium owing to various causes. These conditions were most likely identified as «madness» in the popular culture of the time and were attributed to demonic interference. The victim of demonic intrusion was not to be blamed as morally responsible for the possession.

For their help, the saints expected nothing more than a commitment by the cured person and his relatives to believe in the true God and his son Jesus Christ. On meeting this condition some saints were especially particular. For example St Simeon Stylite the Younger refused to intercede with God on behalf of some Hellenes (believers in the pagan gods) who were reluctant to denounce their «heinous» beliefs and remained uncommitted to Christ (32).

Internalisation

A characteristic model of internalisation of the devil is not provided by the Gospels. However, the incident, as told by Matthew, of Jesus' temptation in the desert, in which the devil implored him to transgress the rules of God and take earthly pleasures, approaches the model, but with a difference. The temptation in this incident originates from an externalised form of the devil. Jesus listens to the devil's voice «tempting» him and responds verbally, reminding the devil of God's rulings and finally dismisses him out of hand, saying, «Begone Satan» (33). The activity taking place within the person, in the case of the internalised devil, has the following characteristics. First, man in general is considered vulnerable and prone to personality weaknesses, often identified as passions. Second, the devil may inflame passions and at the same time weaken the person's judgement, leading him or her to a course of action contrary to the rules of God. Third, God's rules are known, but there is much to be elaborated on, and this is a task performed by the Fathers of the Church who explain the rules and make people aware of the devil's deceptive tactics, and advise how to defend oneself. Fourth, the informed person is expected to use his or her judgement and decide what to do, therefore becoming responsible for his or her own actions.

Man may be vulnerable to several passions, which the devil may exploit, but these derive from a fundamental one, «loving oneself». Other faults

which derive from «loving oneself» include gluttony, love of money, vanity (34). A special case is fornication. In this case, it was explained that an abuse is made of the natural attraction between the sexes for the purpose of reproduction. Responsible for this passion was the «demon of fornication».

The devil's interference with a person trying to perfect himself might at times change from subtle to crude forms such as those illustrated in the life of St Anthony the hermit by Athanasius (c. 296-373 A.D.), patriarch of Alexandria. The devil targeted Anthony, who was young when he withdrew to the desert to become a hermit. The devil «first attempted to lead him away from the discipline, suggesting memories of his possessions, the guardianship of his sister, the manifold pleasure of food, the relaxations of life, and finally the rigour of virtue ...». Thus, the devil raised in Anthony's mind a «great dust cloud of considerations, since he wished to cordon him off from his righteous intention» (35). But Anthony, with prayers and resolve, was able to suppress these ideas (36). The devil then changed tactics. He «... hurled foul thoughts at him, resorted to titillation», and one night the devil assumed the form of a woman, imitating «her every gesture» (37).

The Fathers of the Church dealt with the internalised devil extensively, but not systematically. References will be made here to writings by St John Chrysostom (344-407 A.D.) and St Basil of Caesarea (329-379 A.D.), both considered pillars of the early church, and to writings of St John Cassian (360-435 A.D.) and St Diadochos of Photiki (400-486 A.D.).

The thoughts and comments of St John Chrysostom, who was a prolific writer, are scattered in homilies, letters and other texts. In homily 13 he elaborates on the incident of Jesus being taken to the desert and tempted by the devil. Referring to temptations he explains:

The following [passions] are responsible for numerous failures, [such as] caring for the

abdomen, acting out of vanity, driven by the desire to amass money... What makes us servants of the devil is seeking for more and being insatiably greedy... The enemy is irreconcilable and wages undeclared war against us... We should turn away from the devil, not only in our minds but also in our acts; and we should not do what [the devil] tells us to do, but do what God directs us to do... (38).

In homily 2 St John Chrysostom also points to the thoughts the devil puts in our minds :
We speak what the devil puts in our minds, at times laughing or talking about frivolous and ridiculous things, or cursing, swearing, or perjuring ourselves. (39)

Elsewhere St John points to the responsibility of the person. In homily 6 he states :
God has given us serious and humble reasoning, self-controlling, repenting thoughts. These are gifts of God which we will very much need. Difficult struggles have been imposed upon us, to fight against invisible forces, against evil spirits and their domain. [But] it is sufficient, with calmness and alertness, to fight back these wild armies and defeat them. However, if we laugh and are frivolous and unconcerned, we will be defeated even before the fight begins. (40)

St Basil of Caesarea argues in a similar manner. In a letter addressed to Amphilochos, bishop of Ikonion, (letter 233) he states:

There are two forces present [in the mind], according to the understanding we have, those of us who believe in God; one is sinister, demoniac, which drives us towards defection; the other is godly and of good nature and brings us close to God. [If the mind] abandons itself to the deceiver, giving up its judgement, it will turn to faulty images ... If it opens itself to the godly side and welcomes the graces of the Spirit, it will become capable of comprehending truth which is in keeping with its own good nature (41).

Similarly, in a letter addressed to Valerius, bishop of Illyricum, (letter 91), referring to the Arian heresy, St Basil complains about the devil's attacks on the minds of many Christians:

Those here, who defend the faith of our fathers, are tired of the attacks by the devil, with the many and varied assaults he crafts and engineers (42).

John Cassian (360-435 AD) names eight vices: gluttony, unchastity, avarice, anger, dejection, listlessness, inflated self-esteem and pride (43). About unchastity he said :

Our struggle is against the demon of unchastity and the desire of the flesh, a desire which begins to trouble man from the time of his youth. This harsh struggle has to be fought in both soul and body, and not simply in the soul, as is the case with other faults. We therefore have to fight it on two fronts. Bodily fasting alone is not enough to bring about perfect self-restraint and true purity; it must be accompanied by contrition of heart, intense prayer to God, frequent meditation on the Scriptures, toil and manual labour. These are able to check the restless impulses of the soul and to recall it from its shameful fantasies. Humility of soul helps more than everything else (44). A sign that we have acquired the virtue [of citizens of heaven] perfectly is that our soul ignores those images which the defiled fantasy produces during sleep; for even if the production of such images is not a sin, nevertheless it is a sign that the soul is ill and has not been free from passion (45).... The way to keep guard over our heart is immediately to expel from the mind every demon-inspired recollection of women (46).

Diadochos of Photiki (400-486 AD), a bishop in north-western Greece, identified two types of demons affecting man: the ones affecting the soul, the others affecting the body with their lustful enticements (47). The mind, Diadochos states, produces good and evil thoughts. The latter are conceived as a result of attacks by demons (48).

A man who has fought and controlled almost all passions still has to confront two demons which fight him:

The first troubles the soul by diverting it from its great love of God into a misplaced zeal, so that it does not want any other soul to be as pleasing to God as itself. The second demon inflames the body with sexual lust. This happens to the body in the first place because sexual pleasure, with a view to procreation, is something natural and so it easily overcomes us (49).. [Satan] uses the body's humours [fluids] to befog the intellect with mindless pleasures. (50)

The concepts of demonic intrusion and internalisation were not mutually exclusive. Fathers of the Church, such as St John Chrysostom and St Basil, who elaborated on the internalised devil, also accepted the notion of intruding demons. This becomes particularly evident in their exorcism prayers, which are appeals to God to free those possessed by intruding demons. (51)

In the spiritual world of early Byzantium the personified devil might deliberate about how to interfere with people, as a wicked person would do, taking pleasure in making those he targeted sin and getting them into trouble with God; he was crafty and when his deceptive tricks failed, he grew angry and more determined to return with new plans to attack his victims. The devil could even take human forms if he so wished. For example, when St Anthony fought back the «foul thoughts» the devil had put into his mind, the devil took the form of a woman in order to seduce him and then appeared in the form of a black boy who questioned the saint about how he dared to oppose the «spirit of fornication». The angry *diabolos* then sent a team of demons who beat the saint, leaving him unconscious. (52)

Demonic intrusion and internalisation very likely had different historical roots. Beliefs in demons and demonic interference with man

flourished in the Jewish, Hellenic (53), Egyptian and other cultures (54) of the Eastern Mediterranean. However, some of the specific characteristics of intruding demons which became prevalent in early Byzantium probably originated in Babylon (55,56). Testimonies were cuneiform inscriptions which included examples of demonic possession and incantations for protection against demons. Malevolent demons were lurking around to attack people and to cause illness, suffering and death. The demons were expelled with magic incantations or were tricked into leaving the bodies of their victims to enter an animal or a statuette offered in lieu of the patient (57,58). Particularly influential upon the Christian beliefs on demonic interference were Egyptian «demonological phantasies» that were introduced with the hagiography of St Anthony (59).

Passions which were considered by the Fathers of the Church the stepping stone for demonic interference from within, had similarities and differences, with passions as conceptualised by Stoic philosophy, which had become prevalent in the Hellenistic world (60). According to the Stoics, passions which determined behaviour, at least in part, had to be controlled by those aspiring to be persons of virtue. Virtue (61) was vital because without it happiness, which was equated with *ataraxia*, could not be achieved (62). The Stoic passions have been rendered in modern English as affections, emotions, or impulses, and included such states as anxiety, fear, anger, sorrow, pleasure, and excitement (63). The passions, according to the Fathers, were imperfections in character or maladies of the soul, which the true Christian had to address and eradicate (64). These passions, however, were wider concepts (e.g. love of oneself, love of money) and had been given negative social value from the point of view of Christian ethics. Stoics deliberated about passions consistently from Chryssipos (third century BC) (65) down to Galen (second century AD) (66) before the Fathers, borrowing from them (67), addressed them from their specific perspective.

Demonic interference with man, intrusion in particular as shown in the hagiographies of popular saints, has had an enduring effect on religious and spiritual culture till modern times (68, 69) but this area is beyond the scope of the present study.

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*** The terms «intrusion» and «internalisation» in use in the present study instead of «possession» and «temptation» respectively denote specific psychological activity and in the opinion of the present author are more in tune with modern psychological vocabulary.**

Biography

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