



# DEMONIC POSSESSION AND EXORCISM

in Early Modern France

Sarah Ferber

PRODIGIEUSES.

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VN MERVEILLEUX ET EFFROYABLE  
saisissement du corps d'une femme par le ma-  
ling'esprit aduenu au pais de Laonnois  
l'an 1565.

Chapitre

XL1.



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Engraving from Jean Boulaese, *Le Miracle de Laon en Lamnois*, ed. A. H. Chaubard, Lyon: Sauvegarde Historique, 1955, (from an original in Pierre Boaisuaun, *Histories prodigieuses*, 1575). © Bibliothèque Nationale de France

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# Demonic Possession and Exorcism in Early Modern France

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This is a highly original study of demon possession and the ritual of exorcism, both of which were rife in early modern times, and which reached epidemic proportions in France.

Catholics at the time believed that the devil was everywhere present, in the rise of the heretics, in the activities of witches, and even in the bodies of pious young women. The rite of exorcism was intended to heal the possessed and show the power of the Church – but it generated as many problems as it resolved. Possessed women endured frequently violent exorcisms, exorcists were suspected of conjuring devils, and possession itself came to be seen as a form of holiness, elevating several women to the status of living saints.

Looking towards the present day, the book also argues that early modern conflicts over the devil still carry an unexpected force and significance for Western Christianity.

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For my family, and in memory of my brother and my father

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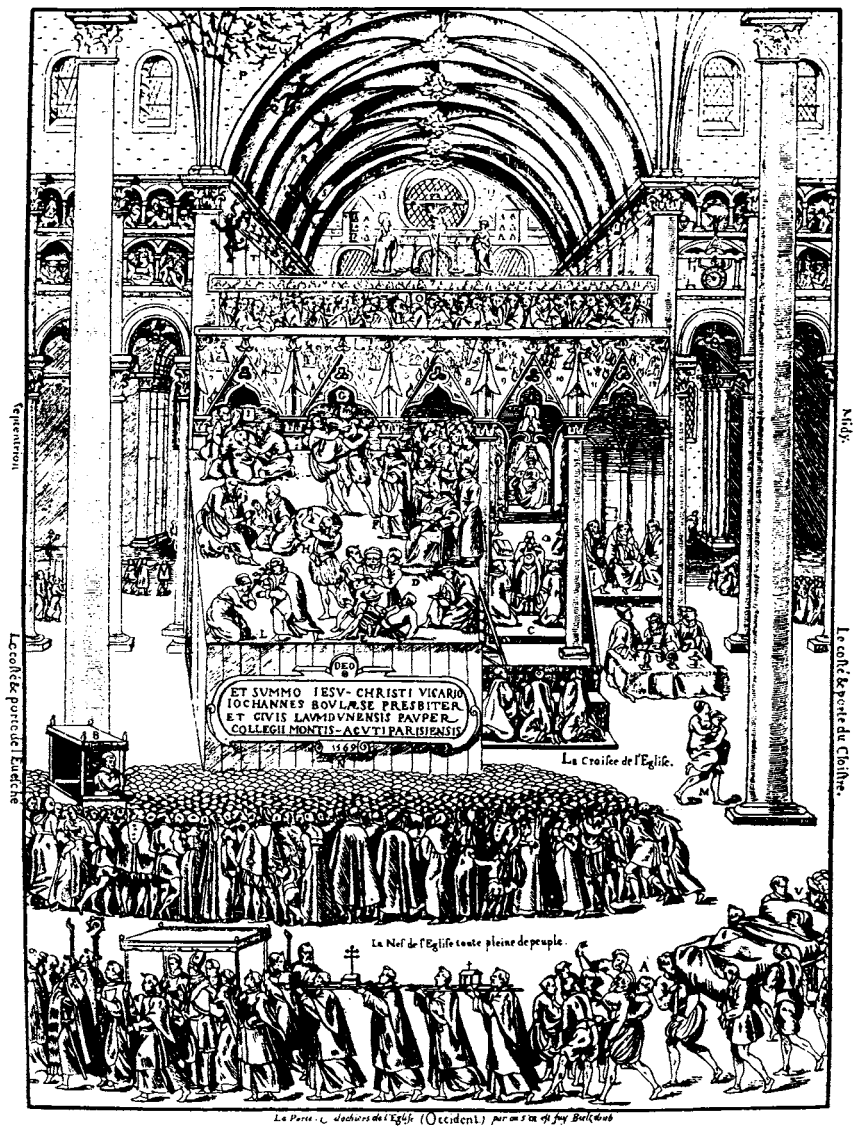
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Engraving by Thomas Belot, from Jean Boulaese, *Le Thrésor et entière histoire de la triomphante victoire du corps de Dieu sur l'esprit maling Beelzebub*, obtenuë à Laon l'an 1566, Paris: N. Chesneau, 1578. © Bibliothèque Nationale de France

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## Introduction

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In 1993 in the state of Victoria, Australia, four people went on trial for the manslaughter of a woman, Joan Vollmer. The four accused said she had died during their attempts to control and expel violent devils, which they claimed had taken over her body. To defend this use of force against 'demonic' resistance, the counsel for the accused referred the court to a seventeenth-century account of authorised Catholic exorcisms in France. The account was written in 1635 by a young English Anglican playwright, Thomas Killigrew, who had travelled to France with a Catholic friend to visit the town of Loudun, in Poitou.<sup>1</sup> This is some of what he saw:

Upon Thursday morning last . . . we went . . . to the Monastery of the Nunns that were possesst . . . upon our first entry we heard nothing but praying to which the possesst were as attentive as any . . . but on a suddaine two of them grew unruly . . . [one] tooke her Preist by the Throte, & Struke him, & then got from him & ran roring & talking to the Preist that was saying Masse, where she committed some extravagances before the Frier could take her away. . . . The Preist then desired us to come after dinner . . . to the Churches . . . and [we] were noe sooner entered but were drawne by a greate Noyse & Crye to a little Chappell in the Church, where we saw a Frier & one of the possesst at Exorcisme, when we came we found her in her fitt, layed upon the ground raging Madd. . . . The Preist . . . stood treading on her brest, & holding the Host over her commaunding the Devill to worship it calling him Dog, Serpent, & other names but I saw in her noe obedience, for I was driven away with the variety of Strange noyse to an other Chapell where there was one possesst & in her fitt; when I came I found the Preist holding the Sanctified strings in his hand, by which they lead the possesst, she lay upon her Back her heeles under her Breech, & her Head as she lay thus turn'd backward. . . . And in this posture houling & talking & ever as the Preiste strucke her with a Brush and Holy-water, she roared as if she felt new tortures . . . the Preist set his foote upon her Throate, & commaunded the devill to tell him why he lay in that strange posture, but the Stubborne Villaine would not obey till he had Charm'd him by the truth of the Romaine Catholike Church, by the present Bodye & Blood of our Saviour that was resident in the Box which he held over him.<sup>2</sup>

## 2 Introduction

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Events such as those Killigrew described were quite common in early modern France, and indeed across western Europe. As D.P. Walker suggests, exorcism of the possessed was exceptional enough to arouse comment, but routine enough to be formulaic: predictably unpredictable.<sup>3</sup> For Catholics, the aim of such displays was to reinforce the shaky foundations of their church's authority in a time of religious upheaval, by demonstrating demons' willingness to yield to an armoury of holy objects and rites deployed by exorcists. Hence Killigrew's description of exorcists using holy water, the Host, and even 'sanctified strings' – leads blessed by priests – to bring the possessed to heel.

Two questions suggest themselves: 'How could such things have happened then? And how could they be seen as acceptable now?' In addressing the first question in depth, this book will seek to provide ways in which the second question might be answered. Modern 'common sense' might suggest that a practice such as exorcism would have been by now relegated to oblivion, yet it is alive and well and being defended at the elite level, even in its extreme forms, as in the case of the manslaughter of Joan Vollmer. This recent example might give pause to reflect on the limitations of 'common sense' understandings of the relationship of past and present religious behaviours: why assume a practice such as exorcism is archaic, or that religious practices are automatically subject over time to a progressive refinement, spiritualisation or rationalisation? And, when considering those who believe in exorcism, why imagine that the type of person most likely to believe in the reality of possession and the power of exorcism would be uneducated or socially marginal? In the early modern period it was common for critics of public exorcism to say that the uneducated, 'the vulgar', were the practitioners and the public to whom the rite appealed. In practice this was simply not the case: exorcism was performed and patronised at the highest social and intellectual levels. Thomas Killigrew, for example, was an educated man visiting an elite convent of nuns, where the reality of possession and the validity of exorcisms had been endorsed by, among others, members of King Louis XIII's family, and the master of realpolitik, the *premier ministre* Cardinal Richelieu. In the modern era, the defence barrister in the 1993 Vollmer trial who cited Killigrew's letter was an eminent Queen's Counsel. In this case, even the presiding judge did not explicitly refute the possibility of demonic possession, thereby legitimating exorcism from within the heart of the judicial system in a professedly secular nation.<sup>4</sup> That is not to say that the uneducated might not be historically a prime audience for public exorcism, nor to deny that sceptical views have more often been articulated among the educated classes. But to assume a socially differentiated view of exorcism a priori would be a fundamental misapprehension about the historical and present realities of this Christian rite.

The status of exorcism as a religious 'fringe' phenomenon also needs to be examined, or, to use a formulation from Natalie Zemon Davis, public exorcism needs to be understood as relating 'less to the pathological than to the normal'.<sup>5</sup> Stuart Clark's paradigm-changing *Thinking with Demons* establishes irrefutably the 'mainstream' position of early modern demonology, notably in the spheres of

language, science, history, religion and politics. The present book seeks to address some of the social and institutional processes through which this status for exorcism was created. For exorcism was not a unique form of religious extremism, but one among a range of manifestations of religiosity in early modern France which entailed either actual or symbolic violence, and which touched the lives of countless people, not just a rabid minority.<sup>6</sup> What needs to be investigated, then, are the belief systems and social conditions which permitted scenes such as the one Killigrew described, not simply to take place, but to form a significant part of Catholic proselytism. In examining several cases of possession, this book will argue that the distance between 'mainstream' and 'fringe' in the early modern era, and what constituted each, cannot be assumed on the basis of factors such as education, or scientific knowledge, or position within or outside the social or church hierarchy. Rather, I will suggest that an understanding of the role of tradition in Catholicism and the social and political landscape in which cases of possession arose shows that very little can be assumed about who was likely to believe in demonic possession and miraculous exorcism, or their significance in French society. The arguments I will explore ultimately have implications for understanding how a text such as Thomas Killigrew's might become evidence at a manslaughter trial in late twentieth-century Australia.

Fear of the devil's power was one of the dominant forces in early modern Europe.<sup>7</sup> The first hundred years following the Protestant schism of the sixteenth century was a time of intense theological, political, military and social conflict, and in this context public displays of battles with Satanic forces became a showcase for rival strands of Christianity. Exorcism – the ritual invocation and controlling of possessing demons, using prayer, sacred texts and exhortation – took place among every western Christian group, to varying degrees, in Europe and in its colonies. In Christianity, the presence of a demonic spirit in the body is believed effectively to override the physical humanity of the possessed, and to control their every move. Such an erasure of the human identity of the possessed made it possible for the body of a human being – usually a woman, in the early modern period – to become a *tabula rasa*, upon which religious conflict and claims for religious authority were made visible.<sup>8</sup> A sense that the devil was truly present implicated all parties: as Killigrew's nonchalant tone suggests, not only exorcists but onlookers were complicit in the erasure of the humanity of the devil's human hosts. Rather than being concerned solely with the well-being of the individual, exorcism was also a way of displaying God's willingness to grant an individual exorcist, whether a Catholic priest or a freelance Puritan, the power of the apostles to cast out demons in Christ's name.<sup>9</sup> Each exorcism was a proving ground for faith, legitimising the authority of the individual who performed it and the church they claimed to represent. And while it was not new for the possessed to serve the purposes of proselytism, the scale of possession and exorcism in this period was.

The degree to which the more extreme manifestations of exorcism were practised and accepted varied from place to place, and within each religious group, with a somewhat greater prevalence among Catholics; all had in common a sense

of the urgent need for the resolution of religious uncertainty. This was a time characterised by a seemingly universal desire to fix truth, to resolve ambiguity and to reinforce a sense of authority. At the same time – and to those same ends – people appear to have felt a significantly increased need for a sense of God’s presence and responsiveness to urgent human pleas. The paradoxical reaction to this crisis was a positive surfeit of certainty, of verified and verifying manifestations of divine power, in the form of visions, ecstasies and prophecies, as well as demonic possession and its miraculous containment through the rite of exorcism. In turn, a situation arose where the need for differentiation between one claim and another became urgent. For there was no preordained limit on the number of miracles available – or rather, there was a destabilising lack of consensus on where the limits lay to the credibility of claims of divine intervention. For Catholic exorcism, such a situation was both permitted and exacerbated by certain structural features unique to Catholicism. This book will argue that in France, home of the most intense and enduring scandals of possession, competing and equally valid claims of spiritual authority allowed at times for seemingly limitless expansion in uses of the rite of exorcism.<sup>10</sup> And it will show that the possibilities of possession and exorcism were exploited to further aspirations at the interpersonal, institutional, social and political levels.

There were three principal ‘predisposing conditions’ for the expanded use of exorcism in early modern France: religious war, witch trials, and new forms of affective spirituality, all of which were underpinned by, and articulated, a fear of the devil.<sup>11</sup> In the remainder of this introduction I will briefly outline these three sets of circumstances, and then consider the rules and traditions within which exorcism took place in Catholicism. Together these sections will provide the interpretive framework for the book, the basis upon which we can consider how individual cases of possession and exorcism unfolded, and the ways in which each case built upon the example of others. The book itself is divided into three parts, each headed by an introductory essay providing background for the case studies which follow.

### **Religious war**

The schism in Western Christendom which followed the sixteenth-century rise of Protestant evangelicalism began a period of endemic religious war, lasting until the mid-seventeenth century. A system of religious authority that had claimed supreme religious authority, Catholicism, suddenly confronted an alternative Christianity on its own turf. The effects on France were devastating: it is hard to estimate how deeply this fracturing of religious authority affected people’s psychological structures, except perhaps by reference to the kind of violence they were prepared to inflict upon each other, which was immense. In exploring this violence, Denis Crouzet has emphasised that the French Wars of Religion need to be understood primarily as being about religion in its own terms, implicitly not a function of other aspects of social life.<sup>12</sup> With this in mind, we need look no



further than the opening salvo of Protestant disputation in France, to see how central theological issues were to this period. The so-called ‘affair of the placards’ was the foundation moment in the rise of schismatic tendencies in France. On the Sunday morning of 18 October 1534, in several cities in northern France, including Paris, supporters of Calvinism hammered up placards in public places decrying what the evangelical writer, Antoine Marcourt, saw as the church magic of the doctrine of the Real Presence.<sup>13</sup>

This central Catholic doctrine holds that the body of Christ is miraculously made present in the hands of the priest at the moment of consecration in the Mass. For French Calvinists – later known as Huguenots – this doctrine was the index of both the ceremonialism and materialism of Catholic tradition, and evidence of a misplaced reliance on an overweening Catholic priesthood as dispensers of papist magic. This focus on the church magic of Catholicism resonated throughout the period in which religious civil war took hold, from 1560 to 1629, and beyond. For while the doctrinal issue of priestly magic could be a soft target for ridicule, it also remained an impressive feature of Catholic proselytism, as Catholics used not only military weapons against Huguenots, but also ceremonial and symbolic force.

It might be hard for some moderns to credit that a street procession in which the Host was borne aloft could truly inspire awe and devotion, or that a hell-fire preacher could induce rage in Catholics or recantation in Huguenots, or that stories of miracles might reclaim Huguenots to the Catholic fold and reinforce the choice of those who had remained loyal to Catholicism.<sup>14</sup> Yet such public and affective displays were crucial features of the religious wars, and the periods of uneasy peace between them. It was as one among a range of such devotional displays that public exorcism of the possessed came to the fore as a way for Catholics to show divine approval for their side, visibly and repeatedly. When Catholic exorcists were presented with sufferers whose bodies were said to be totally taken over by demons, they were given an opportunity to show the miraculous power of the panoply of Catholic devotional forms. They used the Host and other holy objects, such as saints’ relics, to deliver the possessed of their demons. And when the ‘devils’ put up a fight and refused to depart, exorcists conducted mock battles with them, making the ‘devils’ speak and even to testify to the power of the Church’s spiritual weapons. It was this kind of battle which Thomas Killigrew described as taking place between exorcists and the possessed at Loudun: each of the implements used by the priests was made sacred through priestly blessings, and then marshalled to fight the devil.

Theologically speaking, these battles with the devil could not be ‘real’, as the devil is always subject to God, and is therefore not only unable to defeat God in a confrontation in the body of the possessed, but cannot act at all except by His permission. But in allowing the devil ‘air-time’, ostensibly under command from exorcists, militant Catholics believed that God was giving His church a chance to show its unique capacity to humble Satan and his heretical agents, the Huguenots. Many other Catholics objected to this kind of display, calling it superstitious, and urged the immediate expulsion of possessing demons. But the

pressures of war and confessional rivalry provided nourishment for more extreme forms of exorcism.

Part I will trace the fortunes of exorcism in the second half of the sixteenth century, starting with an account of probably the most famous continental possession case of the century, the story of the 16-year-old Nicole Obry, dispossessed in the 'Miracle of Laon' of 1566. People high up the intellectual, ecclesiastical and social scale gave Obry's miraculous exorcisms their blessing, by endorsing them both at the time and later in vast and numerous written accounts. Notoriously, her exorcists forced Obry's 'devils' to speak at length, in support of the Catholic church. For while it is the role of the exorcist to bring a devil to heel (with the aim of expelling him), the temptation to adjure 'him' to speak and show his obedience to God proved irresistible. This practice exposed ambiguities in the rite of exorcism. Such displays left the Church open to criticism from within its own ranks and, more pointedly, from Huguenots: what better way for the devil to gain the hearts and minds of the faithful than to show them supposedly divine cures, which were really only tricks played by a self-seeking or simply foolish exorcist, duped by, or even working in cahoots with, the devil? The discussion of the Obry case will argue that, notwithstanding a rise in Catholic scepticism in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, and in spite of the risk of ridicule and anti-Huguenot violence, the case lent the rite of exorcism a new high profile and respectability, becoming the model for a wave of exorcisms in the second half of the century. The last of these led to a dramatic division among Catholics in Paris, at a moment of high political tension. In 1599, Henri IV was trying to instate a new peace with the Huguenots (the Edict of Nantes), when supporters of the by-then defunct militant Holy Catholic League brought a quasi-'professional' demoniac named Marthe Brossier to Paris with the aim of obstructing the peace. Catholic critics of the possession – moderate *politiques* supporting the king – drew on the tradition of Catholic scepticism to argue that Brossier's possession was invalid, while militant supporters of her public exorcisms elevated it as a sign of divine endorsement for their party.<sup>15</sup> Thus by the end of the century, the status of exorcism among the educated had come to embrace a broad spectrum of vigorously contested, but equally authoritative, views.

### **Witchcraft**

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw the peak of witch trials in France, and, in the same period, most of the classic French demonology texts appeared, including those by Jean Bodin, Pierre de Lancre, Henri Boguet and Nicolas Rémy.<sup>16</sup> Witch trials only rarely occurred as a direct result of people reading demonological literature; however, the production of multiple editions of major texts and of many minor works – from pamphlets to accounts of trials – shows the existence of a literate class preoccupied with the power of the devil, and attentive to calls to rid the world of witches. The devil was thus being fought on

many fronts: in witch trials; in literature; through public exorcism, and (in the view of Catholics) through direct conflict with the Huguenots.

In several infamous seventeenth-century French possession cases, the possessed accused high-profile figures – notably priests and senior female religious – of using witchcraft to send devils into their bodies. These *causes célèbres* produced a voluminous polemical literature, which further contributed to possession and exorcism being subjects of intense debate. A pervasive fear of the devil's capacity for trickery meant that exorcism itself was sometimes seen as a form of witchcraft, of diabolical conjuring. This became a particularly pressing problem when the possessed, speaking as devils under exorcism, accused priests of causing the possession through witchcraft. Who had more credibility: an exorcist getting a demoniac to reveal a hidden act of priestly witchcraft, or an ordained minister of the Church, claiming to be a victim of an exorcist's potentially diabolical fraud? For the Catholic church, public exorcisms and accusations of witchcraft underscored at once the vulnerability and the power of its priesthood.

Part II will address this problematic status of the Catholic priesthood, in a time when Huguenots reviled priests for being magicians, and the Catholic church itself, after the Council of Trent, sought increasingly to purify its ministry, and to reinforce its divinely ordained and socially separate identity. We will consider two major cases of possession which had implications for the role of the Catholic priesthood. A case of possession among Ursuline nuns in Aix-en-Provence (1609–11) was the first in a series of seventeenth-century convent possessions from which later cases, most notably the 1630s story of Fr Urbain Grandier and the 'devils of Loudun' (described in Part III, Chapter 8), took their cue. At Aix two young possessed nuns, Louise Capeau and Madeleine Demandols, accused a parish priest, Louis Gaufridy, of witchcraft and debauchery. After a prolonged series of exorcisms, in which the possessed elaborated on their accusations, Gaufridy was executed. One of the chief exorcists, Sébastien Michaelis, wrote about the case in order to publicise what he saw as a triumph for the reforming Catholic church, but also to defend the potentially suspect actions of exorcists and their unseemly zeal in prosecuting a brother priest. In another convent possession, at Louviers in Normandy in the 1640s, Hospitaller nuns alleged that two priests – by then deceased – had corrupted the convent by allowing nuns to imagine themselves recipients of holy ecstasies, which exorcists later alleged to be diabolical frauds. Another priest, Thomas Boullé, became ensnared in the nuns' accusations during exorcisms conducted over a period of years, and was executed in 1647. The case became a vehicle for arguments among Catholics about the authenticity of possession and exorcism, and about the risks of a more affective, potentially diabolical, form of religiosity. This type of spirituality was widespread in the seventeenth century, and was, in different ways, central to several further episodes of possession.

## **Mystical and affective spirituality**

Personal sanctity and direct communication with God came to the fore in late medieval and early modern religiosity. From around the late fourteenth century, individuals in increasing numbers sought direct contact with God, through devotional techniques such as prayer, contemplation and asceticism. In return, God might show His grace by granting the devotee ecstasies, visions, spiritual illumination, or the power of prophecy. Some of these people came to be known as 'living saints'.<sup>17</sup> In Spain and Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries this movement flourished, particularly among women. In France, the religious was slowed up the potential for such development, but around the turn of the seventeenth century, when Catholicism began to reinforce its gains under Henri IV, there began an unprecedented period of efflorescence in devotional life. The first half of the seventeenth century has been called the 'century of saints', a time when mystical aspirations achieved prominence in the work of the so-called French School, and the inspirational lives of figures such as Madame Barbe Acarie, founder of the Discalced Carmelites, and the eminent theologian Cardinal Pierre de Bérulle.<sup>18</sup>

The sixteenth-century Spanish saint Teresa of Avila loomed large in the French spiritual landscape of the seventeenth century, and the idea of emulating such a great figure and possibly gaining for oneself a reputation for sanctity held a potent attraction for many women. For several aspiring holy women and their male sponsors, demonic possession came to be seen as a kind of praiseworthy suffering, an opportunity to display the martyrdom to which many female devotees aspired in this era.<sup>19</sup> Diabolical torture of the bodies of the possessed, sometimes through inner (especially sexual) temptations, or violent actions such as the devil throwing the possessed to the ground, were seen to be as valid as other forms of asceticism, such as fasting or self-flagellation. In these cases possession by demons lies on a continuum with ecstatic spirituality and other forms of spiritual endowment.<sup>20</sup> Possession of the body by a devil or devils was also held to endow the possessed with the same powers of natural magic to which devils, as fallen angels, are heir. Thus the possessed, speaking as their demons, not only preached under the pressure of successful exorcism and made accusations of witchcraft, but they also (slightly ironically) worked as visionaries, telling people's fortunes.

Yet inevitably this kind of 'positive possession'<sup>21</sup> brought with it the risks attendant on any claim for divine favour in individuals. In a climate of acute anxiety about the true sources of apparently divine inspiration, how was it possible to tell if God were really granting the possessed the opportunity for spiritual advancement, or if the devil were simply duping the possessed, and in turn having the possessed dupe the public by drawing them into the unreliable realm of the senses for proof of God's might? In an era troubled by fear of women's witchcraft and of the devil's incursions, a too-close female affinity with the devil, even through a supposedly blameless possession, led to suspicion that the possessed might themselves be witches. Part III argues that there existed a scale

of authenticity, which separated divinely endowed ecstatic spirituality, potentially suspect demonic possession, and outright witchcraft. It considers the lives of two prominent possessed women from this era: Marie des Vallées in Normandy, and Jeanne des Anges, superior of the Ursuline convent at Loudun. It shows that the status of these women as living saints, while endorsed by several influential sponsors, led each woman to become the subject of intense suspicion and scrutiny.

### **Change and innovation in a sacramental religion**

War, witchcraft and affective spirituality were sources of anxiety that led people to identify the presence of evil in different ways. The process was dialectical, however, for while outbreaks of possession and their resolution through exorcism were responses to a changing religious climate, these displays themselves led to further anxiety about the presence of the devil. Thus, fear of the devil's presence led both to the proliferation of the use of exorcism and to challenges to its use, because of the perceived risk of fraud and collaboration with demons. Exorcism practices thus both responded and contributed to the malleability of the foundations of religious authority in early modern France. In the remainder of this introduction, therefore, we need to consider how Catholic authorities understood and dealt with those ritual practices that had the potential to draw the Church as a whole into disrepute.

Manifestations of sacred power and the divine presence were especially complex matters for the early modern Catholic church, which held (as indeed the Church still holds) that inanimate objects, times, places and human bodies could potentially mediate God's power.<sup>22</sup> This feature of Catholicism is referred to variously as belief in religious immanence,<sup>23</sup> sacramental religiosity,<sup>24</sup> and, in reference to manifestations in the human body, 'embodied' religiosity.<sup>25</sup> The central ritual manifestation of this belief was in the Mass. However, there was a wide array of other rites and observances, known as 'sacramentals', through which religious immanence was also experienced. These included, for example, the cult of saints honoured through pilgrimage, prayer, supplication, and observance of feast days, and the use of blessings and weather magic, employing objects such as saints' relics, holy water, or the Host. All rely on the notion that God seeks actively to be praised and that He will, to some extent, reward faith and devotion by ad hoc displays of His power. The sacramentals can be distinguished from the seven sacraments, as they do not result in grace, which is essential to salvation. Their function within the Church, rather, is to draw believers closer to God, through the worship of His power. As one French historian puts it: 'times and places are not matters of indifference to the Creator. [Miracles] do not occur just wherever or whenever, but at fixed times, and at specific places. The power of God, who chose these times and these places, desires that they be consecrated, and that this choice be honoured by men'.<sup>26</sup> But while miracles which occur following the observation of sacramental practices are to some extent a reward for human devotion, they come, of necessity, with no guarantee of authenticity. The

phenomenon of demonic possession itself is also an endorsement of the idea that divine action can manifest in a physical form, and exorcism of those possessed by demons is a sacramental, which in this period became controversial because of the sheer volume of cases, and because of the extreme forms it took.

As historical debates about the proliferation and forms of exorcism imply, this capacity for divine power to be displayed in sacramental forms has always been of mixed value for the Church. It allows for the penetration of holiness into daily life, in holy places, objects, rituals, persons living and dead, and at special times. Yet the very diffusion of this form of religiosity is also a risk to authority in the Church, because it allows for a degree of innovation to take place at the local level, or within specific interest groups. Nevertheless, if religious passions and vigour emerge from far-flung places or in innovative practices these can ultimately serve the interests of central authority, too, by promoting cohesion and allegiance among believers, or indeed, by generating revenue. For the sake of institutional continuity, there is a need to balance the tensions between innovation – or rather, the identification of new signs of God’s grace – and tradition. Sacramental forms provided innovative sources of allegiance to the Church as a whole, at the same time as the disputation they aroused exposed the weaknesses in institutional Catholicism.

From the point of view of church authorities, whose historical task it was to assess competing claims of divine action, nothing was given about the distinction between a true and a false claim to immanent holiness. Rather, the need for judgement implied the constant (re-)creation of a hierarchy of rites, people and objects. Authorities representing the Church as an institution judged certain claims to be above others, (for example, in distinguishing a claimed piece of the True Cross from an ordinary piece of wood). However, problems arose when sources of authority disagreed. For while an office-bearer in the secular hierarchy, such as a bishop, was the usual source of such an imprimatur, another advocate of comparable authority, such as a university theologian or a papal nuncio, might nonetheless take an opposing view. Such differences could expose the individuality at work in the assertion of institutional authority, and selectivity in the processes of authentication. And there were also competing hierarchies: a local bishop may not have had access to support in Rome, for example, in the way a provincial of a religious order might; thus, opposing views could become enmeshed in jurisdictional rivalries.

Apart from official human sources of judgement, there also existed since the medieval era constantly evolving, notionally objective criteria whereby licit claims were distinguished from illicit. Ideas such as excessive veneration (superstition or ‘vain observance’<sup>27</sup>), the use of designated criteria for telling genuine inspiration from diabolic,<sup>28</sup> the rejection of ‘curiosity’ (that is, of desire for knowledge for its own sake, rather than for godly ends), and the idea of ‘abuse’ (either an uninformed or deliberately manipulative attitude to potentially holy rituals) all provided guides for authorities. But there comes a point when a proliferation of available criteria and competing historical precedents can create a range of conflicting authority

sources, paradoxically returning the act of judgement to individuals. The complexity of this situation was intensified when individuals claimed a divine gift of the power to discern the authenticity of claims. This power lay potentially outside of the priestly hierarchy, being notably (if infrequently) attributed to women, and it could introduce a 'wild card' of spiritual authority that was potentially threatening to institutional hierarchies. Social hierarchy, too, played a part: the support of people of high social standing often lent weight to claims of immanence, particularly as sacramental forms mediated God's action in the physical world, and were thus sometimes regarded as intrinsically the province of the uneducated or 'the vulgar', who lacked spiritual refinement.<sup>29</sup>

Crucially, both critics and practitioners of exorcism in this period found justification for their views in orthodox Catholic sources of authority. These sources of authority could be written, such as the Bible, saints' lives or other canonical texts, or they could be institutional authorities, such as senior figures in the religious hierarchy. To assume that Church hierarchy was inherently resistant to expanding the practice of exorcism, and simply had trouble controlling growing numbers of 'rogue' exorcists, would therefore be to misconstrue entirely the nature of authority in Catholicism. Holiness can manifest in unexpected ways, and openness to claims of divine manifestations is as much a part of clerical duty as is the need to reject fakes. If change and innovation are to occur in a sacramental religion, there must necessarily be a process for the determination of authentic divine intervention. At the top of this ladder of authenticity lie true miracles, and at the bottom are the dubious areas of human fraud, or worse, diabolical imitations of God's works, which, fatally, can lead the faithful astray. The existence of such a scale of possible determinations in cases of dispute is what endows the 'pure' manifestations with their credibility. But how to know whose holiness is real, and whose is merely apparent, possibly the result of vainglory? The need for the so-called discernment of spirits (*discretio spirituum*) to determine true from false claims to personal holiness was an ancient one, but in the early modern era such discernment became especially critical because of the pressure of many competing claims.

At stake in the negotiation of these competing claims was not only the authority of individual members of the Church hierarchy, but the definition of what might broadly be called the identity of French Catholicism. For much of the early modern period, this complex identity was negotiated in part within the strongly contested spheres of sacramental religiosity, and of affective and charismatic spirituality. Specifically, cases of demonic possession and exorcism highlighted in a dramatic and public way the instability and contingency of the many sources of religious authority. To use a perhaps overused metaphor, the sacramental system provided a set of spaces in which change was negotiated in and by the Church, for it was in disputes over interpretation that French Catholic reform and revival took on different and sometimes conflicting attributes.

The use of new or expanded forms of officially sanctioned exorcism reached levels in this period which had not been seen before and have not been seen since.

Yet in a revealed religion like Catholicism innovation is not, strictly speaking, legitimate, because all actions must be justifiable within a tradition of authority traceable to Christ and the Apostles, the saints, canon law, official liturgy, and other authorised and authorising texts. Multiple authoritative traditions in Catholicism allow therefore for a somewhat cyclical understanding of its history. That is not to say that Catholicism, by virtue of these multiple traditions, is in some way untouched by the historical moment: on the contrary, the wide range of potential readings available for any given phenomenon – or indeed the shaping of any phenomenon in the first place – is open to the exigencies of that moment, because of the spectrum of available authoritative sources. This tradition provides the rules within which change can occur. Thus, while sacramental forms require hierarchy to retain their value, the number of things which can drift into the ‘accepted’ category, through practice, is virtually limitless. To use an inelegant metaphor, this system presents the possibility of a ‘bulge’ in the history of exorcism practice, such as occurred in the early modern period. This happened notwithstanding published attempts to corral exorcist enthusiasm, such as the papal *Rituale Romanum* of 1614, and the many exorcism manuals which stressed caution, notably in regard to public performances and especially in the interrogation of demons. For even these texts tended to leave loopholes, and indeed, the very existence of these new and detailed ‘how-to’ works, had at best a mixed value.

What Roy Porter has called the ‘agonizing ambiguities’ for Catholicism in the early modern period were these somewhat perennial ones, albeit writ large in a time of desperation – or perceived desperation – where some thought extreme measures were advisable, and others thought that they only made problems worse. The stakes grew higher in the context of war and witchcraft accusations, in particular, and this intensification helped to drive a wedge into the differences within Catholicism that were there all along, each new drama reinforcing scepticism and belief, by turns. Thus sacramental religiosity provided the openings for innovation, but also the risk of exposure of its own sometimes frail hold on credibility. At the heart of debates about the authenticity of specific cases of possession and exorcism lay this conundrum: successful exorcism displayed the authority of the Church over demons, but all sacramental and charismatic forms, including or especially ‘positive’ possession and exorcism, were suspect by reference to their own potentially diabolical origins. And in an era which placed especially high value on direct gifts from God, and in which there were tensions between competing hierarchies – institutional and spiritual – the question of whose authority was to prevail was raised afresh by each incident of possession. Questions such as this were indeed ‘agonising’ for the Church as a whole, but importantly, they were not generally experienced as such by parties to debate. On the contrary, seeing issues in black and white was a characteristic feature of this period: the religiosity of Catholic reform and renewal was frequently one of proof, of signs, of struggle, and of punishment. There was rarely room for the middle ground.<sup>30</sup>

Historical work in possession and exorcism has examined these phenomena within the context of numerous histories, notably those of witch-hunting,