

**God and Other Spirits:  
Intimations of  
Transcendence  
in Christian Experience**

*PHILLIP H. WIEBE*

**OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS**

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# Preface

The academy continues to consider the existence of God as a claim that might be advanced as the conclusion of a neat argument. However, the scientific community recognizes that claims about what is real can generally be won only by close scrutiny of puzzling events and theorizing about possible explanations. Moreover, although popular culture insists that spirits other than God also exist, neither the academy nor the church seem eager to consider these metaphysical possibilities.

I shall argue that religious experience provides the data upon which theorizing about the ontological claims in religion properly depends and that the efforts to obtain the numerous, detailed accounts required for adequate theorizing has only begun. I am grateful to those who allowed me to report their stories of personal experiences. I do not know if I will live to see the study of religion undertaken in the form I believe to be necessary, but if religious experience is ever given the sympathetic and simultaneously scrutinizing attention it deserves, a new attitude toward the rationality of religion will emerge.

I thank my university for the sabbatical leave granted to me in 2000, during which a portion of this book was written. I take this opportunity to thank my doctoral thesis advisor, Jack Smart, formerly of the University of Adelaide, for motivating me to think about issues related to Christian theism from his perspective. I also thank my friend of many years, Donald Wiebe, for the invitation to read a paper to the Toronto School of Theology, a portion of which appears here in a modified form at the end of chapter 2. It was pub-

lished in 2001 by the *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry*. Another part of chapter 2 bears some resemblance to “Evidence for a Resurrection,” published in 2001 by the *Journal for Christian Theological Research*, and some remarks about the Shroud of Turin echo parts of my “Design in the Shroud of Turin,” which was published by Worldwide Congress Sindone 2000. I am grateful to the editors of these journals for permission to publish simulacra of these papers here.

I express my thanks to Doug Chaffee, who eagerly read the manuscript prior to its completion, caught some infelicities, and made a number of good suggestions. I am also grateful to Oxford University Press for bringing this book to completion, especially to Cynthia Read for her expert editorial assistance. Finally, I take pleasure in acknowledging the support of my wife Shirley.

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# God and Other Spirits

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# Introduction

The Christian faith in its orthodox form makes substantial claims about what exists. Not only is God in triune form said to be real but also other spiritual beings are considered to exist. Two centuries after Christianity emerged in the Greco-Roman world, Origen of Alexandria, the earliest of Christianity's prominent theologians, summarized and explained the central elements of the Christian faith as the first apostles preached it. He said that they asserted the reality of seven distinct transcendent beings or kinds of being: one Creator-God, Jesus the incarnate God, the Holy Spirit, Satan, fallen angels, holy angels of God, and human souls that survive bodily death.<sup>1</sup> We need not dwell on the possibility that his list of transcendent realities might reflect only the beliefs of a Greek theologian, intent on interpreting a faith having Jewish origins for a polytheistic culture, for even a cursory look at the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures shows that their authors wrote of these beings. Origen is well known in Christian circles for expressing questionable or even heretical views, but his account of transcendent realities reflects an orthodox perspective.

Origen identifies only two other elements in the teachings of the first apostles, namely, that the universe is not eternal but was created and that the Scripture carries a deeper meaning than the one apparent on its surface. The emphasis he places on the existence of transcendent realities suggests that they featured prominently in early Christianity. Origen's account is remarkable for the evidence it provides of the early Christian church's interest in metaphysics and its confidence in addressing such matters. This confi-

dence is also borne out in the early creeds of the church, especially the Athanasian Creed, which elaborates on the metaphysical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. These creeds say curiously little about angels and evil spirits, however, suggesting that these might not have been considered essential beliefs, although mention of “the communion of saints” is widely considered to refer to the dead in a way that presupposes the survival of the soul. During most of its history, the Christian church has exhibited confidence in proclaiming what it considers to be “the truth” about visible and invisible things. This confidence appears to have been seriously shaken in the last two centuries.

The ancient and medieval views of the kinds of being found in the universe might not have been uniform, but transcendent realities similar to the ones described by Origen were very widely recognized. In *The Discarded Image*, C. S. Lewis describes the metaphysical commitments that characterized Christian Europe during the medieval era. He says that the Ptolemaic world of hollow and transparent globes was considered to be inhabited by beings and powers of different ranks and powers, including three hierarchies of angels, as described by pseudo-Dionysius.<sup>2</sup> Humans were thought to form a second kind of rational being, their souls naturally considered immaterial and immortal. Some held that human souls were created, along with the angels, well before the creation of Adam, but others considered them to come into existence as bodies are formed.<sup>3</sup> Lewis notes that rival views also existed about a third kind of rational being, variously known as elves, pygmies, gnomes, trolls, pans, fairies, hags, satyrs, fauns, water sprites, centaurs, dwarfs, nymphs, bogies, and other terms. These *longaevi* (creatures having long life) were believed by some to live on earth, by others to live in the air.<sup>4</sup> Lewis remarks that he once stayed at a lonely place in Ireland that was avoided by the local people, not simply because the place was thought to be haunted by a ghost but because fairies were said to lurk nearby. He identifies four views of the *longaevi* among medieval theorists: Some considered them to be distinct from either angels or humans and identical to the daimons (or daemons) of Greek antiquity; others considered them to be angels who were demoted when Satan fell, not because they took part in the rebellion but because they were sympathetic; a third view was that these were the devils who participated in Satan’s rebellion; and a fourth position was that these beings were either spirits of the dead or a special class of the dead.

Enlightenment influences in Western culture have virtually eliminated beliefs in *longaevi* and have contributed significantly to misgivings about other kinds of transcendent realities, such as angels and evil spirits. The question I wish to address in this book is whether evidence exists for some of the invisible beings or powers that Christianity has traditionally endorsed. Christians often appeal to Scripture and tradition to support their claims, but these appeals are likely to be authoritative only for those who already embrace this faith and

seldom impress people of either a philosophical or a scientific bent. One would hardly expect that the Christian view of the universe could be established beyond reasonable doubt by empirical methods, but this does not mean that claims about transcendent beings lack evidential support.

In the Boyles Lectures for 1965, Eric Mascall, historical theologian at the University of London, reaffirmed the existence of the transcendent realities central to Christian tradition, remarking that “behind and beyond the physical universe, there is a realm of purely spiritual beings, in whose affairs we have become implicated.”<sup>5</sup> Mascall identified the crucial beliefs for Christianity to be the existence of God, human freedom, and the immortality of the soul, but he went on to speak about warfare between angels of light and the powers of darkness, dismissing the objection that some might write him off as pre-Copernican or antediluvian. Mascall’s defensive tone is indicative of the recent hesitation of Christian theologians to discuss metaphysical questions related to the Christian faith. Theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg says that only a few theologians are now willing to deal with questions of metaphysics, and these tend to belong to the Catholic Church. He traces this reluctance to the repudiation of metaphysics among philosophers during the last century and observes that thinkers as diverse as the logical positivists, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Martin Heidegger argued that metaphysics was either nonsense or impossible.<sup>6</sup> Pannenberg does not discuss the impact of the academic study of religion by anthropologists and other social scientists on acceptance of the metaphysical claims of traditional Christianity, but these studies also appear to have contributed to the decline of metaphysics. According to Pannenberg, the metaphysical claims found in the sacred writings and traditions of the church are now proclaimed as elements of the original teachings (the *kerygma*) without further elaboration or are demythologized.

Rudolf Bultmann is famous for having called his fellow theologians to demythologize the message of Scripture and the church. This call was based on his observation that modern science rejects the idea that the course of nature can be perforated by supernatural powers and the view that we live in a three-storied universe consisting of heaven, earth, and hell. Noting that history does not take into account any intervention of God or of the devil or of demons, he maintained that these elements should be removed from Christian faith.<sup>7</sup> Bultmann’s call to drop reference to transcendent beings has largely been heeded in the Western church. This decline might be due in part to Bultmann’s own influence, for some consider him to be one of the foremost theologians of the twentieth century, or it could be a result of other influences to which he himself was responding, such as the increasing influence of science. Whatever the cause, the discussion of the possible existence of transcendent realities besides God has been significantly minimized in theological expositions, pulpits, and the writings of philosophers of religion. Robust beliefs in spirits are now expressed primarily in popular culture, in New Age thought, and among biblical

literalists, but the naiveté, credulity, and lack of hermeneutic sophistication with which such groups are charged make their beliefs unacceptable in the academy. Western culture is loath to accord any religion authority to speak on questions of metaphysics, and science is increasingly viewed as having the sole authority to rule on questions of existence and other significant truth claims. Religion is allowed to attend primarily to practical matters, such as marking important moments in a person's life, propounding an ethic, and providing psychological counsel for people in times of grief, distress, and, ironically, existential crisis over a universe emptied of transcendence.

Although Trinitarian beliefs set orthodox Christianity apart from other religions, the other transcendent orders of reality it has endorsed—a supreme deity, angels, and evil spirits—have been considered real in most cultures and religious traditions. Sir James Frazer provided English readers a century ago with accounts from around the world of beliefs in gods and goddesses, spirits and demons. *The Golden Bough* became a classic because of the large amount of information gathered from ethnographers, missionaries, and colonial administrators on beliefs about invisible realities that supposedly influence our ordinary lives.<sup>8</sup> Many of his accounts derived from European cultures, which indicates that beliefs about invisible agents and powers were still influential when the book was first published. Some of these beliefs were remnants of pre-Christian religions whose influence had never been eradicated by Christianity, and some were due to Christianity itself. Frazer poetically observed that “the army of spirits, once so near, has been receding farther and farther from us, banished by the magic wand of science from hearth and home, from . . . haunted glade and lonely mere, from the riven murky cloud that belches forth the lightning, and from those fairer clouds that pillow the silver moon or fret with flakes of burning red the golden eve.”<sup>9</sup>

Popular culture now seems to be turning back to “an enchanted world,” perhaps in response to disillusionment over the inability of science to deal with today's problems. Movies and television programs based on supernatural forces are popular, and numerous accounts reporting encounters with angels have circulated in recent years. The bimonthly magazine *Angels on Earth*, which describes itself as presenting “true stories about God's angels and humans who have played angelic roles in daily life,”<sup>10</sup> is devoted to stories of encounters. Even some members of the academy have given accounts of such encounters, such as the Russian scientist who reported in 1985 that six cosmonauts saw angels with wings and halos near their space station.<sup>11</sup> The angels are said to have followed the space station for about ten minutes on one occasion, when they were seen by three of the cosmonauts, and to have returned twelve days later, when all six saw these glowing figures. The academy does not give much credence to reports of supernatural encounters, just as it has not taken reports of UFOs very seriously. Patrick Harpur thinks that UFO encounters are the modern equivalent of medieval encounters with fairies and elves, so in refusing

to examine reports of either the academy is acting consistently. He remarks that reports of encounters with “the greys” are now so frequent that the church and the academy are beginning to take note.<sup>12</sup>

A significant fact about the metaphysical commitments of Christianity is that only one of them clearly requires evidence drawn from a specific historical era. Evidence for the existence of God, evil spirits, angels, and souls that survive death, if such evidence exists, could be obtained in any era. The soul’s survival, for instance, is occasionally defended on the basis of ongoing human experiences, such as cases of alleged reincarnation, apparitions of the dead, communications with the dead, out-of-body experiences, and so forth.<sup>13</sup> The evidence that is adduced is usually recent, but the survival hypothesis is not dependent upon evidence from any particular historical era. Neither is the existence of God viewed as being dependent upon finding evidence from some unique historical era, for people routinely defend it by an appeal to the existence of the universe, to elements of its design such as its having evolved to support human life (the anthropic principle), or to unique features of human life such as religious experiences, the capacity for morality, and mystical states of consciousness. These are ongoing characteristics of the universe or of people as a whole. The argument for God’s existence from the big bang admittedly requires knowledge of the universe’s “history” at one particular period, but most of the theistic arguments do not. Similarly, arguments in popular culture for the existence of angels are advanced from experiences spanning human history. Only the claim that God was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth requires knowledge of specific historical facts.

Christians have traditionally defended the deity of Jesus by reference to his extraordinary powers, such as being able to resurrect the dead and heal the sick, and by reference to his virgin birth and resurrection. The Resurrection would have to be plausible for claims about his deity to have any credibility, and defending these allegations requires specific knowledge about his life. However, other claims about transcendent realities can be assessed by considering evidence derived in any historical era, including the present one. Whether early Christianity adopted its beliefs in angels and evil spirits from the cultures in which it arose, or had its own evidence for these beliefs, is difficult to determine. Although it has consistently taught that at least some of its crucial dogmas, such as the triune character of God, could be fully known only as a result of divine revelation, many theologians have maintained that such revelation supplements evidence for a transcendent order found in human experience.

My remarks to this point have been phrased in a way that presupposes that such expressions as *God*, *transcendent realities*, and *spirits* can be plausibly interpreted realistically. This presupposition is so commonsensical that stating it seems frivolous, but philosopher John Hick considers the present debate over realistic and nonrealistic interpretations of religious language to be the



most fundamental to philosophy of religion.<sup>14</sup> He identifies the onset of this debate with the German theologian Ludwig Feuerbach, whose *Essence of Christianity* expressed the view that the idea of God is a projection onto the universe of our ideal of love. Ludwig Wittgenstein's analysis of how language functions in speech communities and his contention that language often does not serve the referring function it might appear to serve have been influential in developing nontraditional interpretations of religious language in the last fifty years. Wittgenstein gives expression to what are often described as postmodern views, although he is not so radical as to suggest that language never refers to things beyond itself. Questions remain about the complete interpretation of terms that purport to refer to transcendent realities, and some uses might be other than referential. However, I consider historic Christian faith as making commitments to metaphysical beings and will adopt a realistic interpretation of religious language.

In this book I examine some of the vital phenomena that have been interpreted in Christian tradition as suggesting the existence of both good and evil beings that somehow transcend the known world. I do not confine my attention to the existence of God, even though this is the most important kind of transcendent being, but address the general category of a transcendent reality represented by holy angels and evil spirits. I do not examine the uniquely Christian doctrine of the Trinity, a topic that would take us further into dogmatic theology than I wish to go. Neither do I evaluate the grounds for claiming that the soul survives death. This topic has received recent attention because of the widespread reports of remarkable features of near-death experiences, but it is beyond the scope of this book.

Philosophers give an extraordinary amount of attention to the existence of God as Supreme Deity but very little to other kinds of transcendent realities, especially beings that have been understood by tradition as finite. I shall try to correct this imbalance here. I shall argue that empirical inquiry into religious phenomena—inquiry that is simultaneously sympathetic and critical—meets established standards for rationality and that the future for the academic study of religion, including philosophy of religion, lies in the study of religious experience.

# I

## Intimations of Evil?

Let empiricism once become associated with religion, as hitherto, through some strange misunderstanding, it has been associated with irreligion, and I believe that a new era of religion as well as of philosophy will be ready to begin.

—William James, *A Pluralistic Universe*

Leo Harris of Adelaide, South Australia, was the senior minister of a large Christian church, as well as the founder and leader of an international association of more than sixty churches, when I got to know him in 1970. He was well known in Adelaide and widely regarded as a man of integrity and wisdom. Besides performing the usual duties that come with being a minister, he was reputed to conduct exorcisms. He made only brief references in public services to this controversial ritual, but in private settings he would sometimes provide fairly detailed accounts of some of his experiences. Leo's beliefs on the subject were unquestionably shaped by a traditional interpretation of the Bible, but he also sought to substantiate claims about the existence of evil spirits out of his own experience. I was a doctoral student in philosophy at the University of Adelaide at the time, working on the general problem of defining corroborating evidence for hypotheses. I was intrigued by the claim that evil spirits exist and startled by the contention, extraordinary to me at the time, that contemporary experiences might corroborate it.

I was brought up with Christian beliefs as shaped and mediated by Canadian Mennonites, in which emphasis was placed upon private spirituality, a humanitarian ethic, and pacifism, but at the uni-

versity I embraced the interpretation of Christianity articulated by Rudolf Bultmann. I was impressed with his view that plausible beliefs about the world are determined by modern science, an implication of which is “that a corpse cannot come back to life or rise from the grave, that there are no demons and no magic causality.”<sup>1</sup> I was aware that exorcism had been practiced in the church but thought that a worldview allowing for possession, exorcism, and other supernatural beliefs was absurd. I thought that supernaturalistic hypotheses either had been imposed on events capable of being explained in natural terms or that reports of events supposedly favoring a supernaturalistic explanation were exaggerated. As he responded to my queries about evidence for spirits, Leo’s accepting attitude toward me, combined with his Australian frankness, allowed me to become acquainted from a safe distance with some of the phenomena he had experienced. He seemed open to the idea that natural explanations for phenomena should be explored before appealing to supernatural causes.

Leo told of disturbing phenomena, interpreted as evil spirits acting in or upon people and causing or contributing to bizarre behaviors, but he also told of remarkable cures apparently effected through prayer and other spiritual exercises. The following accounts of alleged demonic influence and exorcism use the language of those who believe that spirits exist and can “inhabit” or control people, inducing them to act in strange ways, including controlling their powers of speech.

*Case 1:* Leo gave an account of an exorcism involving a young woman who had come to him for counsel and prayer. During one of the sessions a “voice” different from her normal one said to him, “I got her father, and I’ll get her too.” When the session was over, Leo asked what these words meant. She explained to him that the telling remark, which startled her when the “voice” uttered it, seemed to reveal the circumstances behind the suicide of her father. His family could not understand why he took his own life and carefully guarded this secret. Now the tragedy and its apparent cause had been revealed in a remark beyond her control.

Evil spirits were once widely thought to cause suicide, and this case might seem to be an instance of a “suicidal spirit” being passed from one generation to another.

Suicide is now widely considered to be explicable in natural terms, however. The suicide rates in Hungary and Finland, for example, many of whose people have common ancestry in the Finno-Ugric people who lived in the Ural Mountains three thousand years ago, are twice the average in the rest of Europe. Moreover, a recent study of suicide among Amish people showed that 73% of the suicides in a hundred-year period could be traced to four families, who made up only 16% of the total Amish population.<sup>2</sup> Such studies suggest

that some genetic characteristic makes certain people more susceptible to suicide than others. Other studies, including some with identical twins and adopted children,<sup>3</sup> confirm the conjecture. Recent evidence suggesting a link between genetics and suicide comes from a study of serotonin 5-HT<sub>2A</sub> by researchers at the Royal Ottawa Hospital in Canada.<sup>4</sup> They found that this neurotransmitter was found to be more common in the blood of suicidal people than in the rest of the population. Although these researchers do not rule out the significance of cultural and environmental factors, they argue that a genetic mutation is implicated in the prevalence of suicide in particular ethnic groups and families. A defender of naturalism could plausibly argue that the young woman in Case 1 inherited a disposition toward suicide from her biological father; moreover, because she grew up with him, she shared the environment that contributed to his suicide. Hence, evil spirits had nothing to do with her behavior.

This naturalistic explanation seems to account for the suicidal disposition the young woman might have had, but it does not quite handle the peculiar but intelligible remark, "I got her father, and I'll get her too," that came from her during the so-called exorcism. Her use of *I* makes little sense if we interpret it as an instance of the young woman referring to herself in a normal way. The statement had a precise meaning for her, as well as great significance in view of the tragic event to which it seemed to refer, so some explanation is required. In another exorcism session from that period in her life, a voice other than her own, filled with hideous mockery, boasted to Leo, "She thought I was God." These first-person remarks exhibit a kind of sentience that we associate only with persons and give the impression of coming from a "person" or "persons" other than the young woman. That such phenomena have been interpreted as coming from diabolical sentient beings is not surprising. However, theories that make reference to psychological disorders, rather than supernatural agents, purport to provide adequate explanations for behavioral features such as these.

Multiple personality disorder, which is now widely known as dissociative identity disorder, is a psychological disorder in which people exhibit behaviors that suggest that their personalities have been segmented, often to cope with traumas that would otherwise be insurmountable. Although its feasibility is a matter of debate among specialists, this disorder has been popularized through such films as *The Three Faces of Eve*, in which actors portray events that resemble real experiences when a human being appears to exhibit the behaviors of different persons. *The Minds of Billy Milligan*, by Daniel Keyes, is another popular account of an American who was diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder. Milligan was carefully observed by a group of psychotherapists for about nine months, during which time he exhibited as many as twenty-four personalities. In one of these, he could write Arabic, and in another he could speak a Serbo-Croatian dialect, even though he had been taught neither lan-

guage. Descriptions of this disorder suggest that the self that we often uncritically assume to be single and united can be fragmented. The different voices of people and the strange things they say sometimes reveal previous experiences. For example, an adult who has been sexually assaulted as a child might speak in a child's voice and say something appropriate to the trauma experienced. This psychiatric approach to the phenomena in question does not presuppose the existence of discrete beings known to religious thought as evil spirits; instead, it offers an understanding that can be seen as fitting into a broadly naturalistic interpretation of human behavior. Whether postulating psychological disorders can account for all instances of peculiar but intelligible speech is debatable, however.

Leo gave another example of an exorcism involving intelligible but peculiar speech, which also exhibits an explicit link to Christian doctrines.

*Case 2:* A woman came to Leo for prayer, and believing that she was harassed by an evil spirit in some way, he urged her to meditate on a few specific passages of the New Testament and return to see him in a week. She returned at the appointed time, and just as he began to pray with her, a piercing voice exclaimed, "She's clean, she's clean. I can't stay." With that, Leo said, the exorcism was over. He then asked the woman to describe what had happened during the previous week, and she explained that she had followed his instructions exactly, meditating on the passages he had suggested. She reported that the passage that became particularly meaningful to her was: "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you" (according to the King James Version, which is the version that Leo used). This text occurs in John's account of the Last Supper and reports a remark that Jesus made to his disciples after Judas Iscariot had left the assembled group to plot the betrayal of Jesus. John says that Satan entered into Judas as he participated in the first Eucharistic meal. Leo considered the timing of Jesus' remark to be significant, for Judas was not "clean."

This case seems to be an instance of what the *Catholic Encyclopedia* describes as demonic possession. It defines this controversial phenomenon as follows: "An evil spirit, one of the fallen angels, has entered into the demoniac, that this spirit may speak through the voice of the demonized person, but that it is not the man, but the spirit, who is speaking, and that by the command of Christ or that of one of His servants the evil spirit may be cast out, and the possessed person set free."<sup>5</sup>

Leo reported that when he first began to perform exorcisms he spent a great deal of time praying with people who came for help. He said that his efforts were often poorly rewarded, for either people were not helped at all or the benefits were temporary. He then introduced meditation on specific pas-

sages of Scripture, instructing those who sought help to spend much time reflecting on the meaning and significance of these passages. Leo taught that the exorcisms occurred primarily as a result of the authority of Jesus Christ and his words and that the role of the exorcist was modest. The practice of incorporating Scripture passages into one's personal life is sometimes described as part of the contemplative practice known as hesychasm. This meditative technique is considered by the Greek Orthodox Church to provide knowledge of the "uncreated light" and was widely practiced in antiquity by those who lived in Christian monastic life.<sup>6</sup> Leo was regarded in his church, as well as in the sixty that he directly or indirectly founded, with a measure of respect that bordered on awe. I had the impression that the people in the Adelaide church treated the exorcism phenomena with great caution and some fear. Michael Cuneo describes some American charismatics who underwent exorcism in the 1970s as having regarded demonic bondage as a mark of "spiritual glamour and prestige."<sup>7</sup> This outlook is completely foreign to what was expressed in Adelaide.

Case 2 again demonstrates the occurrence of intelligible and meaningful speech, although its meaningfulness derives from knowing that the woman who was involved had meditated during the week on this particular passage and that it had become especially significant to her. The remark, "She's clean, she's clean. I can't stay," is peculiar from the standpoint of the woman. She says it, but it is not the sort of thing one would expect her to say. We want to ask: Why does she refer to herself as *she* rather than *I*? Who is the *I* that cannot stay? Where does the *I* not want to stay? The original quotation, "Now ye are clean through the word which I have spoken unto you," has been transformed so that the gist of it is expressed from what sounds like the point of view of someone else occupying her body. One could perhaps understand her having repeated the original quotation in much like its original form, perhaps even altering it slightly so that it became something like "I am clean through the word spoken unto me." Case 2, however, like the first one, gives the distinct impression that a mind or an intelligence other than her own is speaking through her. This impression is strengthened by the fact that the voice heard to speak did not sound like her usual voice, although perhaps too much should not be made of this fact, in that people often alter their voices depending on their audience and on other circumstances. Defenders of psychological explanations might insist that this case is another example of dissociative identity disorder and that no appeal needs to be made to any supernatural agent. Perhaps they are right. However, Leo gave another example that is not readily explicable as an instance of dissociative identity disorder.

*Case 3:* In one of the exorcisms that Leo conducted, the spirits<sup>8</sup> who were ordered to leave a man responded in a distinctive voice with the threat that if they did so, they would enter a certain young man,

who was known to Leo. The young man also lived in Adelaide, which was a city of about 700,000 at the time. Leo said he told the spirits to leave in spite of the threat and ordered them not to enter the young man. Within a half hour or so of this exorcism, he received a telephone call from the mother of the young man who had been named. She begged Leo to come to the house immediately because "something strange had come over her son." When Leo arrived at the house, the young man's mother informed Leo that her son refused to talk and would not leave his room. Leo went to the young man's room and saw from the doorway that he was lying on his bed. Leo entered the room and shut the door behind him, whereupon the threatening voice that he had heard from the older man a short while ago now spoke to him from the bed, saying, "We told you we would get him, didn't we?" Leo believed that the same spirits he had exorcised in a different part of the city were now in the young man. Leo explained that his authority to control the activity of spirits was limited, and that despite the fact that he would order them to refrain from entering others, they did not always obey.

The remarkable feature of this case is the intelligibility of the whole complex of events, especially the remarks coming from the two men other than Leo. The first man uttered threatening words and named the young man; the young man immediately behaved in a strange way and soon afterward uttered words that suggested that the threat had been carried out. The sequence of the reported events, the close timing of them, the coherence of the utterances involved, and perhaps also the similarity of the distinctive voice coming from the two men suggest that something left the first man and entered the second. The events seem to be an instance of what is sometimes called demonic contagion. A defender of a naturalistic explanation for these events might suggest that the speech and other behaviors of the two men can be explained by the fact that both of them had dissociative identity disorder. However, this explanation could be viewed as adequate only if we ignored the content of what was said, the sequence of the events, and the apparent link between the two. We cannot be expected to ignore the content of the statements, however, for such contents are typically used by psychotherapists to attribute dissociative identity disorder to a person and to understand the causes of the supposed dissociation.

Another remarkable feature about this case is that the individual events involving the men are not paranormal from the standpoint of contemporary psychiatric theory, for the theory of dissociative identity disorder supposedly explains them. So the usual objection brought by naturalists to paranormal claims is not applicable here. The extraordinary character of this story emerges only when we consider the events together. I am sure Leo believed that no normal contact existed between these two men and that they did not conspire

to deceive him, although these claims are impossible to corroborate now.<sup>9</sup> I will assume for the purposes of discussion that the events transpired more or less as he related them. These events apparently providing evidence of “possession” or “demonization” are markedly different from many others alleged in the history of possession, as when humans are said to have been changed into animals or their bodies transported through space. Skepticism about paranormal claims of the latter kinds seems justified, but the allegations at the heart of Case 3 are not of this kind. Speech suggestive of dissociative identity disorder occurs frequently enough so that it is not viewed as paranormal.

A superficial response to these events would be to treat them as coincidences. Of course, we have to concede that a small probability exists that the first man would name precisely the young man who immediately began to behave strangely, that the young man would say something that fitted in well with the earlier threat, and that causality does not “connect” them. However, interpreting this sequence of events as coincidences denies to them the kind of intelligibility we find in human life, where speech and actions appropriate to a particular context and past events occur. If we regard the events as separate instances of dissociative identity disorder, we deny to the whole complex its intelligibility. Treating the events as coincidences or as unrelated cases of dissociative identity disorder is an interpretive choice, but such a choice is not consistent with the interpretation generally given to events in human life. The suggestion that we are merely looking at two unrelated instances of dissociative identity disorder seems less plausible than the claim that we are confronted with a coherent complex requiring some other kind of explanation. An example such as Case 3 could induce us to reconsider the adequacy of dissociative identity disorder as an explanation for some of the other cases involving intelligible but peculiar speech.

A causal connection seems to exist between the events in Case 3 because they occurred close together in time and because of the order in which they occurred: the threat to “get” the young man was followed by an event that implies that it was carried out. These are conditions that are normally satisfied by events that are in a causal sequence. Perhaps a question might be raised about claiming a causal link between two events when they are not instances of an established pattern. This query about causality derives from scientific contexts in which variables can be controlled, so that sufficient information can be obtained to establish patterns. Such a requirement is probably too stringent for events involving human behavior, where the conjectures we advance about causes often depend on a vast network of background information that cannot be structured to resemble the hypotheses found in physical sciences. Of course, we are not examining a claim here simply about *human* agents and their behavior, but the relevant background appears to be the human sciences, where claims about causal connections are often tentative and incompletely supported by observation.



The second part of this incident gives the first part a causal significance that it would not otherwise have. If all that had happened was that the first man uttered words that expressed a threat to the second man and then the second man neither did nor said anything remarkable, a defender of the theory of dissociative identity could plausibly maintain that the incident had been explained. It would merely be an instance of a “voice” making a threat to a second person, followed by nothing that could give that threat meaning. However, the events reported concerning the second man put those involving the first in a new light and lend credence to the claim that “something” was “transmitted” from one to the other. Psychiatry is appropriately preoccupied with providing care to those with psychological disorders and explaining their occurrence, and it cannot be expected to examine the supposed causal connections between the abnormal behaviors of different people. Unfortunately, phenomena such as those described in Case 3 do not fall into the boundaries of well-established sciences.

One peculiarity of the remark that came from the young man was the use of the pronoun *we*. This could be as innocent as the royal *we*, which ordinary people sometimes mimic in a mocking way. But it could have another meaning. Leo said that in some exorcisms the “voices” referred to other spirits or implied that they spoke of behalf of a group of spirits. He described a case involving a woman who had suffered several miscarriages and at least one stillbirth. During exorcism a “voice” boasted that “he” was a prince and had authority to allow other spirits to enter into a person or require them to leave. This “voice” went on to say that the refusal of the woman to look at her stillborn child was unfortunate from its standpoint, for her shock at seeing it would have given “him” further opportunity to allow another spirit “in.” Before the exorcism this woman could not bear children, but afterward she gave birth to several healthy children. The “we” in the case of the young man could have been the expression of a “voice” speaking on behalf of “others.”

The examples I have discussed belong to a small subgroup within the large class of phenomena that have been attributed to spirits. Ethnographers, anthropologists, and missionaries have amply documented numerous kinds of phenomena that people have considered to have a source in evil spirits, including storms, diseases, crop failures, and other natural disasters. Many of these examples, however, are not as strongly suggestive of the action of spirits as are the instances of intelligible and peculiar speech illustrated here. Oxford philosopher Anthony Quinton plausibly observed that if a tree emitted coherent speech appropriate to a situation and with the kind of continuity exhibited by normal persons, we might reasonably regard the tree as a person.<sup>10</sup>

The Catholic Church has long maintained that specific criteria need to be satisfied to plausibly attribute being “demonized” to a person in a form requiring exorcism.<sup>11</sup> These criteria include speaking in unknown languages or being able to understand languages without having learned them; levitating or

performing extraordinary feats of strength for one's physical condition; vehement aversion to God, Mary, the saints, the cross, and sacred images; correct prediction of future events; or correct description of events taking place at some distance.<sup>12</sup> According to Catholic theology, only persons exhibiting such specific criteria are in need of exorcism. The difficulty with these criteria, as Aldous Huxley observes, is that they have also been attributed to recipients of extraordinary divine grace as well, which makes it difficult to draw the distinction between being demonized and being a recipient of grace. At this point the church generally introduces the moral impact of these experiences on recipients, as well as the circumstances leading up to their appearance.

The Religious Experience Research Unit, developed about thirty years ago by Sir Alister Hardy from Oxford University, has collected more than six thousand accounts of various kinds of religious experience, among which are some that describe cases of exorcism.<sup>13</sup> Their files are available to researchers, but details that might identify the individuals involved cannot be published. An Anglican priest, who will be identified here as William, provided the following account of an exorcism that is said to have taken place in the Rhineland of Germany in 1947. The person who underwent exorcism will be identified as Nathan, and the witness to the event will be identified as Thomas.

*Case 4:* On the last evening of the Rhineland Keswick Convention three of us set out, at about 10:15 P.M. for a walk through a small wood which led to a village on the other side. Nathan, one of the party, started to tell the story of his life, and when we came to a clearing in the wood Thomas suggested that we should sit down for awhile. Nathan continued to relate his story. On joining the Royal Air Force he had missed the influence of home, and fell into bad company, unable to resist temptation. As Nathan finished his story there was silence. I sat with my eyes closed, wondering how I, as one of the convention leaders, could help the young fellow. What happened next was over in a very short space of time. Breaking through the silence, and crashing through the darkness with tremendous power came my voice, "In the name of the Lord Jesus Christ depart." Immediately Nathan let out a half shout, and fell towards me. He said afterwards, "At those words I saw a black form appear from somewhere at my feet and vanish into the wood, and, at the same time, something indescribable left me."

I felt an urgency for prayer, and if Nathan did not pray, something would happen to him. It was at this point an event occurred so dreadful that since I have prayed that it should never happen again. It seemed as if horrifying pandemonium had been let loose; as if all the powers of hell were concentrated in that spot in the wood. I saw numbers of black shapes, blacker than the night, mov-

ing about and seeking to come between myself and Nathan, whom I was gripping hard. I saw three demon spirits, perhaps more, between Nathan and myself. These shapes were intelligences. They were different from one another. Each had a personality of its own. They began to buffet me, not striking me physically, but thrusting me backwards in spirit away from Nathan so as to make me recoil, perhaps from fear, and so loose my hold. Two other demon spirits, about shoulder high, were just behind me, one on my right, the other on my left. These two were moving about with a swaying, menacing up-and-down motion, such as boxers use when seeking an opening for attack. Again I felt an intense urgency for prayer, particularly for Nathan. "Pray Nathan," I called to him, but the poor fellow could do nothing but sob. With my hands on my shoulders I cried, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin." Again and again I repeated the phrase. I did not notice that Thomas was silent until he said, "What a horrible atmosphere." "Pray Thomas," I commanded. "Pray for us." Together we cried with a loud voice, "The blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth from all sin." Then, after a pause, in a colossal voice such as I have never heard before or since came a verse from Scripture through my lips in terrifying power. The words were forced out of my mouth, "I give to my sheep eternal life; they shall never perish, neither shall any pluck them out of my hand." I was left absolutely gasping after this. My mouth had been stretched open wider and wider, as if the words were too big for my lips to utter. I then led with the Lord's Prayer. For Thomas this was a real climax. He saw nothing, but again felt the atmosphere change. As we reached the words, "Deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory" the feeling of power was immense. The atmosphere was charged with a living presence, impossible to describe. Then everything grew quiet. The air seemed soft and pleasant, as if angel voices were singing, as if a battle had ended, or a great storm had blown itself out. Nathan whispered, "Praise God, Oh what joy."

We made our way back to the conference centre. Nathan could not wait until morning to share the news of his deliverance. Quite independently, Nathan told of how he had seen seven black forms emerge from the trees in the wood, and how he felt some power pushing him forward out of my grip.

The correspondence with the Religious Experience Research Unit indicates that Thomas was contacted by Sir Alister Hardy to give further details of the event, but he declined to do so. Thomas mentioned that he had written a full account of the event at the time it occurred but had shown it to no one. One