

Healing or hurting? Interpretations of possession as a disease in the second half of the 19th and early 20th century press¹

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Abstract: This study focuses on articles published in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century in which possession was portrayed as a disease, be it mental or physical. At the beginning, we will briefly show how possession cases were interpreted by the medical profession in the 19th century. We will also describe changes in conceptions of possession and exorcism in Christian religion over this period. The core part of our study entails an analysis of articles, focusing on descriptions of the disease and how possession was perceived by those involved. The paper also considers individual cases and the outcomes and potential consequences of the exorcisms performed on the possessed, including court cases or being committed to an asylum for the mentally ill.

Keywords: possession, devil, witch, hysteria, demonopathy, mental disease

Introduction

This study examines the 19th century view of possession as a mental illness. We examine the role of possession in society and the manifestation of Christian beliefs about possession in the post-enlightenment period in cases of possession. Our main aim is to investigate press reports of possession cases and exorcisms in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century in the context of modern medicine. In the 19th century, psychiatry became a new medical discipline and perceptions of mental illness and supernatural beliefs were changing. Public opinion shifted away from supernatural interpretations to the more modern explanation that possession was an illness.

The main sources used in our research are newspapers articles, specifically, articles published in Cisleithania in the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century. We identified several discourses in the periodicals published within this timeframe. This

study focuses on the medical discourse. We identified cases in several articles in various periodicals in which possession was portrayed as a disease. As the ideological focus varied from newspaper to newspaper, that is also taken into consideration.

Role of possession

Possession has been variously defined by many researchers. Littlewood, for instance, defines it as “a local belief that an individual has been entered by an alien spirit or other parahuman force, which then controls the person or at least significantly alters their actions and identity to a greater or lesser extent”. (Littlewood 2004, 8). The phenomenon of possession is found in many cultures and societies (Walter and Fridman 2004, 74). Evidence of some form of possession can be found in the majority of the world’s cultures. Examples occur in most religions, but are more common in some societies (Keener 2015, 217).

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Anthropologists describe possession as a type of altered consciousness. It may be involuntary or sought; the latter is typically found in Africa, the Caribbean and parts of Brazil (Littlewood 2004, 8). It is usually spontaneous, but can be induced in healing sessions through an altered state of consciousness (Walter and Fridman 2004, 75). Possession is deeply embedded in the cultures of many developing societies. It is usually thought to help people cope with everyday life and its attendant misfortunes. It has a large range of potential functions, such as everyday resistance against socially oppressive conditions and solving personal disagreements (Jadhav 1995, 809).

Possession is a research topic in many scientific disciplines. In anthropology the focus is on a transcultural framework for classifying or interpreting spirit-possession, or on explaining the cultural meaning of possession in society and finding cross-cultural parallels (Keener 2015, 217). Medical research concentrates on the neurophysiological origins of the symptoms and characteristics of the central nervous system. In psychiatry, possession has been investigated as a mental disorder. It has been diagnosed as neurosis, psychosis, epilepsy and personality disorder. But in some cases the possessed individual showed no signs of mental illness (Jilek 1971, 203). Some psychiatric disorders are considered pathological in all cultures, but there is a group of mental illnesses or conditions that are treated as pathological in some cultures (Jilek 1971, 212).

Possession and medicine in 19th century

In the 19th century, physicians started paying more attention to cases of possession. In this era, asylums for the mentally ill were being built; to protect the afflicted rather than separate them from the rest of society (Huguelet 2009, 67; 65-81). By the end of the 19th century, psychiatry was becoming more professionalized and a growing number of patients were admitted to psychiatric hospitals (Thielman 2009, 15; 6-18). Jean-Martin Charcot, a French physician and psychiatrist, researched hysteria and its relationship to the possession state. In his *Les démoniaques dans l'art* from 1887, he stated that hysteria was not the only cause of the disease associated with possession (demonopathy). Other causes included diagnoses of epilepsy or hypochondria (Charcot and Richer 1887, 91). Charcot identified four phases in hysteria attacks. In the third phase, patients exhibited extraordinary flexibility in movement, dexterity and physical strength. He attributed this to the tendency to misdiagnose hysteria as possession. Patients were liable to exercise strength

disproportionate to their age or gender, and men could be very violent. Some patients were able to contort themselves into the most unimaginable positions, arching over with just their head and feet on the bed and their abdomens bulging (Charcot and Richer 1887, 97). Rapid limb or whole body movements were common. Patients would often jerk up in bed as if they were going to sit up, laying their heads on their knees, but would then bend backwards sharply (Charcot and Richer 1887, 100). Charcot called this phase the passionate attitude period – *période des attitudes passionnelles* (Charcot and Richer 1887, 102). According to Charcot, hysteria attacks were an important part of possession cases. Hysteria manifested in diverse ways, such as through seizures, twisting different parts of the body, ecstasy or, conversely, lethargy, catalepsy, somnolence, paralysis, etc. (Charcot and Richer 1887, 106). In the introduction to Charcot's book *La foi qui guérit* (Faith that Heals), Désiré-Magloire Bourneville pointed out that persons accused of witchcraft were suffering from hysterio-demonopathy and required medical and/or scientific attention, rather than secular justice and executioners (Bourneville and Charcot 1897, 1).

Other physicians sought the origin of mental illness in external influences. Andrevetan attributed nervous disorders to preachers frightening people with horrific religious images and stories. According to Andrevetan, many people in hospices thought they were possessed by the devil (Andrevetan 1862, 10). Some 19th century doctors sought the origins of psychosis in physiological changes. Bittner, for example, claimed that mental illness was caused by the blood as it nourished the nerves. Bittner stated that the brain was highly sensitive to changes in the circulatory system, especially changes in the quality and volume of blood. The symptoms of mental illnesses were manifest mainly in sight and hearing, for example visions of monsters. According to Bittner, hallucinations were related to blood pressure and occurred in conjunction with "bloodlessness" caused by injury or fever. The sufferer's hallucinations are a fixed idea that keeps returning – e.g. believing that one is possessed by the devil (Bittner 1876, 185). Kuffner described the feeling of being possessed as a state where the person thinks they have an additional personality besides their own original one, a concept he called *dvojvědomí soudobé* (Kuffner 1897, 29). He attributed the origin of this condition to thoughts running counter to the original personality that Kuffner considered were meaningless, bad and unpleasant. Rude words coming to mind when praying is one such example. The greater the resistance, the more the person was controlled by and subjugated to them. Motoric hallucinations, unconscious movements,

unintentional utterances and so on are manifestations of this. Affected individuals think they are being controlled by an evil spirit: a state referred to as *daemonomania* (Kuffner 1897, 31).

Possession and exorcism in Christianity

In Christianity, possession is a state in which the afflicted individual's physical activities are controlled by an evil spirit (DiNola 1998, 288). It can occur for several reasons. In the Middle Ages, it was seen as punishment for sinning (Ferber 2006b, 922). Possession could be caused by bewitchment or could be spontaneous but with God's permission (Ferber 2006b, 920). Unlike in other cultures, in which possession can be caused by a good deity or spirit, in Christianity possession is always caused by an evil spirit (Walker 1981, 17). The evil spirits, or demons, represent fallen angels (Kelly 2009, 216). The Christian belief in possession is derived mainly from the New Testament. The synoptic Gospels portrayed Christ as a warrior fighting evil spirits and having the ability to command them. Christ is often portrayed as healer casting out disease (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 24). While traditionally only Christ could cast out evil spirits, relying on his own authority, later Christian priests had to resort to exorcisms and invoke saints and God (Ferber 2006a, 338).

In Christianity, exorcism is a ritual designed to cast demons out of the human body, object or place (Ferber 2006a, 338). The word exorcism derives from the Greek word *exorkizo* – to swear, to conjure (DiNola 1998, 295). Originally, exorcize did not mean casting out the demon, but letting it swear (Walker 1981, 5). In the Middle Ages the Latin word *exorcizo* was interchangeable with the terms *adjuro* and *conjuro* (Bailey 2003, 46).

Records of possessions and exorcisms can be found in church writing dating back to early Christianity. In that period and in the early Middle Ages, diseases were often associated with possession (Godu 1992, 4). And it could lead to any illness (Godu 1992, 1). For example, in his *First Apology* Justin Martyr (100–165) referred to madmen as possessed. He thought such people were haunted by the spirits of the dead (Justin Martyr 1885a, 443). He further claimed that exorcism performed in the name of Christ could cure possession (Justin Martyr 1885b, 509). Possession is associated with illness in the *First Letter of St. Clement*, an anonymous letter stating that the brothers in Christ should visit those tormented by evil spirits. People with healing powers cast out demons with God's help and perform other healing acts (The First Epistle of the Blessed Clement 1885, 108).

The Byzantine historian Sozomenos described, in his third book, a possessed man running through a market with sword drawn, having been restored to full mental health through exorcism (Sozomenos Scholasticus 1886, 692).

Physical healing played an important role in early Christianity (Ferntgren 1992, 1). The early non-canonical Christian texts from the 1st and 2nd centuries contained no reports of miraculous healing. In the second half of the 2nd century, accounts of the ability to heal began to appear in Apologetic writing. And by the 3rd century, the number of reports about miraculous healing was growing. In contemporary writing, it is often hard to distinguish between healing and exorcism (Ferntgren 1992, 6). From the middle of the 3rd century, exorcism became part of the training for catechumens and the ritual of accepting new converts into the church (Nischan 1992, 162). Devil expulsion served both the purposes of healing and rooting out belief in pagan gods. However, there was no commonly accepted method of exorcism (DiNola 1998, 292). Exorcism was just one of many treatments. Other methods included fasting, prayer and invoking the name of Christ (Ferntgren 1992, 12). In the early centuries of Christianity, any Christian could carry out exorcisms (Bailey 2003, 46). Nor was there verification of proof of possession (Godu 1992, 16).

In the High Middle Ages, demonic possession was often thought to be the cause of mental illness (Forcén and Forcén 2014, 262). Epilepsy, schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are examples of such disorders (Forcén – Forcén 2014, 278). An individual was often considered to be possessed when other remedies failed. Yet, if exorcism did not work, possession was ruled out (Godu 1992, 16). The disease indicating possession was called *demonomania* (Vencovský 1996, 101). Exorcisms entailed the invocation of powerful names, initially the name of Christ and later the names of saints. The first attempts at creating the liturgical texts for exorcisms probably emerged in the 10th century. During an exorcism, the demon was commanded to leave the body or body parts thought to be possessed (Forcén and Forcén 2014, 263). In the High Middle Ages, a growing number of women, known as saints, reported to have supernatural visions. At the same time, a growing number were reported to be possessed. The “saints” and the possessed exhibited similar symptoms and it was often hard to distinguish between the two. Their symptoms included falling into a trance, xenoglossia, predicting the future, surviving without eating, and even levitation (Forcén and Forcén 2014, 263). Trances caused by various diseases were often feminized (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 11). However, holiness

was predominantly a male phenomenon, especially among the nobility or clergy. Conversely, possession was associated mainly with women (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 7). In the 13th century, trances and visions were attributed to diseases of the womb or melancholy. The latter was considered the cause by some early modern demonologists, such as Jean Bodin (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 35). According to Bourguignon, it was not only in Christianity that possession predominantly affected women but also in various other religions and cultures. Most exorcists were men (Bourguignon 2004, 557). Alongside exorcisms, some mentally ill people received medical treatment. But only for a very narrow range of diseases (episodes of melancholy and violence, etc.). In the 15th century, the first asylums for the insane were set up in Spain and in Italy. Treatments were based on Arabic medicine (Foucault 1997, 83).

In the early modern period, the Reformation and witch hunts shaped belief in possession (Burns 2003, 239). Early modern demonologists drew a clear distinction between the possessed and witches. Possession was not seen as a voluntary act and so it was not considered as a crime (Levack 1996, 1613). At the end of the 16th century, suicide was frequently attributed to possession (Midelfort 1992, 130). After the Reformation, the Protestant churches abandoned the rituals and ceremonies of exorcism. Protestants generally believed in possession, but considered exorcisms an *adioforon*, a non-obligatory religious act that had no basis in the sacraments. Zwingli, Calvin, and other Reformation leaders thought exorcism a papal relic (Nischan 1992, 163; Kelly 2009, 216).

Typical symptoms of possession in the early modern period included vomiting foreign objects, seizures, great strength, clairvoyance, xenoglossia, and insensitivity to pain (Levack 1996, 1616). Possession and the typical symptoms were derived from several sources, especially Francesco Guazzo's *Compendium Maleficarum* (1608), which contains a description of 50 possible symptoms (Ferber 2006b, 921; 920-924). During this period, a large number of exorcist manuals was published. The most important authors of these manuals are Girolamo Menghi, Valerio Polidoro, and Petrus Thyraeus (Ferber 2006a, 340).

Even in the early modern period, the notion of using exorcism for the ritual expulsion of an evil spirit did not replace the use of exorcism as a healing tool (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 21). In the 16th century, diagnosis was still completely reliant on assessments of the patient's visible symptoms. Natural causes could not be determined just from visible symptoms and exorcism was no longer just a means of treatment but also of

diagnosis. This change elevated the importance of exorcism and led to greater usage (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 20). In 1643, the Roman church issued a decree calling for women's supernatural experiences to be treated with skepticism (Caciola and Sluhovsky 2012, 32).

In the 17th century, possession was increasingly associated with witchcraft, which meant that witches were frequently accused of causing possession (Levack 1996, 1614). By the turn of the 18th century, mental illness institutions could be found in larger cities (Venocovský 1996, 155). Doctors and philosophers began to shift away from religious interpretations of mental health and toward philosophical and scientific perspectives (Thielman 2009, 12). In the 19th century, supernatural causes of disease had completely disappeared from medical publications. But the role of religion in mental illness continued to attract interest (Thielman 2009, 13).

Possession as an illness in 19th and early 20th century press

Morzine

The first case in this study concerns mass possession in the alpine village Morzine. This case started in 1857 and ended in 1868. More than two hundred people were thought to be possessed. In 1857, two young girls who were preparing for their first communion claimed they were possessed and drew public attention to their symptoms (Levack 2013, 228). In September 1857, another 13 girls aged from 10 to 22 exhibited similar symptoms (Devlin 1987, 136). We analyzed 25 articles published in 16 periodicals. Nine of the articles contained medical discourse. In several newspapers, the Morzine case was described as an epidemic (Ost-Deutsche Post 1865; Lumír 1874; Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung 1864). *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* called for doctors to investigate the "disease" (*Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* 1858). It claimed that there was a predisposition for mental illnesses in Morzine (*Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* 1858). *Ost-Deutsche Post* stated that possession was a special disease called demonomania (*Ost-Deutsche Post* 1858). *Fremden-Blatt* referred to it as an epidemic or disease that affected mostly women "Everyone is familiar with the sad and strange disease that has affected the village of Morzine for years and cannot be identified. Those affected by the disease were labeled as possessed, and many inhabitants believed it was caused by a spell" (*Fremden-Blatt* 1864). This article was also published in *Grazer Zeitung* (*Grazer Zeitung* 1864). *Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung* noted that the disease resembled St. Vitus' Dance and

mainly affected young girls aged 9 to 16 (Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung 1864). Several periodicals provided detailed descriptions of the symptoms. The main symptom among patients in Morzine was convulsions, followed by hysterical laughter, a burning sensation in the body, stuttering, and eye rolling. Some newspapers mentioned invulnerability, experienced for example when falling from a great height or during seizures (Wiener Kirchenzeitung für Glauben, Wissen, Freiheit und Gesetz 1858; Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung 1858). Possessed individuals also fell into a deep sleep (Wiener Kirchenzeitung für Glauben, Wissen, Freiheit und Gesetz 1858, 6; Die Presse 1858). To investigate the situation in Morzine, the French government dispatched Adolph Constans, chief supervisor of mental hospitals. The French government's decision indicates it felt the case required a doctor with knowledge of mental disorders.

Ponte a Ema

Another case occurred in Ponte a Ema near Florence in 1893. According to newspaper reports, the daughter of a local farmer was suffering from hysteria. It is worth noting that it was the newspapers that provided the diagnosis. It was said that she screamed all night long. Her father asked several doctors for help, but they could do little to help her. Her seizures worsened and the local priest informed her father that she might be possessed (*Teufelei*). The farmer took his daughter to Florence where a famous witch lived. He told the witch that his daughter had been bewitched (*verhext*). The farmer confidently observed the exorcism, which was performed in a darkened room with light from only two candles. When the incantation (*Beschwörung*) ended, the witch stated it had worked and told them to go home. The first person to visit them would be the source of the girl's illness. She told them to dispose of that person and then the disease would disappear. The peasant obeyed the witch's command. In the morning an old woman, a beggar, asked for a piece of bread. A horrific act then ensued, according to the newspapers.

The farmer grabbed her with both hands and threw her into the hot bread-oven. Two passing milkmen heard her calling for help. They kicked the door down and pulled the old beggar out of the oven. The exact details of what happened next are unknown; we are simply told that the farmer was charged and punished. The article was first published in *Deutsches Volksblatt* (Deutsches Volksblatt 1893) under the heading "Wieder eine Teufelsaustreibung" and subsequently in other newspapers as "Opět vymítání ďábla" (Národní listy 1893a), "Eine Teufelsaustreibung bei Florenz" (Grazer Tagblatt 1893a), "Ueber eine Teufelsaustreibung"

(Arbeiterinnenzeitung 1893), "Eine Teufelaustreibung" (Mährisches Tagblatt 1893a), "Wieder eine Teufelsaustreibung" (Salzburger Volksblatt unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg 1893a) and "Eine Teufelsaustreibung" (Troppauer Zeitung 1893).

Gif

In 1893, articles about a young woman from the French village of Gif, near Versailles, appeared in the newspapers. The 19-year old had been suffering from seizures for four years. According to *Národní listy*, she was an ugly laborer who was probably afflicted by a disease (Národní listy 1893b). *Marburger Zeitung* reported that she had fallen ill and had nervous attacks (*erkranktean nervösen Anfälle*) that developed into hysteria (Marburger Zeitung 1893). When struck with a seizure, the girl would roll around the floor making strange noises (Národní listy 1893b). The locals claimed she was able to predict the future. They came to the conclusion that she was possessed. The priest reported the matter to Bishop Goux of Versailles and requested permission to perform an exorcism. The priest and his assistant prayed over the patient for several months (Národní listy 1893b). Amid growing protests against the church, the mayor of Gif asked Dumontpallier, a leading Parisian doctor, to examine the girl. Dumontpallier and his colleague Pikert diagnosed a late stage of hysteria. However, the girl's relatives refused to allow the treatment (Národní listy 1893b; Marburger Zeitung 1893). The priest then performed another exorcism. The newspapers consistently use the term "ill" to describe the girl. One of the exorcists claimed to have heard the devil in her voice. Bishop Goux justified the exorcism by saying that the girl's illness was so unusual and abnormal that the doctors were helpless (Marburger Zeitung 1893). No further details are given, but the girl eventually made a complete recovery (Národní listy 1893b).

Montelepre

On 5 September 1893, reports of a possession case in Montelepre on Sicily were published in *Mährisches Tagblatt* ("Eine barbarische Scene") and *Grazer Tagblatt* ("Stück Aberglauben"). The newspapers identified the cause as persistent belief in witches and the devil among the predominantly rural population of Sicily. They described the inhabitants as being narrow-minded. Most thought the victims were suffering from the effect of an evil spirit on the human body. A 17-year old girl complained of a painful illness. The family asked the local witch (*Dorfhexe*) to help. She stated that August 15th was the ideal date for an exorcism. The exorcism began with a hot bath of nettles, snail shells, crayfish

and mole skins. Incense was burnt around the tub and the girl was covered in a sheet. She lost consciousness and later died. Relatives thought her fight against death was a sign of the healing power (*Heilkraft*) fighting the evil spirit. The witch and the “superstitious” relatives were charged with murder (Mährisches Tagblatt 1893b; Grazer Tagblatt 1893b). Later other newspapers published the same or very similar articles under different titles, e.g. “Ueber einen barbarischen Vorgang” (Feldkircher Zeitung 1893), “Eine barbarische Scene” (Znaimer Wochenblatt 1893), “Aberglaube!” (Salzburger Volksblatt unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg 1893b), “Ein Opfer furchtbaren Aberglauben” (Prager Tagblatt 1893). An article “Príšerný čin povery” also appeared in Czech in *Národní listy* (Národní listy 1893c).

The Kabard woman 1902

This last case, discussed in this paper, was a highly critical article published in five newspapers. It concerned a young Kabard (local ethnic group) woman in the Caucasus mountains who was possessed. The case was referred to in the newspapers as a dark superstition (*finstere Aberglaube*). A young woman had fallen ill and as she had convulsions, the villagers thought she was possessed. Her husband asked the local mullah (Islamic religious leader) for help. The mullah advised him to exorcise the woman. The man laid a fire and undressed her. He tied her arms and feet and tried to “heal her” on the fire until she lost consciousness. The ill woman, as she is referred to in the articles, began to scream but witnesses thought the noise was caused by Satan leaving her body. When the authorities investigated, the mullah stated that it was a common “healing procedure” (Pester Lloyd 1902; Ostdeutsche Rundschau 1902; Salzburger Volksblatt. unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg 1902; Pilsner Tagblatt 1902; Brünner Morgenpost 1902). A shorter article was published in *Mährisch-Schlesische Presse* (Mährisch-Schlesische Presse 1902).

Conclusion

In this study, we analyzed five cases of possession that were presented as a disease in 19th and early 20th century newspapers and one case of mass possession – the Morzine case. Most of those affected in Morzine were young women and some newspapers describe Morzine as a young woman’s disease (Fremden-Blatt 1864; Vereinigte Laibacher Zeitung 1864). The possessed in the other cases were young women as well. One should not be surprised to find that possession was thought to be a woman’s disease in 19th century medicine. Some diseases were considered to affect women in particular. In the first half of the 19th century, physicians believed

that hysteria was specific to women (Drouin-Péréon-Hautecoeur 2020, 1). Newspaper reports described Morzine as an epidemic of hystero-demonopathy. Montelepre, Ponte a Ema, and Gif were all depicted in the newspapers as cases of hysteria. But that does not automatically lead us to the conclusion that only women were possessed in the 19th century. During our research, we found possession cases among men as well. But our paper is mainly based on newspaper articles so we only examined cases that were publicized. Consequently, the cases selected represent a small sample of the possession cases documented in the 19th century.

None of the possessions cases that were attributed to disease analyzed in this study ended in a ritual church exorcism, with the exception of Gif. The Morzine case ended with the intervention of the French government and the gendarmes. In Montelepre and Ponte a Ema, the village witches expelled the devil. The Kabard woman was exorcised by her husband on the advice of the local mullah. In the cases analyzed here, the cases where possession was seen as a disease tended not to end in a ritual church exorcism, but rather in various folk techniques for expelling the evil spirit.

Of the 24 newspapers discussed in this paper, we were able to identify the ideological slant and focus of 21 newspapers. *Lumír* was a literary magazine (Beránková 1981, 130) containing poetry, feuilleton and cultural information (Bednařík, Jirák and Köpplová 2019, 106). Some periodicals had a national German focus – *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (Lang 2003a, 190), *Deutsches Volksblatt* (Melischek and Seethaler 2016, 183), *Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung* (Lang 2003a, 190), *Pilsner Tagblatt*, *Ostdeutsche Rundschau* (Olechowski 2004, 417) and *Ost-Deutsche Post* (Lang 2003b, 173). Others were political party mouthpieces – *Grazer Tagblatt* and Deutsche Volkspartei für die Alpenländer (Lang 2003a, 292). *Arbeiterinnenzeitung* was a social-democratic magazine (Lang 2003a, 109), while *Národní listy* was liberal paper that supported Národní strana svobodomyseľná (Beránková, Křivánková and Ruttkay 1988, 171). Other liberal newspapers were *Die Presse* (Kubiček 2008, 32), *Ost-Deutsche Post* (Lang 2003b, 173), *Feldkircher Zeitung* (Lang 2003a, 250), *Mährisches Tagblatt* (Fasora-Hanuš-Malíř 2007, 345), *Znaimer Wochenblatt* (Fasora-Hanuš-Malíř 2007, 28), *Prager Tagblatt* (Fasor-Kunštátň-Pavlíček 2019, 345) and *Salzburger Volksblatt. unabh. Tageszeitung f. Stadt u. Land Salzburg* (Glaser 1956, 153). Christian and conservative media included *Wiener Kirchenzeitung für Glauben, Wissen, Freiheit und Gesetz* (Lang 2003b, 422). Some of the newspapers were published by the governmental departments – *Grazer Zeitung* (Olechowski 2004, 417) and *Troppauer Zeitung* (Olechowski 2004,

418). *Brünner Morgenpost* were independent (Malíř 2013, 89) and *Pester Lloyd* were political newspapers promoting Hungary (Rózsa 2003, 2). As we can see the idea that possession was a disease was not typical of a particular ideological slant but could be found in various media, as well as in Christian newspapers.

In this paper, we analyzed five 19th century cases of possession. We showed how 19th century medical opinion was linked to newspaper depictions of possession as a disease. We also looked at how the media presented the possession cases, what the outcome of the case was and the means used to expel the devil.

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FRANTIŠEK VÁLEK

Wellbeing, Harm, and Religion – Conference Report

September 9–11, 2021, Brno, Czech Republic

In September 2021, Masaryk University in Brno hosted the fifth international annual doctoral conference in religious studies. The *Department for the Study of Religions* at Masaryk University was not the only organizer. The conference was arranged in cooperation with (mostly doctoral) students from several institutions: the *Center for Religious Studies* at the Central European University, *Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies* at Charles University, and *Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies* at the University of Pardubice.

The papers all centred around the key theme of wellbeing, harm, and religion. Three interesting keynote lectures, one on each day, formed the backbone of the conference. Andrea di Antoni from Kyoto University opened the conference with a lecture on “Spirits in the Material World: An Anthropology of Religious Healing, Affective Affordances, and Affective Technologies”, in which he presented his anthropological research and discussed the methodological implications of healing through spirit possession practices. On the second day, Radek Kundt from Masaryk University presented his paper “Effects of Extreme Ritual on Physiological and Psychological Health”, familiarizing the audience with the cognitive field research of the organizing institution. On Saturday, Michal Pagis from Bar-Ilan University closed the conference with her paper “Re-enchanting Therapy” on integrating Buddhist and Jewish elements in psychological practice.

The two full conference days were structured around presentations by doctoral students from numerous institutions around the globe. Participants came from, or joined in from, Italy, Czech Republic, Netherlands, Poland, Hungary, Iran, Portugal, India, Brazil, Austria, Germany, and Egypt. The conference theme was explored from various different cultural perspectives – from antiquity to the modern era – and through the prism of different methodological approaches – ranging from textual interpretative approaches to anthropological research to computer modelling. Conference delegates had the opportunity to experience the interdisciplinary nature of religious studies. Moreover, the small size of the conference meant there was plenty of opportunity for fruitful discussion after the papers and when mingling with a good cup of coffee and tasty snack.

Given the ongoing pandemic, the conference was held in hybrid format. Naturally that had its ups and downs. Some participants were able to join us from afar and the conference papers could be heard by a wider audience. But unfortunately, some participants had unreliable internet connections and others even found it impossible to deliver their presentation. Those attending in person were able to enjoy the additional program, consisting of a guided city tour and social events to foster bonding among young scholars.

In addition, the conference in 2021 was a turning point in the sense it broadened collaboration among doctoral students at Central European institutions researching religion. Following the conference, *Central European Symposium on the Academic Study of Religion* (CESAR) was established, serving as a platform to bring together doctoral students in Central Europe. Since, University of Pardubice hosted the sixth year of the conference, themed “Transformations of Religions in Times of Crises: Spiritual Alienation and Rethinking of Ethics” in September 2022. The 2023 conference on “Religion and Identity” will be held at University of Szeged in October. The readers of the current issue are wholeheartedly welcome to participate.