Baptismal exorcism: an exercise in liturgical theology

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Introduction

The practice of exorcism has been a distinct, even dominant, feature of the baptismal rite of many liturgical traditions until relatively recent times. While the notion of exorcism may conjure up theatrical images of screeching demoniacs and cross wielding priests, the fact is that most Christians, throughout much of history, underwent exorcism at least once in their life—at the font. The current baptismal order of the Lutheran Church of Australia also preserves (or has reintroduced) a brief, optional form of exorcism.[1] The inclusion of this rite is somewhat unusual among baptismal orders today, although it must be noted that many orders still retain some form of renunciation of the devil, which although distinct from the exorcism, is related to (and follows from) it.

This essay will seek to provide a historical sketch of baptismal exorcistic rites, as well as drawing out some of their theological implications. As the title suggests, the essay is an attempt in liturgical theology, whose central task is elucidating theology from the church's *leitourgia*. Arriving at an adequate definition of liturgical theology is itself the subject of numerous books;[2] however, for our purpose it is sufficient to note that liturgical theology is that theology of God, humanity and the world manifested in and through historic liturgical enactment. The immediate source of liturgical theology is the liturgical *ordo* as it has developed over time. Rather than starting with a generalised theology of worship and then mining the liturgy for illustrative purposes, liturgical theology lets concrete liturgical sources themselves shape the theological project. This is not to supplant Scripture with liturgy, but simply to recognise that Scripture's native home lies within the liturgy and its enactment.

This paper, after identifying the basic scope of baptismal exorcistic practice, will trace its development down one historical trail, before considering some theological insights that emerge from the historical liturgical witness. It will then conclude with one example

1 This 'Rebuke of unclean spirit' reads as follows: 'Until Christ claims us in baptism through his Holy Spirit, we are under the power of the devil. Therefore I say: Depart from N, you unclean spirit, and make way for the Holy Spirit, in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen'. *Church rites*, 4.

2 For example: Alexander Schmemann, *Introduction to liturgical theology,* 1966; David Fagerberg, *What is liturgical theology?* 1992, and *Theologia Prima,* 2004; Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: a liturgical theology*, 1993.

of a liturgical theology based on the practice of baptismal exorcism, that of the Russian Orthodox priest and theologian, Alexander Schmemann.

Baptismal exorcism: the basic elements

In the earliest centuries, baptism was not confined to a single rite, but instead comprised a complex initiatory process entailing a whole suite of rites. In time, and allowing for local variation, this process consisted of:

- a period of moral and spiritual formation, the **catechumenate**, which could vary in length from 40 days to three years, and sometimes, by choice, the greater portion of a person's life
- a shorter period of intense **pre-baptismal preparation (election)**, often accompanied by substantial doctrinal instruction and personal scrutiny
- the **rite of baptism** itself, made up of pre-baptismal rites, the baptism proper, and post-baptismal ceremonies
- a final period of **mystagogy,** where the newly baptized received further instruction in the 'mysteries' recently undergone

In time, many distinct rites with an exorcistic dimension would become an integral part of the initiatory process, or ordo. Some of the most basic of these were the following elements.

Exorcisms were performed on people and things, both in imprecatory and deprecatory forms. As *imprecations*, the exorcisms directly adjured Satan or the demons to leave the candidate (or object); as *deprecations* they implored God to release the persons or objects from demonic power. These spoken formulas were usually accompanied by some kind of action or gesture (hand-laying, blowing upon or hissing/spitting at the candidate/demon) and posture or position (kneeing upon goatskin, arms stretched out). In time, the spoken exorcistic texts could become extended works of Scriptural meditation and theology. Unlike baptism itself, the exorcisms were generally repeated many times in the period leading up to baptism, especially in the period of election, and also in the pre-baptismal and post-baptismal rites themselves. Here they were closely related to the ministry of catechesis, prayer and self-examination, or scrutiny. With regard to objects, it was salt, and particularly oil and water that would attract exorcism. Oil was used extensively for exorcistic anointing, and was therefore believed to be in need of cleansing and deliverance. And since Jesus' baptism in the Jordan was (in early centuries) the dominant baptismal metaphor, it was also deemed necessary to exorcise the present day 'Jordan', the font.

Exsufflation (or **insufflation**) was a breathing-out by the presider upon the candidate. It usually symbolised contempt for the devil, but in some cases it could also be understood as a gentle blowing of the Holy Spirit upon the candidate. As with exorcism, objects were also blown upon in this manner, often in the shape of the cross.

The **renunciation** (*apotaxis*) of Satan and his works is the oldest, most widespread, and most enduring of the various exorcistic rites. It often followed immediately after the final exorcism, which freed the person to make that renunciation. Especially in Eastern rites, it was followed by an act of adherence or allegiance to Christ (*syntaxis*), as distinct from the recitation of the Creed which took place at the actual immersion. The renunciations were often accompanied by physical actions and postures designed to dramatise the adjuration of the evil one, such as facing west (the symbolic place of darkness) while making some show of disdain. In its most basic form it comprised a threefold renunciation of Satan, his pomp and his angels, but his service, works, worship, retinue, vanity, inventions, and indeed the whole world and its pleasures, could also be renounced.

Anointing played a major, and sometimes dominant, role in the rite of baptism. In many early rites, baptismal anointing did not have an exorcistic function; its interpretation was instead pneumatic. Anointing (usually of the head) conveyed the Holy Spirit and assimilated the candidate into the royal priesthood of Christ. But in time baptismal anointing (now applied to the whole body) would assume exorcistic meanings: pre-baptismal anointing served to expel the evil one, and post-baptismal rites helped to protect the neophyte and strengthen them for a lifelong battle against the deposed, yet present, adversary.

Similar to anointing and often connected with it, was the act of **signing** (or **sealing**) the candidate. Here a mark was placed upon the forehead, often with oil, in the shape of the cross. As with anointing, it admitted both exorcistic and non-exorcistic interpretation. Closely related to sealing was **the 'Effeta' (ephphetha) rite**. In earlier times this probably sealed the so-called 'entrance points' (eyes, ears, nose, etc) against further demonic entry; in time it would also suggest the idea of Christ opening the ears and mouth (Mk 7:32–35), and the aroma of Christ (2 Cor 2:14–16).

Not all of these exorcistic elements were present in every rite, nor did they all appear at once or in the same form—but they occurred with enough frequency to be considered stable elements in baptismal ritual. By way of systematisation, H A Kelly has organised exorcistic baptismal rites under three headings: rites of expulsion, renunciation and repulsion.[3] Rites of **expulsion,** presupposing the candidate's powerlessness, induced harmful spirits to depart from the candidate; rites of **renunciation** were based upon prior expulsion, and assumed that the candidate could now offer some kind of voluntary resistance to Satan; rites of **repulsion** armed the newly baptised against the future return of powers that had been expelled and renounced.

Baptismal exorcism: an historical sketch

The **New Testament** does not provide us with any direct precedent or instruction concerning the use of exorcism in the administration of baptism. The Gospels show

3 Henry Ansgar Kelly, 1985. *The Devil at baptism: ritual, theology and drama*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca/London, 20.

Jesus delivering people from the grip of demons, Acts recounts exorcistic activity, and Paul declares that believers have been freed from their subjugation to various principalities and powers. But while the Scriptures provide ample warrant to interpret baptism as an exorcistic act, there is not at this stage any demonstrable ritualisation of this understanding in the initiatory process. According to Kelly (272), it may have been the Egyptian Gnostics of the second century who first adopted some kind of pre-baptismal exorcistic rites.

The **pre-Nicene** Eastern liturgical traditions (east and west Syria, Egypt) provide us with some of our earliest extra-biblical descriptions of initiation rites.[4] Here we see the beginnings of some prominent characteristics of the baptismal tradition: some kind of catechetical period, a baptismal theology based on new birth, regeneration and adoption (based on Jesus' baptism and spiritual anointing in the Jordan), and consequently a strong emphasis on *non*-exorcistic anointing, signifying the candidate's assimilation into Christ's messianic priesthood. But at this stage, the baptismal process has not adopted any explicit exorcistic practices. This did not necessarily mean that demonic overthrow played no role in baptismal thinking—only that it was not explicitly ritualised.

In the Western tradition (Rome, North Africa) of this same period things look a little different. Tertullian (155–220 CE) does not mention any practice of baptismal exorcism; however, he is our first witness to the practice and text of the renunciation, a core unit of the baptismal rite from then on. But it is in the document known as the *Apostolic Tradition*[5] where the exorcistic dimension of baptism suddenly comes to prominence. In it we read of the daily exorcism of candidates in an intense pre-baptismal period, as well as at the pool, where rites of exorcism, exsufflation, renunciation, and anointing were administered. No distinction is made here between men, women and 'little ones'. The following passage describes the process:

> From the time that they were set apart, let hands be laid on them daily while they are exorcised. And when the day of their baptism approaches, the bishop shall exorcise each one of them, in order that he may know whether he is pure. And if anyone is not good or not pure, let him be put aside, because he has not heard the word with faith, for it is impossible that the Alien should hide himself forever.
>
> On the Saturday, those who are to receive baptism shall be gathered in one place at the bishop's decision. They shall all be told to pray and kneel. And he shall lay his hand on them and exorcise all alien spirits, that they may flee out of them and never return into them. And when he has finished exorcising them, he shall

4 Syrian sources: *Didache, Didascalia Apostolorum*, Justin Martyr's *First Apology* and *Dialogue with Trypho*, *Syrian Acts of Judas Thomas*, *Odes of Solomon*. Egyptian sources: various writings of Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

5 This highly influential church order has traditionally been associated with the antipope Hippolytus, and dated around 215. Recent research, however, indicates that *Apostolic Tradition* is of Syrian provenance and may well reflect 4th century Roman practice. So it is therefore only hesitantly regarded as a pre-Nicene source.

> breathe on their faces; and when he has signed their foreheads, ears and noses, he shall raise them up. And they shall spend the whole night in vigil; they shall be read to and instructed (Apostolic Tradition 20:3,4, 7–9; Whitaker: 6).

So in this pre-Nicene period one could say that a broad difference between East and West lay in the fact that baptismal rites in the east placed more emphasis on the reception of the Holy Spirit, while in the west attention would increasingly focus on the expulsion of evil spirits.

The **4th and 5th centuries** witnessed profound social and political change brought on by the official adoption of Christianity and the resulting influx of converts seeking admission to the church. In such a climate the process of scrutinising and exorcising candidates developed dramatically. This held true for both eastern and western traditions, as the initiatory process became more 'homogenised' across the various patriarchates. Much of our understanding of this time comes via the great 'mystagogues'—Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, John Chrysostom and Ambrose of Milan—who used the baptismal and eucharistic rites to unpack the faith for the new Christians. In their liturgical homilies and descriptions we now see the full complement of exorcistic rites: exorcism of people (all ages) and things (oil, water and salt), exsufflation, renunciation, sealing and signing, pre and post baptismal anointing, and other assorted rituals.

Some highlights from Cyril's catechetical and mystagogical lectures give a taste of their instruction. Cyril urges the *competentes*[6] to attend the daily instructions where they would also be exorcised: 'Let your feet take you swiftly to the catechetical instructions. Submit to the exorcisms devoutly. Whether you are breathed upon or exorcised, the act spells salvation'. This process is likened to purifying gold in a furnace which removes impurities: 'Similarly, the soul cannot be purified without exorcisms, exorcisms which, since they are culled from the divine Scriptures, possess divine power' (*Procatechesis* 9; McCauley: 77). What is striking in this exhortation is the connection between exorcism and the ministry of the word, a connection that would be lost in future centuries. Anointing was also a prominent part of the process, and this was understood by Cyril in both priestly (i.e. non-exorcistic) and protective (i.e. exorcistic) terms. Recalling their pre-baptismal anointing, Cyril reminds the neophytes that there 'you became sharers in Jesus Christ, who is the cultivated olive tree'. But this 'partaking in Christ's richness' also had an exorcistic and protective function, serving as 'a token which drives away every trace of the enemy's power' (Sermon 2; Yarnold: 77).

Much more could be said about this period which has had such an influence on modern baptismal thinking, but several observations can suffice. First, even though these 'awe inspiring' rites were tailored for adults coming out of paganism, children were included in them. Secondly, the exorcistic elements did not simply belong in the catechumenate, but were experienced in the immediate preparation period, and even at baptism itself.

6 The *competentes* (in Rome, *electi*) were those who had 'given in their names' and were now in their final period of pre-baptismal preparation.

Thirdly, these exorcistic rites were conducted as an intense ministry of the word. Candidates were scrutinised by exorcism *and* the word.

Despite the interesting developments in other liturgical rites, our attention must turn to **Roman initiation practices**, since that is where Lutheran rites find their genesis. The first really important source for the development of exorcism at Roman baptism is the letter of John the Deacon to Senarius (circa 500). This letter describes a number of exorcistic elements already encountered: catechesis together with exorcism and exsufflation, renunciation, sealing, postbaptismal anointing. When the *description* of baptismal rites in John's letter is placed alongside the baptismal *texts* and *formularies* of the Gelasian Sacramentary (the book of priest's prayers reflecting 7th century practice), we gain a picture of Roman baptismal process at the start of the Middle Ages. It looks something like this:

- enrolment in the catechumenate for an unspecified period of time, with rites such as the giving of blessed salt, followed by a period of instruction with frequent exorcisms (the scrutinies)
- election to baptism, with the final period of election comprising the 40 days of Lent
- three scrutinies on the 3rd, 4th and 5th Sundays of Lent
- pre-baptismal anointing of the senses, which served both to seal the word of God in the candidate and to fortify them against further corruption
- baptism by triple immersion
- vesture in white
- first post-baptismal anointing by presbyter (signifying assimilation to priesthood of Christ)
- second post-baptismal anointing by bishop (signifying the reception of the Holy Spirit—the origin of the later sacrament of 'confirmation')
- reception of the baptismal eucharist, including (for this time only) milk and honey

While this process of making a Christian still assumed a lengthy ecclesial process, several new factors would soon change that practice forever. First, the prime candidates for baptism were no longer pagan adults, but infants of Christian parents, whose need for saving baptism reflects (and even contributed to) Augustine's teaching on original sin. John the Deacon notes that

> … all these things are done even to infants, who by reason of their youth understand nothing. And by this you may know that when they are presented by their parents or others, it is necessary that their salvation should come through other people's profession, since their damnation came by another's fault. (Johnson: 166,167)

Second, and resulting from this, the original sense of scrutiny (as an examination of the candidate's faith and conduct) was lost when applied to infants. Catechesis and scrutiny would increasingly refer to rites of exorcism alone. J D C Fisher writes:

> In short, it would appear that … by the end of the fifth century the object of the scrutinies was not to examine the faith and knowledge of the catechumens but to discover whether the evil spirit has departed from them, and for this reason they consisted primarily in exorcisms. (1965: 9)

Third, while retaining most of the texts of the longer initiatory process, the actual enactment of initiation would soon become compressed, or 'telescoped', into a shorter and shorter time period. Even though the Gelasian Sacramentary preserved the scrutiny texts of the 3rd, 4th and 5th Sundays of Lent, they would eventually be performed within the space of a single rite (albeit celebrated in different parts of the church). With that, the medieval rite of baptism, now heavily exorcistic, was in place.

Luther's 1523 Taufbüchlein[7] only slightly revised this medieval rite, retaining the initial exsufflation with exorcism, a series of exorcistic deprecations and imprecations,[8] the 'Effeta' rite and the renunciation. The **1526 revision** pruned these elements considerably, but it still retained two brief exorcisms and the renunciation, as the bold parts in the following table shows:

7 Luther's 1523 order was based on the *Magdeburg Agenda* of 1492 and the *Agenda Communis* (1505–1520).

8 All but one of the exorcisms in this order originate from the Gelasian Sacramentary. The only exception is the initial short exorcism 'Come out, unclean spirit and make way for the Holy Spirit' (number 2 in the table) which is derived from *Ordo Romanus 50*, and is the basis for the 'Rebuke of unclean spirit' appearing in the current Lutheran Church of Australia rite.

1523 Taufbüchlein	1526 Taufbüchlein
1. **Exsufflation (3 times)**	1.
2. **'Come out unclean spirit'**	2. **'Come out unclean spirit'**
3. Signing with cross and formula	3. Signing with cross and formula
4. **'Almighty and eternal God'**	4.
5. 'Immortal God'	5. 'Immortal God' (begins as 4.)
6. Reception of the salt with formula	6.
7. Flood prayer (*Sindflutgebet*)	7. Flood prayer (*Sindflutgebet*)
8. **Exorcisms:**	8. **Exorcism:**
• **'Therefore, accursed devil'**[9]	•
• **'Listen, accursed Satan'**[10]	•
• **'I exorcise you'**	• **'I exorcise you'** (first half)
9. 'O Lord, holy Father'	9.
10. Gospel: Mark 10	10. Gospel: Mark 10
11. Laying on of hands and Lord's Prayer	11. Laying on of hands and Lord's Prayer
12. **'Effeta' with spittle**	12.
13. Entrance into the church	13. Entrance into the church
14. **Renunciations**	14. **Renunciations**
15. Creedal interrogations	15. Creedal interrogations
16. Anointing with oil and formula	16.
17. Question of desire of baptism	17. Question of desire of baptism
18. Baptism in threefold name	18. Baptism in threefold name
19. Anointing with formula	19.
20. Giving of white robe and formula	20. Giving of white robe and formula
21. Giving of candle with formula	21.

Luther's attitude and reasons for these revisions are somewhat contested. On the one hand, the devil played no small part in his thinking, and he wished this to be verbalised; on the other hand, he didn't necessarily feel the need to physically ritualise this belief, largely due to the superstitious mindset of many parishioners. Bryan Spinks (10–12) has schematised Luther's revisions under three categories: features belonging to the core

9 In the Gelasian sacramentary, this was a refrain spoken after each exorcism. It began: 'Therefore accursed devil, remember your sentence and give honour to God, the living and the true, give honour to Jesus Christ his Son, and to the Holy Spirit, and depart from these servants of God' (Whitaker: 217).

10 This second exorcism over males in the Gelasian sacramentary began 'Listen, accursed Satan, adjured by the Name of the eternal God … you and your envy are conquered, depart trembling and groaning. Let there be nothing between you and the servants of God, who even now ponder heavenly things, who are to renounce you and your kingdom and make their way to blessed immortality' (Whitaker: 217).

of the rite, and thus retained (short exorcisms, renunciation); features adding nothing to the rite, or *adiaphora* (breathing under the eyes, 'Effeta'); and features to be omitted lest they obscure the glory of baptism (exorcism of salt, blessing of the font).

On the whole, **Lutheranism** followed the 1526 order more closely than the 1523 form. At times the exorcisms were fiercely retained, as Lutherans sought to define themselves over against Calvinist repudiation of baptismal exorcism.[11] In time, under the influence of rationalism and pietism, exorcistic elements would all but vanish. Australian rites would follow this trend. A number of agendas used in our early history emphasised heavily and didactically the fall of Adam, original sin, the wrath of God and the threat of damnation—but without any exorcistic ritual. There were exceptions, such as the *Wittenberger Agende,*[12] which contained the preliminary exorcism*,* and it is along these lines that the LCA rite of baptism has included its own (optional) exorcism.

Finally, in the wake of **Vatican II**, modern Roman Catholicism experienced profound changes in its almost one and a half thousand year old baptismal tradition. In 1969 it released orders tailored to the baptism of children, and 1971 saw a valiant attempt to re-introduce the ancient catechumenate in a contemporary setting—the *rite of Christian initiation of adults*. Both rites signal a major shift in the way exorcistic elements are approached: the exorcistic elements have been either (a) eliminated, or (b) changed from imprecations directed towards the evil one, to prayers addressed to God. They also reflect far more deliberately the liturgical context in which they take place, drawing on the liturgical propers and engaging the active participation of the congregation. The question has therefore been asked whether or not modern Roman practice has 'gone soft' on the devil, and while some resistance was initially offered to this charge, it seems safe to conclude that for many modern Catholics, some 'demythologising' of the baptismal rites was long overdue.

A cursory glance at recent baptismal rites from other Protestant churches would suggest similar thinking—while the renunciation of Satan (or of a more generalised evil) is common, imprecatory exorcisms are absent. The current concern with spiritual warfare, taking place in Catholic and evangelical circles, is apparently played out in other contexts.

Baptismal exorcism: some theological and liturgical reflections

If the task of liturgical theology draws upon the history and practice of lived rites, what theological insights might emerge from the practice of baptismal exorcism, especially in its extensive, pre-medieval form?

1. Most importantly, baptismal exorcism was a **ministry of the word**. 'Let your feet take you swiftly to the catechetical instructions. Submit to the exorcisms devoutly', Cyril says

11 The Reformed objections were summarized well in Martin Bucer's *Censura*.

12 The exorcism reads: 'Ich beschwöre dich, du unreiner Geist, bei dem Namen des Vaters, des Sohnes und des heil. Geistes, dass du ausfahrest und weichest von diesem Deiner Christi', *Wittenberger agende*, 8.

in one breath. Indeed, the exorcisms 'are culled from the divine Scriptures'.[13] Baptismal exorcism had to do with hearing the word in faith and holding it fast. Many of the exorcistic prayers and imprecations were developed works of theology, open to interpretation and reflection. As such, they did not just function at the level of expelling/repelling malign spirits, but they served to connect the hearer with the whole biblical narrative. Exorcistic meditations did not only appeal to scriptural passages dealing directly with demonic expulsion, but they employed a wide gamut of biblical narratives and allusion.[14] So the third exorcism over females in the Gelasian Sacramentary read:

> I exorcise you, unclean spirit, in the name of the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, that you may go away and depart from these servants of God. For he himself commands you, accursed one, damned one, who opened the eyes of the man born blind, and on the fourth day raised Lazarus from the tomb (Whitaker: 218).

By means of these biblical/exorcistic enactments, candidates became participants in the grand scriptural drama of salvation: of exodus and redemption, of wilderness wandering, of fighting ungodly forces, and of participating in Christ's own ministry.

2. Baptismal exorcism reflected the **slow process of spiritual formation**, beginning with the catechumenate, finding its high point at baptism, and finally unpacked in mystagogy. Exorcism therefore could not fast-track what was otherwise accomplished by daily repentance and renewal. Originally there were no examples of baptismal exorcism as isolated, one-off rituals. Only when the whole process of initiation was telescoped into a single service could the more 'magical' and less natural impression of exorcism arise.

3. Baptismal exorcism, as was the case for the initiatory process as a whole, was a **communal reality**. It was performed within the Christian community, by representatives of that community, and was often experienced in a group setting. To a large degree, those undergoing exorcism were already regarded as belonging to the church—the rites they submitted to spoke more of their Christian future than of their pagan past.[15] At the same time, the exorcistic rites witnessed to the intensely **personal dimension** of baptismal integration. They necessitated considerable human, even physical, interaction as candidates were turned this way and that, compelled to kneel, urged to strip, rubbed down with oil, hissed and screeched at, blown upon, and generally manhandled. Such personal engagement countered the manifestly anti-personal one from whose grip they were being released. It required Christ's own human presence (in the person of the minister) because of the one who sought to dehumanise the human race.

4. Exorcistic rites were understood both as **performative** and as **expressive** acts. On the one hand, it was believed that something really *happened* as a result of the rite:

13 McCauley, 77.

14 The exorcisms of the Gelasian Sacramentary, for example made reference to biblical narratives involving Moses, Susannah, Peter on the water, the blind man, and Lazarus.

15 See how the exorcism referred to in footnote 9 regards the candidates as 'servants of God, who even now ponder heavenly things'.

demons were actually cast out, then and there, because in the 'fearful' and 'awesome' words of the rite, Christ himself was speaking. But on the other hand, the rites *expressed a prior reality* that went far beyond the confines of the rite, a cosmic reality which was not dependent on the church's rites, but which those rites nevertheless mediated. However they were understood, the spiritual impact of exorcism resulted in the candidate's **justification** and **sanctification**. Baptismal deliverance from the clutches of Satan and original sin testified to the God who freely justifies; but the ongoing struggle with Satan assumed by the exorcistic rites signalled the need for continuing sanctification. Ritual progression from the pre-baptismal exorcisms—which assumed the candidate's helplessness—to the candidate's free and voluntary renunciation demonstrates the progress from captivity to Spirit-led freedom.

5. As is the case with liturgy in general, and even with Scripture, the rites of baptismal exorcism demonstrated the **symbolic and poetic nature** of Christian revelation and communication. A clear distinction between sinful supernatural beings, the sinful systems of the world, and the sinful desires of our hearts was not always possible. The power of Satan/evil could be understood both as a *presence* and a *power*, and as something *within* us and as something *around* us. Only symbol and figure could adequately handle the mysterious nature of the spiritual world. The symbolic and allegorical interpretations given to exorcism by the mystagogues did not thereby demythologise the rites in a modern sense, but it did protect them from a crass literalism that viewed exorcism as little more than a Christianised form of magic. Symbolic reflection on liturgical exorcism instead enabled multiple salutary connections to be made between the candidate's personal situation and the whole saving economy. As Kelly (273,274) notes:

> The notion that all sinners were literally possessed by demons did not find much favour with the Fathers, and when they were confronted with baptismal ceremonies that presupposed it, they were forced to interpret them allegorically: the candidates were treated as if corporeally possessed to illustrate the spiritual subjection that Satan had brought upon mankind, which could not be removed by the subjects' own volition alone, but required primarily the free benevolence of God.

6. But despite the point just made above, exorcistic rites nevertheless **reflected the contemporary worldview**. E R Dodds observes that in classical antiquity '(v)irtually every one, pagan, Jewish, Christian or Gnostic, believed in the existence of these beings and in their function as mediators, whether he called them daemons or angels or aions or simply spirits' (38).

Moving quickly to the current day, it is probably this issue that explains the abandonment or substantial revision of baptismal exorcism in contemporary Christian rites. Shortly after the new Roman Catholic rites were released, Balthasar Fisher felt the need to explain that:

> Catholic liturgical reform has sought a middle way between a traditionalistic taking over of archaic and no longer practicable formulae, on the one side, and on the other a modernistic reduction to meaninglessness of religious convictions which … are basic to the New Testament. (55)

More recently, Dominic Serra, having considered the past and present role of the Roman baptismal scrutinies, asserts:

> We no longer exorcise by adjuration as though Satan dwelt within the elect. We pray to God for those approaching baptism and appeal to Christ that he free them from all attachments that may lead away from faith and the following of the Gospel. (526)

It is this direct address and adjuration of Satan, the imprecation, that most discomfits contemporary Christians.[16] Even for many believers, the presence of spirits and demons plays no role in our public understanding of what makes the world go around or what makes a person 'tick'. And yet, paradoxically, dark powers continue to trouble our imagination and lurk at the edge of our sight. It seems fitting, then, to conclude with one person's defence of such traditional rites of baptismal exorcism, that of Alexander Schmemann in his liturgical theology of baptism, *Of water and the Spirit: a liturgical study of baptism*. Byzantine initiatory rites provide the basis for reflection on God, humanity and creation, and in the following discussion, on the nature of evil.

Baptismal exorcism: the liturgical theology of Alexander Schmemann

Schmemann acknowledges that the devil holds little or no place in the religious outlook of modern people. Even many of his fellow priests feel the need to 'liberate' the liturgical texts from the demonology of an antique worldview. Nevertheless, the 'Church has always had the experience of the demonic, has always, in plain words, *known the Devil*' (21). This does not result in a systematic formulation of the Devil, since it is impossible to define rationally the one who is in reality irrational. Nor will it do, in Schmemann's thinking, to 'explain' the Devil in terms of an ultimate absence of good, a view that could be held by any deist or humanist; nor does the remedy for the supposed power of the Devil lie in education and 'enlightenment'. For evil is not simply an absence, but a *presence*: 'the presence of something dark, irrational and very real, although the origin of that presence may not be clear and immediately understandable' (22). And far from being an expression of ignorance, this presence of evil knows what it hates: 'The more some … knew Christ, saw His light and His goodness, the more they hated Him' (22). Demoniac reality therefore takes personal form: just as 'the ultimate mystery of "goodness" lies in the person, the ultimate mystery of evil must also be a personal one' (22). Yet such realism, as an irrational mystery, cannot be reduced to formulas and propositions, but can only be expressed in symbols and images.

16 The commentary of the current Lutheran Church of Australia rite notes, on the one hand, that the 'unclean spirit is evicted from the candidate, who becomes a temple for the Holy Spirit to dwell in'. Yet it quickly points out that 'the rebuke does not presuppose that candidates are demon-possessed' (314).

All that Schmemann has spoken of here finds its expression and response in the baptismal liturgy. Evil 'is not to be "explained" but faced and fought. This is the way God dealt with evil' (23). Therefore in the baptismal rite

> … the exorcisms come first because on our path to the baptismal font we unavoidably 'hit' the dark and powerful figure that obstructs this path. It must be removed, chased away, if we are to proceed … Exorcisms therefore are the beginning of the fight that constitutes the first and essential dimension of Christian life. (23,24)

Schmemann is also adamant that direct imprecations against the Devil are essential to this contest:

> We *speak* to the Devil! It is here that the Christian understanding of the *word* as, above all, *power* is made manifest. It is power of creation and also power of destruction. They are, in the words of John Chrysostom, 'awesome and wonderful invocations', an act of 'frightening and horrible' power which dissolves and destroys the power of the demonic world. (24)

Having quoted the first of three lengthy pre-baptismal exorcisms Schmemann notes how the poetic quality of liturgical language is entirely appropriate for the acts of power performed there:

> Exorcism is indeed a poem in the deepest sense of this word, which in Greek means *creation*. It truly manifests and does that which it announces … Exorcism does all this because it is proffered in the name of Christ; it is truly filled with the power of Christ, who has 'broken' into human territory … because He has already destroyed the demonic power from within. (25)

Conclusion

Schmemann's meditation may not compel contemporary churches to re-introduce rites that have fallen out of use, or that have never been used in their tradition. Dominic Serra's cautionary word should not be simply dismissed as modernism:

> Nothing could be less 'traditional' than to dust off old and disused rites and to put them in a contemporary context in which they will appear irrelevant and misunderstood only to atrophy and die a second time. (511)

Nevertheless, Schmemann's example of liturgical theology demonstrates how the church's liturgical rites can serve as a basic form of scriptural interpretation. The liturgy enables us to hear Scripture not just as a record of past deeds, not just as a guide for ethical living, but as God's living and performative word addressed to his community now. Likewise, rich baptismal liturgies, even their exorcistic elements, enact the address of Christ towards everything that is against God and his creation, and can

help us appreciate that baptism 'delivers from death *and the devil*, and gives everlasting salvation to all who believe what he has promised'.[17]

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17 Martin Luther, *Small Catechism*, Baptism, 2.

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