

BOOK REVIEWS

The Exorcism of Anneliese Michel

Felicitas D. Goodman

Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Co., 1981, ix + 255 pages,
\$12.95 (hardback).

Reviewed by:

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This is, quite simply, a remarkable book about a clash of world views. In 1978 a young German woman named Anneliese Michel died. The German courts found her parents and the priests who attended her guilty of negligent homicide. The courts concluded that Anneliese died because she had been subjected to extensive and severe exorcism rites, rather than continuing the medications she had been given for epileptic seizures. The paradigm that guided the court's decision was a medical/psychological one that views reality as a uniform phenomenon, and digressions from that reality as manifestations of pathology.

But, as Goodman points out, if the court had used cross-cultural, rather than clinical, psychologists as its expert witnesses, a different decision might have been reached; cross-cultural psychologists are aware that religious trance and possession is an accepted phenomenon in a large number of human societies. Of course, it is far easier to take this basically anthropological outlook toward non-Western societies. It is much more difficult for psychologists (and anthropologists) to remember that very different belief systems are operating within a pluralistic society. As often as not, these discrete world views co-exist relatively peacefully within the society at large — and within the individuals within that society. Occasionally, however, the incompatibility of certain world views comes to a climax. The trial over the death of Anneliese Michel was the result of such an occasion.

Anneliese Michel was believed by many of her peers to be possessed by the devil. She, her family and friends, and neighboring Roman Catholic priests, acted in accordance with those beliefs. Goodman's astute ethnographic analysis places those beliefs, and the ensuing behaviors within their proper social context. Goodman shows that in the light of the deeply mystical Catholicism that permeates Bavarian Germany what was thought and done by Anneliese and her peers made good sociological and physiological sense. For the people

who comprise this social universe a separate reality is a normal human experience, and through the centuries they have created techniques for safely entering and leaving it. Goodman claims that these time-honored techniques failed to work for Anneliese because they were "tampered" with by including techniques commensurate with the medical world view, i.e., Tegretol (for epilepsy) interfered with the discharge functions of the exorcism rite.

It is somewhat dangerous to tangle with the medico-psychological establishment as Goodman does because she, like other scientists who have also challenged its hegemony, leaves herself open to charges of "flakiness." She has tried to counter these charges in advance by pulling together a number of physiological and neurophysiological facts and hypotheses to provide a medical, albeit non-pathological, rationale for altered states of consciousness in general, and specifically, for the curative effects of the exorcism ritual. The resulting theory is plausible, but its validation awaits more research. The important thing to note, however, is that this hypothesis, combined with the sociological/anthropological findings that are presented, are far more plausible than the medico-psychological theories and half-facts offered by the expert witnesses at the trial. On the other hand, I think Goodman weakens her argument slightly by not attending more closely to some of the psychosocial stressors that may have precipitated and exacerbated Michel's condition.

The preceding statements present the bare bones of the central argument of this book, but they do not capture the *experience* of the book. The priests who performed the exorcism rites taped all their sessions. Goodman used these tapes, as well as extensive interviews with the priests, family, friends, and acquaintances of Anneliese Michel to recreate the phenomenological world this young woman lived in — in the process providing an exquisite and shattering anthropological record of a modern ritual in process. Anthropologists strive to view the world as their informants see it. Goodman has reached near perfection in accomplishing this aim. Castaneda's works have the same goal in mind as he seeks to present a separate reality from the inside, but I think they fail because they never succeed in presenting any concomitant sense of the normal waking reality. Goodman's account has strong emotional and intellectual impact precisely because both states of reality are present — there is something universally human to identify with. Unfortunately, this accomplishment also contains within it its own stumbling block. Because Goodman makes Anneliese so real, it is also more difficult not to apply one's own world view toward her; because she was similar, it is sometimes difficult to remember that she was also different. It is hard to maintain the anthropological posture. It is far easier, and tempting, to fall back on medico-psychological paradigms and automatically assign her unusual behavior to

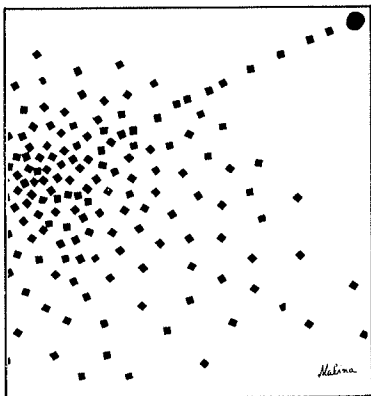
the realm of pathology. But it would be wrong to do so in this case.

The word "provocative" is an over-worked term often applied to many books — but it retains its original force of meaning for this work. The world view presented in the behavior of Anneliese and her Bavarian peers is so very different from that which guides most scientists (and many modern religious humanists) that it is difficult to accept. Even Goodman ultimately explains the behavior in materialistic, physiological terms. Nevertheless, the book calls on psychologists to reassess their tendency toward ethnocentricity that is based on their own normative belief patterns. At the same time, Goodman calls on anthropologists to use their traditional standards of non-ethnocentricity and cultural relativity in their analyses of Western, pluralistic societies. Finally, this book provokes modernist theologians to re-examine the well-springs of religious behavior in contemporary society.

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