

Book Review

The Dead Rescue The Living: Spirit Possession in a Gujarati Christian Community

by J.M. Heredero, S.J., Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, Gujarat, India, 2001, 219 pages.

—Reviewed by Mark Johnson

How do we understand spirit possession? The author, a Jesuit missionary who has worked in Gujarat for forty years, set himself the task to understand exactly what was going on in one of the villages that had been his stomping ground for so long. He freely admits that, although he had heard that there were cases of 'spirit possession' in the Catholic community, he had never encountered any and had never been called upon to counsel any of those involved. Although the Vankar Catholic community in Gujarat had been in existence for some generations, it was something of an embarrassment to the Church hierarchy that members were reportedly being possessed by evil spirits or ghosts (bhut). Not only so, but those who were so affected were regularly taken to Muslim or Hindu healers for exorcism. Clearly there is here a phenomenon that needed examining in a competent way. Gathering some help from the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and psychology Father Heredero set out to interview some of those affected.

Lucidly written case studies form the backbone of the book. In the first part of the book, however, Heredero outlines the social and historical background of the focal village of 'Bhutpur' and the wider community. In these chapters the author demonstrates sensitivity to the complex of forces operating in the society at the time of the beginning of the Church: social and cultural factors as well as local politics. His survey of the nineteen castes that make up local society is tabulated in the all-too-familiar ladder fashion (although he does include a footnote here explaining that the middle thirteen caste positions are essentially contested). To put the phenomena in their religious context the author also studied local beliefs about the soul, death and ghosts refer-

ring to both textual sources and popular knowledge. Throughout the study the author is careful to explain reflexively the prejudices with which his training as a Catholic priest and his Western bias towards rationalism have left him. He did not want to go into the study with preconceptions about the results but recognised, as everyone involved in such research must, that such a naïve position was impossible. The first question for him was, how was he going to study ghosts when he didn't believe in them?

Throughout his study, Heredero investigated 25 cases of 'spirit possession' in the community. In his enquiries he regularly encountered a great reluctance on the part of those involved to talk about the experience.

Right at the beginning, I wanted to check a case of possession with a middle-aged man and his wife. When I broached the subject, the husband smiled embarrassingly. Then, he quickly made up his mind and started explaining to me the whole story. His wife, horrified, objected: "Do not tell Father these things!" (p. 47-8)

The author found some helpful insights in the writings of I. M. Lewis, whose *Ecstatic Religion* (1989) has become a standard text in the social study of possession. Lewis found that the social context of possession was particularly significant: "possession works to help the interests of the weak and downtrodden who have otherwise few effective means to press their claims for attention and respect" (ibid.: 28). In a tight social order there will always be channels for the letting off of built-up pressure. Among the Newars of the Kathmandu Valley, the society this reviewer is most familiar with, such a tension has traditionally been resolved through festivals in which a certain amount of fighting or other anti-social behaviour is allowed. Those involved challenge the social order but not so as to cause it to collapse completely. Similarly, possession acts as such a safety valve. Lewis again:

possession expresses insubordination, but usually not to the point where it is desired to immediately rupture the relationship concerned or to subvert it completely. Rather, it

ventilates aggression and frustration largely within the uneasy acceptance of the established order of things (ibid.: 107).

Heredero concludes:

Far from looking down on possession, I now saw it as a possible therapy. A possessed young wife could insult with impunity her mother-in-law! She had let off steam (p. 53).

Indeed, in the cases the author presents subordination is a constant factor.

The use of modern medicine also comes up for scrutiny. One young 'possessed' man by the name of Simon was prescribed medication for what was diagnosed as 'obsessive thoughts'. There was no improvement so he was taken to a Muslim exorcist who seemed to succeed where medicine failed. Heredero does not suggest by recounting this story that the exorcist had a correct interpretation of his actions but looks for a more subtle answer. Careful interviewing of the man's history uncovered deep personal disappointment that happened to be resolved at precisely the same time as the Muslim exorcist's cure. The strength of Heredero's study is here, in the care with which he records personal histories along with his careful analysis of the social and cultural context.

Anyone involved in the attempt to minister among the peoples of South Asia must wrestle with the pastoral issues presented here. Do we accept without question the interpretation that our friends give of their experiences? When someone tells us they have been cursed by a witch, for example, are we to take their analysis at face value? If we don't how can we avoid a reputation as one who is ignorant or insensitive to local realities? How can we present the Bible's own analysis of the human condition in a way that is understandable and does not lead to traditional behaviour merely going 'underground'? How do we go about presenting the Bible's teaching on death and what is traditionally referred to in theology as 'the last things'? The way forward pastorally must be strongly Biblical and deeply sensitive to local beliefs without being naïve. Heredero helps us to see how we might move ahead, at least in the latter.