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POSSESSION, THEOLOGY, IDENTITY: A PACIFIC EXPLORATION

The growing contemporary interest in spirit possession prompted eleven past and present faculty members of The University of Auckland's School of Theology, along with two of the School's recent post-graduate students, to offer essays that in some way explored the reality of spirit possession in Oceania today. Authors were chosen because of their particular research, teaching, or ministry competencies, and this explains the division of the book into three sections. The first section draws on the experiences of those engaged in pastoral ministry with people who believe they are possessed, or those whose particular research interests are the relationship of faith, culture, and praxis. In the second section, the function and place of spirit language in the biblical texts is examined, while the last section's focus is somewhat broader, addressing some of the historical responses to spirit possession, as well as emerging pneumatologies of good and bad spirits and their impact on the human condition.

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**SPIRIT POSSESSION,
THEOLOGY, AND IDENTITY:
A PACIFIC EXPLORATION**

Elaine M Wainwright, General Editor
with Philip Culbertson and Susan Smith



2010

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Introduction

Elaine M Wainwright

Spirit possession is a way of viewing or describing the world. It finds different expressions in different ages. It is evident in a variety of ways in a wide range of cultures—in their religious stories and secular worldviews, in the arts and in people's lives. For many in the contemporary world, the notion of spirit possession would be seen as anachronistic, belonging to a previous era in which belief in a spirit world helped to explain phenomena which now can be given a more scientific explanation, whether that be medical, psychological, sociological, or anthropological. For others, however, the presence of and possession by spirits remains a significant aspect of their worldview and/or of religious belief.

This has been evident recently in New Zealand society. A young filmmaker in 2000 prepared a documentary named *The Truth about Demons* that explores quite bi-

zarre phenomena that occur in the life of a young man who is researching the world of demons or evil spirits. In 2001, a man was convicted of the manslaughter of a young Korean woman who died as a result of being exorcised of evil or demonic spirits. As recently as 2007, a young Māori woman was drowned in a ritual designed to control a spirit that was believed to have possessed her. Also, New Zealand society is significantly impacted by Māori and Pacific cultures in which the spirit world occupies a significant place. It is not surprising, therefore, that the George Sainsbury Foundation would be set up by George Sainsbury on 10 March, 1989, 'for research into and treatment of spirit possession as it relates to mental illness for the benefit of those persons suffering from such sickness.' We do not know what experiences led to the family's desire for such research. In 2006, however, Anthony Molloy QC, a legal representative for the Foundation, approached the School of Theology at the University of Auckland, asking if the School could conduct research into spirit possession.

Approaches to the study of spirit possession are many and varied. Emma Cohen, in her book *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition*, combines careful ethnographic study with theory in contemporary psychology and religious studies.¹ The significance of location for such studies and their interdisciplinary character is similarly demonstrated by

1. Emma Cohen, *The Mind Possessed: The Cognition of Spirit Possession in an Afro-Brazilian Religious Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Susan J Rasmussen in *Spirit Possession and Personhood among the Kel Ewey Tuareg*.² The research project undertaken by the School of Theology in response to the grant of funds from the George Sainsbury Foundation likewise gives particular attention to context. It is undertaken in Aotearoa New Zealand for the 'benefit of those suffering' from spirit possession in this particular context.

The research project's grounding in experience is indicative of the contextual approach to theology that characterises the School of Theology in the University of Auckland. Initially, it was hoped that this project could be undertaken as an exercise in contextual theology. While this was not possible, the volume does provide some of the raw materials toward such theologising in its structuring and extensive conclusion. The conclusion is not a theology per se but it highlights some of the directions opened up by the research that could contribute to ongoing theological reflection on issues relating to spirit possession. Its authors, Philip Culbertson and Susan Smith, give the sort of description of each essay that one would normally find in an Introduction. I will not repeat those descriptions but simply locate each contribution within the structure of a possible contextual theology.

The first four essays, by Henare Tate, Philip Culbertson and Mary Caygill, Ann Nolan, and Winston Halapua, open some small windows onto aspects of spirit possession in New Zealand and its wider context of Oceania. Two essays draw on the experience of the researchers,

2. Susan J Rasmussen, *Spirit Possession and Personhood among the Kel Ewey Tuareg* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

namely that of 'Pa' Tate, a Māori Roman Catholic priest who has spent a lifetime doing ministry among his people, and Winston Halapua, a Tongan Anglican priest and bishop who reflects on his own encounter with the spirit world in his native Tonga. Caygill and Culbertson likewise explore located experience, though not their own, but rather, the experiences of a limited number of Samoan and Tongan adults now living in New Zealand. Ann Nolan sheds light on spirit possession in the areas of psychiatry and the health professions, especially mental health, by way of a study of literature, both historical and contemporary, that has had an impact on 'the treatment of spirit possession as it relates to mental illness', in the language of the George Sainsbury Foundation.

Initial analysis of the experience of spirit possession in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand and Oceania in the four opening articles is followed by four articles that engage with aspects of the theological tradition. Keith Stuart, Alice Sinnott, and Elaine Wainwright examine representative texts within the biblical tradition, which is always a significant dialogue partner in doing theology. Stuart and Wainwright both demonstrate that the very language of spirits, especially evil spirits and possession, emerges late in the biblical period. Social scientific and literary approaches to the Book of Tobit and to the story of the Gerasene demoniac in the Gospel of Mark demonstrate the interdisciplinary nature of contemporary biblical studies and the ways it can contribute to the interdisciplinary study of spirit possession within religious studies and the social sciences. Alice Sinnott analyses the way in which the Book of Tobit features in Salley Vickers' novel

Miss Garnet's Angel and the contribution that this contemporary literary work can make to the doing of theology as a response to the articulated experience of spirit possession.

Just as Sinnott's study demonstrated that possession may not necessarily be by an evil spirit, Helen Bergin engages with the Christian tradition of a spirit that is named 'holy', or the Holy Spirit. In keeping with the Foundation's yearning toward what will be of benefit to those suffering from possession of a spirit that is debilitating or causing illness, or what will bring well-being for them, Bergin demonstrates how the Christian tradition of the Holy Spirit is associated with freedom, power, and wholeness. These aspects together with the biblical tradition of casting out of evil spirits provide foundations for developing a theology of well-being in contexts of spirit possession. The Conclusion raises important questions as to how the theological tradition can be brought into dialogue with other disciplines in the social sciences and mental health.

Manifestations named as spirit possession and deliverance ministries emerge in different ways in different historical periods and Christian denominations as well as in other religious traditions. The final two essays in this limited project examine such manifestations and ministries. Laurie Guy, as a historian, opens one small window onto spirit possession and exorcism within New Zealand in the Assembly of God church between 1970 and 1989. Susan Smith takes her readers on a more global journey, introducing them to the challenge being brought to First World 'liberal Christians' by the emerging voices and ex-

periences of indigenous churches in which spirit possession and deliverance are significant phenomena. A number of strands of this volume come together in this essay in which Smith demonstrates the importance of a contextualised and inculturated, as well as an ecumenical, theology if the churches are going to be able to respond to spirit possession in today's world in a way that leads to healing.

This volume represents the first stage of research into spirit possession in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand under the auspices of the George Sainsbury Foundation. Undertaken, as it has been, by staff from the School of Theology at the University of Auckland and their former research students, it is limited to the theological disciplines and to the New Zealand context. Many essays have made clear, however, that New Zealand cannot be understood in isolation from its more immediate context of Oceania and its membership in the global community. It has also become evident that theology is informed by other disciplines, just as it can inform other research. A more interdisciplinary study undertaken with a body of international scholars and across other disciplines would further enhance what has been initiated in this volume. It is proposed, therefore, to extend the research requested under the auspices of the George Sainsbury Foundation to include such interdisciplinary and international studies. This second phase will, it is hoped, be accompanied by an International Conference in Auckland that would bring such studies to the New Zealand context. This is both the hope and dream that this present set of essays has evoked for its writers and we trust for you, its readers.