



Catholicism and the Decline of Magic: Gabriele Amorth and the “Unbelieving Catholic World”

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Famed for his role as an exorcist in the diocese of Rome, in later life Gabriele Amorth (1925–2016) wrote a series of works describing his ministry and making the case for the need to restore the exorcistate. In these works, Amorth sought to explain why exorcisms were no longer routinely performed and attributed this development to local bishops who no longer believed in the devil as a real and active presence in the created order. In so doing, he offered a Catholic priest’s account of the process of disenchantment, or the decline of magic in the modern world. While this is often associated with the rise of modern science, which offered an alternative world view, Amorth argues that science is, and has always been, compatible with exorcism. The failure of belief in both the devil and exorcism Amorth decries was, he suggests, the result of misguided biblical hermeneutics influenced not by science but by a misguided scientism.



Padre Pio was loved dearly, but he knew that he had terrible enemies who hated him to death—not men, who may have been mistaken on account of bad information, prejudice, and incomprehension. The Padre never looked at any man as an enemy. The true enemies were the demons; enemies of the Padre and enemies of every one of us.

Gabriele Amorth, *Padre Pio: Stories and Memories of my Mentor and Friend*

With these words, Father Gabriele Amorth (1925–16) described the battles his friend and mentor Padre Pio (1887–1968) had waged against demons since childhood. A Capuchin friar, Padre Pio was famed for his extraordinary charisms, including the stigmata, which he received in 1918. Amorth's account of Padre Pio's battle with demons formed part of a biography that adopted many hagiographic conventions, which Amorth wrote in the late 1990s, that is, prior to both Padre Pio's beatification and canonization. It begins, for example, with an account of the early life of Francesco Forgione (Padre Pio's birth name), emphasizing the fact he had been chosen by God since birth. Amorth (2021, 14) recounts how "from the earliest years of his life, starting at the age of four, the boy was favored with heavenly visions and already had to fight against the devil, who often made himself visible in obsessive and frightening ways." In 1903, Francesco received a vision in which a radiant figure urged him to fight against a menacing giant. With the assistance of the radiant figure, Francesco defeated the giant. This was just the first time Padre Pio would face such challenges, and, in Amorth's (2021, 13–18) words, his life thereafter remained "a continual fight against the devil." Demons frequently appeared to Padre Pio in numerous forms, including "an ugly black cat or some other repugnant animal," naked women who would dance provocatively, or most dangerously of all, authority figures such as Saint Francis, the Virgin Mary, and even Christ himself (Amorth 2021, 115–16). During these encounters, demons not only tempted the friar and tormented his spirit but left him physically bloodied and bruised. They continued to torment him in this manner until the end of his life; in 1964, for example, demons seized the ailing friar and struck his head against the floor of his cell, leaving his face bruised and swollen (Amorth 2021, 113–19, 138).

Amorth's biography of Padre Pio reveals that he believed the world was, in the terminology of Max Weber (1864–1920), enchanted. On the one hand, he was convinced of God's ongoing engagement in the created order. This was evidenced by Padre Pio's extraordinary charisms, which included not only his stigmata but also further gifts such as divinely inspired visions and the ability to bilocate, that is, to be in two places simultaneously. On the other, Amorth believed in the literal existence of demons and the profound danger they posed to humanity. Indeed, his concern for demons was so great that he dedicated much of his life to carrying out exorcisms. He was, however, aware that not all Catholics shared his beliefs. On the contrary, in his memoir, *Un*

esorcista racconta (*An Exorcist Tells His Story*), first published in 1994, Amorth (1999, 54–55) laments that this aspect of pastoral ministry was considered outdated by bishops and parish priests alike and, as a consequence, had been long neglected by the Catholic Church (see Young 2016, chap. 6–7). Seeking to explain why, Amorth argues that belief in the devil as an omnipresent danger, whose existence explained the continued power and danger of the magical arts, had declined within the Catholic clergy over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His account of the decline of the exorcistate therefore offers the historian a new means to engage with enduring questions about disenchantment and the decline of magic in the modern era.

While multiple historians have demonstrated that magic never really disappeared from Western society but continues to exist, especially in popular culture, there have been several recent efforts to analyze why social elites came to reject belief in magic and witchcraft in the modern age. (On the continuity of magic, see, for example: Davies 1999; de Blécourt and Davies 2004; Young 2016b; Waters 2020; Lynn 2022.) The decline of belief in magic among elites is often construed as the displacement, whether by science or humanist critiques, of the religious world view that sustained belief in preternatural activity (Henry 2008; Hunter 2020; Machielsen 2021; Pfeffer 2021). While these studies make important contributions to the historiography of disenchantment, they have not tended to pay particular attention to the changing ideas of clerical elites. While Amorth's analysis may not necessarily be accurate, it is nevertheless significant because it helps address this lacuna. It provides a priest's interpretation of the reasons the Catholic hierarchy not only ceased to recognize its duty to perform exorcisms but, more importantly, also rejected the complex of beliefs that made this rite appear necessary.

For Amorth, the decline of belief in exorcism reflected wider developments within the church. He argues that since the nineteenth century there had grown up what he refers to as an “unbelieving Catholic world” (Amorth 1999, 119); that is, a population of Catholics who had come to reject a complex of ideas—including the reality of extraordinary charisms and the active presence of demons in the world—he considered fundamental to the faith. Amorth's argument therefore offers an alternative perspective on disenchantment. Instead of an inevitable outcome of secularist modernism, Amorth viewed the process of disenchantment as a crisis within the faith that led Catholics to adopt a skeptical attitude towards phenomena they had once taken for granted. I argue that we can understand Amorth's analysis using the concept of a cosmology. My use of this category is inspired by the sociologist N. D. Jewson (1976, 225–27, quote 225) who, in a different context, defines cosmologies as the “conceptual structures which constitute the frame of reference within which all questions are posed and all answers are offered.” By the twentieth century, Amorth suggests, European clerical and theological elites had largely rejected a cosmology that sustained the beliefs that God regularly intervenes in his

creation, demons exist and pose a constant menace to humanity, and the rites used to protect the faithful from them are a vital aspect of pastoral ministry. They replaced this cosmology with an alternative framework that posited a natural order in which God rarely intervenes and the devil is regarded as a mere symbol of evil. Within such a cosmology, demonic possession and magic were no longer conceivable and, as a consequence, practices such as exorcism were consigned to the church's history.

At the heart of Amorth's explanation for the decline of his cosmology lies a critique of modernism within the church. The so-called modernists did not constitute a coherent movement; instead, "modernist" was a label applied from the late nineteenth century to movements opposed by conservatives within the church (Jodock 2000, 8; O'Malley 2008, 68–71). According to Amorth, however, modernist tendencies among theologians led them to privilege science and skepticism and question the reality of miracles and demonic activity. Amorth's comments should not be taken to imply that he rejected modern science, for he believed it can play a vital role in Catholic society. He nevertheless maintained that the inappropriate application of scientific ideas within biblical hermeneutics had reduced theological interpretations of the created order to natural causes. This led theologians to deny the reality of demons and the necessity for exorcism and question the extent of divine intervention in the created order. Having internalized these modernist theological ideas, the episcopate and parish clergy taught them to their parishioners, creating an "unbelieving Catholic world" that not only rejected the reality of demons but also adopted a skeptical attitude towards all facets of the faith.

Faith and Reason in Amorth's Writings

In his writings, Amorth articulates a consistent and coherent cosmology that simultaneously emphasizes God's ongoing activity in the created order, manifested for example through Padre Pio's extraordinary charisms, and the ongoing spiritual threat of demons. For Amorth, this belief system had been marginalized within an increasingly scientific—or, perhaps better, scientistic—and consumerist society. To him, it seemed that for much of the twentieth century the Catholic Church had appeared reluctant to acknowledge, let alone resist, these developments, a point demonstrated in a vignette contained in his biography of Padre Pio. At some point in the late 1950s or early 1960s, Amorth and his brother visited San Giovanni Rotondo, the town in southern Italy that hosted Padre Pio's friary, Our Lady of Grace. By this time, the friar had gained considerable fame as a living saint, and the once isolated town had become a center of pilgrimage and home to a large hospital complex. Despite, or perhaps because of, the popular acclaim bestowed upon him, Padre Pio often aroused the suspicion of central ecclesiastical authorities. Throughout his ministry, Padre Pio had faced questions about whether his stigmata were real and allegations about his sexual propriety and personal integrity. This scrutiny

became especially intense in the years 1923–33 and 1952–62, periods Amorth refers to as the “Decades of Fire” (Amorth 2021, chaps. 9 and 11). The visit Amorth describes occurred at some point after the second Decade of Fire, during which the Vatican, both skeptical of the claims made about the friar’s extraordinary charisms and wary of the cult that had grown up around him, conducted a rigorous investigation of his activities. (On the investigation into Padre Pio, see Amorth 2021, chap. 9 and 11; Luzzatto 2010, chap. 5–6, 10.)

During their visit, the Amorth brothers by chance met Archbishop Andrea Cesarino (1880–1969), who asked how they felt about the crowds of people who flocked to the town. Interpreting the bishop’s inquiry as a tacit criticism of the movement that had grown up around Padre Pio, Amorth’s brother replied, “You priests, I don’t understand you. The people don’t pray, don’t receive the sacraments. And yet this [pilgrimage to see Padre Pio] seems to make you angry. Instead of encouraging it, you do all you can to deter it” (Amorth 2021, 121). Reflecting back on this meeting, Amorth notes that he and his brother had done the archbishop an injustice, for he was in fact a staunch supporter of Padre Pio who had done all he could to protect the friar. Amorth nevertheless reiterates his point that, for unfathomable reasons, many within the ecclesiastical hierarchy were not capitalizing on the enthusiasm generated by the friar’s ministry. For Amorth, this was symptomatic of both the central church’s detachment from lay piety and, more shockingly, its failure to respect tradition, including recent conciliar decrees. He notes with apparent incredulity that “[t]he extraordinary gifts of God, such as Marian apparitions or the presence of a man of God who accomplishes a world of good, should be received ‘with thanksgiving and consolation,’ as Vatican II affirms in regard to extraordinary charisms. But let’s be frank: that is not what happens.” In truth, when faced with “such realities,” church authorities “react with an incredulity and a resistance that have nothing to do with prudence” (Amorth 2021, 121–22).

While evidently frustrated by the church’s attitudes towards Padre Pio, Amorth nevertheless acknowledges the need for “prudence” when assessing claims of divine intervention in the created order. This is perhaps unsurprising. Since at least the sixteenth century, the church’s approach towards assessing reported miracles had been characterized by what we might call institutionalized skepticism. This point is best illustrated through the process of saint-making, which requires evidence that God has worked miracles through the putative saint. Although the fundamental elements of the process of canonization date back to the medieval period, from the age of the Reformation onwards, the church developed more stringent means to assess putative saints and regulate their local cults. During the post-Tridentine period, canonization processes became further elaborated and institutionalized following such developments as the establishment of the Sacred Congregation of Rites in 1588. There were, however, also conflicts within the church. From the late sixteenth century, the Holy Office of the Inquisition arrogated to itself the right to investigate

individuals believed to be saints and their cults (Schutte 2001; Gotor 2002; Ditchfield 2007, 206–16.) Amorth nevertheless intimates that the ecclesiastical hierarchy's attitudes towards Padre Pio were not the product of due diligence but the result of a perverse refusal to acknowledge a deeper truth.

The institutional church's reluctance to acknowledge Padre Pio's extraordinary charisms was, Amorth suggests, a reflection of fundamental divisions within the church, which were exemplified by the scientific investigation of Padre Pio's wounds. Throughout the friar's life, physicians and clerics investigated the veracity of his charisms, seeking to determine whether they could be ascribed to natural causes such as hysteria. While establishing natural causes for these phenomena could indicate the friar was either ill, deluded, or a fraud, proving they could not have occurred naturally would have provided *prima facie* evidence for their truth. In his biography of Padre Pio, Amorth does not indicate that he was unduly concerned by either the impulse to investigate Padre Pio or the use of the tools of science to undertake this task. He nevertheless stresses the requirement to ensure such investigations are undertaken appropriately, which for Amorth meant in accordance with church tradition.

To understand Amorth's position, it is necessary to briefly sketch the longer history of the scientific investigation of examples of extraordinary charisms and the claims of sanctity they inspired. As numerous scholars have demonstrated, since the Middle Ages, science has been used to determine whether reported events and observed phenomena constituted genuine miracles, whether they had occurred naturally or been produced with the assistance of demons (Park 1994; Ziegler 1999; Bouley 2017; Eire 2023; de Ceglia 2025, chap. 4). During the early modern period, such investigations were underpinned by a scholastic, predominantly Thomist synthesis of knowledge. This system for ordering the relations between human and divine knowledge demanded that all philosophical claims about the functioning of the created order had to be consistent with the truth established in the higher discipline of theology. It was, for example, illegitimate to argue that the world is truly eternal. The aim was to produce a rational, coherent account of the created order that was nonetheless in accordance with an interpretation of the faith that, for example, accepts the reality and danger of demons and acknowledges that God routinely intervenes in his creation to produce miracles (Tarrant 2022, 56–68; 2024).

By the late eighteenth century, this established manner of assessing miracles and extraordinary charisms, and the cosmology on which it depended, was challenged by the rise of rationalism and the growth of natural explanations for observed phenomena. This was not a new problem. Philosophical naturalism had been a consistent feature of the Western intellectual tradition since antiquity. From the twelfth century, Aristotle's philosophy was once more widely studied in the Latin West. This was especially significant as his philosophy did not allow for preternatural or supernatural causation. From the thirteenth century onwards, philosophers defended their right to present Aristotelian "naturalist" accounts

of the cosmos as philosophically necessary, although ultimately untrue, for these did not conform with revealed truth. Although these philosophers maintained that their position was compatible with the faith, many ecclesiastical authorities opposed their form of philosophical discourse. Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), for example, developed his synthesis of knowledge to combat this particular manifestation of naturalism. Nevertheless, this means of discussing philosophy persisted into the seventeenth century, especially in the universities of the Italian peninsula. (See, for example, Van Steenberghen 1955; Pine 1986; Dales 1984; Grendler 2002, chap. 8) From the seventeenth century, a new and more explicit challenge to theological accounts of the natural order began to emerge, with some philosophers putting forward accounts that were explicitly materialist and atheist (Hedley Brooke 2003; Wolfe 2014). By the nineteenth century, these perspectives were becoming increasingly dominant within emerging modern concepts of science, with the consequence that the magical and the miraculous were gradually excluded from the domain of science proper. Equally significant, scientific practitioners claimed that their more circumscribed account of the natural order was the true and accurate representation of reality.

The significance of these developments was clear to the papacy. Among the decrees passed at the First Vatican Council (1870) was *Dei filius*, which lambasted the “rationalism and naturalism” that has “plunged the minds of many into the abyss of pantheism, materialism and atheism” (Tanner 1990, 2:804). To counter these tendencies, the church reasserted the Thomist principle that while humans could use the reason given to them by God to make knowledge about the created order, they could not use it to contradict the truths established in theology. Crucially, this decree did not seek to prevent the practice of science or Catholic engagement with scientific knowledge. On the contrary, it asserted that the church does not “forbid these studies to employ, each within its own area, its own proper principles and method: but while she admits this just freedom, she takes particular care that they do not become infected with errors by conflicting with divine teaching, or, by going beyond their proper limits, intrude upon what belongs to faith and engender confusion” (Tanner 1990, 2:809; see also O’Malley 2018, 133–79). In this manner, the decree defined the appropriate role of human knowledge, including modern science, while reasserting the church’s authority to define the truth. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the papacy continued to reassert the centrality of scholasticism and Thomism as a means to combat modernist tendencies (Jodock 2000, 79–81; O’Malley 2008, 53–92; Del Colle 2010).

These considerations formed the backdrop to the scientific investigations into Padre Pio’s extraordinary charisms, which were initiated by different groups within the church for a variety of reasons. As early as 1911, Padre Pio’s spiritual adviser Agostino of San Marco in Lamis (1880–1963) harbored concerns about his wellbeing. Having witnessed Padre Pio’s stigmatic pains (sensations he experienced prior to receiving the physical wounds), his ecstatic visions, and his

battles with demons, Agostino was so worried that he contacted a local doctor to check whether there were natural causes for Padre Pio's apparent afflictions (Luzzatto 2011, 50). When Padre Pio's wounds first appeared, the Capuchin Order commissioned reports on them from physicians, including Dr. Luigi Romanelli, Dr. Amico Bignami and Dr. Giorgio Festa. According to Amorth, each doctor approached the stigmata with professional skepticism but, following their examination, was forced to conclude they were scientifically inexplicable. Indeed, Festa subsequently became a "strenuous defender of Padre Pio" (Amorth 2021, 37–38; cf. Luzzatto 2011, 37–43). The central church also maintained its long-established practice of monitoring claims of extraordinary charisms and the cults they inspired, which in the 1920s resulted in the Holy Office launching an investigation into the friar and his claims (Luzzatto 2011, chap. 4).

While empirical observation had persuaded Drs. Romanelli, Bignami, and Festa that Padre Pio's stigmata were genuine, others remained unconvinced. Among them was a certain Edoardo Gemelli (1878–1959). Raised in an anticlerical family in Milan, the young Gemelli trained as a physician and, on graduating, conducted experiments in neurophysiology and psychology. In around 1903, he converted to the Catholic faith. It seems his conversion and subsequent interests were influenced by reading the *Life of Saint Francis* (1894), a work published by the Protestant minister Paul Sabatier (1854–1941). The content of this work was surprising, for, despite his Protestant faith, Sabatier used the methods of positivist historiography to argue that St. Francis's stigmata were not only real but also unquestionably the wounds of Christ. In 1904, Gemelli entered the Franciscan Order and was ordained four years later. Still inspired by Sabatier's work, he devoted himself to studying the stigmata using both his scientific and religious training. Although he rejected the scientific positivism of Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), who had described such venerated saints of the Catholic Church as Francis of Assisi (c. 1181–1226) and Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556) as mentally disturbed, Sabatier set himself the task of using the science of psychology to explore mystical experiences and miracles (Luzzatto 2011, 43–50).

It is likely that Padre Pio first came to Gemelli's attention in 1911, when he was contacted by Agostino of San Marco in Lamis. As we have seen, Agostino had previously contacted various physicians to consult about Padre Pio's physical and mental health; he now sought to draw upon Gemelli's recognized expertise to get a psychological assessment of the friar. It seems no investigation took place at this time, but the two men did finally meet in 1920. In the years that intervened, both clerics became embroiled in the First World War, with Padre Pio serving as a priest soldier and Gemelli bringing his ministry to the frontline by preaching sermons that extolled patriotic values. Gemelli was also fiercely critical of soldiers who inflicted wounds upon themselves to escape the fighting. In 1917, he published *Il nostro soldato. Saggi di psicologia militare (Our Soldier: Studies in Military Psychology)*, in which he denounced both those who inflicted wounds

on themselves and those suffering from shell shock, arguing that both were the victims of suggestion and self-suggestion (Luzzatto, 50–57).

In 1920, Gemelli took it upon himself to visit Padre Pio, arriving at the friary of Our Lady of Grace in San Giovanni Rotondo on the nineteenth of April and leaving the following day. The two men met only briefly, speaking for no more than a few hours. During this time, Gemelli made no physical investigation of Padre Pio's wounds but instead subjected him to a psychiatric examination, the results of which he later forwarded to the Holy Office of the Inquisition. As we have seen, this institution had played a leading role in examining living saints since the sixteenth century. Gemelli's conclusions were damning. In his report, Gemelli argued that Padre Pio's mysticism was in fact a form of hysteria, an opinion rooted in both his scientific training and his experience examining troops with self-inflicted injuries. This report prompted the Holy Office to launch their own investigations later that year (Luzzatto 2011, 57–60). Thus began the period Amorth refers to as "The First Decade of Fire." Following its investigations, the Holy Office declared in 1923 that there was no evidence Padre Pio's wounds were supernatural. Later that year, his order made an abortive attempt to send him to a new friary in order to dispel the cult growing up around him. In 1926, the Holy Office prohibited Catholics from visiting Padre Pio and in 1931 banned him from publicly celebrating mass or hearing confession, only relenting after three years (Amorth 2016, chap. 9; see too Luzzatto 2011, chap. 4). Amorth held Father Gemelli personally responsible for these developments, arguing that Gemelli influenced both Pope Pius XI and the Holy Office (Amorth 2021, 91–92).

Despite his criticism of Gemelli, Amorth's assessment of these events is ambivalent. On the one hand, he believes it was necessary to investigate claims of extraordinary charisms and that science could play a decisive role in proving the truth of such claims. On the other, he maintains that the central church's investigations into Padre Pio exceeded the prudent measures necessary to root out a false saint, whether a fantasist or a fraud. In an article he wrote for *Famiglia Cristiana* in 1958, "So Then, Should We Believe Padre Pio or Not?", which he reprinted in *Padre Pio*, Amorth argues that supposedly scientific explanations for Padre Pio's wounds were often unsuccessful on their own terms. Various "rationalist physicians," he notes, had sought to find an explanation for the Capuchin friar's stigmata. He was especially scathing of efforts to diagnose a psychological disorder. To illustrate his point, he related an anecdote about a young American doctor who told Padre Pio he believed his wounds had been caused by him reflecting on Christ's crucifixion. According to Amorth (2021, 43), "the good friar answered him with a kindly smile, 'Ataboy! Now go think intensely about an ox, and before you know it you will be sprouting horns.' The quip was enough to make that rookie doctor change his mind." Amorth's point was not that science should not intrude on religious matters but rather that

science badly practiced produced baseless attacks on Padre Pio's extraordinary charism that could readily be rebutted.

In the concluding sections of his 1958 article, Amorth addresses the investigations instigated by Gemelli. Although he does not refer directly to these events or to Gemelli by name, he alludes to "a certain visit" to San Giovanni Rotondo that took place during the pontificate of Pius XI that resulted in a "negative" judgment. Amorth (2021, 44) notes that "this was not an official judgment, much less an infallible one. It was one opinion among many, expressed by a physician who was immediately called a jackass by another doctor." While Gemelli may have been scientifically trained, Amorth implies that Gemelli was so blinded by his own prejudices that he produced a judgment that was not scientifically justified and led him to reject a higher truth. Seeking to absolve Pius of the blame for these events, Amorth here argues that Pius had been unaware of the investigations. He also suggests the pope had in fact accepted the truth of Padre Pio's extraordinary charisms. Pius, he notes, accepted the testimony of Father Luigi Orione (1872–1940), who claimed he had seen Padre Pio in St. Peter's during the beatification of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (April 29, 1923), while the friar was known to also be present in San Giovanni Rotondo. Amorth (2021, 45) invites his readers to weigh the evidence he provides, imploring them "let us think with our heads, but using reason, which should always characterize man." Amorth's broader point was that, viewed from a neo-Thomist perspective, it was not Padre Pio's defenders who were irrational but those who were so unreasonably committed to forms of scientific reductionism that they ignored or willfully misinterpreted the evidence for his gifts (Amorth 2021, 44–45).

Science, Religion, and Demonology

The foregoing discussion of Amorth's attitudes towards Padre Pio has demonstrated that Amorth defended a cosmology supported by knowledge derived from both theology and science, and following the principles reaffirmed at Vatican I, he always believed theological knowledge should take precedent. This attitude towards scientific knowledge carried over into his ministry as an exorcist. Most obviously, this intellectual framework informed his defense of the reality of demons. Amorth argues that scripture teaches that both angels and demons are spiritual creatures who possess the gifts of intelligence, free will, and intelligence. Using a characteristically Thomist line of argument, he suggests that this fact, established in the higher discipline of theology, demonstrates that demons are a real presence in the created order and that this knowledge must be factored into any complete account of its operations (cf. Tarrant 2022, 56–68). Expanding on this point, he argues that "[t]hose modern theologians who identify Satan with the abstract idea of evil are completely mistaken. Theirs is a true heresy; that is, it is openly in contrast with the Bible,

the Fathers, and the Magisterium of the Church” (Amorth 1999, 27). Having used an appeal to scripture and tradition to establish that it was heretical to deny the real existence of demons, Amorth turned to detail how demons operate and how their threat could be resisted, a discussion that allowed him to demonstrate how science could complement knowledge derived from faith.

While some modern theologians downplayed the threat Satan poses, Amorth was convinced that Satan’s power was growing in the modern world, allowing him to afflict humans in ever greater numbers. Satan’s expanding dominion was, he maintains, due to the influence of Western consumerism, which encouraged a life of materialism and hedonism, turning the majority of people away from the faith. Somewhat surprisingly, Amorth links the rise of commercialism to the influence of socialism and communism, noting that Marxist ideas had infested Italian media and culture. At the same time, church-going had markedly declined. Amorth claims that at the time of writing (1994) only 12 percent of the population attended Sunday mass. This had detrimental consequences, for, he observed, “it is a well-known fact that where religion regresses, superstition progresses.” In these circumstances, an interest in spiritism, witchcraft, and occultism flourished, especially among the young, a phenomenon accompanied by an unacceptable rise of such practices as yoga and transcendental meditation. These trends were further encouraged by the growing popularity of Satanic rock music. As a consequence, Amorth (1999, 53–54) notes, it is “unbelievable how widespread are witchcraft and spiritism, in all their forms, in middle and high school. The evil is everywhere, even in small towns.”

Amorth explains that the power of demons could manifest itself in several different ways. At the most basic level, the devil engages in “ordinary activity,” that is, forms of temptation designed to lead humans astray. While he considers this to be important, the focus of Amorth’s discussion is the devil’s “extraordinary activity,” which itself takes six forms. The first of these is inflicting physical pain, a phenomenon that afflicted such individuals as Saint Paul of the Cross (1694–1775) and, more recently, Padre Pio. The second is demonic possession, the phenomenon wherein the devil takes control of an individual’s body, although not their soul. The third is diabolical oppression, the infliction of illness or suffering, for instance the tribulations inflicted on Job. The fourth is diabolical obsession, when Satan afflicts his target with intrusive thoughts and ideas, inducing anxiety and even suicidal thoughts. The fifth is diabolical infestation, wherein demons affect houses, animals, or objects. Finally, there is diabolical subjugation or dependence, a category that involves individuals voluntarily submitting to Satan, typically via a pact. This is the type of extraordinary activity normally associated with the practice of illicit magic (Amorth 1999, 33–35).

Amorth believed the exorcist has a vital role to play in combatting Satan’s extraordinary activity, and he sought to achieve this through his ministry. Amorth did not, however, consider science to be a necessary threat to belief in exorcism

nor the world view that supported it. This point becomes rapidly evident in his discussion of the process of exorcism. He notes that “[t]he purpose of exorcism is twofold: the one purpose that is mentioned in all the books on the subject is the liberation of those who are obsessed. However, the starting point of and the first purpose, that of diagnosis, is all too often ignored” (Amorth 1999, 44). Amorth maintains that diagnosis is the true point of departure for all exorcism because he believed it is only through the process of performing an exorcism that one can establish whether there actually is a possession. This is because he acknowledged that “[e]very phenomenon we encounter, no matter how strange or inexplicable, may have a natural explanation. Even when we are faced with a multitude of psychiatric and parapsychological phenomena, we may not have sufficient data for a diagnosis” (Amorth 1999, 44).

With these words, Amorth underlines his belief that his cosmology, which makes conceivable the diagnosis and treatment of exorcism, is compatible with modern science. The process of performing the exorcism allowed him to determine whether an individual was truly suffering from a natural affliction that should be treated by a physician or whether they were being attacked by demons, meaning they could be assisted only by a trained exorcist. Indeed, he controversially maintained that performing an unnecessary exorcism, one which might allow these distinctions to be made, was far less harmful than not performing one out of an abundance of caution. Elsewhere in this text, he cites approvingly the case of the Carmelite friar Francisco Palau (1811–72), who towards the end of his life bought a hospice in which he cared for the mentally ill. The friar exorcised all of his patients as a matter of course, releasing those who were assaulted by demons from their affliction while continuing to care for those who did not respond to the exorcism and were, perforce, suffering from genuine mental illness (Amorth 1999, 61).

While Amorth believed that it was possible, indeed desirable, to reconcile modern science with his faith in order to perform his ministry successfully, he remained highly concerned that some within the church used science to cast doubt on the reality of demons and thus the necessity of exorcism. For example, he notes that “I have to laugh when some modern ‘experts’ in theology state, as though it were a great novelty, that certain types of mental illness can be confused with diabolical possession” (Amorth 1999, 47). For Amorth, this modern theological position represented a failure to understand properly both the faith and science on their own terms, and the history of their interaction. To illustrate this point, Amorth draws attention to the fact that in 1583, the Synod of Reims recognized the danger of confusing mental illness and diabolic possession (Amorth 1999, 47; see too Young 2016a, 125). With this case, Amorth neatly makes the point that modern scientific knowledge does not pose a unique challenge to the faith but instead raises questions with which clerics had successfully contended for centuries. The clergy have always recognized that there are diseases and illnesses that have natural causes, which

could and should be understood and treated according to the best scientific knowledge. This belief has not changed. The difference in the modern era is that theologians no longer seem prepared to entertain the idea that mental disturbance can also be caused by demons.

At the heart of Amorth's criticism of the idea that cases of extraordinary demonic activity could be explained away by modern science lies a rejection of scientific reductionism rather than science itself. He writes that "I greatly esteem those psychiatrists who are professionally competent and know the limitations of their science. They are honestly able to recognize when one of their patients exhibits symptoms that go beyond any known disease" (Amorth 1999, 60–61). In this context, he praised the work of Professor Simone Morabito, who was able to recognize the distinction between cases genuine of mental illness and possession and, as a consequence, knew when to enroll the assistance of exorcists to effect a cure for his patients. He was, however, highly critical of those physicians who could not or would not recognize the efficacy of exorcism. He recalled the case of an exorcism performed by his mentor Father Candido Amantini (1914–92) on a young man whose doctors had diagnosed him with epilepsy but been unable to treat him. The young man's current psychiatrist agreed to witness the exorcism. Upon Amantini placing his hand on the patient's head, the patient fell to the floor wracked by convulsions. Unmoved, the psychiatrist remarked that this was evidence of his epilepsy. Yet, once Amantini placed his hand on the patient's head once more, the patient sprang to his feet and stood motionless. The stunned doctor was compelled to admit that this was unusual behavior for an epileptic. The patient was eventually healed by Amantini's exorcisms rather than his doctors' treatments (Amorth 1999, 60–61).

Amorth's position, then, is a denial of neither science nor the curative powers of modern medicine. Rather, it is a call for science and medicine to recognize the limits of their power. Indeed, he remarks, "I very much appreciate scientists who, even if they are unbelievers, recognize the limitations of their science" (Amorth 1999, 62). For Amorth, scientific knowledge is entirely compatible with a belief in exorcism if its practitioners and proponents do not overstate its explanatory power but instead recognize its limits. A proper scientific understanding of the world, one that exhibits epistemic humility, is complementary to a cosmology that maintains a belief in the real and active intervention of demons and a providential God. This is a conception of the natural order and humanity's capacity to comprehend that order consistent with church tradition and practice from the age of the church fathers, but which especially complements neo-scholasticism. Working in this manner, Christians could make use of both theological and scientific knowledge to ascribe observable phenomena to their true cause. Amorth, however, rejected forms of scientific reductionism that attributed phenomena solely to natural causes, thereby excluding contemplation of preternatural—that is, demonic or angelic—or supernatural—that is,

divine—causation (Clarke 1997, part 2; Bartlett 2008; Tarrant 2022, esp. chap. 2). More significantly, according to Amorth, it is essential to ensure that these forms of reductionism do not unduly influence theology. There is, he believed, a need to reconfigure the balance between science and the faith to ensure continued Catholic belief in both miracles and the real and present danger posed by demons.

The “Unbelieving Catholic World” and the Decline of Magic

Throughout his life, Amorth dedicated himself to reviving not only the exorcistate but also the cosmology in which it was embedded. Achieving this aim was, he believed, essential not only to fulfill the pastoral duty to reestablish the practice of exorcism in the Catholic Church but to protect the integrity of the faith as a whole. Amorth (1999, 119) revealed these wider concerns during a discussion of the efficacy of sacramentals such as water, oil, and salt in his practice of exorcism: “The ‘unbelieving Catholic world’ may laugh at my assertions. It is certain that sacramentals are most efficacious when they are used in faith; without faith, they are ineffective.” In this passage, Amorth specifically refers to those who do not accept on faith the power of the sacramentals to combat demons, but his point is that skepticism about the reality of the latter had led Catholics also to doubt the power of former. The rot within modern Catholicism had therefore spread further than just the rejection of belief in demons. By choosing which parts of the faith they chose to accept, Catholics had inadvertently called into question other related beliefs. Since a lack of belief in one area had these ramifications for the integrity of Catholicism, it is essential, he implies, that Catholics approach their faith as an indivisible whole (Amorth 1999, 119).

In conversation with Elisabetta Fezzi in the early 2000s, Amorth discussed why the situation had come to pass. This led him to reflect on the reasons the practice of exorcism and the wider cosmology in which it was embedded had become so marginal in the Catholic Church of the twentieth century. He began by observing that “[u]ndoubtedly rationalism heavily influenced the Enlightenment” (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29), but he placed these developments in a longer history. Pursuing a perhaps surprising line of argument, he suggested that the decline of belief in exorcism was caused by the witch hunts of the early modern period. (On the witch hunts, see, for example, Thurston 2006; Roper 2006; Levack 2013; Goodare 2016). During the early modern period, he wrote, the Inquisition persecuted “the so-called *bone femmine*, who were considered a little crazy and who then were called witches and sent to the stake” (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29). This was, he suggested, not only a historical injustice but a failure of pastoral care that should have been avoided. Under the guidance of the Grand Inquisitor Torquemada (1420–98), Amorth noted, no witch was sent to the stake. He also cited favorably the case of a French bishop “who exorcised a nun who really was a witch, truly possessed by the demon, and doing immense evil” (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29). Rather than prosecuting the

nun, the bishop performed a series of exorcisms that freed her from Satan's power. Unfortunately, Amorth lamented, "intelligent bishops who act in this way are few" (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29). Indeed, he continued, even Saint Charles Borromeo (1538–84), the reforming bishop of Milan, had sent witches to the stake. "Evidently," he noted tartly, "sanctity does not exempt a person from being a victim of the mentality of his own epoch!" (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29)

Amorth therefore argues that the witch hunts were caused by two impulses. The first was a tendency to inflate the number of individuals investigated as witches by pursuing the unwarranted prosecution of marginalized, often older, women, while the second was a pattern of treating alleged witches as threats that needed to be expunged from society rather than as victims of Satan's power who required the church's assistance. It must be noted that Amorth did not engage with historians' accounts of why the witch hunts occurred or what a witch was believed to be in the early modern period. For example, he did not discuss the work of historians such as Carlo Ginzburg (b. 1939) who have described the development of a new stereotype that grew up from the fifteenth century onwards that depicted the witch as part of a diabolic cult intended to undermine Christendom (see, for example, Ginzburg 1966, 1989). Amorth nevertheless stresses that although a swath of individuals was erroneously persecuted, witches did indeed exist. As he notes in his anecdote about the good French bishop, witches could have been the victims of demonic activity, that is, possessed individuals who perpetrated acts of witchcraft and needed to be exorcised. Amorth did not develop this point, but his description of the sixth form of extraordinary demonic activity in the modern world, diabolic subjugation, indicates he recognized that there are real forms of magic that individuals operate through the agency of demons. Examples of magical arts practiced in premodern Europe include forms of necromancy, techniques to find lost treasure, love magic, and a host of divinatory practices ranging from chiromancy to predictive astrology. Since the age of the church fathers, Christian authorities have argued that these arts produce their effects by making explicit and tacit pacts with demons and therefore required extirpation (Amorth 1999, 33–35; cf., for example, Tarrant 2022, esp. chap. 1–3).

While Amorth certainly believed it was correct the witch hunts were stopped, he argued that the revulsion these massacres rightly elicited precipitated a historical error. For "with the world horrified by these excesses and this collective folly, everything was denied: there were no witches and no demons. Everything was swept away! Everything was abolished. As a result, there were no more exorcisms. One excess replaced another" (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29). According to Amorth, the institutional church and individual Catholics not only began to doubt the reality of witches but also the devil's real existence and power in the created order. While it was unquestionably good that the church no longer prosecuted innocent old women, they also stopped investigating genuine

examples of demonic activity, ranging from possession to forms of sorcery and magic. This development delighted the devil, for he had always strived to hide his existence and power. As Amorth observes, “This has been, and is now, his greatest strength” (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29–30). Diminishing belief in the devil’s active engagement in the created order meant that his powers were no longer recognized, let alone feared, in the modern world. This led to the situation Amorth laments in *Un esorcista racconta*, where exorcism was rarely available and the danger posed by using a Ouija board or practicing yoga barely understood.

The account of the disenchantment of Catholicism Amorth presents here also provided a framework he frequently deployed in his writings. In his biography of Padre Pio, for example, Amorth (2021, 132) remarks that prior to Padre Pio’s appointment to the office of exorcist in 1986, the exorcistate had been “practically abandoned for three centuries.” This gives an approximate date for his posited decline of belief in exorcism, and indeed wider belief in magic, as the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century, which broadly corresponds with the periodizations familiar from narratives of disenchantment. It is also in line with the conclusions of historians of exorcism such as Erik H. C. Midelfort (2005, 18–19) and Francis Young (2016a, 155–56) (each writing after Amorth), who both suggest that two differing intellectual trends, Enlightened rationality and Jansenism, fed a growing skepticism toward exorcism during the eighteenth century. Amorth’s account of disenchantment was, however, no more than a sketch. The focus of Amorth’s discussion was explaining why Catholics by and large had rejected this cosmology in the late twentieth century, and so he had relatively little to say about why belief in exorcism declined in the eighteenth century. The absence of a detailed periodization, any engagement with the voluminous historical literature on witchcraft, or, in truth, any empirical evidence, may be troubling to a historian. Amorth, however, was not attempting to write history but seeking to remind his fellow Catholics of the devil’s malign power in the world and explain to them how this fundamental issue had come to be neglected in the modern world.

Although it lacks detail, Amorth’s account of disenchantment provides context for his interpretation of the rise of skeptical naturalism within the church. He believed that by the mid-twentieth century this attitude had become so institutionalized that the Catholic elite were complicit in the devil’s continued erasure from modern Catholic cosmologies. To illustrate this latter point, Amorth notes that the Pontifical Lateran University refused to allow him to run a course on the sacramental of exorcism, even though it is a sacramental listed in canon law (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29). The main target of his complaints, however, was the episcopate. “I am convinced,” he writes in *Un esorcista racconta*, “that allowing the ministry of exorcism to die is an unforgivable deficiency to be laid squarely at the door of the bishop” (Amorth 1999, 54–55). As a consequence, he continues, “The Catholic hierarchy must say a powerful *mea*

culpa. I am personally acquainted with many Italian bishops; I know of only a few who have ever practiced or who have assisted during an exorcism or who are adequately aware of the problem” (Amorth 1999, 55). The bishops’ failure to recognize the devil’s continued active presence in the natural order was a serious pastoral failing, for individuals in need of this ministry were being denied the aid they required. Indeed, Amorth (1999, 55) argues that a failure to deal with a “valid” request to perform an exorcism made bishops “guilty of a most serious sin of omission.” These failures, this collective negligence, had also led to the dissolution of what Amorth (1999, 55) refers to as “*the school*,” that is, the system by which a practicing exorcist trained his pupil.

Amorth returns to these themes in a later chapter of *Un esorcista racconta*, “The ‘Cinderella’ of the *Ritual*,” a title that refers to the fact that exorcism was the only part of the *Roman Ritual* not updated after the Second Lateran Council. Here, Amorth (1999, 166) notes: “This crisis [the decline of the exorcistate] is not only doctrinal; it is pastoral above all. That is, it involves bishops who are not appointing exorcists and priests who do not believe in this office anymore.” In this chapter, he further elaborates on the reasons contemporary bishops rejected belief in the need for exorcism. The problem, he contends, began with the theologians. He cites two representative examples. The first is Luigi Sartori (1924–2007), who, in a 1989 article for *Famiglia Cristiana*, argued that a number of those whom Jesus exorcised were not, in truth, afflicted by demons but suffering from nervous disorders. “This,” Amorth (1999, 166) declares, “is an insinuation of the worst kind, and it is false.” The gospel, he continues, always clearly distinguishes between instances of miraculous healing and those of liberation from demons, and those instances when Jesus bestowed these distinct powers on others. Although the Evangelists may not have possessed modern disease categories, they were capable of discerning the difference between natural illness and demonic possession. If anyone was incapable of making such judgments, it was Sartori (Amorth 1999, 166). Compounding his offence, Sartori (cited in Amorth 1999, 167) also observes that “Jesus the miracle worker expressed above all the strength of love; he built relationships of mutual empathy; that is why he could work miracles, and not because he possessed sacred and secret powers like a sorcerer.” Amorth (1999, 167) rejects such ideas, dryly noting that Jesus could perform such feats not because he was a sorcerer but because he “possessed the omnipotence of God, and with his actions demonstrated that he was God. These ‘subtleties’ seem to escape some modern theologians.”

Amorth also discusses the case of Luigi Lorenzetti (1931–2018). Writing in *Famiglia Cristiana* in 1988, Lorenzetti observed that while it was impossible for the believer to discount completely the possibility of demonic causation of observed phenomena, it was equally impossible to identify definitively specific examples of demonic activity. Indeed, he concludes, that “[i]n general we do not err if we substitute a scientific-natural interpretation to the

magic-demonic one” (Lorenzetti, cited in Amorth 1999, 167). For Amorth, such a position smacks of hypocrisy. “This is,” he writes, “like saying I believe in demons in theory, because I do not want to be accused of heresy, but at the practical level I do not believe, because at the practical level I trust only natural science” (Amorth 1999, 167). For Amorth, this constituted the crux of the problem: elite theologians were denying the reality of a scripturally based cosmology that acknowledged demonic intervention in favor of one founded on a reductive scientific naturalism that denied preternatural and supernatural causation. He posed the rhetorical question: If theologians were unable to comprehend the faith correctly, what chance had the average priest?

Amorth (1999, 173) offers a typically forthright analysis of the origins of these modern theologians’ errors, declaring: “I will never tire of repeating this: rationalism and materialism have polluted a segment of theologians, and their influence on both bishops and priests has been profound.” Amorth further expands on this theme in an appendix to this chapter. There, he draws attention to the influence of the Lutheran theologian Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), whom he complains many Catholic scholars have adopted as a “new father of the Church” (Amorth 1999, 178). Famed for his efforts to “demythologize” scripture, Bultmann sought to downplay the facticity of events recorded in the bible, including stories of angels, demons, and miracles. For Amorth, this hermeneutical approach produced entirely negative results. To illustrate his point, Amorth (1999, 178) cites Bultmann’s observation that “[w]e cannot use electric light and radio, or turn to modern medicine in the case of sickness, and at the same time believe in a spirit world and in the miracles that the New Testament presents us.” Amorth (1999, 179) rejects such a view, noting that “assuming that technologic progress is proof evident that the word of God is outdated indicates an inability to think.” By aping Bultmann’s efforts to demythologize biblical hermeneutics, Catholic theologians had rejected the truth expounded in scripture. Ultimately, Amorth maintains that the decline of belief in a world inhabited by demons cannot be explained by the emergence of science per se but by modernist theologians embracing a misplaced scientism. It therefore follows that combatting these errors does not require picking a fight with science or scientists but instead the reform of theology.

Although Amorth lamented that for many years his voice and those of other likeminded individuals had not been heard within the church, in his conversation with Fezzi in the early 2000s, he suggested there was cause for optimism. He believed it might be possible to restore a true Catholic cosmology, in effect reversing the process of disenchantment that had occurred within the church. Amorth recalled that when the “latest popes began to speak of exorcisms and encourage exorcists, things changed, and no one dares to oppose it officially any longer” (Amorth and Fezzi 2018, 29–30). The “latest popes” to whom Amorth refers were likely Paul VI (1963–78) and John Paul II (1978–2005). In *Un esorcista racconta*, Amorth notes that these popes had given three and eighteen speeches,

respectively, on the subject of exorcism. Perhaps more significantly, members of the curia appeared to agree with his analysis of the causes of the decline of exorcisms. In the appendix to the “The ‘Cinderella’ of the *Ritual*,” Amorth cites a report commissioned by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—the successor to the Holy Office of the Inquisition—which since 1981 had been headed by Cardinal Ratzinger and, later, Pope Benedict XVI (2005–13). This report reiterates the importance of belief in Satan and his powers and lambasts those who would reduce him to a mere metaphor. Echoing Amorth’s (1999, 181) beliefs, the report states that “[t]hose who know biblical science cannot fail to recognize that they are faced with a campaign to change public opinion and will wonder where this process of demythologizing, which started in the name of hermeneutics, will lead them.” It seemed to Amorth that at the start of the new millennium, his contention that rebuilding the exorcistate required a radical reform of theology and winning over a skeptical episcopate was shared within the highest reaches of the curia.

Conclusion

Amorth’s account of disenchantment forms part of a broader polemic against modernist tendencies within the Catholic Church, which, he argues, led not only to a rejection of exorcism but struck at the very foundations of the faith. In his discussions of Padre Pio and exorcism, Amorth offers a big picture analysis of the history of a Catholic cosmology that stressed the ongoing presence of angels, demons, and a providential God. Although Amorth does not explicitly make this point, he sought to return the church to an understanding of the created order that predated the modern era. It is perhaps better to say that, from his perspective, he wanted to restore to its rightful place a cosmology consistent with church tradition that had become marginalized. Although in this sense his views represented continuity within the church, his position had become relatively unusual. It had been displaced by modern conceptions of the faith that sought to reinterpret scripture and fundamentally reconfigure traditional Catholic cosmology. While Amorth wanted to return to an older cosmology, he did not reject science. On the contrary, one of his aims was to show that modern science is compatible with the world view he defended. It offers valuable tools that facilitate the demarcation of the boundaries between natural, preternatural, and supernatural causation. In this sense, modern science continues to fulfill the same role it did in premodern European societies. Although his views had been marginal within the church for much of the twentieth century, Amorth believed his vision for restoring what was, in effect, a reenchanted cosmology might be realized under the guidance of popes such as John Paul II, who shared Amorth’s enthusiasm for saints and their ability to inspire the laity (Walsh 2011). It is perhaps telling that Padre Pio’s beatification and canonization both occurred during the closing years of his pontificate.

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