

## SOC 3290 Deviance

### Lecture 4: The Demonic Perspective:

To many of us, otherworldly or supernatural explanations of deviance seem like something from another time. Yet, as the recent story of the so-called “possession” brought forth to explain the murder at the beginning of this week’s chapter reveals, such ideas are far from dead in today’s society (e.g. the religious right).

In the West, it has been several centuries since such ideas were mainstream - albeit powerful - explanation of the causes, consequences and control of deviant behavior. The breakthrough into essentially secular, naturalistic explanations can be traced to changes beginning in the 14th-15th centuries (the reformation, followed by the enlightenment, modern science and technology, capitalism, and secularization). As time went on, sectors of society, culture and individuals became progressively removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols.

So why do we begin consideration of theoretical perspectives on deviance with a perspective whose dominance is mostly in the past? There are several answers: (1) these ideas are not entirely absent from our society; (2) In order to fully understand more recent theories, it is important to consider earlier ideas which they emerged as a response to; (3) critics of modern secular theories have argued that some of these are merely the old demonic perspective in a new guise - so we must evaluate the demonic perspective first.

#### **Theoretical Images:**

The oldest of all known perspectives on deviance, the demonic perspective suggests that we look for the cause and cure of deviant behavior in the realm of the supernatural. Deviance is equated with sin, viewed as a transgression of the will of God (or the Gods). The human world is seen as but a battleground for the forces of another, more powerful supernatural world, and we are seen as constantly torn between supernatural forces of good and evil. When we succumb to the influence of evil forces, we are drawn into deviant behavior. This occurs in two ways: (1) temptation; and (2) possession.

Temptation is said to seduce us by the allure of evil (e.g. Eve’s temptation by Satan). This affords us humans some measure of choice. In principle we can say no. Yet, “following our ancestral fall from grace, we are said to be weakened and seducible by the multiple forms taken by the devil (e.g. sloth, anger, lust, pride, envy, gluttony, greed, etc.).

Possession is more determinant. A possessed person is believed to be literally taken over by the devil or some evil spirit. Once possessed, a person may be viewed as no longer responsible - as no longer able to choose how one behaves (e.g. during the Salem witch trials,

those perceived as “possessed” were to be given “spiritual assistance,” while the “witches” were to be burned).

Yet, even though one of these routes is less deterministic than the other, behind both paths to demonic deviance lurks the devil.

One other thing should be considered in this regard: the so-called cosmic consequences of deviance. Under this perspective, deviant acts are seen to harm more than a particular or immediate victim. Each act is also a transgression against God, indeed against the whole order of nature and all who comprise it. As such, the vested interests of all are clearly linked to the control of deviance. Peace and order will not be restored until the guilty pay the price for their demonic acts.

### **Identifying Demonic Deviance:**

In societies where demonic conceptions of deviance are dominant, there are a number of “methods” used to identify demonic influence. For example, among judicial proceedings of the Kabre of northern Togo, “diviners” are consulted - individuals who are believed to possess a God-given “second sight” enabling them to trace the origin of evil spirits and spells (much like psychiatrists in our criminal trials). If challenged, the accused may then be subjected to a painful trial by ordeal, which, if s/he survives, may be declared innocent.

Trial by ordeal was also commonly practised during the medieval period in the West. This generally involved torture, presided over by priests or other representatives of the divine will here on earth. Admissions of deviance were literally produced by the disembodiment of deviants from their present sinful state. Since it was believed God fortified the innocent to persevere, it was often possible that the innocent would ultimately be vindicated only by their endurance until death.

While this may seem horrific, it is important to note that there was nothing particularly sacred about the body during this time - there was little profit in preserving the body at the expense of the soul. Indeed, horrible as their actions were, they were evidently convinced that they were doing the work of God.

Another method commonly used during this period was trial by battle. Since it was believed that the justice of God was mirrored in natural events, the good person would inevitably be victorious and the deviant would fall. While generally reserved for the wealthy and those of high status, this, in tandem with trial by ordeal, served to diagnose the handiwork of the devil.

### **Colonial America:**

In England, and later Colonial America, inquisitional techniques were largely absent due to the system of common law permitting trial by jury, separation of prosecution and judge, the right to confront one’s accusers, and the right of appeal. Hence, the British system identified “the

work of the devil” in the public courtroom.

A case in point are the Salem witch trials of 1692. Girls who played with a mysterious kitchen slave, and later began to behave oddly (e.g. screaming, barking and scampering like dogs), became seen as possessed by the devil, were implored to explain themselves. They soon began to point fingers at members of the community who had brought this on, who were tried, convicted, and executed (mostly people of low status or who had offended community morality). But things didn't end there, as more “signs of the devil” appeared (e.g. stillborn children, animals dying). The search for witches continued, the possessed girls were asked for more names, and the cycle continued. Soon the whole community was caught up in a mania of witches.

Lacking a tradition of inquisitional torture, five types of evidence were accepted (1) mistakes in reciting the Lords' Prayer; (2) testimony of those who attributed their bad fortune to the demonic activities of the accused; (3) physical “marks of the devil” on the accused; (4) confessions of guilt (“only 50”); (5) “spectral evidence” (e.g. people who said they saw “ghostly forms” that had taken on the appearance of one of the accused). Some of these (e.g. the first two) were ruled out by officials themselves, and 3 and 4 also became viewed with suspicion. It was actually “spectral evidence” that became the central tool used to diagnose the witches as the trials dragged on to their deadly completion. In the minds of these individuals, spectral evidence was, after all, supernatural evidence, and this was then the “truest form of evidence available to God's community on earth.”

### **The Confession:**

The Lateran Council of 1215 had great influence on the future of the demonic perspective by banning trial by ordeal and battle as methods of diagnosis. It also introduced the sacrament of penance or confession, paving the way for the focus on individual responsibility that we now take for granted.

### **Social Control of Demonic Deviance:**

The demonic perspective differentiated little between various types of deviance. Insofar as all were seen as demonically inspired, each was subject to the same general strategy of control: a religiously administered ritual of public punishment. The idea was to purge the sinner's body of traces of the devil and to restore the body of the community to its proper relation to God.

During Medieval times, obedience to God meant obedience to the church. Priests acted as official mediators between God, the sinner, and a spiritual community afflicted with the devil. Presiding over the ritual of penance, Priests granted God's forgiveness and prescribed punishments which cleansed an infested body of evil. They also acted to prevent demonic temptations, especially heresy and sins of the flesh. In the years following the Reformation, for example, Jesuits were unleashed to combat heresy and unorthodox religious thought through fearsome means (e.g. the Spanish Inquisition's burning of heretics reflecting the “divine punishment” of burning in hell; invoking the *lex talionis*: “an eye for an eye”). The bodies of deceased sinners were even considered dangerous, such that various rituals were put in place to

prevent the spirits escaping and causing more harm (e.g. breaking on the wheel, casting ashes to the wind, drawing and quartering, hanging until the body rots, etc.). Of course, those of higher status didn't have these things done as often (e.g. were more often beheaded).

### **Public Spectacles:**

The purgative and symbolic dimensions of demonic punishment were nowhere more evident than in spectacles of public execution: where death was neither swift nor efficient. Known as the "ritual of a thousand deaths," this involved application of purifying pain inch by inch to the demonically infested body, with death but the last step in the restoration of supernatural order.

Other control rituals, however, were more representational in nature: symbolizing the supernatural subjugation of the body without taking pain to its human limits (e.g. being publicly shamed by putting one in the stocks; being branded with the "scarlet letter"). Other symbolic rituals of penance were self-imposed (e.g. parading barefoot begging God's forgiveness, public self-flagellation). In both ways, the shameful stigma of demonic deviance was placed on the sinner as s/he journeyed through this world to the next.

Both kinds of punishment relied on two additional elements of religious control: (1) a reliance on centralized authority; and (2) the local or community nature of control practice.

### **Centralized Authority:**

The demonic perspective centralized the control of deviance in the hand of religious authorities. Divinely ordained officials administer ritual punishments that purge offenders of demonic influence and restore God's blessing upon the entire community of the faithful. In some respects this is an advance - since it restricts the arbitrary nature of revenge by feuding. However, it also ruled out the reconciliatory control rituals existing in earlier, more egalitarian societies in favour of centralized authority.

This development emerged as changes in technology permitted groups to create an economic surplus above and beyond what was needed for simple material survival. This enables some members of society to become full-time managers of the labour and social activities of others. For the first time, power was hierarchically arranged, and this brought a whole new strategy of control driving an institutional wedge through the equalitarian cooperation and reconciliation that was formerly so prominent. Moreover, in its earliest form, centralized authority was justified by divine precept. Just at the moment in history when technological changes made centralized control a material possibility, God's voices were heard by "his" prophets, "chosen" to rule in "his" name. Soon an elaborate religious organization arises, complete with authorized agents and an official code specifying who can do what, when, where and why. Such codes also specify what is to be done to the deviants who violate them - legitimately defining the institutionalized social inequalities ushered into history with the advent

of centralized authority.

### **Community Control:**

While justified by the principle of centralized religious authority, supernaturally ordained control rituals are practically administered within local communities. People who violated the laws of God were to be dealt with locally, purged in public as visible reminders of the ever-present struggle between God and the devil (e.g. local “lunatics” and “idiots” wandered the streets, cared for by family and community). Only exceptionally burdensome deviants and those without any supportive ties were housed under the same roof with others (e.g. small religious hospitals and local, privately administered jails).

The public administration of punishment was also a manifestation of the commitment to community control during this period. All were invited and frequently required to witness the ceremonies of bodily penance by which the whole community was restored to grace (e.g. executions, mutilations, being banned from the community (“outlawry”), being fined depending on the status of the victim). All symbolized the importance of the local community in its immediate and direct responsibility for its own body of deviants - punishing most, while physically or symbolically removing the bodies of the worst.

### **Heterosexist Patriarchy and Religious Control:**

It is today evident that Western use of demonic imagery have valued abstract male ideas about the purity of spiritual forms over the sacredness of women’s bodily experiences (e.g. “God the father”). The male bias of dominant Western religious thinking is evident in many of the founding texts of the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as in the fact that over 80% of the 1-9 million “witches” hunted down and burned between the 15-18th centuries were women. This is evidence of a patriarchal logic at work within dominant forms of western religion.

Paganism, the target of these witch hunts, moreover, is a religious practice which honours the earth as the “Great Mother” or the “Goddess” - emphasizing the spiritual significance of women and the rhythms of nature. Since the late Middle Ages, pagan peoples have been ruthlessly attacked, destroyed or driven underground - equated with Satanism or devil worship. High on the list were women who had rejected heterosexual marriage, widows, natural healers and midwives. Such women were accused of heresies and superstitions, feared because they lived outside the heterosexual hierarchies and logical imperatives of patriarchal social control. Also condemned were gay men, lesbians, and others who refused to honour the heterosexist inequalities of “blessed” family life (e.g. gays, then known as “faggots,” were used as kindling to ignite the pyres used to burn witches).

While condemned as heretical, paganism represented a primary form of religion for many common Europeans until the late middle ages. It was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> century that the Church was in a military position to launch an all-out attack. Following the crusades, Christian military

might was turned on heretics at home - reaching genocidal proportions in the 15-16th centuries.

All of this was justified by the bible's valuing the "pure word of the orderly male sky God over the supposed chaos and impurities of women's bodies. For example, in the first chapters of Genesis (Man was created in God's image, while Eve was created from Adam's rib. Another, earlier account of woman's simultaneous creation showed this woman - "Lilith"- falling into chaotic sin, promiscuity, and violence contrary to "God's order"). Then there is the story of Eve's fall from Grace, tempted by the serpent - and then to be punished by perpetual subordination to man due to her role as a "conduit of evil."

Many horrible social control practices were justified on such bases, cruel manifestations of patriarchal religious control, and, even today, many aspects of Judeo-Christian ritual still subordinate the body of women to the word of men (e.g. restricting female priests, advocating against abortion and birth control in the name of "traditional family values").

### **The Demonic Perspective Today:**

Originating in antiquity and continuing as the predominant interpretation of deviance until the 18<sup>th</sup> century Enlightenment, the demonic perspective is not dead today. Consider the popularity of stories about possession, horror movies, tabloid tales and the spiritual imaginings of many people today. Evangelical preachers fill football stadiums and reach large radio and TV audiences with sermons suggesting that the devil lies behind crime, sexual immorality and family breakdown. Few of us haven't been confronted, at one time or another, by the "word" of those who tell us that deviance is sin, and that giving ourselves (or our money) to a holy cause is the best form of social control. The religious right in the U.S., which lobbies against abortion, women's rights, welfare, promotes censorship, and desires to restrict civil rights is but one example. Some even have claimed that AIDS is "God's punishment," actively (and often successfully) lobbying against gay rights legislation. Indeed, there is still much controversy over accepting gays and lesbians in various Christian churches and congregations.

Perhaps the best example of the political clout of the demonic perspective is the so-called "moral majority" lobby group in the late 70's/early 80's. This group, spearheaded by the Rev. Jerry Falwell, was instrumental in the political defeat of numerous left-leaning legislators and in the election of President Reagan. Such views were - and are - broadcast widely over the airwaves, through distribution of numerous publications and pamphlets, and over the internet - usually based on a selective reading of the scriptures. Despite the fall of many high profile television preachers in the lurid sex scandals of the 1980's, the airwaves are again filled with preachers and politicians calling for a national moral revival (e.g. some in the Canadian Alliance), and the intensive marketing of all kinds of "Christian" merchandise (a bit of a contradiction in a group that frequently decry the evils of materialism).

While much of the foregoing would suggest that contemporary political uses of the demonic perspective have been conservative, there has also been the use of religious imagery to

“deviantize” certain forms of social oppression, domination or injustice (e.g. the Civil Rights Movement; Antiwar movement, Liberation Theology, etc.) Naturally, those with vested interests don’t always like such scriptural interpretations, and respond at times with violence.

### **Assessment of the Demonic Perspective:**

Judged by the naturalistic standards of the secular, modern world, the demonic perspective is very inadequate. It relies on belief rather than on observable fact and is thus said to be totally untestable.

Yet it is important to note that it is not dead - and as such may be usefully observed in various contemporary sociological phenomena (e.g. state laws regulating the debate over creationism vs. evolution being fought about in court by civil liberties groups and state officials).

Without challenging anyone’s religious faith, there are distinct analytical advantages to suspending a supernatural view of the world and taking a rigorous naturalistic look on the study of deviance and social control: (1) we are able to critically examine the ways things in this world impact on one another (e.g. aspects of the body or social organization, whether and how they impact on the incidence of deviant behavior). These things are valuable to find out regardless of the nature of our religious beliefs. We can’t, however, discover much about them until we suspend our commitment to a demonic perspective.

### **Naturalistic Observations About Spiritual Perspectives:**

Some have attempted to explain historical events, such as the Salem witch trials, in other ways (e.g. psychoanalytically, as caused by unconscious sexual frustration). Yet, such interpretations attempt to explain how invisible things which most people no longer believe in may be explained by a new order of invisible things more acceptable to the modern mind. How is it that the invisible things of psychiatry are today more believable than the invisible things of demonology? There are many parallels here - the avoidance of responsibility, the deference to expert opinion, etc.

Other naturalistic accounts have taken a different tack - that the belief systems of colonial puritans assumed that witches were real, so they became real in their consequences for society.

But why did this occur in 1692 New England? Kai Erikson traces this to various social disruptions in the Puritan community: (1) the revocation of their legal charter by the British government, precipitating an economic crisis; (2) the new wave of religious tolerance sweeping across Europe constituting a threat to their experiment in religious orthodoxy; (3) Shifts in the religious orthodoxy of the group from a sense of dependence on God to some asserting an ordained mastery over their surroundings. All of these things encouraged intensive internal dissent against a backdrop of spiritual malaise. Moreover, given the patriarchal climate and religious imagery, at a time of economic hardship when the male mastery over events seemed

least secure, it isn't surprising that the "devil" came in the form of "bewitching" women.

More generally, in Catholic Europe the *Malleus Maleficarium* simultaneously encouraged the stereotype of witches as female, led to many horrific ritual punishments of largely lower class women, and distracted people from noticing the contribution of church officials to the perpetuation of medieval poverty. There was a difference in England, however, related to the less repressive social control machinery (trial vs. inquisition; property confiscation vs. not).

Such analyses, while not explaining away demonic belief, make it possible to situate them in the social and historical contexts in which they were used. This is done by suspending judgement about the truth of the demonic perspective and considering it as something influenced by - and influencing - a wide range of other cultural, political, and economic things by which the social world is organized. This also is productive of useful research questions, such as why a revival of demonic imagery arose in the 1970's -80's (e.g. a similarly "disrupted society" after Vietnam, Watergate, economic crises, and counter-reaction to the secular, individualistic 1960's).

### **Spiritual Observations:**

We must also reexamine naturalistic analysis in terms of its supernaturalistic dimensions. That doesn't mean returning to a demonic perspective. Rather, it is pointing to the fact that naturalistic viewpoints often lack any perspective with which to judge the "evils of the modern world." Noted sociologist Stanford Lyman feels that many evils are found in the foundational bedrock of society itself. Similarly Richard Quinney suggest that we currently occupy a "sacred void," and that the material and social problems of our existence are amplified by the unthinkability of spiritual questions. We need a new religious concern which not only repudiates the essential secularity of capitalism, but makes socialism whole by integration of the sacred void. Tiff and Sullivan argue that social control by others denies us responsibility, and thereby our "spiritual homes" - the ability to become part of the process we create. Finally, bridges between sacred understanding and naturalistic control processes are embodied by people committed to maintaining or reexamining the values of pagan worldviews and practices (e.g. in the third world; in the resurging interest in Goddess-centred feminist spiritualities that contrast with traditional, patriarchal social control practices, lack of respect for diversity, the commodification of the body, and disrespect for nature).

In different ways, these writers remind us to temper the naturalistic analysis of deviance with an awareness of the moral, spiritual, and cosmic nature of the subject matter. At bottom, the demonic perspective informs us that the control of deviance is first and foremost a battle between good and evil - who gets to name the good and control the bad. This is overlooked or covered up by the neutral-sounding language of some of our more "modern perspectives." Let us not be fooled: deviance is - and always has been - a moral battle in which the winners are declared saints and the losers sinners.