



The Cessation of the Oracles: Authenticity and Authority in Jesuit Reports of Possession in South India

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Jesuit writing from South India in the Eighteenth Century

Jesuit writings on Asian religions emerging from the rites debates in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries have been well-studied (Mungello 1989; Županov 1999). Although the papal legate Charles de Tournon came down against adaptation in 1704, Jesuits of the South Indian missions continued to argue their case, and to maintain their practices, until the final bull, *Omnium Sollicitudinum*, of Benedict XIV in 1744. Moreover the rites debate continued to motivate the production of treatises on Hinduism, arguably right up to suppression of the Jesuits in 1773. The most famous of these is Gaston-Laurent Cœurdoux's *Mœurs et Coutumes des Indiens*. Completed by 1777, Cœurdoux's work was not published directly but served as the primary source for Jean-Antoine Dubois's *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, first published under the auspices of the English East India Company in 1816, and republished to wide acclaim several times during the nineteenth century (Murr 1987). In addition to these treatises, only some of which reached print, an important outlet for their scholarship was the collection entitled *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* (LEC), of which 34 volumes appeared at irregular intervals from 1702 to 1776.¹ This included letters from missions elsewhere in Asia and the Americas, as well as India. Of those from India,



some are from Bengal and elsewhere, but the majority are from authors associated with the Madurai and Carnatic missions.

The history of the Carnatic mission of the Jesuits begins with the arrival in Pondicherry, in 1688, of a number of Jesuits who had been forced to leave Siam following a revolution. When it became clear that they would not be able to return to Siam, it was decided to start a mission in the region to the north-west of Pondicherry, along the lines of the Madurai mission established in the extreme south by Roberto Nobili at the beginning of the century. Initially, the mission consisted of three missionaries, Jean Venant Bouchet (1655–1732), Jean Baptiste de la Fontaine (1669–1718), and Pierre Mauduit (1664–1711), under the authority of Guy Tachard (1651–1712) in Pondicherry (LEC, vol 6.: 232–5). Bouchet, Fontaine, and Mauduit had all spent time in the Madurai mission, and the Carnatic mission was explicitly modelled on the methods used in Madurai. Although Léon Besse (1917: 175–241) records the names of almost a hundred Jesuits who served in the Carnatic mission during the eighteenth century, Stephen Neill (1985: 93) calculates that for 'the greater part of the time there were not more than six missionaries in the whole of the vast field'.

About a score contributed to the published *Lettres édifiantes*, although half of these wrote only one or two letters. The most notable contributors are Bouchet (nine letters), Pierre Martin (seven letters)², Cœurdoux (four letters) and Jean-François Pons (a single letter, but a significant one). Although some of these missionaries lived on into the nineteenth century, the mission effectively came to an end with the dissolution of the Jesuit order in 1773. While according to Neill (*ibid.*), their missionary labours yielded 'no more than a somewhat exiguous reward', their contributions to European understanding of Indian religions were rather more significant. It was almost certainly one or more of these Jesuits who was responsible for the infamous "Ezour-Vedam"—a pseudo-Veda in Sanskrit, widely discussed in Europe following Voltaire's use of it as evidence of the historical priority of Indian religion. They were also, however, the first Europeans to obtain copies of the actual Veda, which they sent to France in the 1720s where they lay unread in the royal library.³

In addition to the published letters, many others have been preserved, notably the annual letters providing an overview of the missions' activities from year to year, but also a range of private letters.⁴ Overshadowed on the one hand by their illustrious predecessors in the seventeenth century, in both India and China, and on the other by the mostly British scholars associated with the Asiatic Society of Bengal, who are usually identified as the founding figures of scholarship on Hinduism,



the writings on Hinduism of the eighteenth-century Jesuits have been relatively little-studied. This is the more regrettable as the eighteenth century is one of the most interesting in Indian history in terms of the cultural encounter between Europe and India.

At the start of the century, the Mughal empire was at its peak under Aurangzeb; by the end of it, the British were emerging as the single greatest power in India, having taken advantage of Mughal decline following Aurangzeb's death. Thus, during the period of the *Lettres édifiantes*, European presence in India was transformed from leased coastal settlements, whose leaders were all too aware of their vulnerable position and dependence on Indian rulers, to large-scale de facto political control and developing colonial rule. In the south, the British position was not finally secured until the defeat of Tipu Sultan in the fourth Mysore war in 1799. The Jesuits were witnesses to this decisive shift and even played a small part in the struggle for supremacy between the British and the French and their Indian allies, notably Tipu.⁵ The shift in the balance of power was accompanied by a shift in attitudes toward India, and toward Hinduism, which would only harden as colonial power consolidated. We ought not to read the attitudes of later writers from the period of British colonial rule back into the writings of others from an earlier period.

Possession in the Jesuit Letters

Cases of possession are frequently reported by the Jesuits in the Madurai and Carnatic missions in the first half of the eighteenth century. The Annual Letters of the Madurai mission report cases almost every year, and further cases are reported in the private letters of the missionaries. Many of the reports are very brief, and follow a stereotyped "edifying" formula. Almost all describe possession as involuntary. The possessed are described as being tormented by the devil in unspecified, but 'cruel' and 'horrible, ways, usually over a period of some years. They are typically presented as having sought to be rid of these torments using all the means available to them in Hindu practice (exorcists, offerings, pilgrimage), but in vain. Finally, on the advice of Christian neighbours or relatives they turn to the church, and through learning the catechism, through being baptised, or through being exorcised with holy water, a blessing or a crucifix they are freed from their torment. The result is always the conversion of the energumen, often their spouse or children as well, and sometimes others of their village. Over half of the forty or so reports I have examined fit this pattern, or an abbreviated version of it. Thus we read, for example, in the annual letter for 1708, a report by Father Emanuel dos Reys at Maleyadipatti: 'A certain woman who had



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been possessed by the devil since many years, after visiting many temples of idols, was brought to the church, and by the power of exorcism set free.' (Dias 1709)⁶

Reports of possession being deliberately induced are rarer. Tachard, travelling along the Malabar coast in 1701, describes possession in a ritual which he did not himself witness. The ritual involved the sacrifice of a pig between three piles of earth arranged in a triangle:

The assembly being all met... the priestess goes between the three columns, and begins to invoke the devil, by uttering certain mysterious words with strange howlings, and violent contortions of her whole body. This is accompanied by different instruments of music, the sounds of which change according to the various spirits who seem to possess her, by turns. At last a certain sacred air is played, and the instant it begins, the fury starts up, takes a knife, stabs the hog, and rushing on the wound, drinks the reeking blood. She then cries aloud prophecies, threatens the town and province with dreadful punishments, in the name of the devil, by whom she is, or pretends to be inspired, in case the persons present refuse to give her whatever she shall ask, whether gold, silver, jewels, rice, linen, in short, any thing: and these mad priestesses generally terrify the spectators to such a degree, that they sometimes draw to the value of two or three hundred crowns from them. (LEC, vol. 3: 207-9)

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Two other reports of what we might regard as voluntary possession lead to involuntary torment, again with the edifying result that the tormented are freed through the power of Christ and become converts. In 1711, Emmanuel Nunez describes a woman who every year performed the *ticcatti aṭṭam* or firepot dance at a village goddess festival.

Now one day when handling that red hot vessel and winning the admiration, and even the veneration, of all, it happened that, contrary to precedent, her hands were burnt. Whereupon she herself burning with indignation, threw away the vessel and started abusing the idol for his treachery in deluding her for so many years with faked prodigies. On the spot she gave up her god and decided thereafter to worship the God who, instead of being the prey to fire, can save from eternal fire the followers of Christ. The devil resisted at first and by most cruel torments tried to make her give up her idea. (Capelli 1712)

Nevertheless the story ends with the baptism of the woman and one of her sons. Likewise in 1735, a male *camiyaṭi* (god dancer) who had decided to convert was attacked by the 'infernal enemy' who

so violently contracted the nerves of his hands and feet that he could no more walk and therefore was unable to go to the church,



which was at a great distance. So, while he was carried to the church, the evil spirit was heard on the way lamenting in the following manner: Where do you go? Why, ungrateful wretch, do you abandon me? Where shall I go without you?—But the man, scorning his cries, pursued his way to the church. As he was learning the customary prayers, he was again agitated by terrors of which the demon was the author but he triumphed over them with God's help and found in the salutary fountain of baptism together with the health of his soul the health of his body. (dos Reys 1736)

Two other cases of deliberate possession ending less happily are described in the letters. In the early 1730s, Jean Calmette twice reports the case of a Brahman who, some twenty years earlier, had sought to perform a rite from the Atharva Veda against the army of Mysore which was besieging the town of Chinnaballapuram [Chikballapur].⁷ The Brahman withdrew to the nearby village of Gudibanda to perform the rite. A mistake in the performance of the rite led the demon to 'seize' (*saisir*) the priest and his assistants.⁸ The priest died on the spot, and his assistants 'within eight days of possession' (Fonds Brotier, vol. 89: fol. 41r.; LEC, vol. 23: 136-7).

A different case also leading to the death of the possessed is recounted at length in a letter from Bouchet, written around 1710.⁹ He describes an oracle living just outside Tiruchirapalli who was possessed on the same day every week. Although large crowds came to hear his oracles, the possession was accompanied by torments and left the man with a violent illness. As the possessions began to increase in both length and frequency the man appealed to the demon to put an end to the possession. The demon promised that if the man were taken to the temple at 'Changandi' (Sangenti) the possessions would cease:

the oracle was fulfilled to the letter, but in a manner very different from what they expected for the patient expired in the most horrible convulsions after throwing up a quantity of blood through the nose, the ears, and the mouth, which is in India the usual sign of an illness and death caused by possession. Thus it was that the devil justified his oracle in which he promised that the unfortunate man would not longer be sick nor receive any more of his visits. (LEC, vol. 9: 74-5)

The letter in which Bouchet describes this case was addressed to a fellow Jesuit in Europe, Jean-François Baltus (or Balthus). Baltus had intervened in the so-called "War of the Oracles", a debate which began in Holland with the publication of Anthonie Van Dale's *De Oraculis veterum ethnicorum* (Amsterdam, 1683), but had 'penetrated almost everywhere by the 1720s' (Israel 2003: 223). Van Dale denied the supernatural



agency of the ancient oracles, arguing that their reputation arose from a combination of the fraudulent cunning of their priests and the credulity of their clients. They had been silenced not by the advent of Christ, but by the decrees of Constantine. Van Dale's work had been reworked in French by Bernard Le Bovier de Fontenelle in his *Histoire des Oracles* (Paris, 1686). Fontenelle was more prudent than Van Dale, and did not deny that demons could have spoken through oracles if God chose to permit it. God had not, however, and therefore the practical consequence of Fontenelle's work was the same: the pagan oracles relied for their effect not on supernatural agency but on priestly fraud and human credulity. Fontenelle also followed Van Dale in denying that the pagan oracles had been silenced by Christ. Van Dale was attacked in Germany and Holland, but in France Fontenelle's work had caused 'barely a ripple of unease' until Baltus published his *Réponse* to it in 1707 (Israel 2002: 367). Jonathan Israel (2003: 223) describes the resultant debate as 'a classic instance of an Enlightenment three-way contest between a reactionary counter-Enlightenment in one corner, moderation or the mainstream Enlightenment in the second, and in the last the "Radical Enlightenment"', identifying Baltus with the first camp, Fontenelle with the second, and Van Dale and some of Fontenelle's supporters with the third. Baltus adduced evidence from classical sources and the Church Fathers in defence of the longstanding Christian belief that pagan oracles were given by demons but fell silent at the death (or birth) of Christ.¹⁰ Bouchet wrote to support Baltus 'with a new demonstration... not like yours drawn from the monuments of antiquity, but from facts which happens before our eyes in our Missions of Madura and the Carnatic, and which I have myself witnessed'.¹¹

It is in this context that we have to understand the conclusion to Bouchet's account of the death of the possessed oracle:

It is easy to imagine how the bystanders were terrified by such a tragedy. No one I assure you, took it into his head on this occasion, to suspect any fraud in the possession of that man or in the oracles he had uttered for such a long time. I do not even believe that the most fastidious of our critics will persuade themselves that dissimulation can be carried to this extent. Such at least was not the idea of that unfortunate man's wife. She was so affected by the sudden and violent death of her husband that she gave up idolatry and devil worship of which her husband had been the victim, got herself instructed as soon as she could and was baptized at Kalpalayam. There I several times heard her confessions and often made her relate these events in presence of the pagans, and oftener still, of the Christians who came to our Church. (LEC, vol. 9: 76)

Bouchet refers to other miraculous events perpetrated by the power of



the devil, including the Indian rope trick, but insists that the Indians are not credulous. When oracles are given in ways other than those accepted by tradition, fraud is suspected and invariably exposed. Oracles are not given through temple images, or other inanimate objects. It is not that the Hindu priests are incapable of imposture—Bouchet describes an instance where a temple image was made to appear to shed tears—but that the people would not be so easily deceived.¹²

You will easily imagine that people capable of such deception could have discovered the secret of speaking by the mouth of their idols, the thing being as easy as I have shown, if they had thought they could thus deceive the pagans who consult the oracles. But those oracles were constantly given in India, not by the organ of the statues but through the priests, whom the devil drives into a sort of fury or enthusiasm or even through the mouth of some of those who are present at the sacrifice, and who sometimes, in spite of themselves find themselves more skilful in the art of divining than they should like to be. (ibid.: 96)

The emphasis on demons speaking through humans is, as Isabelle Clark-Dèces notes, bound up with Christian ideas of possession which represent the devil as entering and leaving the body through its orifices, especially the mouth (Clark-Decès 2007: 67). Nevertheless, if it is easy fraudulently to make images speak, one would have thought it easier still to fake possession. Bouchet returns, however, to the physical torments inflicted by the devil on those he possesses, which is such a strong feature of these Jesuit reports. Like the death of the possessed man near Tiruchirapalli, the physical torments of the possessed are the strongest rebuttal to 'our European skeptics ... those whom an excessive spirit of criticism has turned into unbelievers regarding the best authenticated facts, when they are interested in not believing them' (LEC, vol. 9: 83).¹³

Having defended the belief in the demonic agency behind oracles, Bouchet concludes his letter with evidence supporting Baltus's reaffirmation of the belief that the pagan oracles had been silenced by Christ. Baltus had defended a modified version of this belief, which allowed for the fact—pointed out by some of his critics—that reports of oracles had continued even after the time of Christ. In Bouchet's words, what Baltus had proven was that 'the oracles of paganism ceased only in proportion as the salutary doctrine of the Gospel spread in the world' (ibid.: 105).¹⁴ He gives two examples of occasions where the mere presence of a Christian at a possession had silenced the demon.

When as a matter of fact some Christians happen by chance to be in those tumultuous assemblies where the devil is wont to speak



through the mouth of possessed persons, he keeps a profound silence and neither prayers, nor evocations, nor repeated sacrifices can make him break it. This is so common in those parts of the Madura Mission where we have residences that the pagans before beginning their sacrilegious ceremonies, are very careful to make sure that no Christians are among them, for they are convinced that a single Christian mixed with the crowd would make their devil silent and powerless. (ibid.: 106-7)

As well as supporting Baltus in his dispute with Fontenelle and his followers which was underway during Bouchet's time in Europe in 1708-1710, Bouchet's letter served the broader purpose of justifying the mission by identifying it with the apostolic period of Christianity. Bouchet had gone to Europe to press the Jesuits' case in Rome for their policy of adaptation, following the ruling against these practices of the papal legate Charles de Tournon in 1704. Bouchet both opens and closes his letter to Baltus by comparing the missions to the primitive church, each time emphasizing the miraculous.¹⁵ At the time that he wrote, the Jesuits' missionary practice was under attack from their Capuchin rivals in India, and Bouchet's emphasis on the miraculous support of their work can be seen as a response to the Capuchins' criticisms.

Bouchet uses the same strategy in another published letter, addressed to a Jesuit intending to join the Indian mission. Here he describes the hardships of the missionary life, making an explicit point-by-point comparison with the hardships listed by Saint Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (LEC, vol. 15: 272-9). He then goes on to speak again of exorcisms, describing several cases in order to demonstrate that 'nothing is more real than the demons' power over the idolators' (ibid.: 300, my translation). 'One cannot', Bouchet continues, 'suspect the Indians of deception in this, as happens sometimes in Europe among those who counterfeit possessions.'(ibid.: 300-1, my translation) The reason is that, unlike Europeans who have something to gain by their deception, the Indians stand only to lose, because the conversion which frees them from possession will also lead them to lose their caste, and with it all their family, goods, and reputation. Bouchet says that he has seen missionaries arrive from Europe with a strong predisposition against the idea of demonic power, but soon convinced by the evidence of their own eyes (ibid.: 303). Again, the reality of demonic possession serves—alongside the comparison with the Apostle's sufferings—to legitimise the mission.

The missionaries themselves rarely display any doubt about the reality of what they take to be demonic possession, but the issue is addressed by their editors and translators. In his introduction to the volume in which Bouchet's letter to Baltus was published in the *Lettres*



édifiantes et curieuses, the editor, Jean-Baptiste Du Halde, addresses the issue of Bouchet's unquestioning acceptance not only of demonic possession but also other supernatural events caused by demons:

That which Father Bouchet recounts in his letter to Father Balthus, concerning the power which the demons exercise over the idolaters, and the power which Christians have over the demons, will perhaps not be to the taste of certain persons, who are credited with being a little sceptical. But beyond the testimony of a man like Father Bouchet, whose capacity is known, and whose probity is not to be doubted (which suffices to persuade any reasonable mind); could one come to doubt all at once the missionaries, the Christians, and the Gentiles themselves, who are eye-witnesses of this truth? You will see in the letter of Father Chavagnac that the same prodigies take place in China; it is assuredly so that nothing is more common in the American islands. (LEC, vol. 9: xv-xvi, my translation)¹⁶

The English Protestant who translated the first ten volumes of the *Lettres édifiantes*, John Lockman (1995, vol. 2: 278), was not so kind, commenting that 'Father Bouchet seems surprisingly credulous on occasion of these oracles'.

In only one of the cases reported in the letters does a missionary express doubt about the reality of an alleged possession. In a letter from 1701, Pierre Martin, writes:

It was about that time that another pagan came to my church and found there health for his soul as well as for his body. Since four years he had been tormented by the devil; the evil spirit, according to what he said, sucked all his blood, with the object of taking away his soul which scarcely clung to its body. He was so thin that on seeing him, one would have taken him for a skeleton. I thought that this alleged demon was simply consumption which gradually undermined his health, yet in such an emaciated body he kept a keen spirit, full of common sense. The idea he had of this blood-drinking devil was not the result of a disordered brain, but of the common opinion of these people who attribute all their diseases to the devils, enemies of the peace and happiness of men. I included him among the catechumens and gave him some remedies that might relieve him. Our Lord blessed my little solicitude, so much so that after a week he was able to come and see me and to repeat what he had learned at the catechism class. So great was the surprise of his fellow villagers that one of them who had brought him to church, being convinced that human remedies could not have wrought such a rapid cure, opened his eyes to the truth and asked for baptism. (LEC, vol. 9: 202-4)

Despite thinking the 'alleged demon was simply consumption', Martin appears not to have challenged the villager's assumption that the cure



had been supernatural because the result was conversion. Similar considerations seem to underlie the Jesuits' ready acceptance of the widespread Indian belief in possession. Of all the Jesuits in the South Indian missions, it is Bouchet who writes most about possession; he claims to have baptised in a single month 400 people 'of whom at least two hundred had been tormented by the devils' (ibid.: 117), and elsewhere writes that 'an infinite number of idolators are tormented by the evil spirit' (LEC, vol. 15: 300, my translation). But he is far from alone, and his claim that 'hardly a year passes in the Madurai mission without a large number of idolators, cruelly tormented by the devil, being delivered on hearing the instructions which prepare them for baptism' (ibid.: 304, my translation), is indeed reflected in the annual letters, which virtually every year include reports of possession from different missionaries. Writing about diabolic possession in Europe, Moshe Sluhovsky seeks to "trivialize" possession and to show what he calls 'the banality of such cases in early modern Europe':

Possession was an idiom that was part of the cultural vocabulary of early modern people. It was therefore easily appropriated and shared by the demoniac herself, her family and neighbors, as well as by the lay and clerical healing experts or theologians who partook in the diagnostic and healing processes and in the curing ceremonies that followed. (Sluhovsky 2007: 14-15)

Sluhovsky's identification of the demoniac as female reflects what he calls the 'almost universal overrepresentation of women among the possessed in most societies' (ibid.: 16). Despite this, there is an approximate gender balance in the cases reported by the Jesuits.¹⁷ It is difficult to know what to make of this, as the Jesuits report only some cases, mostly those that result in conversion. They make no attempt to give a more general account of possession. One way to explain the departure from the usual overrepresentation of women might be to consider the reports in the wider context of Orientalist stereotyping of Indians as childlike, irrational, and effeminate over against the Europeans' self-perception as adult, rational, and male. There is some evidence for this in the Jesuit reports—they emphasise the innocence and simplicity of the Indians, and their writing is undoubtedly paternalistic. But there is little evidence for their having perceived Indians as effeminate. This is perhaps unsurprising, given that many of the letters stress the persecutions suffered by the missionaries, and that they were written during a very unsettled period of South Indian history, reflected in the many accounts of wars between the 'little kings' of the south in the Jesuits' letters.

The Jesuit reports are nevertheless very much a part of what



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Sluhovsky, following William Monter, calls the 'golden age of the demoniac' (Monter 1976: 60, cited in Sluhovsky 2007: 22) in early modern Europe. In explaining this flourishing of possessions, historians have pointed to the propaganda value of exorcism in the context of the religious fragmentation of Europe, and the rise of the modern missionary movement in the New World. A number of the exorcisms described in the Jesuit letters fit the pattern seen in Europe of demons being forced to testify to the truth of the Christian religion.¹⁸ Most cases are simple acknowledgments of the power of the Christians or their God over the demons, but some offer more specific testimony, if not quite the detailed theological disquisitions reported at some exorcisms in Europe. Bouchet describes an occasion where Father Bernard de Sà interrogates a man, or rather the demon possessing him:

He first asked him where were the gods who the Indians worshipped? The response was that they were in hell, where they suffered horrible torments. But, the Father continued, what will become of those who worship these false divinities? They will go to hell, he replied, to burn there with the false gods whom they have worshipped. Finally the Father asked him which was the true religion; and the demon replied through the mouth of the possessed that none was true except that which was taught by the missionary, and that it was the only one which led to heaven. (LEC, vol. 15: 309-10, my translation)

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In Bourzes's Annual Letter for 1713, Father Emanuel Machado reports a similar testimony:

One of these energumens being asked about what was that famous Hindu trinity which consists of Brahma, Vishnu, and Rudra, whether they were men or spirits, answered that they were men, and being further asked where they were, he answered: in hell, in the midst of and foremost among the other damned. The heathens who could not bear such an answer could only retort that Devil being the Father of Lies was not to be believed; forgetting that a liar does not always lie, and that if he brings witness against himself he is to be believed. (de Bourzes 1714)

A different, and more dramatic, form of propagandistic testimony occurred during an exorcism conducted by Joseph Beschi. From about 1718, the Jesuit missionaries had begun to report on the activities of the Lutheran mission established at the Danish enclave of Tranquebar in 1706. Three concerns predominate in their reports of the Lutherans' work. First, that they use money to attract converts; second, that they have a printing press and are able to disseminate widely their heretical tracts; and, third, that many of those they convert are apostates from Catholicism. Beschi had joined the Madurai mission in 1711 and although



he was regularly moved he spent several years in the Tanjore stations of the mission which were the closest to Tranquebar. Stationed on the front line of the Protestant advance, he became one of the most vehement critics of the Lutherans and in 1728, at the request of his superiors, responded to their printed books by writing a sharp Tamil refutation of them.¹⁹ These works, which had to be hand-copied, were insufficient to resist the "flood" of Protestant literature, so in 1731 Beschi hit upon the idea of instituting a festival of the Virgin at Elakurichi 'with the result that those whom we could scarcely contain by harassing them and confuting them with all the means in our power and prevent their invasion [i.e., of Tanjore], have by her been routed and almost entirely exterminated.' (Beschi 1732) It is unsurprising then, that the only case of possession which might be regarded as anti-Protestant propaganda is reported by Beschi.

Among those who were carried away into the heretic party by seduction or by their own interests, a man and his wife went to see a exorcism done by the gentiles in the town of Tanjaor. The devil, leaving the body of the possessed, entered into that of the heretic woman. The gentile exorcist was very suprised and asked the evil spirit the reason. 'It is,' he replied, 'that this one is mine just as much as the other.' The husband, terrified at this turn of events, acknowledged his crime and, touched by a powerful repentence, led his wife to our church at Elacourichi [Elakurichi] where he prostrated himself on the ground and, dissolving into tears, asked pardon from God for his fault. After this he took the same earth watered with his tears, and having put it, with deep faith, on his wife's head, she was immediately delivered from the possession of the devil. (LEC, vol. 21: 29-30)²⁰

Sluhovsky notes that the 'large majority of early modern cases of possession and exorcism' were never recorded in print being

at most, included as short entries in parochial registries or in Books of Miracles in provincial shrines... The tantalising cases that became major theaters of Catholic-Protestant propaganda were exceptional, while the thousands of cases that... were not used for polemical purposes were the rule. (Sluhovsky 2007: 26)

This particular case, however, seems to have had an afterlife which demonstrates quite how powerful the testimony of demons could be in religious propaganda. The Lutheran missionary historian, Wilhelm Germann, himself a missionary in Tamil Nadu, reported that over a century later this story continued to circulate among Tamil Catholics, albeit with the variation that it was Luther himself who attempted the exorcism, the demon demonstrating his power over Luther by causing the possessed woman to leap on him and tear off his clothes, whereupon Luther runs



for shame (Germann 1868, vol. 1: 2; vol. 2: 196).

Endnotes

¹ The first seven volumes were edited by Charles le Gobien. References will be given to the volume and page numbers of the first edition. Ines G. Županov (2011: 404) notes that 'ce corpus de correspondance missionnaire et de commentaires éditoriaux des *scriptores* parisiens fut une véritable machine apologétique qui transforma les missions jésuites françaises en Inde en un feuilleton littéraire à grand succès'.

² Martin was part of the Madurai mission, but spent ten years in the Carnatic mission (Besse 1917: 51).

³ On the manuscript collections of these Jesuits see Sweetman (2019).

⁴ Mostly in the Archives de la Province de France de la Compagnie de Jésus, in Vanves, Paris. The letters from India form part of the *Fonds Brotier*, materials collected by the last librarian of the College of Louis le Grand, Gabriel Brotier, before the closure of the Jesuit colleges in France. On the history and holdings of the archives, see J. Dehergne (1968). References will be given to the volume and folio.

⁵ Sanjay Subrahmanyam (1989: 209) argues that, despite his alien status and religious interests, 'the Jesuit letter-writer must be recognised for what he was—an important witness to events in early modern Asia'.

⁶ The Jesuit Madurai Province Archives (JEMPARC) include transcriptions and translations—from Portuguese, Italian, and Latin into French by Léon Besse, and thence into English by Augustin Saulière—of material collected from archives in many places. David Mosse (2012: 291) counsels caution in using these translated materials without access to the originals, but I have not always had the opportunity to consult the original sources. Unless otherwise specified, translations into English cited here are—as far as I am aware—by Saulière.

⁷ An unsuccessful assault on Chikballapur took place during the reign of the Wodeyar Mysore ruler Kanthirava Narasaraja II (1704-13).

⁸ Calmette's language probably reflects that used by his informants. Frederick Smith (2006: 14) notes that words used for possession are 'frequently derivatives from the root *Vgrh* (to grasp, seize)'.

⁹ This letter has also been discussed by Županov (2011: 415-20) and Francis Clooney (2005: 39-46).

¹⁰ For the history of this idea, and its use in the early modern period, see C. A. Patrides (1965: 500-7).

¹¹ Some forty years later a Portuguese author would use reports from the Spanish conquest of Mexico in the same way (Francisco de Pina de Sá e Melo, *Triumpho da Religião. Poema epico-polemica* [Coimbra, 1756]: 77, cited in Israel 2003: 224.)

¹² This is an important part of Baltus's rebuttal of Fontenelle and Van Dale. Cf. Israel (2002: 369).

¹³ In another case described by Calmette in his 1735 letter, it is again the physical symptoms which are taken to authenticate the possession. A young woman from a caste which had never had Christians was possessed as the result of sorcery carried out by one of her parents. Recourse to a Brahmin had only worsened her sufferings: in place of one demon, she was now tormented by a legion. When finally, after six months, she came to the missionaries, they had little difficulty persuading her to convert: 'Ce qui persuade que c'étoit une véritable possession, c'est que de temps en temps son visage changeoit prodigieusement de couleur, et que d'autres fois elle avoit les plus violens saisissemens, qui suspendoient toute fonction de ses sens, sans cependant lui ôter la connoissance' (LEC, vol. 23: 139).

¹⁴ This idea had already been advanced in the seventeenth century by Thomas Browne and others (Patrides 1965: 505).



¹⁵ 'The prodigies which contributed to the conversion of pagans in the primitive church are being renewed every day among the Christians communities which it is our happiness to establish in the lands of the infidels' (LEC, vol. 9: 63-4); 'Is it not, Rev. Father, a great consolation for us to see renewed before our eyes not only the fervour but also the miracles of the primitive church?' (ibid.: 122).

¹⁶ See also the similar statement in an editor's footnote to Beschi's account of the possession of an apostate (discussed below): 'Nous avons cru devoir conserver ces récits de possessions, et parce qu'ils sont rapportés avec des preuves qui ne permettent pas d'en douter, et parce qu'on en trouve beaucoup d'exemples dans l'Évangile et dans l'Histoire ecclésiastique.'

¹⁷ The gender of the possessed is not always reported, and although the majority of the cases refer to a single person, there are sometimes cases where several individuals are possessed. But of those reports which I have examined where the gender of an individual is identified, there is an almost equal number of male and female energumens.

¹⁸ This is true of both the letters intended for publication (in the *LEC*) and the annual letters.

¹⁹ *Veta Vilakkam* "Splendour of the Veda [i.e., Scripture]." The Tranquebar missionaries quickly responded with a pamphlet entitled *Tiruccapai Petakam* ("Schism in the Church") provoking Beschi to write two further polemics: *Petakamaruttal* ("Refutation of Schism") and *Lutterinattiyalpu* ("The Essence of Lutheranism"). See Blackburn 2003: 52.

²⁰ The incident is described by Calmette.

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