

Exorcism Demands Rising Amid Immigration Influx, Report Says

An English think tank says the country's rise in immigration correlates with a growing demand for exorcisms.

"Nevertheless, exorcisms are now a booming industry in the U.K., with a number of interviewees noting the astonishing increase in demand – often, as one noted, in defiance of any actual rules or procedures put in place by any church, such as "The House of Bishops' Guidelines for Good Practice in the Deliverance Ministry" produced by the Church of England," Theos writes in a new report.

"Part of this has been driven by immigrant communities and Pentecostal churches which are very open about their exorcism services. There are potential dangers to this: without discounting the possibility of demonic possession, the perspective of several Christians working in the mental health sphere said that, in the ... majority of cases, the person in question was suffering with mental health issues which required psychiatric assistance," the report continues.

The think tank says the point of the report isn't to focus on the migrants, but to promote additional resources for Christians struggling with mental illness who are not demon possessed.

Theos reports medical professionals are often frustrated with Christian patients with mental health issues who go off their medication because they've been told that prayer is enough, and relapsing as a result.

But the United Kingdom isn't the only one experiencing the exorcism bump—it's a thriving industry in the United States,

as well.

“Exorcism is more readily available today in the United States than perhaps ever before,” writes Michael Cuneo, a sociologist at Fordham University, in his book, *American Exorcism*. “By conservative estimates, there are at least five or six hundred evangelical exorcism ministries in operation today, and quite possibly two or three times this many,” he writes, in addition to numerous exorcisms performed by charismatic, Pentecostal and other brands of Christianity.

While Christ Himself told His followers to cast out demons, Theos argues that the command to heal the sick and cast out demons is twofold, not one and the same. Instead, Theos advocates Christians seek to understand mental illness and not force exorcisms.

Theos writes:

The first is that there really is some cause for concern. Exorcisms really do seem to be a booming industry and much of what is going on is done outside the rules and structures set up by churches to manage, monitor and conduct exorcisms. That in turn leads to the second reason it was included, which is that this is really the extreme end of a much broader issue. Christians can be guilty, and we heard plenty of examples of this in interviews, of “over-spiritualizing” mental health issues, that is, treating everything as a spiritual issue, rather than a medical one. ...

The broader scope of this is that there is a real need for greater theological reflection on what mental health means and looks like in Christian language. The report outlines some Christian anthropological and biblical principles on which we might begin to build such a reflection. This work is vitally important. Mental health is now approaching the status of national crisis, with some one in 10 of all adults suffering a mental illness. Faced with such a social issue,

we need Christians to get involved, but we also need them to get involved well, confident in the ground on which they're standing, and without the danger of making things worse by over-spiritualizing medical issues.

Sometimes churches turn to exclusive spiritual warfare tactics when battling something as common as depression.

Clinical psychologist Al Saunders says depression is as prominent inside the church as outside the church. However, as the church stigmatizes depression, many may be afraid to come forward and admit their struggles.

"I think church needs to quit telling people depression is a sin problem," Saunders says. "It doesn't help anyone get better if I just judge you and pound you for having that problem. This is forcing depressed people to go underground, to hide in shame."

The stigma in the modern-day church is that many believe "depression" is only thoughts of sadness, where in reality, the disease is characterized by much more.

Officially, most depression symptoms are medical and physical, not just emotional. Someone may be in a depressive episode if they experience a change in sleep or eating habits, motivation, enjoyment, energy level or concentration for a period of at least two weeks.

But faith in God is sometimes not enough. Whether the cause is spiritual or physical, if ignored, depression can rip apart the soul.

"If you get stuck in that rut long enough, it morphs from spiritually triggered thing to a medical problem," Saunders says. "It sets in on you which takes time to pull back (from) and affects the way I view myself in God."

Mental illness, however, can run much deeper than depression,

and the stigma surrounding the issues amplifies. The greater the illness, the more often church members assume demonic possession.

Pastor Steve Austin tells *Charisma News* that the stigma can be deadly.

"I am from a spirit-filled church where we believe in anointing oils and prayers of faith. In this world, medication for mental illness is not really accepted. I can talk about addiction, but if I mention medication for depression or anxiety, a team of people preps to cast out a demon," Austin, author of *From Pastor to a Psych Ward*, tells *Charisma*.

"I often wonder if we would have the same response to a Christian with cancer or heart disease? I am a pastor, and five years ago I nearly died by suicide. With both mental illness and cancer, you can't see the disease. But, while it is perfectly OK for a cancer patient to have chemo, it is not always acceptable for someone with a mental illness to take a prescription to address the chemical imbalance that dramatically affects their life."

Austin says that well-meaning Christians who say Christ alone can heal mental illness force those struggling into the shadows. The church can do more, he insists.

He says:

That might include some research, definitely some reaching out. What would happen if the church said to those with mental illness, "you are different, but not less?" What if the church could break down walls of shame and begin a healthy dialogue? Isn't that what every person wants—to be heard and respected? To feel as though we belong? As the church, this is the perfect opportunity to offer some of that "peace that passes understanding" to someone who feels the constriction of anxiety around their throat. Helping someone who is panicked to slow down, look at the larger picture,

find God in the ordinary moments and see all they do have to be thankful for just might save a life. It is impossible to think about a hopeful future and a caring support system when we feel ostracized and defensive. The Father is standing, arms wide open, waiting to embrace all of His children who are burdened, weary and anxious. It's time for the church to do the same.

And Theos agrees.

Ultimately, "There is work to do in making the positive case for spirituality and more specifically religion in helping with mental health," according to the report.

"There is a growing evidence base that religion (and spirituality more broadly) can be beneficial for recovery and well-being and that people want their spiritual and religious needs addressed within the medical and care sectors, but there is still a sense in which secular bodies have been wary about embracing such opportunities." {eoa}