

(1964); and Pratima Bowes, *Hindu Religious Tradition: A Philosophical Approach* (1978). For modern approaches see David Miller, *The New Polytheism* (1974) and James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (1977).

ARVIND SHARMA

Pope Joan

See Manfreda, Sister.

Porete, Marguerite

Marguerite Porete belongs to the circle of Beguines, probably the most creative aspect of the women's movement that emerged on the medieval European scene beginning around the late twelfth or early thirteenth century. Beguines were communities of women, widespread in the urban areas of the Lowlands, northern France, Germany, and extending southward into northern Italy. These communities belonged to no formal, ecclesiastically approved order. The women were committed to poverty, chastity, praying, and service, but they followed no formal rule, which made them automatically suspect in the eyes of some church leaders. Some Beguines lived alone as solitary women; others lived together in groups as small as two or three or as large as three hundred. In France, Beguines were dependent upon regional or local protection, either secular or religious. Perhaps the most famous beguine was the Great Beguine in Paris, which was founded by Louis IX in the mid-thirteenth century and housed up to four hundred women.

Marguerite Porete may have been a solitary Beguine, receiving no protection of any kind. She was probably an itinerant teacher and preacher, very likely expounding her teachings contained in her book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, to small groups of interested listeners. Word may have reached her of the church hierarchy's displeasure with her views, whereupon she turned to the scholastic theologian Godfrey of Fontaine, who approved the text, although with cautions. Nevertheless, the bishop of Cambrai burned her book in her presence in 1306, with express orders not to teach or write such things ever again, threatening punishment by the secular court. Marguerite Porete did not submit to the bishop's threat, and after being imprisoned for a year and a half she was burned at the stake as a relapsed heretic on 1 June 1310. The excerpts used to condemn Marguerite Porete to the flames were carried to the

Council of Vienne in 1311 to support two papal decrees condemning the Heresy of the Free Spirit. One decree, *Cum de quibusdam mulieribus*, explicitly condemned the status of Beguine; the other, *Ad nostrum*, listed eight doctrinal errors of the Beguines. These decrees in effect amounted to an attack on Beguines, especially in Germany, which continued until the Council of Constance in 1417.

The Mirror of Simple Souls enjoyed a fairly wide circulation in the medieval era, according to the manuscript evidence. In addition to the copies in Old French, the text was translated into Latin, Italian, and Middle English. The text of *The Mirror* is, in the traditional format of treatises in Old French on the nature of love, composed as a dialogue among the allegorical figures of Reason, Love, and Soul, as well as others. Theological concepts expressed in courtly language penetrate the nature of the soul in the spiritual ascent to God. *The Mirror of Simple Souls* is a daring attempt to explore the mysteries of humanity in relation to divinity.

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ELLEN L. BABINSKY

Possession

Possession refers to a widespread set of beliefs to account for changes in an individual's behavior, capacity, or health. A spirit is said to replace temporarily the possessed person's identity. Possession has been reported in 74 percent of preindustrial societies and also appears in segments of industrialized societies (Bourguignon, 1991). Possession experiences have been integrated into larger belief systems and utilized variously for social ends. A society's belief in possession may serve to explain changes in personality and alterations in sensory modalities, including amnesia, anesthesia, speech patterns, voice quality, and so on. Such transformations in behavior and experience may involve an al-

tered state of consciousness, referred to as *possession trance*. Possession trance may be intentionally induced (voluntary) or spontaneous (involuntary). It may be desired (positive) or feared (negative). In the latter case, rituals such as exorcism are likely to exist to compel the possessing entity to depart.

The term *possession* appears in New Testament accounts, and later phenomena in the Christian world have often been patterned on scriptural precedents. Exorcism is still practiced by some Christian churches. Enthusiastic religious behavior, as practiced for example in Pentecostal churches, can also be interpreted as a form of possession—in this case by the Holy Spirit, rather than by harmful beings. Belief in negative possession, and ritual practices associated with such belief, exist in Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Such belief and practices often predate the world religion practiced in certain localities and have been integrated into it, frequently rejected by the more sophisticated levels of these complex societies.

A belief in spirit possession in the absence of an altered state, often referred to as *spirit intrusion*, is widely given as an explanation for various types of illness. In the New Testament a spirit causes muteness in a man, excessive menstrual bleeding in a woman, and so on. Among various traditional African societies, such as the Hausa, possession spirits are said to cause sleeping sickness. Many African societies believe in a witchcraft being that dwells in the stomach of the human host and is able to cause harm. When the reputed witch dies, an autopsy can determine the presence of such a witchcraft being. By contrast, some Native Americans believe in a type of power that enters a shaman, giving him the ability to cure.

The identity of the possessed person varies from society to society. The nontrance possessed may be patients or healers, witches or shamans. Persons in trance, believed to be possessed, may be patients or healers but also prophets or politico-religious leaders.

There are no systematic data on the distribution of possession and possession trance by gender, but women generally predominate. However, individual reports give examples of both women and men in each category. In Africa, for example, diviners who use various mechanical devices for diagnosing problems are generally men, whereas diviners who are also mediums are most generally women. Similarly, the Delphic Oracle in ancient Greece was a woman, although her pronouncements were interpreted by male priests. In the European tradition, among both Christians and Jews, the demon-possessed are most frequently women. Other examples include the teenage girls tried for witchcraft in Salem (although said to be possessed by witches, not by de-



A woman in a vodou trance is held by two assistants to the *boungan*, the high priest, who help to guide her through the unseen world, Haiti, c. 1950 (Bradley Smith/Corbis).

mons). Women figure as the possessed nuns of Loudon in seventeenth-century France. There are often-cited cases of possession among women in Hindu India. Women are reported as possessed by fox spirits in Japan.

The classic French cases of possession were studied during the nineteenth century by neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot in connection with his research on hysteria. Charcot found many similarities between hysterical patients and the possessed women described in the literature of past centuries. Clearly, both the hysterics and the nuns had learned their behavior in a cultural context. Hysteria of the type studied by Charcot is no longer seen in clinical settings, and the category has been dropped from medical classifications. Demon-possessed individuals are representative of negative spontaneous possession. Cases of positive spontaneous possession are exemplified by religious leaders such as Mother Ann Lee, the founder of the Shakers, or by the "sleeping" preaching girls of seventeenth-century French Protestantism. There are cases of possession among charismatic leaders in both historic and contem-

porary (both modern and modernizing) societies. Possessed women appear in various New Age religions in the United States.

The most common remedy for harmful possession is exorcism. In parts of Africa, however, the diagnosis of possession is often considered a step toward accommodation with the possessing spirit. This usually requires membership in a cult group that provides for the periodic "feasting" of the spirits.

Societies vary in the amount of importance given to possession beliefs. Bali, for example, has many different types of such beliefs associated with different social roles. Healers and diviners are usually women. Kris dancers may be both men and women. Masked actors in possession trance dramas are men, although they may impersonate female characters. Hobby horse possession trancers are men. Entranced little girls who, possessed by a village deity, dance on the shoulders of men, are a particularly striking example of Balinese possession trancers.

Why women predominate among possession trancers has been a subject of debate. Suggested reasons include female psychophysiology (hysteria, calcium deficiency), women's conservatism, and their response to an inferior social status. No single explanation accounts for all examples.

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See also Possession Cults.

ERIKA BOURGUIGNON

Possession Cults

The term *possession cults* may be said to refer to communities of women and men creating ceremonial opportunities to manifest a spiritual personality through the body of one or several of the participants. *Possession* refers to the interpretation of an altered state of consciousness experienced by a usually trained participant as being the manifestation of the personality of a spirit. *Cult* refers to the communal action usually deemed necessary to manifest and interact with the spiritual person in or through the body of the human participant.

Though the terms *possession* and *cult* have a robust history of usage in social scientific literature, both present barriers to understanding the phenomena they seek to describe. The former has been sensationalized in novels and films to suggest an anomic, pathological, or demonic invasion of the personality, where the latter suggests inauthentic and authoritarian religiosity. Though the phenomena described in scholarly literature as possession cults may not be free of pathology or inauthenticity these religious traditions are characterized by communal, sanctioned action that brings about important, even uplifting, contact with the presence and power of a spiritual person.

To avoid the pejorative associations of both terms we may prefer to privilege the participants' interpretation of the phenomena and speak of spirit "manifestation," "incorporation," or "mediumship." And inasmuch as traditions of spirit manifestation are considered contacts with a sacred world, they may be better termed "religions."

Following the pioneering work of Erika Bourguignon, researchers have organized their interest in these religions in two directions: understanding the state of mind of those experiencing spirit manifestation; and examining the interpretations of their behavior developed by the religious communities concerned with them.

The experience itself has been characterized as trance, dissociation, fugue states, hysteria, hallucinations, cataplexy, epilepsy, hypnosis, and somnambulism. Though attempts have been made to distinguish various types of behavior, researchers have found the distinctions too rigid and the phenomena too fluid for categories to be useful. Bourguignon herself subsumes all related experiences as "altered states of consciousness," while Felicitas Goodman prefers "trance" as a general term.

Certain generalizations can be made about the neurophysiology of spirit manifestation. According to Goodman, those undergoing manifestation are likely to breathe more deeply, perspire more readily, blush,