

The Principle of Symmetry from the Respondents' Perspective: Possessions, Apparitions and Mental Illnesses in Research Interviews with Clerics

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Key words: the symmetry principle; reflexivity; religion; psychiatry; apparition; possession; co-operative inquiry; STS

Abstract: In our current research project, we study how experiences such as hearing the voice of the Lord or having a vision of Virgin Mary are dealt with in psychiatry and Catholic pastoral practice. How is the status of these phenomena negotiated by the participants? Under what conditions do they become instances of legitimate religious experience or, alternatively, symptoms of mental illness? We approach the study of these issues "symmetrically"—we do not prefer *a priori* medical or spiritual explanations. Some time ago, we demonstrated and explained such an approach (which is common, e.g., in contemporary sociology of science), and its relevance for our research, in an analytic paper on the movie "The Exorcism of Emily Rose" (released in 2005). The paper discusses a highly ambiguous relationship, pictured in the film, between medical and spiritual interpretation of the story of a young girl who was considered possessed by demons and who died after unsuccessful exorcism (KONOPÁSEK & PALEČEK, 2006). The question that has inspired this paper is: can such a symmetrical approach be of any relevance also for people we are studying? In an attempt to get an answer, we have interviewed four Catholic priests on this particular issue. The priests had been asked to watch the movie on Emily Rose and read our paper on it in preparation for the interview. Based on the subsequent discussions (and also on some other empirical data of our current research), we wanted to shed some light on whether and in what ways our specific epistemic perspective coheres with the views and positions of our respondents. It turned out that this reflexive research experiment not only helped to clarify points of mis/understanding between us and our respondents, but also contributed to our own appreciation of the role of symmetry in our current research project as well as in the studied social practice.

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In this article we discuss just one specific issue and a very small portion of data related to our current research project on religiosity in the making.¹ Basically, in the main analytic section, we explore only four specific interviews with clerics gathered during a kind of reflexive exercise. This exercise took place in mid 2008 and was aimed at how the principle of symmetry, our key methodological-theoretical principle, was understood, accepted and valued by one particular subset of our respondents. In other words, in this text we are going to discuss how certain (perhaps counter-intuitive) elements of our long-term research effort are viewed by some of our informants. To make this study-about-study organized, we will first quite extensively clarify the project in general and only then will we shift our attention to how we talked about our research approach with our subjects. Yet, of course, given the meta-nature of the text, the complex interplay of themes and issues related to our research as a whole (on one hand) and the small reflexive exercise (on the other hand) cannot be avoided. The two levels will necessarily and intentionally remain mixed, intertwined. [1]

Here is an outline of the article, step-by-step: In Part 1, we provide an overall background by introducing our research in its entirety. We explain its aims and questions. Part 2, which discusses an American exorcism movie and our earlier paper about this film, has a double mission. First, it illustrates and elaborates our basic approach characterized by a kind of symmetrical view of medical and spiritual accounts of events such as demonic possession or religious apparitions (the movie is a nice example of such an approach). At the same time, however, it already provides information about one key element of the above-mentioned four interviews (and reflexive exercise), since these interviews always started with explicit focus on precisely this movie and our interpretation of it. Before we start describing and analyzing the exercise itself, however, we briefly discuss some theoretical perspectives on the principle of symmetry as well as its relevance for qualitative research (Part 3) and explain why we decided to restrict our experiment to priests only (while entirely omitting mental health professionals or patients, visionaries, worshipers etc.) (Part 4). In Section 5 we finally get to the main analytical questions of this paper: we present what is interesting or even controversial in what we have learned from the four interviews about our own "symmetrical" research approach. In order to bridge between the themes arising from the interviews and our more general research concerns, we use, at the end of the article, some other empirical observations from our fieldwork. The lessons learned are summarized in the conclusion (Part 6). [2]

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1. The Research Project: Religious/Psychiatric Phenomena in the Making

As sociologists with background in contemporary science and technology studies (STS), we initially became interested in spiritual and religious experiences in psychiatry. We focused on how psychiatric expertise and practical settings of mental health care deal with patients reporting apparitions of Virgin Mary, feeling identified with Jesus Christ or possessed by the Devil, hearing the voices of saints or demons, or the voice of God. Later on, we began paying more attention to these phenomena as ambiguous boundary objects connecting/dividing the fields of psychiatry, psychotherapy, and modern medicine on one hand, and religiosity, spiritual life, and church activities on the other.² We therefore started studying how the experiences of religious apparition or demonic possessions are accepted, rejected, framed, dealt with and made accountable *both* in mental health care and in pastoral work.³ [3]

The empirical data for our project have been gathered during the last five years and include numerous in-depth interviews (with clerics, theologians, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, parishioners, and patients), ethnographic fieldwork, and study of documents, lectures, professional publications and various cultural artifacts. During the interviews we put emphasis on how things are practically done, encouraging participants to specify sequences of actions, observable qualities and settings, mundane particularities. [4]

The main point has been to understand the phenomena "in the making." How it happens, in observable empirical details (GARFINKEL, 2002) and by means of various collective practices (often conventionally summarized under the heading of "social construction"), that, e.g., seeing and speaking to Virgin Mary ultimately *becomes* either psychiatric symptom, a kind of mental pathology, or genuine and recognized spiritual experience? Eventually, how can it be both? What are the consequences of such fabrications for the particular case as well as for psychiatric care and/or pastoral work in general? [5]

In sum, by means of our long-term qualitative research, we have been trying to understand two related things. First, what happens to apparitions or possessions when they are getting psychiatrically relevant—i.e., when they are translated or incorporated into mental illness? Second, what happens to "the same" kind of experiences or realities when they are getting spiritually significant—that is, when they are becoming an instance of true religious event or spiritual imagination? In order to achieve perceptive and sound knowledge of these processes, we

2 MITCHELL and ROBERTS (2009, p.49) note that according to a number of studies it is impossible to find any phenomenological differences between the voices and visions of the mystic and the psychotic that would unequivocally distinguish one from the other. "In general, little difference is found between the beliefs and experiences of a person with psychosis and a spiritual person in form or content but it is the way in which the experiences are evaluated that distinguishes them." For a similar view see FULFORD and JACKSON (1997). That is why PETERS (2001) suggests reconsidering multidimensionality of such delusional beliefs—they belong to multiple worlds.

3 Our qualitative research work is relatively close, in some important respects, to the ethnomethodologically inspired studies by BERRYMAN (2001, 2005, 2006).

assume a kind of unbiased or balanced view of the phenomena would be useful. We do not want to *a priori* prefer any of the two perspectives, psychiatric or religious. We do not want to know in advance (and better than the participants) what the phenomenon, each particular case under study, really is. [6]

2. The Movie: Exorcism of Emily Rose

Early in our research, we attempted to explain *and* exemplify our overall approach by discussing an exorcism-related American movie that addressed the tension between the medical and the religious in a remarkable way (KONOPÁSEK & PALEČEK, 2006). We wanted to show the subtle work and specific position of the filmmakers and, by the same token, to shed some light on our own approach. The film was directed by Scott DERRICKSON in 2005 and has become known under the title "The Exorcism of Emily Rose."⁴ [7]

The DERRICKSON's film has often been characterized as horror, even by its authors. But it is not a typical horror movie. There are pretty horrifying scenes in it, but they do not go along with a thrilling story unfolding in front of our eyes toward an unknown end. From the very beginning, it is clear how the story of Emily Rose, the girl suffering from what she perceived as demonic possession, ended. The narrative begins where most similar stories end: Emily is dead, exorcism is over. In the first plan of the film, the exorcism of Emily Rose, the alleged cause of her death, is not so much (and not primarily) shown to be co-experienced by the audience, but rather rationally debated, investigated, explained, challenged, ridiculed, defended, and litigated. The film takes us to a courtroom and we see exorcism *on trial*. The film is, in fact, a *court drama* with elements of horror. The horrifying sequences represent only a kind of the second plan. They take the form of flashbacks, of vivid re-presentations of witness' allegations, of retrospective reconstructions. [8]

This approach alone makes the movie sociologically relevant, since the common procedures of social research resemble much of what is done during court trials: during research, we collect various and often contradictory participants' accounts, official documents, opinions and expert testimonies; we classify pieces of information and evaluate their validity; we test the relative strength of associations that make up "the real"⁵; and we try to distinguish facts from fictions ... The legal battle depicted in the DERRICKSON's film can thus be taken, at least in some important aspects, as a model for our own sociological questioning, doubting and judgments. [9]

Our detailed analysis of this popular culture artifact suggests that the film displays an instance of Rashomon-like undecidability (HAMA, 1999; KUSÁ, 2003; MEDINE, 1992) between different versions of reality. The Rashomon effect has

4 The film was inspired by real events in Germany, 1970's. The original case of a German young woman was described by anthropologist Felicitas GOODMAN (1981). Her work was extensively consulted during the preparation of the film about Emily Rose.

5 For the idea of "trials of strength" see Bruno LATOUR's "Irreductions," part of his "Pasteurization of France" (1988).

been discussed, with references to the movie of the same title by Akira KUROSAWA (inspired by two short stories by the Japanese writer Ryunosuke AKUTAGAWA), as a way of "reasonable" and convincing accounting of a case or event by its multiple participants in more or less different ways, while no decisive clues for determining the "right" version of the story are provided to the audience, leaving the case radically open for more than one interpretation. Similarly, the makers of the Emily Rose movie carefully build the story in such a way that, from the beginning to end, does not allow telling where the truth is—whether with the medical experts of the prosecution or with Father Moore, the unsuccessful exorcist, and his atheistic ambitious advocate Erin Bruner. Even the judge herself, at the end of the movie, suspends the validity of final judgment. The priest is found guilty, but sentencing is ultimately so mild that it relativizes the judgment. [10]

In our analysis, we paid special attention to the character of Dr. Adani, expert witness of the defense. She enters the scene in a key moment of the trial. Erin Bruner, the attorney of Father Moore, is getting desperate: everything seems to be conspiring against her and it seems she is going to lose. Let us briefly explain her situation. [11]

The prosecutor's argument is simple: Emily would have survived if medical specialists had been able to do their work. Instead, Father Moore took responsibility and—with the consent of both Emily (and her family) and the Church—attempted exorcism. He failed. The woman died soon after from overall exhaustion, hunger and self-inflicted injuries. Father Moore was accused of negligent homicide. The prosecutor summons medical experts to support this claim. These experts and their specific point of view dominated the initial phases of the trial. Every aspect of Emily's trouble, as reported by witnesses and depicted in retrospective flashbacks, was immediately and smoothly translated into the medical discourse. Expert witnesses for the prosecution talked about hysterical behavior, paranoid delusions, catatonic convulsions, and hallucinations. The defendant disagreed. But her objections did not aim against medical explanations of Emily's suffering as such—not yet. The lawyer only challenged the particular chain of arguments, suggesting that medical specialists had known exactly and precisely what had been wrong with Emily, had been able to help her, and that it had been the priest's activity that prevented them from saving Emily's life. But now, this line of argumentation turns to be a deadlock for Father Moore and his defendant. Erin Bruner is slowly losing this fight. It is difficult to fight with medical experts within their own field. [12]

Now, the above-mentioned turning point is coming. The advocate comes across an anthropological book by Dr. Adani⁶ on contemporary cases of possession, mostly in the Third World.⁷ Inspired by the book, she decides to radically change

6 Dr. Adani is a fictitious character, although in many respects clearly modeled on Felicitas GOODMAN, above mentioned real-life anthropologist involved in the "historical" German case that has inspired the entire movie.

7 Studies of demonic possessions often come from the Third World (DWYER, 2003; LEWIS, 2003; SHARP, 1993) or from safely distant European history (ALMOND, 2004; CERTEAU,

her strategy. Instead of endless and inefficient attempts at invalidating the claim of the prosecution by "punching holes in the medical approach," as she says in this scene⁸, she would try to validate the alternative—namely that Emily could really have been possessed. The lawyer noticed that the anthropologist dealt with demonic possession and exorcism very seriously in her book, *from a scientific point of view*, but *without debunking it* as something non-real. Thus, while explaining her new position to the jury, the advocate assures: "You may not believe demons exist. You won't have to." She is not pushing members of the jury to the perspective of believers, devout Christians. Instead, she wants them to look at the case from a kind of social science perspective. She asks them to "open their minds" (to suspend taken-for-granted explanations and culturally dominant frameworks) and carefully listen to participants' accounts of what happened. Accordingly, the advocate encourages her witnesses to use their own words for descriptions of what happened. She does not ask questions of a doctor trying to understand a disease, but rather of a social scientist trying to understand a foreign culture. And she summons, as her very next expert witness, Dr. Adani, professor of anthropology and psychiatry, the author of the book. She also suggests to the court listening to a field recording of the exorcism ritual, the beginning of which reminds one of a standard social science field recording (a neutrally sounding voice indicates the situation and all the people present). During her closing speech the defendant even makes an appeal very close to the well-known Thomas theorem (THOMAS & THOMAS, 1928, pp.571-572): she reminds the jury that the demonic possession of Emily was enacted as real by actions of those who firmly believed it was real. In short, since that turning point in the trial, the case is not accounted exclusively in terms of "sick Emily" anymore and the defendant side is given space for retelling the case in terms of "Emily possessed by demons." [13]

Thus, it is a social science perspective, mobilized as a new ally by the agnostic lawyer, what enables the defense to grasp the phenomenon of demonic possession and defend it as a possible (version of) reality. This in itself is an important achievement, given the trial is occurring within the secular culture, in which decisions are sometimes regarded fairest when two parties argue "as unfairly as possible, on opposite sides, for then it is certain that no important consideration altogether escape notice" (BRETT quoted in JASANOFF, 1997, p.52). Devil and possession become subjects of ordinary witness examination focusing on participants' testimonies. The questions such as "what happened then?" and "what did it look like?" take the speakers away from abstract theological disputes to the level of anthropologically relevant practices. The theological authority of Church, after all, is unavailable, unusable for Father Moore's advocate. Church representatives, afraid of losing reputation and public favor, are horrified by this new turn in the trial and not willing to talk in public about such sensitive topics. [14]

2000; FERBER, 2004; VAN DIJKHUIZEN, 2007)

8 If not stated otherwise in this part of the text quotation marks indicate quotations of talk of respective characters in the movie.

To sum up, a social science approach enables the agnostic advocate to defend the devout priest effectively, in an accommodating way, and even in conformity with what Father Moore believes in. Moreover, only thanks to this strategy the priest is ultimately given an opportunity to do what he wanted so much: to tell "what really happened to Emily and why" and construe his testimony as a powerful Christian mission. This coalition of the devout priest and atheistic, ambitious lawyer is only seemingly paradoxical. Sure, the connection between the two is partial, temporary and situated; it links two very different and hardly commensurable worlds. But it works pretty well for both Father Moore and the advocate. This specific configuration and the undecidability of Emily's condition (maintained until the very end of the film and forcing viewers to deeply re-think the tension between modern medicine and religious spirituality) seem crucial for us. They illustrate the key moments of our own research position in an expressive, intuitive and non-theoretical way. [15]

3. Theory: The Principle of Symmetry Beyond "Pure" Epistemology

In terms of theory, we would say that the filmmakers played with a kind of symmetrical view. By delicate means of the cinematic language they avoided any final resolution as to the nature of Emily's condition and grasped both the medical and spiritual aspects of the story seriously enough, without *a priori* debunking any of the possible explanations. [16]

The principle of symmetry was powerfully introduced to sociological debates by David BLOOR and his strong program of sociology of knowledge in the late 1970s (1991). Subsequently, it was further developed, discussed, tested and radicalized by numerous followers in science and technology studies (STS), above all, by the so-called Paris school (CALLON, 1986; LATOUR, 1993). In fact, as put by Dick PELS (1996, p.278), "the history of the field of science and technology studies [...] can be plausibly narrated in terms of successive extensions and radicalizations of the symmetry principle." Although the problem of symmetry has been so specifically and abundantly debated only within the field of STS, it is also clearly relevant for wider sociological methodology in general and qualitative research in particular. We will come back to this soon. [17]

Given the long controversies that have shaped the concept, symmetry in STS may refer to various things: the ways researchers handle true and false beliefs, scientific and social elements, human action and material world, the rational and the irrational. Whatever may be the case, the principle is that both items in these pairs of categories should be explained by the same type of causes. Only then can we ask how it actually comes to pass that something can effectively and safely be taken as true or false, rational or irrational. Symmetry, in this sense, attempts at transgressing or bypassing natural attitudes and the taken-for-granted order of reality. "Normally," the truth is by definition self-evident, while errors and falsities stem from some cognitive failures caused by social forces, cultural circumstances or mental conditions of human subjects. To facilitate the transgression of the taken-for-granted reality and to make the symmetrical view more intuitive, analysts are encouraged to enter the empirical scene *before* it

becomes clear and evident how things are. This is why STS scholars have so often been busy with analyses of ongoing scientific controversies (COLLINS, 1981, 1985) and with studying "science in action" (LATOURE, 1987). [18]

Although the principle of symmetry included, from the very beginning, pronounced political and ethical elements, its epistemological value has frequently been emphasized as the only reason why symmetry is useful. The symmetrical attitude is viewed, above all, as a kind of neutralizing, impartial and balanced epistemic stance toward the empirical world. From such a stance, one simply should not presuppose any *a priori* divides or hierarchies between various realms of the real, because it would necessarily mean taking one side or the other. Thus, existing asymmetries would be inadvertently reinforced and the resulting picture would be distorted. [19]

This kind of neutralizing epistemological view of the symmetry principle has been criticized from both within and outside STS. One for all, Dick PELS argues that

"[s]ymmetry [...] is rarely if ever symmetrical. It presents a 'methodologized' and utopian version of what remains a rather exceptional case in a larger class of what I refer to generically as 'third positions'" (1996, p.281).

"[...] analytic third positions are not external to the field of controversy studied, but are included and implicated in it. They are not value-free or dispassionate but situated, partial and committed in a knowledge-political sense. [...] A symmetrical approach invariably subverts the dominant view and strengthened the side of the weak and the marginal" (p.282). [20]

This partial and political nature of the symmetrical approach is nicely evident in the story of Emily Rose. The "third position" is embodied, above all, by the anthropologically inspired and agnostic lawyer, defending the priest against the confident and widely recognized logic of medical expertise (and even against the representatives of the Church, worried about exorcism becoming the subject of public discussion). [21]

We researchers of psychiatric/religious realities in the making find ourselves in a comparable position. When studying how the uncertainty of controversial phenomena on the borders between medicine and spirituality is practically handled and managed, how it is more or less routinely turned into certainty and facticity, we simply try to avoid taking one or another explanation of these phenomena for granted. There is no doubt for us that such an approach helps in producing sound knowledge and making convincing statements. However, by applying symmetry we do not aim at some kind of neutralistic detachment. We do not aspire to establish a passive and "pure" research relationship to the studied world and become simply conformed to what WOOLGAR (1989) describes as the modern ideology of representation. Further, rather than in strong causal explanations we are interested in promoting both general and sociological respect

toward complexities, irreducibilities and ambivalences.⁹ Our position relatively suspends the self-evident and widely recognized dominance of medical rationality (at least within our own secular society) and, in a way, strengthens the often neglected and misunderstood side of the spiritual and religious.¹⁰ [22]

Besides epistemology and politics, however, a mixture of other considerations is at stake here, involving important ethical moments. Above all, we felt that our theoretical-methodological background gave us a feeling of better interactional comfort during research interviews. By taking spiritual accounts, in principle, as seriously as medical explanations, we could speak honestly, "naturally fairly," and *in the same way* to all the involved people with sharply different and sometimes even antithetical views. As will be mentioned later, we also could eventually provoke genuine interest in our research on the part of interviewees, which made us respectable conversation partners for both sides. The encounters therefore became at least partly mutually rewarding. [23]

The above considerations of the symmetry principle in relation to our own research project already indicate some relevance of what STS scholars call "symmetry" for the wide community of qualitative social researchers. Let us now sketch out the grounds for such relevance more explicitly. First and above all, a huge portion of STS research routinely and massively uses qualitative methods. In fact, contemporary science studies are one of the key application areas of qualitative methodology. Second, and in relation to this, key figures in STS have always had ambitions to shape wider sociological thinking and practice (LATOUR, 2005; LAW, 2004).¹¹ They themselves and their followers have successfully applied STS-related theoretical and methodological positions far beyond the field of science and technology—let us just mention studies on politics and power, medicine, art theory, economy, religious representation etc. (BARRY & SLATER, 2005; JONES & GALISON, 1998; LAW, 1991; LAW & HASSARD, 1999).¹² So-called actor-network theory, perhaps the most well-known approach originating in STS, has become a *general* social science theoretical-methodological framework comparable, e.g., to ethnomethodology, critical discourse analysis or phenomenology. Third, the symmetry principle, as formulated from within STS,

9 Such an ambition has a very practical meaning for us. In the field of mental health care the value of respectful, non-reductionist and complex approaches was articulated repeatedly, e.g., by DAVIDSON, STAEHELI, STAYNER and SELLS (2004, p.224), when they say: "health cannot be promoted by reducing disease alone, just as life cannot be lived solely by minimizing dysfunction."

10 Within the overall European context, which is generally rather diverse (DAVIE, 2001), the Czech Republic belongs to the most secularized countries (e. g., LUŽNÝ & NAVRÁTILOVÁ, 2001). Yet, the problem of medical reductionism and little sensitivity toward religious experience does not apply only to highly "secular" countries. As noted, among many others, by LÓPEZ-IBOR and LÓPEZ-IBOR ALCOCER (2010, p.211): "Very often, from the psychiatric perspective, religious phenomena have been considered in a one-dimensional and too superficial way, often considering them just as symptoms of a major psychiatric disease or traits of an insufficiently developed personality."

11 STS contributions to general/qualitative methodology have been recognized also from outside the field—e.g., BECKER (1986), KENDALL and WICKHAM (1999).

12 After all, our own current research project can be listed as an example of qualitative research inspired by STS-related approaches, but focused on other than science-and-technology-related issues.

implicitly, but importantly refers to some well-recognized issues of qualitative social sciences. Here we have in mind mainly the almost omnipresent imperative of research reflexivity, which is often based, among other things, on a kind of symmetrical view of what can be known by researchers on one hand and those under study on the other hand, and understanding of which has greatly been enhanced also by STS (ADKINS, 2002; KNUUTTILA, 2002). Further, to mention another example, systematic inclusion of two seemingly incommensurable positions or accounts into a single explanatory framework (without reducing one to the other!), which may be taken as still another expression of the symmetry principle, can provoke an interesting contribution to debates on possibilities and limitations of so called triangulation (see, e.g., SEALE, 1999, pp.53-61).¹³ [24]

4. Facing the Priests: Feeling Like Strangers with Strange Ambitions

As already indicated, we do not understand the symmetry principle (and reflexivity) in purely epistemological terms. Rather, we approach them also as practical embodiment of responsible research politics and fair relations with research subjects of various and often conflicting positions. Such research practices imply active subjects who are taken by the researchers not just as mere information resources, but rather as partners in projects that are intelligible, acceptable, and meaningful for them. That is why we always carefully explain our background to the research subjects and encourage them to ask questions about our approach and aims. [25]

There have been occasions in our fieldwork, however, when this did not seem enough and we felt the need for more systematic and in-depth feedback from our respondents. At these moments we wanted to know more about the following issues: What might be the relevance of our symmetrical approach for subjects involved in the studied situations? How do the interviewed people actually understand our own research position? What significance does it have for them—if any? With these questions in mind, we started thinking of more systematic participant involvement (OLESEN, 1998) in our research and decided to carry out a small research experiment in a kind of "co-operative inquiry" (REASON, 1998). In order to understand the design and focus of this experiment, the discussion of which will come in the main analytic part of this article (Part 5), let us now briefly characterize and explain precisely those fieldwork moments when we felt, facing our interviewees, like strangers with very strange ambitions. [26]

Among our respondents there are two special groups of interviewees. They consist of those practitioners who develop and sustain specialized knowledge of the phenomena we are focusing on and who can therefore be taken as "cognitive authorities" (e. g., MERTON, 1976): priests and medical professionals. These people seem to be key agents in the construction of both diagnostic certainty and incommensurability or *asymmetry* of respective positions. Nothing must seem more distant for them than our symmetrical view of mental

13 To use an example from our current project: in what sense can priests' or theologians' account of someone's demonic possession be taken as a triangulation of explanations (of the same case) provided by psychiatrists?

pathologies/supernatural religious experiences, emphasizing uncertainty and looking for commensurabilities (for heuristic reasons). [27]

As for the questions regarding intelligibility, acceptability, and meaningfulness of our specific approach for our respondents, priests were of particular interest for us, while medical professionals did not present such a challenge. Why? The psychiatric thinking had already been relatively familiar to us. One of us had been long active, as a mental health professional, in the area of non-clinical psychiatric care. His parallel sociological-analytical work had focused on diagnostic work in psychiatry (PALEČEK, 2004). Further, mental health, medicine and medical expertise have always been frequent and rewarding subject matters for our own discipline—sociology in general and contemporary science and technology studies in particular (e. g., BERG & MOL, 1998; LUPTON, 2003; ROGERS & PILGRIM, 2005). Last but not least, like sociology, psychiatry belongs to the culture(s) of scientific knowledge. We simply felt ourselves relatively close to the medical perspective. [28]

The setting of pastoral work, by contrast, seemed rather distant and impenetrable to us. We had no previous research experience in this area and we felt fairly uncertain about how our particular approach and research questions would be accepted by people of faith—worshippers, priests, theologians. On one hand, our research perspective was not based on some critical rationalistic attitudes toward religion. We did not want to explain religious phenomena as (nothing but) a kind of "social force" or "element of culture." Our ambition was rather to follow a Latourian path of non-reductionist social science, perfectly well compatible with qualitative research's emphasis on specificities, ambivalences and empirical detail, which would take the studied reality more seriously for what it is, practically and often ambiguously, for its actors (LATOUR, 2000, 2005). We hoped that people of faith might appreciate such a position. On the other hand, however, our "open-minded" attitude clearly was not an instance of religious belief. Taking apparitions and possessions more seriously as possibly religious/spiritual phenomena did not mean, for us, taking them simply for granted and accepting them a priori as such any more than respective medical interpretations. Would such an approach—sympathetic, and yet alien to religious faith—be acceptable, reasonable or meaningful for respective cognitive authorities of religion?¹⁴ [29]

5. The Reflexive Experiment: Symmetry from the Clerics' Perspective

In order to disentangle this complicated issue we decided to organize the following small research experiment. We asked four Catholic priests, a tiny portion of our research sample, for a special kind of interview.¹⁵ They were

¹⁴ Let us note: discussing what we call "symmetric view" neither logically nor necessarily means discussing it with both clerics *and* medical experts. We have chosen priests simply because their perspectives on symmetry (as we understood it) were a complete mystery for us.

¹⁵ A brief methodological note: The intention was not to make an extensive, systematic exploration, but rather a small discursion ("experiment") that would give us a quick insight into the topic. We already knew that the issues of demonic possessions and miraculous apparitions were somewhat too sensitive for many clerics as a subject for a research interview. Also, as explained below, the interviews required time-consuming preparation on the part of the

instructed to watch the above-mentioned movie on Emily Rose¹⁶ and read our early paper on it (KONOPÁSEK & PALEČEK, 2006) in preparation for subsequent focused dialogues. During these interviews, however, we not only discussed how the priests understood the film and our interpretation of it. Rather, we used the film and its interpretation as an intuitive starting point of in-depth debates of our research approach, with emphasis on the principle of symmetry. Therefore, we extensively discussed with the priests limits and possibilities of taking the spiritual and the medical equally seriously and studying these two realms together, in a single grasp, so to speak. [30]

In the following part of this article (the main section) we would like to present an analysis of these interviews and some other empirical observations. In the first plan, the analysis really sheds some light on whether and in what ways our specific epistemic perspective coheres with the views and positions of one specific group of our respondents. In the second plan, however, this reflexive research exercise also contributed to our own better understanding of the role of the symmetry principle in our current research project. Therefore, we believe that this "experiment" validates the epistemic usefulness of reflexive co-operative procedures in qualitative research. [31]

To remain focused on the most interesting aspects of the problem, we will structure the following analytical part of the paper on the basis of two subtle points of disagreement or misunderstanding between the priests and ourselves, as they became evident during our subsequent analytical-theoretical reflections. Both points are related to what the interviewees considered as limitations of our approach. First, they argued that our observations of the chosen phenomena from a "third position" do not allow understanding religious faith from inside and thus at all; according to them we necessarily remain on the surface. Second, the priests appreciated "symmetrical attitude" only as a preliminary and tentative perspective, as a mere point of departure to real life and real decisions. Let us now look more closely at these arguments. [32]

5.1 Inaccessible inner world of faith?

Our interviewees frequently manifested their genuine interest in our research. They were pleased, not surprisingly, to hear that we sociologists were willing to treat God and religiosity with respect and for what they are (without trying to explain them as effects of culture, social forces or anything else). More literally,

interviewees. Thus, it was clear from the beginning that we could not hope to have involved a greater number of people. We simply devoted a couple of weeks to arranging and doing these specific interviews with priests that were recommended to us by our former respondents as people who might be interested in what we were doing and willing to talk to us. The interviews were semi-structured and thematically focused (more clearly in their beginnings and only loosely at their ends) and lasted usually about two hours, sometimes more. During analysis of interview transcripts we focused not only on how and when the priests were explicitly supportive or dismissive toward our research perspective, but also (and mainly) on the moments of possible misunderstanding or tension: if we wanted to be understood and accepted by our research subjects we had to analyze precisely these moments.

16 Two of the priests had already seen the film, one had heard about it.

the priests found it "great and wonderful" (Pastor B)¹⁷ that we were keen to take spiritual realities as—in principle and a priori—no less relevant and valid than mental illnesses or psychic pathologies. They appreciated that our analysis of the film on Emily Rose was "unprejudiced" as well as properly restrained. [33]

It was common to all of our respondents, however, that they also mentioned limits of our approach. An "unprejudiced attitude" accompanied by the empirical focus on practices and phenomenal qualities, they indicated, cannot lead to any solution. It cannot bring us to things that are really important, to the faith itself. As one of the priests said, the kind of epistemic position we try to take can be seen only as a useful basis, as a *preliminary and transient attitude*, a precondition for something else:

Pastor N: "If I take this position as a basis ... as a real foundation of viewing the world around us, then I think it's absolutely perfect. And it should truly be the most fundamental [attitude] ... but this foundation is not enough. One has to decide: either she/he would be agnostic or believer." [34]

Similarly another interviewee:

Pastor G: "[when talking about the spiritual and the medical without prioritizing former or latter], we are only discussing things, not coming to conclusions, and so we remain on a level ... from where we can shift to still another level ... this is how I see the relevance of your writing." [35]

Not empirical observations, but *an insight* into the nature of things is what counts:

Pastor S: "It seems to me that in order to assess that reality [of Emily Rose's condition] one has to have an insight into the thing. And then it would not be a matter of symmetry, but of seeing the truth." [36]

Despite their reservations, the priests could accept—in general—our position also due to some translation work. Each interviewee somehow managed to translate our research strategy (the principle of symmetry) into something else, more or less different, but relevant to his work or "personal theology." Thus, one of the priests took our strategy of studying psychiatric-religious controversies as a general *personal attitude*, which he viewed as a precondition for a truly free choice, free decision for life with or without God. During the interview he repeatedly emphasized (even beyond this particular context) the importance of one's free and well-grounded decision for pious life. Another priest highlighted the possible mediating role of the social science perspective in the dialogue between mental health professionals and pastors. Still another put our approach in contrast to journalistic or pop-cultural sensationalism: he simply considered it important that we try to talk about the phenomena of demonic possession or oppression in

17 If not indicated otherwise, in this section we quote from the four interviews with Catholic priests described above; the initials (B, N., G, S) are fictitious. We spoke Czech, translation into English is ours.

a moderate, sober way. This issue was, according to him, highly topical, but not much discussed and sadly neglected even by responsible clergy. [37]

Thus, it can be concluded that the priests did accept the symmetrical approach as explained and performed in our paper on DERRICKSON's movie, although only partially, in a modified way and with reservations. This seems to be a sufficient background for maintaining a working research relationship, mutual interest and recognition. Yet, a closer look at the limits the priests were talking about opens further noteworthy issues. One of the pastors explained:

Pastor B: "As I say, if you have such an approach and enter the field of spirituality to study the phenomenon as if from outside, then ok. But you *cannot* tell, from your position, *what* it is from inside. You simply deal with phenomena. And you cannot say where they come from and why, why they are with us, in essence."¹⁸ [38]

The priest indicates that there is a world of faith essentially inaccessible to social analysts, even when they are determined not to reduce/translate the religious and the sacred into a set of some social forces. This world cannot be reached and understood even when analysts, together with LATOUR (2000) or BERRYMAN (2005), do their best to take objects and contents of faith for what they are (told they are). Why? Because this world of faith is somewhere deep *inside*, while empirically observable and reportable phenomena are irreparably located outside, on the surface. In other words, there is a black box of faith, of the revealed Truth, that cannot or perhaps should not be opened by social scientific means. The black box can only be opened by means of personal insights and contemplation, which can hardly be communicated—and if it can, then only by means of theological/pastoral discourse. [39]

But here we could object that the other camp also has its black boxes: psychiatry and mental health care rely upon their inner Truths too; they also guard certain "given" essences hidden behind "uninteresting" and "mundane" phenomena of daily practice and the task of sociologists is to show how the latter level or sphere of reality is constitutively related to the former.¹⁹ Thus, if we strive for studying the work of psychiatry and of pastoral work (of medical knowledge and of theology) symmetrically, we should by definition avoid opening black boxes of only one of the two fields. After all, why we should talk about what constitutes the psychiatric truth of someone's unusual experience, while remaining reverently silent about what spiritual phenomena are "from inside" of religious life? Why should we not try to study "where they come from and why, why they are with us, in essence" (Pastor B)? [40]

The above mentioned priests' hesitations are understandable, of course. In a way, they seem to have more at stake than, e.g., medical experts or scientists in a comparable situation. Pious life with and for God, as more or less directly

¹⁸ Italics here and elsewhere in quotations, if not stated otherwise, indicate emphasis made by the speaker, in his talk.

¹⁹ Precisely opening black boxes and studying things long considered sociologically irrelevant is something STS, our source of inspiration, are good at (LATOUR, 1987; PINCH, 1992).

characterized by our interviewees, appears to be essentially constituted by means of various incommunicable "insides"—insides that, contrary to what is communicated by scientists, should preferably not be publicly shared. What is outside, on the surface, communicated or phenomenal, raises suspicion as something untrue, non-authentic, non-genuine and even dangerous.²⁰ [41]

Distinctions along the axis inside-outside can be found in many places of our debates with the priests. Let us look at some interesting moments. For the Catholic Church, apparitions as well as demonic influences represent a sensitive issue, requiring a lot of restraint. The interviewed pastors repeatedly explained, for instance, why they have to be extremely cautious and even a priori dismissive. Priests are often afraid of being associated with middle-age obscurantism and superstition and they do not want to encourage naive religious imagination. Thus, acknowledging an experience reported by a parishioner as supernatural or miraculous is typically the last and least probable option. It must be, some priests said. (Pastor B: "Sometimes I say that my job is to fight against superstition [laughter].") If a worshiper starts talking about an apparition of Virgin Mary, about hearing God's voice or about a vision of a demon, the priest often leads him or her to understand that it was, in fact, an "inner" vision, a matter of purely personal imagination, or hearing the voice "inside one's soul." The priests characteristically push in this direction despite the fact that some people describe their visions and hearings in terms of "real perceptions," of seeing by their eyes and hearing by their ears. And if someone still insists, against this spiritual guidance, on the supernatural nature of his or her experience and keeps talking about it, he or she may easily be sent to a psychiatrist by the priest. In sum, apparitions, visions, heard voices etc. become acceptable within the ordinary parish life only if they remain (or become) "inner spiritual phenomena" located inside parishioners' souls, hearts, and minds. [42]

But non-problematic and accepted apparitions are those that not only occur somewhere deep inside, but also remain there. Telling about religious visions or apparitions to others means that there is something suspicious and dubious about the experience:²¹

Pastor G: "If someone really has an apparition, he or she would not boast about it. He or she would never come and say: 'The Virgin Mary told me this ...!' And 'Jesus told this!' He or she would *never* act like this. This is simply the first and principal moment ... [concerning] genuineness of apparition."

20 The relationship between scientific and religious modes of representation is, of course, much more complicated (e.g., LATOUR, 1998). Here we remain on the level of what priests themselves emphasize about this particular aspect.

21 This is noted also in theological literature, as one of the negative criteria: true apparitions (as a special kind of revelations) cannot have the character of sensation, they cannot be blatant, they cannot resemble propaganda or advertising, and they cannot be catchy (BENEŠ, 2003, p.86). After all, it is characteristic that all the revelations that occurred after death of the last apostle are officially called "*private* revelations" (to distinguish them, by this not very accurate term, clearly and principally from "public" revelations of the Biblical times, the set of which is officially recognized as complete and closed) (e.g., BENEŠ, 2003; HVIDT, 2007, pp.10-28). Our respondents, however, highlighted this feature not as one among others, but rather much above all the other criteria, as a key and simple indication.

Pastor B: "When I have a *personal* experience, it surely is something deeply intimate and I would not go out with these things, among people in the street. Everything is given for show today, but I think that certain things really belong to the private." [43]

Scientists use to say "publish or perish," indicating that one's actions and experiences as a scientist would mean nothing without making them publicly available and debated. According to the priests' accounts, it seems quite the opposite with supernatural spiritual phenomena. They indeed are important, respectable and valuable elements of religious life, they can mean a lot ... but only if they are not "published in the parish," so to speak. [44]

In general, elements of the outside are typically associated for our interviewees with pride, disobedience, sensationalism, and out-dated or even false forms of faith. Ideal model examples of this association are old women, grannies or even "candle hags," with their pictures, loud singing and praying, discussing abundantly their theologically incorrect visions in the neighborhood. But the idea of locating the focus of faith deep inside one's soul is far reaching, affecting the entire personal theology of the speakers. An old priest "whose life ended with the 2nd Vatican council, unable to openly debate, so much insisting upon his nice frock he can wear during the mass" (Pastor G) is part of basically the same story.²² [45]

Theology and religious/pastoral practices intertwine in the tension between inside and outside. One of the priests, when talking about the Evil and its nature, mentioned the following metaphor taken from the Bible (St. Peter):

Pastor N: "The enemy of God is like a lion, roaring and walking around a cage. But the lion can only roar. He cannot get inside the cage and devour me, until I myself open the door ... until I do something which would break down the protection given from God to each of us." [46]

It is therefore us who are inside, inside the cage, safe and protected by God; the danger, the lion representing Satan, threatens from outside. The ritual of exorcism follows this logic by trying to get demons out from inside of the possessed. Similarly, the possessed persons are sometimes put in isolation from the outside world, to prevent contacts with the Evil, and thus facilitate the procedure of exorcism. [47]

There are many similar examples showing how crucial the distinction and hierarchical relationship between the inside and the outside (or surface) is for the interviewed pastors and for their understanding/performing where and what the religious Truth is. No wonder then that the priests highlighted limitations of our research strategy, within which we try to make possessions and apparitions

22 None of the priests we interviewed belonged to this older generation of churchmen. There was no prior intention in this selection, but it may be symptomatic: perhaps our interviewees coming mostly from younger and middle-aged generations already had their beliefs so firmly secured somewhere deep inside (and independent of things loudly said and actions done in public) that they were not afraid of talking to us. (Indeed, this comment should be read as a little ironic and "ungrateful" nag from those who have learnt to take performativity of words very seriously.)

commensurable (studiable together) with psychopathology and mental illnesses by bracketing out the Truths "inside" various black boxes. But fortunately, as always, there is more ambivalence in what the respondents say than it may seem at first, which gives our strategy more chances to succeed. A closer look at our transcripts indicates that: 1. the interviewed priests admit, make evident and often spontaneously highlight the importance of observable, phenomenal qualities and practical, collective actions for religious life; and 2. the "insides" and "outsides" of what they are talking about are not separate realms. Thus, it is possible, for instance, to empirically study how "inner," spiritual and deeply personal states or experiences are *enacted* or *mediated* by practical means; or, how subtle spiritual qualities or religious contents become embedded in material settings of the parish or church. [48]

Let us notice, for instance, how one of the priests talked about the exorcism ritual as depicted in the DERRICKSON's movie. At one moment, he emphasized that during exorcism the priest must be speaking, in the name of Jesus, *directly* to the other side (meaning Satan). It is a spiritual confrontation, he said, an *inner* spiritual battle. Everything else is irrelevant, including the personality of the possessed or dampening pharmaceuticals she might be taking (such as Emily Rose). To say that some other circumstances play a role in the ritual would mean "reducing or denying the power of God" (Pastor G). Yet, a few minutes later, in the very same interview, the exorcism procedure suddenly becomes a long term process, in which elaborated collective and material practices play an undeniable role:

Pastor G: "[After the exorcist casts lower demons from the possessed body] and gets closer to Satan himself, it becomes more complicated. A spiritual struggle of the *entire prayer fellowship, fasts, holy masses*, and so on [is needed]. The possessed person sometimes has to be *isolated from the outside world*, so that further contacts with the Evil are prevented. She may find a shelter *in a monastery*, participating in *divine services, praying alone*. For instance, a man from [name of a city] was given a *picture of Christ, which was to help him to have the idea of Jesus Christ in mind*" (emphasis ours).²³ [49]

As mentioned above, the exorcist speaks to the Devil in the name of Christ: the strength of his words is directly derived from the power of God. However, Pastor G. also explains how important it is to select a *proper priest* to serve as exorcist. The exorcist's personal integrity as well as blamelessness of his entire life protect him against Satan's counter-attacks. Also, it is crucial that the exorcist *never acts alone*, but is backed up by another priest and often by an entire prayer fellowship. [50]

In sum, there is perhaps something, which might be called "a direct dialogue of the priest with the other side (during the ritual)"; but at the same time, we can also observe rich descriptions of how demons do specific and observable things, by which they are present in the world and located here or there. The priests (a number of all the interviewed churchmen, not only the four priests involved in our small reflexive experiment) speak about how demons act physically and how

²³ These practices correspond to what can be found elsewhere in the literature, scholarly or religious (AMORTH, 1999; GOODMAN, 1988).

these actions are mediated by multitudes of mediators (the possessed person/body in the first line, but also for instance, as noted by one of our respondents, execrative e-mails). Similar things, of course, can be said about the person of exorcist and other actors involved. All these things turn out to be relevant for the practice of exorcism and have to be closely monitored if the ritual is to be successful. [51]

5.2 When is the right time for a "symmetrical" view in pastoral practice?

As already noted, the interviewed priests often appreciated what they understood as our unprejudiced attitude toward the spiritual (in confrontation with the psychiatric). Also, they endorsed the idea, on a general level, that spiritual and medical issues should not be considered separately, because they are often interrelated. As put by one of our interviewees:

Pastor B: "... the border [between mental illnesses and spiritual crisis] is so fragile that when somebody is more sensitive toward the spiritual world, by the same token he or she becomes a bit unstable ... or more vulnerable toward psychic or psychiatric dysfunctions [...] I think these two things cannot be separated." [52]

In daily pastoral practice, however, such general observation often translates into something else:

Jan [researcher]: "And what if [...] somebody comes and simply says that ... either that she is possessed or that she has had unusual religious experiences ... [such as] hearing voices."

Pastor S: "So I clearly say it is a delusion. A woman from [name of a city] recently came to see me. She told me she had had a beautiful apparition of Jesus: Jesus Christ was sitting on a kitchen desk during her cooking at home, dangling his legs like this (laugh). And he was writing down all what she was saying ... Well, I did not ridicule her. I only told her: 'You know, I think Jesus Christ simply wouldn't sit in your kitchen asking questions such as "Do you eat carrot?";' ... So it obviously was a delusion. There are countless such delusions, hallucinations and illusions." [53]

True, this apparition was really weird and also this particular churchman is special: he is not only priest, but psychiatrist as well. This makes him a sought-after double expert. Believers visit him as somebody who knows "both sides" and who is able to help them *either* in a religious way *or* by means of medical advice. And he routinely maintains a clear borderline between the two specialties.²⁴ [54]

But is this story of the pastor-psychiatrist really so unusual? We do not think so. In fact, we have heard many such stories or examples during our fieldwork. It happens rather often that churchmen are confronted with experiences, behavior and statements of their parishioners that are beyond the accepted theological framework or personal taste of the priest. Classification of such experiences,

²⁴ We described the overall tendency to separate the spiritual from the pathological in order to "do justice" to the former in another paper (KONOPÁSEK & PALEČEK, 2010).

actions or accounts as pathological (in mental, social or moral terms) is a quite usual strategy for the priests to manage these situations. These judgments typically come quickly, without careful, systematic and unbiased weighing of evidences.

Pastor B: "Thus, approaching things in an unprejudiced way means: [to assume] yes, it could have happened. [...] But it also depends on what kind of case it is, you know. When some—to put it a bit crudely—some candlewoman comes to see me, having ten altars at home and seeing Virgin Mary or someone else in the corner all the time ... well, it's a matter of her religious imagination, as a rule. [...] There are no reasons to believe [her or it]." [55]

Indeed, there is a good portion of common sense in this account. Most people, believers or not, would probably say: Pastor B is right, that's how it is.²⁵ At the same time, however, there is also some portion of stereotypical prejudice and bias in this account. If we try to carefully look at similar events in a non-ordinary, symmetrical-empirical way, they may look not so strange. In any case, Erin Bruner, the advocate of Father Moore (from the DERRICKSON's movie), or her anthropological expert witness talked quite differently than the above pastor about comparably bizarre situations. [56]

Although occasionally we can feel somewhat embarrassed by how quickly and easily the priests are finished with certain cases, we do not want to criticize such behavior as principally wrong. Not at all. A carefully unprejudiced and empirically based attitude (or a kind of symmetrical approach) is not for any occasion. It is an attitude or practice that is mobilized only temporarily, from time to time, at certain occasions. Our respondents would agree with this. However, contrary to what they asserted in the interviews, we suggest that such an extraordinary attitude does not typically take place sometime "in the beginning," as a deliberative exercise (or as just "discussing things" in the words of Pastor G) that precedes real engagement in the world. The contrary is true. The approach based on the symmetry principle usually comes only *after* a certain moment, i.e., *in response* to what happened during engagements in the complicated world. In other words, we mobilize this elaborated and demanding knowledge-political practice not as a kind of general tentative attitude, as a default mental setup suitable for first-contact events, but only when we have a strong and specific reason to do so—typically, when we are facing a complicated controversy. After all, as already mentioned, important foundations of the symmetrical sociology of scientific knowledge were laid down at the occasion of studying incommensurable positions in scientific controversies. [57]

But we need not argue here merely by referring to the usual habits in the field of science studies. To see the point, let us just go back to our empirical data on pastoral work, religious life, and possessions or apparitions. The situations mentioned by the churchmen in the above quotations were simple and not controversial: a man or woman comes to the priest, reports a more or less weird

²⁵ As such, it is a nice example of what it means that objective reality is "socially constructed" (BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1967).

experience and is more or less accepted by him—that is, usually not much accepted or only somehow accepted under the condition the parishioner would keep the event private, as an intimate spiritual experience. The priests act in an authoritative way at such occasions, some of our interviewees were rather strict about it. Prejudices, everyday routines, stereotypes and biases are natural parts of this game, it cannot be otherwise. Individual parishioners are typically too weak in such a context to produce a complex controversy. They quickly conform. There are simply no traces of the symmetry principle in how churchmen handle extraordinary spiritual experiences during these "first contacts." [58]

Occasionally, however, there are situations other than that. We mean situations when things get beyond usual routines and daily life in the parish. And these typically are "big cases" or controversial events that simply force us to think radically differently. The trial with Father Moore, the unsuccessful exorcist accused of Emily Rose's death, is a nice example. [59]

Interestingly enough, this example (and our related arguments) remained uncomprehended in this particular respect by our priests. They did not fully appreciate that a kind of symmetrical approach to medical and spiritual accounts of Emily's condition was not a matter of anybody's fair-minded talking in antechambers of true religion, some tentative deliberation preceding important spiritual moments (and losing its point when issues of faith come to the fore), but rather an extraordinary and elaborate way of disentangling a complicated controversy, which was as much spiritual as it was legal or medical. Sure, before getting into serious troubles Father Moore and Emily's family did not need this specific perspective at all. But once they made important spiritual decisions and the world of faith clashed with hardly commensurable medical rationality, the strange "third position" adopted by the agnostic lawyer became relevant and meaningful—even in spiritual terms. In fact, issues of faith could have been considered seriously at the court of law *only* thanks to this peculiar perspective. And how, by what kind of questions, was this achieved? Not by an insight or some kind of hardly communicable understanding from inside, but rather by asking participants about what they had seen, heard, felt and done ... Our priests missed precisely these two related moments both in the movie and in our interpretation of it (KONOPÁSEK & PALEČEK, 2006), which was associated with how they talked with us about the limits of our approach as they understood it. [60]

This interesting misapprehension helped us more fully appreciate what the priests missed. And we now also better realize some subtler parallels between the trial depicted in the movie and other cases we are empirically studying—the cases in which a kind of symmetrical approach is worthy of use (suitable not only for us, but also for church authorities). [61]

To show such a situation, let us now shift our empirical focus to briefly discuss the case of Virgin Mary apparitions in Litmanová, a small mountain village in Eastern Slovakia.²⁶ Three children from the village saw Virgin Mary for the first

²⁶ This is one of the most important and interesting cases we are currently studying. But we could also take other examples of widely recognized, and yet controversial Marian apparitions, better

time in August 1990. Since then, apparitions on the Zvir Mountain repeated (since 1991 each month regularly) and lasted until 1995. The apparitions became well known. More and more believers visited the place and participated in monthly divine services. There were thousands of people on the site in January 1991; in August 1991, at the anniversary date of the first apparition, about half a million of believers gathered on the mountain, praying and waiting for Virgin Mary's messages. No wonder that these events were also widely reported in the media. Pilgrims continue coming and praying in great numbers until now, even after the apparitions ended. [62]

What was and is the attitude of the Church toward these apparitions? In short, the Church is cautious but not disapproving. As the pastor from Litmanová told us in an interview (paraphrasing, not recorded):

"I am often asked by journalists whether I believe it or not. But it is open for me. And I do not have the need to close it in any way." [63]

Although the pastor did not present the above sentences as an official statement of the Church, but rather as his personal opinion, he expressed the official attitude quite well. In fact, he only paralleled the position of the special Church commission that was established (and later reestablished) to decide whether the apparitions in Litmanová were genuine or not. By definition, this commission's task is to close the question of authenticity of the apparition. But although the final decision is still on the way (and may never come)²⁷, it does not prevent the commission from making many practical decisions and taking actions regarding the place and the event. The Church simply does not need to close the question to do all the related work and pursue its Christian mission on the site. [64]

It is here, nonetheless, in certain moments of the commission's work, where the apparition seems to be treated in a way that is relatively close to what could be called an STS-inspired symmetrical approach. Various phenomenal ("surface") aspects of the apparitions are investigated; the contents of messages are analyzed—connections, coherences and contradictions with the Scriptures are closely examined, and individual messages are compared with the respective messages from other apparitions elsewhere; psychiatrists assess mental conditions of visionaries; their physical conditions are studied and eventual reactions to outside stimulus during the visionary ecstasy are tested. In sum, various expert assessments and lay testimonies are taken into account and

known to broader audiences, such as apparitions in Medjugorje (analyzed, e.g., by CLAVERIE, 2003; for an overview of the contemporary situation related to Marian apparition see MATTER, 2001). With this Litmanová case we overpass the empirical ground of our small reflexive exercise with the four Catholic priests (the Slovak pastor quoted below is not one of them), although not entirely—revelations and apparitions (including apparitions in Litmanová) were repeatedly mentioned by our respondents even during the above-analyzed interviews on our symmetric approach.

27 Which does not mean that the official answer is unimportant. The contrary is true. Only a few apparitions in the modern history have been officially "approved" by the Catholic Church and the positive evaluation of each such case always was a rare and highly celebrated occasion, with wide-ranging consequences for the Christian community. No wonder, some local worshipers pray for the commission to decide properly (i.e., that it was a real apparition) and Church authorities take the issue of authenticity very seriously.

carefully compared. A kind of methodological skepticism is exercised. The events seem to keep open towards various and typically contradictory explanations. Different versions of reality *are seriously and without haste considered as possibly real*: mental disorder of the visionaries, cheating, seeking personal benefits, devil's work, and, of course, more and more, the initiative of Virgin Mary. So here it finally is: a kind of symmetrical approach enacted by those we study. [65]

Of course, the commission is neither the only nor the decisive actor of the entire assessment process. Without various forms of the pilgrim apparition work (DAVIS & BOLES, 2003), i.e., without thousands of both the regular and occasional visitors coming even today to the place, praying, singing and glorifying God, participating in services, witnessing spiritual and physical recoveries, there would have been no such commission, no such careful examination.²⁸ As for many practical matters relating to what happens each day on the mountain, the fact that the final decision is still on the way (and nobody can expect it in the near future)²⁹ does not really matter. Or better, it does matter, but in a positive sense: the suspended final statement *allows* the Church to actively participate in the gatherings, to manage, control and cultivate popular religiosity in action. Despite the lack of an official statement whether the apparitions were genuine or not, a chapel has been built on the place. Church services are provided regularly. The place was officially declared by the Church as the "place of prayer" and, later on, in 2008, as a Marian pilgrimage site. And so on. [66]

All these actions aimed at cultivation of the pilgrimage site do not take place in separation from the main question to be solved by the commission. In an important way, they validate and make publicly evident the truth of the apparition. The continuing presence of pilgrims, the new sacral architecture, the increasing interest of the Church, the recovery stories told and circulating—all these things can effectively be (and actually *are*) taken as signs of the divine power and grace behind. Thus, we can see that the truth of these apparition does not consist of what happened somewhere "inside" the visionaries (inside their souls, hearts, minds or brains), at least not so much, not only. Rather, it is practically produced and reinforced by countless subsequent contributions of "many hands"—i.e., by empirically observable presences, actions, and mediations. By the surface of events. [67]

6. In Conclusion

Our approach was generally valued well by the interviewed priests. They took it as a sign of our interest in "serious talk" across domains and as an articulation of principal fairness, of an unprejudiced attitude. All in all, they gave us a rather favorable feedback. But while accepted as a kind of "reasonable Other," we felt also misunderstood. Or to put it better, we realized, during the analysis, that the

28 As HVIDT (2007, p.299) aptly puts it on this issue: "If all Christians should wait for the judgment of the church, it would never start investigating."

29 The local commission only gathers evidences and makes recommendation, which is to be subsequently sent to Vatican. Only there the main decision would be taken. The procedures do not usually have time limits and may take extremely long.

principle of symmetry has been translated by our interviewees into something rather "nice" and similar, but in fact misleading. And this was also reflected in how the priests talked about some limitations of our approach from their perspective. The presented article is an attempt to disentangle the misunderstanding and thus also to contribute to wider sociological debates on the symmetry principle and on various forms of reflexive, co-operative qualitative inquiry. [68]

Let us emphasize, that the misunderstanding about symmetry was harmless, and in fact productive. "Interest in serious talk," "principal fairness," or "unprejudiced attitude" are qualities we do want and are pleased to be associated with. They can be taken as virtues of a good conversation partner and, as such, they enable one to develop and maintain mutually rewarding research relationship. Further, it is true that these qualities somehow belong to the symmetrical approach (as we see it), perhaps as its "side-effects." [69]

For us, the challenging puzzle to be solved was that our interviewees hesitated to accept such an approach as something relevant for themselves and for the mission of their Church. First, they saw the approach fatally limited to observable things on the surface of the world, so to speak. As such, they considered it necessarily ineffective face to face with the inner spiritual reality of religion, which remains inaccessible. Second, and in some relation to the first, the interviewees considered our approach useful and powerful as a basic cognitive setup, but only until a certain moment—namely, up to the point when crucial issues of faith (understood religiously, from within the Christian context) come to the fore. Once a person becomes Christian, the radical openness toward various possible versions of reality is not desirable anymore. In other words, the view of a priest or a worshiper seems far away from the perspective of an agnostic lawyer (from the story of Emily Rose) or a social scientist. [70]

We found such an interpretation of the symmetry principle to be an interesting part of the problem. Being confronted with what the priests said, we more fully realized that symmetry cannot be reduced to a cautiously balanced view of things. And it cannot be fully translated into some tentative attitude of suspended decidability, which does not fit well with real engagement in the world (and can only precede it). We saw it in the interviews. The priests themselves documented by numerous examples from their own practice that basic, initial attitudes and perceptions look differently. They are normally, typified, routinized, tacitly framed and action-oriented (as described already by SCHUTZ, 1967). Thinking invisibly depends upon our institutions (DOUGLAS, 1987). In situations of the "first contact" and of daily routine, when parishioners come to tell their more or less bizarre spiritual stories in the private space of parsonage, the pastors react quickly, without any sign of openness toward all possible interpretations. No symmetrical approach is in use here. Not typically, not visibly. [71]

Symmetry, as numerous empirical evidences suggest, gets typically mobilized at other occasions. It starts making sense, above all, when taken-for-granted order gets disrupted, things cease running smoothly and important issues become publicly at stake—such as during the court trial depicted in the Emily Rose story.

Or, when pilgrims are suddenly coming in thousands to the site of alleged Marian apparition in Litmanová, the situation transcends established routines and the church has to react. Incommensurable positions must be reconciled in such a situation, at least partly and temporarily, with as little harm as possible for thousands of worshipers, for the church and its public image, for experts involved, for the visionaries, for the Bible and Virgin Mary, but also for the scientific world view, daily village life, national self-esteem, pilgrimage economy and so on. [72]

This is a delicate task for the church commission, indeed. Does the commission *clearly and immediately* see whether the apparition was authentic or not? Does it have some mysterious direct access to the inner religious reality of the respective events? Perhaps its individual members do—but even then they cannot produce an official statement on such a basis. Only the commission as a body can make the statement. To do so, it has to count people, transcribe recordings, compare texts, collect testimonies, and study historical documents and pictures. It has to travel, participate, observe, and talk. Does that mean that the commission is interested in mere "surface" phenomena, in an outside reality? Not at all, of course. Deeply spiritual matters are at stake here, some of the very essential elements of the Christian faith. [73]

In short, the work of this church commission in Litmanová can be used as a nice counterexample to what our four interviewees assumed about the relevance of the symmetrical approach from within religious perspective. As was shown during our analysis of our focused discussions with Catholic priests, we were able to find partial counterexamples even there, between the lines of their politely skeptical remarks. The priest's miscomprehension of the symmetry principle has helped us better understand in what kind of situations "symmetry" makes sense—even from within the religious perspective. [74]

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