THE CASE OF ROBERT BACHMAN—A STUDY IN THE PSYCHOLOGY OF RELIGION¹

BY W. W. RICHARDSON, M.D.

NORRISTOWN, PA.

The case of Robert Bachman, the so-called "Devilchaser" of Northampton Co., Pa., presents some points of unusual interest and for that reason is deemed worthy of record.

The father was a man of temperate habits, was active in the Reformed Church at one period of his life, but for the past fifteen years took no interest in the church. He died recently at seventy-four years. The mother exhibits no unusual mental nor religious tendencies and is in good health at seventy years.

The patient is the sixth child in a family of seven. He does not measure up to the mental caliber of his brothers (several of whom have gone to college), though the patient was given the same opportunities. He went to school until 14 years of age and states that he had to study hard for what other pupils learned easily and often copied from others in order to get along in school. When asked how Robert was different from the other brothers, one of them said that he always had too much to say, or "slopped over," to quote the exact expression. He has had hay fever occasionally and gonorrhea at 21 years of age. Syphilis denied. Has used alcohol very sparingly.

Bachman was a farmer until eight years ago, when he became a millwright in the cement mills and rose later to be master mechanic, earning over \$100 per month. Was married at 28 years of age and is now 35 years old. The first child died at nineteen months from pneumonia and seemed normal. The second child was born some five months after his admission to the hospital and is very healthy in appearance.

Bachman was confirmed in the Lutheran Church at 16 years of age, but experienced no religious excitement at this time; was a Sunday-school teacher at 24 years of age and took a rather active interest in church work. Later, however, he at-

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tended less regularly and has gone to church very little in the past few years.

In January, 1908, he was one evening playing cards and drinking a little with friends, when one of them mentioned that a common friend had been converted. Bachman for some reason was interested, and in the morning sought the converted friend. The story was told and Bachman was instructed to read his Bible. He became convinced that he had not been living right, cancelled an engagement to play cards that night and read the Bible with his wife instead (his wife coöperating readily). He now read the Bible whenever he had the time, and finally asked for a leave of absence from work that he might more fully search the Scriptures.

It was during this period that he saw a vision in the sky, of "angels-of-light," whereupon emissaries from the devil, which were darker, came up from below to obscure the angels of light but could not. His wife, sitting near, did not see the vision. He soon began to talk of his new-found religion to his brother-in-law, Mr. Smith, and the latter and wife quickly took up the same ideas. There was now a little group of these worshipers who called themselves by no special name but read the New Testament and made their own interpretations. All of them appear to have been people very much of Bachman's own mental caliber. They met during April, 1908, at Bachman's house, on a Sunday, and held a service, but it is denied by all present that there was manifested any excessive or unusual religious excitement.

Finally on Saturday, April 25, the brother-in-law Smith, his wife and their five-year-old little girl, Irene May Smith, came to spend a few days with the Bachmans. Smith then related how he had had the "second coming of Christ" in his heart that day at home and told how it affected him. On the way over Mrs. Smith had gone through the same experience, so that the husband and child had to get out of the buggy until the ordeal was over. Upon the horse becoming unruly at this time it was attributed to the devils who were leaving Mrs. Smith and entering the animal.

Bachman felt some surprise that the Smiths, who had so recently been converted, should have gotten "farther along"

than he. The Smiths told him it was because he didn't humble himself sufficiently and couldn't wholly give up the world.

The next morning (Sunday), while they were discussing religion, Bachman felt the "second coming of Christ" and retired to his room, where he went through various gestures and movements indicative of the casting out of the devils in him by the Spirit of God. Mrs. Bachman, later in the day, passed through the same experience.

During this time all four had frequent "visions." The one having a vision would suddenly stop talking, become motionless and perhaps place the hands over his eyes. Some visions lasted as long as an hour. During the vision no attention was paid to questions, though the subject was conscious of what was going on about him. The "New Jerusalem," "the second coming of Christ" and various heavenly objects were seen.

Monday afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Smith were "swept and garnished," this consisting in first falling slowly to the floor, lying motionless, then rolling about and kicking the furniture and other objects in the room. Bachman and his wife likewise passed through this experience a few hours later. During all this time meals were very irregular. The Spirit told them when to eat and they assembled without being called.

The child was in and out, but spent most of the time at the neighbors, stating that she was afraid of her father and uncle because of their looks and actions. On Monday afternoon the child came in several times, playfully offering each one in turn leaves, flowers and other trifles. They construed these as temptations from the devil to lure them from their new-found faith and the child was his instrument. Each time she offered anything they beat upon their knees and went through contortions to keep out the devils, at the same time ordering the child out so roughly that she was frightened.

About dark Mr. and Mrs. Smith retired to their room where Bachman found them crying. Smith explained that he cried because he couldn't give up the world and Bachman tried to cheer him. The child now appeared and went over to the bed where her parents lay. Bachman pushed the child roughly away. Again she approached and again he pushed her, this time to the floor. At this juncture the Smiths arose and began smashing the furniture in the room, Bachman encouraging them to go

ahead and thus drive out the devils. Bachman himself now knelt over the prostrate child, taking her neck in his grasp. Once she spoke, mentioning the name of God which only aroused him the more, as he felt that she was wholly possessed of devils which, through her, were using God's name in vain. The others soon left him in the room alone with the child, and he remained in the same position upon the child for hours, during which time the child's death was accomplished. He said afterward that he had no idea of the passage of time, but heard later that it was about two o'clock when the others entered. He heard Smith outside say "this is the devil's work" and he knew from this remark that Smith had gone back and had lost God.

Bachman has stated that, while sitting upon the child, the impulse came to kill her to drive out the devils and send the child to heaven instead of to hell, and thus to save them all from the temptations coming to them through her. While kneeling he was calling upon the devils to leave the child. The impulse to kill came, he felt, from God, though he did not hear God's voice nor see Him.

The next day when arrested he was still having some visions, but his condition soon became calmer. In prison he showed little of his former excitement, and was not specially exalted except when questioned as to his beliefs.

When examined by the writer May 21 (three weeks after the tragedy) he gave the above account with little hesitancy and no display of emotion except a slight exaltation when discussing his religious views. He had no regrets in the whole matter except that the others faltered at the last and did not keep the faith. In regard to his future he was in God's hands. He felt that there could be no turning back and that he must go on. To go back would be to go into torment. His creed was simple and consisted in following the teachings of the New Testament as closely as possible and abjuring the regular churches. One should not wear ornaments as being temptations to a worldly life. His account was perfectly coherent and he at no time showed embarrassment nor inability to express his thought.

It may be said here that Mrs. Bachman and Mr. and Mrs. Smith were kept in prison for a short time and then were allowed to return to their homes. Evidently they were awakened to the true relation of things by Bachman's act, and it is

certain that, whatever vestiges of their former views these three may entertain, they are not now insane and probably suffered only from religious hysteria of epidemic and transient type.

Bachman, having been declared insane by a commission in lunacy, was admitted to the State Hospital for the Insane at Norristown, June 5, 1908.

His condition and attitude of mind remained apparently unchanged for some months and it was not until December, 1908 (six months after admission), that any change in his views could be noted. In two examinations, some days apart, by different observers, it was noted that he showed distinct emotion, even to tremor and at time tearfulness, when speaking of his trouble. Referring to his crime, he said he must have been influenced by a higher power than his own and, if that power was God, as the patient believed it was, then there could be no sin—"but," he added, "if it was the power of the devil, then of course it was a great sin." This is the first admission from him of even the possibility of error on his part. He admitted that he had read the Bible too much at home and had gone into the matter of religion too deeply and that it probably had influenced him the same as too close attention to any subject would have done. He was willing to admit the possibility that he might have been temporarily unbalanced at the time of the murder, though he could not himself see things in that light. He stated that he was under a great nervous strain when visiting his father some days before the crime and knew that he was not altogether himself.

No marked change in his mental attitude has been detected since that time, though some statements recently made indicate further renunciation of his former position. In a conversation held nearly a year after the ones above reported, he stated that he and his wife had lived in a very narrow circle all their lives and that he had never realized how ignorant they were of life and the relations of things until he came to Norristown. He said he had known nothing of insanity nor what insane people were like. Since coming here he had had much opportunity to learn what insanity meant and to compare himself with others whom he knew to be insane. While he still felt that his act was not wrong for the reason that his motives were pure and that he had no evil thoughts against the child, still he tacitly admitted

the probability that he was not mentally sound when he killed the child. At this conversation it was noted also that he was under a considerable emotional strain and that he felt the subject a painful one, thus showing a striking contrast to his early readiness of speech about the matter.

Since his admission to the institution he has been a model patient in every respect, working faithfully and efficiently wherever placed and showing much enjoyment in the day's work, especially when out-of-doors or about machinery, for which he has an aptitude. He is extremely tactful and courteous in all his relations with both patients and officials. He never discusses his troubles with anyone unless questioned and then only with the physicians.

In a careful search of the literature for similar cases I was able to find no case of a precisely analogous character. The following cases, however, show points of resemblance and were reported by Dr. Henry M. Hurd in the Annual Report of the Eastern Michigan Hospital for Insane for the year 1884, Dr. Hurd being at that time superintendent of the Michigan institution.

Two sisters were admitted to the hospital at the same time with the following history: There was a strong neurotic taint in the family including imbecility, epilepsy and alcoholism. The brothers and sisters of the patients were below the average intellectually. The one patient was never bright and had had two attacks of depression prior to this attack. After marriage, and immediately after childbirth, she was in a morbid mental state for five months before the outbreak to be described. The sudden death of a niece, from epilepsy, coupled with the supposed suspicious acts of the patient's husband at the same time, suggested to the ignorant family the probability of witchcraft as the cause of death. The patient, already probably insane, began to experience hallucinations of smell and taste, fancied herself to be suffocating, heard strange sounds; all of which phenomena were attributed to witchcraft.

Soon other members of the family had similar experiences and within a few days all the ten adult members of the household were having precisely the same symptoms. They cut little pieces from the fingers and toes of the first patient in order to keep her blood running, believing that, if the blood stopped, life would

be extinguished through witchcraft. They fired guns through the windows and did many other strange things to keep out the witches. A physician who went to investigate was stabbed, through their fears of harm, and finally the whole family was arrested and a lunacy inquiry followed. The first-named patient and the sister who had done the stabbing were committed to the hospital. As soon as they were removed, the rest of the family dropped their delusions and in a few days were able to return home.

The second sister, who was feeble-minded and superstitious by education, relinquished her delusions in a few weeks and was permitted to return to her home and household duties. The first patient was still under treatment when the report was written, but a year or so later was taken home in an improved condition.

Dr. Hurd concludes his description as follows: "In this instance, all the delusions, which were entertained by other members of the family, were unquestionably derived from the one insane woman. Had she been surrounded by persons of healthy minds and fair education, who possessed the ability to discern the results of disease, it is probable that the insanity of the first sister would not have extended beyond herself."

The similarity between this group of cases and the Bachman case will be readily noted, in each there being the basis of ignorance and superstition and the ready susceptibility to suggestion, leading up finally to acts of violence, with the rapid disappearance of the morbid state in most of those affected.

Although there are numerous accounts in history of outbreaks of epidemic convulsions and other nervous and mental manifestations; usually of religious origin, very few of these accounts mention any actual cases of permanent insanity as having resulted. The elder Edwards (1) has left an account of the nervous disorders which accompanied the revivals of religion in New England from 1735-1742. Many instances are given of fainting, falling, trance, numbness, outcries and convulsions and he relates that some of the subjects "lost their reason."

In a most interesting account of the remarkable epidemic convulsions of religious origin which occurred in Kentucky and reached their height about the year 1800, Yandel (1) states that "notwithstanding the intensity and duration of the nervous dis-

order, no instance is recorded in which permanent insanity resulted."

In a lay account of the great revival of 1859 in Ireland by Archbishop Stopford (2) the writer describes many cases of morbid religious excitement and makes the statement that there were observed twenty cases of positive insanity of a "hysterical kind." The duration of these cases, however, is not stated and whether by modern tests they would be regarded as really insane is problematical.

To understand the crime of Bachman it is necessary to know the environment of the man. It is well known that among the Germans residing in eastern Pennsylvania, especially in certain sections of Lancaster, Berks, Lehigh, Montgomery and Northampton counties, there are numerous small religious sects, many of which hold very peculiar views. No farther away than Reading there is said to be a band of the "Holy Rollers," who, at the height of their religious excitement, roll about on the floor, shouting and singing, until exhausted. Witchcraft and demonology are common beliefs and the "pow-pow" man does a thriving business. To illustrate: the wife of one of my patients, apparently a woman of average intelligence, brought me a piece of cloth which she had had "pow-powed" by a "pow-pow" man, who assured her that if the cloth were laid upon her husband's pillow for a certain number of nights, it would cure his insanity. It is even asserted that in the section of Northampton County where Bachman lived, there are women who, believing themselves to be witches, sell "hoodoos," and that witch-dances are held upon a certain hill in which dances men and women participate, and in which rites very similar to those of the ancient Druids are observed.

With this brief statement of the atmosphere of superstition and religious fanaticism in which Bachman lived, the origin of his beliefs and crime is rendered more comprehensible.

Searching more closely for an explanation of his deed, the ignorance of the man should be given full consideration. When an ignorant man of unstable disposition searches the Scripture for many days he is likely to make too literal interpretations thereof and come to grief. It will be remembered that on the afternoon before the homicide the Smiths and, later, Bachman, had been "swept and garnished" and that earlier they had all

seen the "second coming of Christ," been purified and had forsaken the world. If I may be pardoned, I will here quote verses 43, 44 and 45 from the twelfth chapter of Matthew.

"43. When the unclean spirit is gone out of a man, he walketh through dry places, seeking rest and finding none.

"44. Then he saith, I will return unto my house from whence I came out; and when he is come, he findeth it empty, *swept and garnished*.

"45. Then goeth he and taketh with himself *seven other spirits* more wicked than himself and they enter in and dwell there; and the last state of that man is worse than the first."

Here, then, we see the scriptural foundation for the ceremony of being "swept and garnished" and, furthermore, we find an explanation for the great fear of being pursued by devils which *just at this stage* began to concern them. For the rest of the day they were apparently largely occupied, through their literal interpretation of this passage, in keeping the devils from entering into them, they having been purified and sanctified. The little girl in her innocent play offered them leaves and flowers and from that moment was considered the agent of the devil and was spurned as a contaminated thing.

Beard (3) in his analysis of the factors leading up to the Salem Witchcraft makes the following pertinent statement: "The weaker and more immature the mind, the further it extends its imaginings and the less it heeds what is immediately about us. This law of the *correlation of feebleness of mental force* with *immensity of imaginings* is universal; the less we know, the more we dream—such is the psychology of witchcraft"—again, "for the undeveloped mind nature is too mean and small a thing; only in the supernatural can there be found proper food for emotions."

A proper interpretation of the term religion will also aid us materially in understanding Bachman's deed. Religion *per se* is a different thing from morality. In the early ages, religious rites were frequently anything but moral and this is seen among savages of the present day. Morality was added as an adjunct to religion as the race developed. Whenever, even in the present day, religion becomes fanatical, it becomes selfish, the moral element may largely disappear and cruelty reigns.

To quote from Ribot (4): "The religious sentiment and the

moral sentiment, though having numerous points of contact and moments of fusion, are yet, in their nature, essentially distinct. Primarily, the religious feeling is a special emotional form, the moral feeling is another form. A mass of facts demonstrate that in the beginning the religious feeling is not only quite a stranger to morality but even in conflict with it. Contemporary criminologists have shown that prostitutes and even ferocious criminals are most assiduous in their devotional pastimes. This is because the religious feeling, in its origin and taken by itself, is fundamentally selfish, being nothing else but anxiety for one's individual salvation. The superposition of the moral sentiment has taken place in all the great religions." These observations throw light upon the apparently wanton cruelty of Bachman's act. His religious exaltation was selfish, cruel, pitiless, he being chiefly intent upon protecting from contamination himself and his companions.

Why, then it may be asked, did not Bachman return to a normal mental attitude if his deed was only the cruel act of a misguided fanatic, performed at the culmination of a religious frenzy? It might naturally be supposed that, after a few days, the excitement having subsided, he would repudiate his act and see its folly. A key to the explanation is to be found in Bachman's own words to the writer when examined about three weeks after the crime. After his description of the crime and when asked as to his future, he said that he regarded himself as clay in the hands of God to be dealt with as God might wish. He felt that there could be no turning back now and that he must go on. To go back *would be to go into torment*. The conserving power of nature here has evidently asserted itself. To fall from the heights of religious exaltation and bliss suddenly into an acute remorse for his terrible deed would have been more than any ordinary mind (much less, Bachman's) could have withstood and the result would have been perhaps a violent acute insanity. In the language of the psychologist, a "defense-reaction" was set up to avoid this mental catastrophe and the intense religious excitement gradually simmered down to a mild exaltation which lasted for many months and finally seems to have largely disappeared after the lapse of nearly two years. This transition was aided no doubt by the suggestions of those in whom he had confidence but was probably more dependent upon

his own observations of the mental derangements of others, his broader contact with people in an entirely new environment and especially through the lapse of time.

It has been asserted that Bachman is a religious paranoiac. To the writer this view is untenable for many reasons. While Bachman was deeply interested in religion he was not the leader in the various manifestations at his home, but followed the lead of Smith and his wife in having "visions," being "swept and garnished," etc. Therefore he cannot be said to have been the paranoic leader of a band of weaker minds.

The rapid onset of the psychosis is certainly opposed to our conception of the classical picture of paranoia with its very gradual development.

Again, there has been absolutely no development of that exaltation and self-importance which we have learned to associate with religious pananoia. On the contrary, during the past year there have been many evidences of increasing insight into his condition and a realization of the awfulness of his deed on the part of the patient. The early exaltation has entirely disappeared.

Whereas, the religious paranoiac is usually ready and anxious to parade his views before the world, Bachman is sensitive and retiring and never mentions his trouble unless questioned. Everything indicates that his interest in his family and the affairs of the institution is such that he rarely thinks of religious matters. While in the beginning he sometimes asked for a Bible he never does so now and seems to have no desire to read it. It seems to me certain, after much study of the case, that there has been absolutely no development of systematized delusions of a paranoiac nature which, if present, should now be more firmly fixed and conspicuous than ever. The history of all such epidemic hysterias or insanities is that they are nearly always transient or at least not permanent. Had Bachman not perpetrated the crime through mistaken religious zeal it seems certain that his mental disturbance would have subsided as rapidly as did that of the others.

Bachman is an anachronism. Had he lived centuries ago when babes were sacrificed in the religious rites of the Druids and others, when morality was not developed and ignorance of all things was widespread, when demonology and witchcraft were

the prevalent beliefs, he would not have been considered insane nor his acts strange.

He lacks poise and, by the testimony of those near him, has evidently always been an extremist. Just as he always had "slopped over" in his talk, so here he "slopped over" in his deed—and committed crime.

As to the proper pigeon-hole in the classification for such a case as this it is not easy to decide, but in view of the epidemic nature of the whole manifestation, the absence of delusions at present and the tendency toward recovery of a normal mental tone, a diagnosis of hysterical insanity of the epidemic type seems the only one justifiable.²

REFERENCES

1. D. W. Yandel. "Epidemic Convulsions," *American Practitioner*, Dec., 1881.
2. Stopford. "The Work and the Counter-Work," Dublin, 1859.
3. Geo. M. Beard. "The Psychology of the Salem Witchcraft."
4. Th. Ribot. "The Psychology of the Emotions," p. 325.
5. Art. "Religion," "Epidemic Insanity," *Dict. Psych. Medicine-Tuke*.

² Since writing this paper my attention has been called by Dr. A. R. Moulton to a case which is identical in many respects with the one here reported (see "Case of Chas. F. Freeman, of Pocasset, Mass.," by C. F. Folsom, M.D., *American Journal of Insanity*, Vol. 40, p. 353). This man, an Adventist, after months of religious contemplation, killed his little child in the belief that the Lord had commanded him, as he commanded Abraham, to sacrifice his beloved child. The next day he announced to his fellow Adventists that the child was to arise on the third day. His wife also became imbued with these beliefs. He was arrested, indicted, but upon testimony as to his insanity, was sent to the Danvers Hospital for treatment. Three years later application was made for a trial, much medical testimony being introduced to show that the man had recovered. He was tried and was declared "not guilty by reason of insanity." According to the Massachusetts law of that time, he was sentenced to the Danvers Hospital for life, although admitted to be entirely sane. Some four years later he was released upon a governor's pardon. I am informed that he then went to a distant city, changed his name and prospered in business. He never had a return of his mental disorder.