

Religion Today
October 9-15, 2005
The Exorcism of Emily Rose
Robert Torry

The recent horror film, "The Exorcism of Emily Rose," is loosely based on an incident that took place in the early 1970s in Wurzburg, Germany. It received significant press coverage at the same time the blockbuster film, "The Exorcist," arrived in German theatres. "Emily Rose" then, might be profitably understood as a movie about events shaped by a movie.

As in "The Exorcist," the devil has possessed a young girl, Emily Rose, a devout Catholic from a small Minnesota farming community. In the new film, a valiant priest struggles on her behalf with the powers of darkness. Her death in the course of the exorcism leads to criminal charges being leveled against the priest, and the courtroom drama that ensues pits the religious interpretation of Emily's tragedy against the authority of modern medicine.

This contest in "Emily Rose" recalls that Regan, the possessed girl at the center of "The Exorcist," undergoes a number of medical tests to determine the cause of her symptoms prior to church representatives finally determining her condition is a supernatural rather than medical problem.

"The Exorcist" shows little ambiguity concerning the cause of Regan's trouble. Indeed, it powerfully affirms that the possession is genuine and that only the intervention of religious specialists can effectively deal with the case.

"The Exorcism of Emily Rose," by contrast, leaves a bit more wiggle room. Emily may well be possessed by a demon, perhaps by the devil himself, but the clashing testimony in the trial allows for a medical/psychiatric explanation of her condition. The trial features a difference of opinion between one psychiatrist who contends that Emily's condition can be explained solely within medical terms and another who accepts a supernatural explanation. It also

features testimony by an anthropologist who argues for an acceptance of possession, whether supernatural in cause or not, based upon its wide occurrence in many cultures and historical periods. The anthropologist argues for the effectiveness of a cure produced by the ritual of exorcism.

Thus while "The Exorcism of Emily Rose" is indebted to "The Exorcist," it is less committed to an insistence upon the supernatural. By presenting both sides as equivalent, the scientific and the religious, it echoes the current cultural debates involving Intelligent Design. The film adapts the stance taken by the advocates of teaching Intelligent Design in American public schools in tandem with teaching evolution. After all, the argument goes, each is a theory, and students should be apprised of the putative intellectual "options" available.

Similarly, the film suggests, juries, like students, should have access to explanatory discourses radically removed from those developed by materialist science and a rationalist legal system. However comforting some may find this postmodern denial of the universal validity of any "master narrative," what would the reaction be if the film depicted a trial approached from a slightly different supernatural perspective? Imagine a film depicting a witchcraft trial arguing for at least a consideration of the sort of "spectral evidence" accepted by the judges in Salem. If the supernatural can be adduced, as "Emily Rose" seems to suggest, in a legal defense, how about its being employed by state prosecutors as the basis of a criminal charge?

Torry is an associate professor who teaches film and popular culture courses in the UW Department of English. Past