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## The Last Exorcism

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# The Last Exorcism

## **Abstract**

This is a review of *The Last Exorcism* (2010).

*The Last Exorcism* is a faux documentary about an exorcism in rural Louisiana. Since *The Blair Witch Project* (1999), this has proved to be a highly successful premise for low budget horror films. *The Last Exorcism* cost only \$2 million to make, yet earned \$21.3 million its first weekend. The story follows Cotton Marcus (Patrick Fabian) a Charismatic minister and exorcist. Although Marcus has apparently lost his faith, he continues the family business of performing exorcisms using his father's book of demonology. Marcus does not believe in demons and callously uses slight of hand to produce frightening effects for his paying clients. However, he justifies this deception, arguing that he is providing peace of mind to superstitious people. Marcus is forced to reassess his practice when he reads about a boy who was accidentally smothered during an exorcism. Horrified, he agrees to perform one final exorcism with two documentary filmmakers in order to reveal to the public that exorcism is a sham. But when the film crew answers a letter requesting an exorcism, they begin to suspect that a girl's possession may be genuine.

This film contains many of the same themes as *The Exorcist* (1974). In both films the hero is a holy man who has lost his faith and believes in medical science more than the concept of demonic possession. Marcus not only mentions *The Exorcist* during the faux documentary, his staged ritual involving props and special effects is largely a re-enactment of this film. Despite this, *The Last Exorcism* is not

derivative. In fact, (barring its supernatural elements) it is a realistic portrayal of the culture of exorcism that has formed in America since *The Exorcist*. As Marcus explains early in the film, in the twenty-first century exorcism is more popular than ever. Furthermore, most modern exorcisms are performed not by Catholic priests, but by Charismatic and Pentecostal ministers. Sadly, the detail of the child smothered during an exorcism is also based on true events. In 2003 an autistic boy, Terrance Contrell Jr., was accidentally suffocated to death during an exorcism. A similar incident occurred in 1976.

Other details show that *The Last Exorcist* is a well-researched film. Nell (Ashley Bell), the possessed farmer's daughter, exhibits symptoms that have been part of exorcism lore since the 16th century, such as the ability to predict someone's death. She also contorts herself into a classic position associated with possession called "the hysterical arch." Bell has described doing extensive research for the role, including interviewing people who claim to have suffered genuine possession.

The hero's name, Cotton Marcus, appears to be a reference to Cotton Mather, the famous Puritan minister. Like Marcus, Mather preached at the same church where his father Increase had. He also wrote on witchcraft and demonology and served as a consultant during the Salem Witch Trials. The book of demonology Marcus uses is written in Latin, suggesting it may have been handed down from a

learned Puritan-like Mather. This detail reminds us that demonology has always been a consistent and enduring aspect of American culture.

The film also illustrates how popular belief in exorcism is frequently embedded in a web of occult lore and urban legend. The people of Ivanwood, Louisiana where the exorcism occurs are shown talking about such phenomena as cattle mutilations, UFOs, and Satanic cults. These tropes have been staples of Satanic conspiracy theories in America since the 1960s. Indeed, the film's denouement appears to be an homage to *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) as well as many lesser Satanic conspiracy films of the 1970s.

*The Last Exorcism* appears to be aimed at people like Cotton Marcus, modernists who can see popular belief in the supernatural all around them, but dismiss these ideas as provincial and ignorant. The film succeeds by exploiting nagging doubts that our rational worldview could be wrong and that the people we dismiss as superstitious could actually be right. On the other hand, a confrontation with supernatural evil suggests that God too is worthy of belief.