



April 2006

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Recommended Citation

Yarri, Donna (2006) "The Exorcism of Emily Rose," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol10/iss1/5>

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The Exorcism of Emily Rose

Abstract

This is a review of *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005).

This film is based on the purportedly true story of a religiously devout college-age Catholic girl whom she and her family believe is possessed by a demon. The focus of the story is the trial of Fr. Richard Moore (Tom Wilkinson), who has been charged with criminally negligent homicide for the death of Emily Rose (Jennifer Carpenter), which occurred as a result of her exorcism under his care. As the trial proceeds, Emily's story is told, from her early affliction by demons; to the physical, emotional and spiritual suffering she experienced; to her eventual hospitalization; and then to the ultimate exorcism, which results in her death. Fr. Moore's principal concern while on trial is not escaping jail as much as being granted the opportunity to "tell Emily's story," which we discover near the end of the film in Fr. Moore's reading of the letter Emily wrote on the day after the exorcism. Emily reports her experience of having spoken with the Virgin Mary, who apparently gave her the choice of leaving behind her suffering, or staying on earth and showing others the way to the spiritual realm. Emily receives the stigmata as a result of this encounter, which Fr. Moore claims to have seen. The basic issue the film raises is whether or not Emily was indeed possessed by demons, or whether she was simply mentally ill.

This film inevitably invites comparison with the very popular and well-known film on demon possession made in 1973, *The Exorcist*. In viewing and comparing these two films, one wonders why the latter was even deemed necessary,

considering how similar the stories are. Both had young seemingly innocent and sweet girls who exhibit bizarre, inexplicable behavior, including bodily contortions and speaking different languages. Both result in the performance of an exorcism, remarkably similar in content, and both deeply affect the priests involved. And yet in spite of the fact that *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* is based on a true story, the film does not engender any real feelings of sympathy either towards Emily or Fr. Moore. Rather, it has more the feel of a horror film, with a boring and uneventful trial, and a priest who seems rather odd. If one were interested in watching a film on demon possession, *The Exorcism* would be a far better choice, and watching it is still an excellent cinematic experience, even 30 years later.

In spite of its many weaknesses as a film, however, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* still raises a number of significant questions for religion, especially Christianity. Most obvious is whether or not demons exist. Many conservative Christians and Catholics as well believe in the reality of demons and subsequently demon possession, taking the Bible quite literally on this point. Most moderate and liberal Christians have accepted the demythologizing approach to the Bible of theologians such as Rudolf Bultmann, and have rejected demons as part of an outdated cosmology and worldview. In either case, the deeper question may be the relationship between mind and spirit. What does it mean to have a religious experience? Are all unusual and seemingly bizarre "religious" experiences simply

the result of mental illness? How do we truly "discern the spirit/s?" Certainly in at least the Roman Catholic tradition, visions and the stigmata are believed to be the province of the truly spiritual. Although we cannot prove that these experiences are legitimate religious ones, we cannot disprove them either. Ultimately, faith is a principal factor in answering these questions. The film also raises the issue of redemptive suffering. Are there certain humans chosen by God to suffer in unique ways in order to somehow instruct others in the spiritual life? While pain and suffering are certainly not experiences to be sought after for their own sake, perhaps they can and do have a religious significance beyond the merely physical and mental.

The Exorcism of Emily Rose ends with a shot of her epitaph, which quotes Philippians 2:12: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling." This passage also suggests the conclusions reached by the filmmaker of the reality of Emily's story and experience of demon possession. However, it also raises the question anew for each of us of what is meant by salvation, how it is attained, and what is the role of evil in this quest. Whether demons exist in reality or in our minds, this film reminds the religious among us that there is certainly more to spirituality than meets the mind.