

Ignorance, not the devil, is the root of all evil

“The Exorcism of Emily Rose” opened in theaters last week. It had a \$30 million weekend, more than triple its closest competitor. Because a simple horror film couldn’t have that kind of box office success, “Exorcism” was pitched as “based on a true story.” The real story, however, is very different. Very different, and very sad.

Her name was not Emily Rose, but Anneliese Michel. She was born in Klingenberg, Germany. She died in 1976 at the age of 23.

Anneliese’s life was a tragic convergence of nature and nurture. Had she been raised in a different home, she would have received medical treatment and, perhaps, been able to live a normal life. Had she not been afflicted with a terrible disease, she would have come home from college and married a nice German boy. Neither of those futures would come to pass.

Anneliese was raised in a fundamentalist Catholic sect. The Washington Post reported that she would atone for the sins of others by sleeping on a bare floor in the middle of winter. Time magazine’s original 1976 article described her walls covered with pictures of saints, a font of holy water by her door.

She had her first seizure at 16, and was diagnosed with grand mal epilepsy. She began to see demons in the faces of friends and to hear voices that told her she was doomed. Her parents became convinced she was possessed and called in parish priests for an exorcism. Medical treatment was discontinued.

During the last year of her life, Anneliese Michel endured 67 exorcisms. According to testimony and taped evidence, she spoke in the voices of six distinct demons, barked like a dog, ate insects and licked her own urine off the floor. She died of starvation; her parents and the priests were tried and convicted of negligent homicide. They all received suspended sentences.

You might think “that was three decades ago, it could never happen now.” You’d be wrong. Last June, Sister Maricica Cronici died while bound to a cross, left there for three days without food or water by a priest who was trying to “drive out her demons.” Further investigations revealed that before taking her vows, Maricica Cronici had a history of schizophrenia.



OPINION
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Sadly, exorcisms continue to be performed today. In my judgment, every single one is performed on people who are mentally or emotionally troubled, but whose troubles are completely rooted in the natural world. The ceremony can have a powerful effect, but that’s because everybody involved believes in it. That doesn’t make demons real, just belief in them.

That’s precisely why films like “The Exorcism of Emily Rose” do more harm than good: They encourage belief in demonic possession. After all, “The Exorcist” was released in Germany two years before Anneliese Michel died. Her taped voice during her exorcisms sounds like Linda Blair, and psychologists around the world reported huge increases in alleged demonic possession after the film opened in theaters. For every two steps forward that science tries to take us, Hollywood takes us one step back.

Nor is Hollywood above a creative touch or two to make a true story more interesting. The writers of “Emily Rose” added a few details missing from Anneliese’s life, details that conveniently make the supernatural case stronger. Or rather, they would if they weren’t complete fabrications.

It used to be that we didn’t know anything about natural phenomena, so people thought demons caused earthquakes and hurricanes. Nobody thinks that any more.

It used to be that we didn’t know anything about disease, so people thought demons made us sick. Nobody thinks that any more.

Right now, we don’t know much about the human mind, so people think demons can live there. Will we still believe that a hundred years from now? I think citizens of the 22nd century will say exactly the same thing: Nobody thinks that any more.

There are demons in the world, but they can’t be killed with Latin words and ancient rituals. They are the demons of poverty, fear, and ignorance. They can be banished only with the power of compassion, the act of courage, and the light of understanding. Perhaps someday, they’ll be playing at a theater near you. But not this week.

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