

Devil in the details: When faith is ruled by fear

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [November 1, 2005](#) issue

People say ‘God is dead.’ But how can they say that when I show them the devil?”

So asks Emily Rose in a note read after her death in ***The Exorcism of Emily Rose***. Emily explains from beyond the grave that the Virgin Mary appeared to her and offered to end her demonic possession by taking her life. But Emily chose to suffer in order to show the world that demons are real—and teach us that we’d all better behave.

The Exorcism of Emily Rose has taken a beating from the critics, who denigrate it as Christian propaganda. Its clear evangelical purpose is to scare the hell out of us. The proper postmodern retort to that complaint might be, “What movie is without an element of propaganda?” Nevertheless, this movie ends up being a B-grade courtroom thriller (full of A-list actors), with some religious horror tacked on.

The story of Emily’s possession, failed exorcism and ghastly death is told in a series of flashbacks during the trial of Father Richard Moore (played by the extraordinary Tom Wilkinson). Father Moore is accused of convincing Emily (Jennifer Carpenter) to stop taking her epilepsy medication. He did so because he believed her real problem was that she was possessed by six demons. The film portrays the priest as a more astute diagnostician than his secular accusers.

The flashbacks recall images from the 1973 film *The Exorcist*—unnatural contortions, primeval screams and futile efforts at restraint. Instead of spewing green bile, this possessed person eats bugs and sees frightening images in nature and other people. Her demonic captors refuse to budge despite Father Moore’s ritual entreaties. This leaves the not-exactly-hopeful impression that not only are demons real, the church can’t do much about it.

Defending Father Moore is a plucky agnostic, Erin Bruner (Laura Linney). The prosecutor is the no-nonsense Ethan Thomas (Campbell Scott), a “man of faith and a man of facts”—in fact, a Methodist. The courtroom drama moves to a predictable conclusion: the defense attorney’s doubt turns to faith while the worldly, mainline Protestant DA fumes at the judge for allowing evidence about demon possession:

“Why don’t we just read some monkey bones?” The judge allows Father Moore to testify at length about the details of exorcism and the nature of the forces of darkness. The defense scares up an anthropologist who argues that Emily’s medicine numbed the part of the brain that the exorcism ritual is meant to stimulate. Believers, 1; Skeptics, 0.

The Virgin is said to have predicted that many would come to faith through the girl whom Father Moore proclaims a saint. The closing scene informs us that her grave is still visited by many as a sort of shrine. We remember the film’s opening promise: it is “based on a true story.”

Loosely. The film adapts the story of a Bavarian girl named Anneliese Michel, who died of starvation after her parents and two priests tried for months to exorcise her demons in the mid-1970s. The bug-eating and shrieking are details from that story. The film shifts the story from Bavaria to a stark, rural Catholic America. We get the impression that Louisianans are converting to Christianity en masse at Emily’s graveside.

Theologically the film is even more wobbly. A crucial step in St. Augustine’s conversion, he says in his *Confessions*, was the intellectual demonstration that evil is not real. It exists only as a shadow of the good, like an eye that is designed to see but has been disabled. So on Augustinian grounds, this effort to prove God’s reality by proving the devil’s is completely backward. God alone is truly real. The devil exists only as a pretender to divinity, as one whose existence tends toward nothingness.

There may be a case to be made that Methodists and other rational types are too wary of the supernatural and too trusting of science. This film does not make that case. We incorrigibly unguillible believers will probably remain unworried by the smell of sulfur, the 3 a.m. witching hour, lots of cats and frightening figures in black robes. For what sort of faith would this film convert us to? One ruled by fear, one powerless against the forces of darkness, one that trusts in the demon-induced death of a God-appointed martyr. It has nothing to do with the goodness, beauty and peace of God that enchanted Augustine and has enchanted the church for 2000 years.