The Exorcism of Emily Rose

Erin Bruner: Laura Linney
Father Moore: Tom Wilkinson
Ethan Thomas: Campbell Scott
Doctor: Shohreh Aghdashloo
Emily Rose: Jennifer Carpenter
Karl Gunderson: Colm Feore
Judge Brewster: Mary Beth Hurt

directed by Scott Derrickson.
Written by Paul Harris Boardman and Derrickson.

Roger Moore  Orlando Sentinel

"Based on a true story." Yeah, right.
… the trial itself is perfunctory, playing as just a device, a means of legitimizing, for movie purposes, a scary superstition.

Derrickson gives unequal time to alternative explanations for Emily Rose's symptoms, something the faithful shoot down because science accepts uncertainty in the absence of all the facts in its pursuit of truth _ and faith, not needing proof or evidence, does not.

But again, this is a horror movie, not a dramatic study of some of the more primitive fringe beliefs of Catholicism. As horror, it's only mildly chilling. As anything more serious, it's half-hearted and intellectually not up to the challenge, great cast or no.

Chris Hewitt  Saint Paul Pioneer Press

"Exorcism's" premise _ that much of what goes unexplained in the world can be attributed to religious forces _ is an interesting approach to the idea of spiritual belief. Although "Exorcism" pays lip service to Scott's arguments, its sympathies are with the priest, who is dismayed by Emily's death but convinced he did the right thing.

I wish "Exorcism" pursued that theme more forcefully. There's a suggestion here that not only is the justice system ill-equipped to deal with questions of faith but also that religious belief is too often dismissed as mental illness (that idea is explored better in the movie "Fratley" and the book "Mariette in Ecstasy"). That's fascinating stuff, and the Scott and Linney characters provide a chance to deal with it, but "Exorcism" isn't willing to commit to exploring why a person might become convinced that God can help her more than doctors.

Robert W. Butler  The Kansas City Star

I can't believe I'm saying this, but sometimes a movie is too smart for its own good.

The result of all this is a case of split personality. Derrickson and company didn't want to make just a horror film _ they seem vaguely uncomfortable with the more lurid manifestations of possession.

As a result the film lacks the devastating visceral punch of "The Exorcist." And because the exorcism scenes occur in flashbacks sprinkled throughout the movie, their immediacy and shock value is diffused.

…there's no denying that in cultures around the world, spiritual possession is so common as to not merit special mention.

But by staking its claim in the middle ground, "Emily Rose" never quite delivers the goods. It'll get you thinking, no doubt. But emotionally it becomes bogged down in its own indecision.

Lisa Schwarzbaum  E.W.

… an intelligent inquiry into the limitations of belief and faith as a defense in a court of law woo-wooed up with a heaping of religious-girl-gone-mad compunction fits. Part Law & Order, part The Omen, the movie doesn't trust the audience to follow serious theological and legal discussion without a spook hook.

The defense contends--well, Erin doesn't know what to contend. To explain her shift from secular doubt to a newborn faith in her client's veracity, director Scott Derrickson and writing collaborator Paul Harris Boardman put the attorney through her own mild attack of spiritual demons… Unfortunately, by the time she comes to believe in the power of belief, my eyes had rolled back in my head.

David Denby  The New Yorker

A windy fake.

The frame of the movie consists of an austerely photographed court trial and a high-minded debate between, on one side, science and medicine and, on the other side, faith and a belief in demons. It's a Bush-era debate-guess which side wins?

Directed by Scott Derrickson, who wrote the ridiculous screenplay with Paul Harris Boardman. (In wide release.)

David Noh  Film Journal International

Paul Harris Boardman and Derrickson's script is a thing made of cheese, veering from a stereotypical view of Emily Rose's over-religious bumpkin family, whose household is overrun with the stray cats she was constantly adopting, to Bruner's career woes, as she sorrowfully broods over her future and the difficulty of her case over Tanqueray martinis, which she orders with the bark of "Dry!"

Donald Clarke  Irish Times

… the film loads its bases in such a shocking fashion that, rather than a balanced study of complicated issues of faith and jurisprudence, it rapidly takes on the quality of a piece of right-wing Christian propaganda.

During the case, Campbell Scott's dry prosecutor - diabolically logical, despite being a Christian - presents some unconvincing medical arguments to explain away these events. But the hysterical music and frenzied weather that accompany the girl's attacks leave us in no doubt as to the film-makers' view of her condition: this is not epilepsy.

Reinforcing the film's suitability for midnight screenings in the red states, the script introduces Linney as a decadent, childless (East Coast-educated, I bet) urban smartypants, who guzzles Martinis in rooftop bars after enabling murderers to walk free. Later she learns to accept the value of faith and replaces the Tanqueray with herbal tea. Meanwhile Emily Rose's family are depicted as decent hardworking people left behind by modernity.

The most outrageous moment arrives in the later stages of the film, when it is suggested, with apparent seriousness, that the dead girl, clearly nuttier than a crate of Snickers, may soon become a saint.
Yes, The Exorcism of Emily Rose is a Song of Bernadette for the Culture War years.

Peter T. Chattaway Books & Culture

For some, the existence of evil is one of the great arguments against the existence of God; for others, it is one of the great arguments in his favor.

…when Ethan [(Campbell Scott)] tells the jury that Father Moore's beliefs are rooted in "archaic and irrational superstition," one cannot help but wonder if he is also meant to represent Protestant hostility towards certain kinds of Catholic belief. The film distances us from Ethan in other ways, too. While we share certain private moments with Erin, Father Moore, and Emily herself, we never see Ethan outside the public spheres of the courtroom or the bar where the lawyers gather and sometimes do business—and where, in yet another distancing move, Ethan turns down an offered drink and asks for water instead.

…while the film does present arguments for both sides of the case, the viewer is still aware that the conversation is being steered in certain directions. Every time a witness describes the strange phenomena Emily saw, the voices that came from her mouth, or the contortions her body went into, another witness offers a scientific or naturalistic explanation, and it is left to the viewer to decide which of these explanations makes the most sense. Often, both explanations are depicted in flashback sequences, but the film has been sold as a horror movie, so the more sensational flashbacks are longer and better developed.

However, it would be wrong to say that The Exorcism of Emily Rose offers a clear apologetic for the faith. In fact, there is quite bit to this story that might give a Christian pause. Dr. Adani (Shohreh Aghdashloo), a cultural anthropologist who specializes in demonic possession, testifies that Emily died not because her priest told her to abandon her medical treatment, but because the drugs the doctors gave her interfered with the "psycho-spiritual shock" that exorcism is supposedly intended to provide. The viewer may be gratified to see the medical establishment's logic turned on its ear, but is this not another naturalistic explanation for what is supposed to be a supernatural matter? Does the power of Christ compel demons only when chemicals stay out of the way? We are also told that Emily was a devout Catholic, but many Christians would assert that baptized, Spirit-filled believers cannot be possessed by demons. Father Moore goes even further and says that Emily will one day be recognized as a saint precisely because she was possessed by demons. He bases this on Emily's claim to have seen the Virgin Mary, after which she experienced the stigmata. In a letter to Father Moore, Emily says the Virgin offered to take her into the afterlife, but she chose to stay behind and cope with the demons instead—and to refuse further treatment, including further rites of exorcism. "People say that God is dead," Emily writes, "but how can they say that if I show them the Devil?"

Thus the film spells out what was only implicit in The Exorcist: by proving the reality of evil, we can prove the existence of God. But there are problems with Emily's argument, not the least of which is that many cultures have believed in demons and wicked spirits without believing in the Almighty God of Judeo-Christian faith. (In the film itself, this point is underscored by Dr. Adani's cross-cultural testimony.) I am also reminded that Linney starred in another recent movie about alleged real-life supernatural events, The Mothman Prophecies (2002). That film was based on a book by occult specialist John A. Keel, which concludes with a quote attributed to Charles Fort, … "If there is a universal mind, must it necessarily be sane?" Thirty years ago, The Exorcist told a modern, mechanized world that the spiritual world is real. But today's postmodern world might need to hear something slightly different. Getting people to believe in the supernatural realm is one thing. Getting them to believe in God is something else.

This doesn't help that by the end none of the lengthy 'intellectual' arguments are resolved. Instead, the 'reasonable doubt' of courtroom judgement is merely tilted, to admit the possibility of supernatural forces we can't see.

… agnostic Linney ends up wearing a locket as a talisman against evil. Interesting that she doesn't resort to a cross. For a film about demonic possession, The Exorcism of Emily Rose remains fatally agnostic itself (a witness even testifies to the multicultural nature of possession). In their unfailing determination to cater to both believers and sceptics, Derrickson and co-writer Paul Harris Boardman don't so much keep open an uncanny sense of suggestion as fatally bleed their drama of suspense.

At a time when the President is asking for evangelical concepts like "intelligent design" to share equal time with evolutionary science, The Exorcism Of Emily Rose offers the dangerous proposition of hokum as an argument for faith.

To add an air of legitimacy, the filmmakers have conned a handful of first-rate actors into taking lead roles that might better have been left to provide 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.

Liese Spencer Sight & Sound

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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 unguessible believers will probably remain unwarried 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.

Scott Tobias Onion AV Club

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...the film initially takes a Rashomon-like approach to the flashbacks, immediately following a demonic visitation scene with its possible medical explanation. But it doesn't stay balanced for long.

At one point, Linney even argues against the role of facts in determining the outcome of the case, saying that they eliminate other possibilities. And while there's no doubt that those pecky facts are sullying the nation's courtrooms, The Exorcism Of Emily Rose gets this and other dubious points across by scaring them into people. Unlike the world's Stigmatas and Amityville Horrors, Emily Rose has an austerity that makes it more effective than other Exorcist rip-offs. The downside for the rational-minded is that it's also more persuasive.

Russell Brown  Getting Reel

Along the way, the movie attempts objectivity, but clearly the heroic characters are the devout, as the scientists are portrayed as cold, heartless nuts who don't possess the wisdom to think beyond their own test tubes. The prosecuting attorney, likewise, is an ice cube who claims to be a religious man, but in reality, we intuit that he pays lip service to God more than actually believing in him. With fire and brimstone courtroom theatrics, it's easy to see The Exorcism of Emily Rose as Inherit the Wind in reverse: the scientists are the zealots, the religious men are humanists, and in his case of faith vs. fact, God wins.

As a work of propaganda, The Exorcism of Emily Rose works undeniably well, proposing that because we can't prove that God doesn't exist, the result of that doubt must be a willingness to accept the possibility that he does, and all the resulting ramifications. It's somewhat simplified but equally foolproof, leaving little wiggle room for your run-of-the-mill liberal urban agnostic who won't listen to political arguments based on religious belief. And as audiences lap up the exciting thrills of a well-made horror flick, they also unknowingly are fed a convincing dogma, and just possibly, a viewer entering the theater who wasn't sure about natural selection or intelligent design might get subtly pushed to one side without knowing it. Indeed, it's become a trademark right-wing trick — the use of suggestion and implication, a creeping mindset that invades the psyche, planting ideas that stick in the subconscious.

But what works even better in The Exorcism of Emily Rose is the depiction of the emptiness of the modern, urban, agnostic lifestyle. ... The final image of the film is Bruner lying in bed after having just quit her job, gazing at the viewer, wondering how life will be changed by this experience. The audience senses that she will now lead an existence that is influenced by religion, but that her epiphany will be less about God and more about lifestyle — you guess that she's going to work less, find a husband, have some kids, and go to church. And this is the real genius of The Exorcism of Emily Rose: It's not so much the promotion of Christianity that's convincing, but rather the debunking of lifestyles not guided by a belief in a higher power that sticks in your mind.

In contrast [to The Exorcist], in The Exorcism of Emily Rose, order is represented by the devout (the nuclear Rose family) and possession is a way to prove the existence and power of religious forces. Late in the story, the filmmakers suggest that the devil taking over the girl's body is actually an act of God: The Virgin Mary offers Emily a choice — to be rid of the demons or allow them to live inside her as proof to others of mystical powers. She chooses martyrdom, and becomes a Jesus figure — stigmata and all — and in an epilogue we learn that thousands flock — stigmata and all — and in an epilogue we learn that thousands flock to her grave to pay homage. Emily Rose's death is a Passion-esque demise — meant to inspire belief, not doubt, allegiance to a higher power because of her suffering. Thus, the exorcism can't (and must not) succeed for two thematic reasons: first, because it would negate the Christ-like sacrifice and, second, because it would prove that man is powerful and can work the wonders of God (i.e. healing the sick) which edges closely to unpopular ideas (abortion, Terry Schiavo, euthanasia) amongst religious conservatives. As Regan was possessed by the devil for being the daughter of a liberal and God saves her so she can continue to be a liberal, Emily Rose is possessed by the devil so she can "scientifically" prove there is a God, and inspire liberals to give up their corporate jobs and start having families and attend church.

Possession, in this case, is a tool of God, not a punishment for not believing in him.

Perhaps it's a sign of the time that movies, which used to be instrumental in suggesting a more progressive world and illustrating change through symbolic storytelling, are experiencing a role reversal. The smart money these days is on tradition and the "values" culture, not the culture of change and revolution. Moviemakers, of course, always want to find what's selling and keep remaking it until the tide turns. And so, The Passion and The Exorcism of Emily Rose are two sides of the same coin — both playing to consumers who voted for Bush because he goes to church and because Laura is just such a sweet lady. The question is: Where are the voices of the other side? Like the Democratic Party, left-wing filmmakers are finding their ideology a tougher sell. Blue state audiences, these days, are too busy spending their dollars at the latest quirky coming-of-age tale or offbeat love story, kitscheg and clever-ing themselves into an irrelevant corner. Meanwhile, the Emily Rose side uses genre to gain political converts, planting ideas of God into the psyche, like fantasies of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. Call it Karl Rove cinema.

A.O. Scott  New York Times

... an anthropologist (Shohreh Aghdashloo) who studies demonic possession and is studiously noncommittal as to whether it really exists.

The movie pretends to take the same tolerant, anything’s-possible position. While not especially good - judged strictly on its cinematic merits, it ranges from O.K. to god-awful - it is still a fascinating cultural document in the age of intelligent design. Its point of view suggests an improbable alliance of postmodern relativism and absolute religious faith against the supposed tyranny of scientific empiricism, which is depicted as narrow and dogmatic.

The sincerity of a believer - Father Moore, in this case - is conflated with the plausibility of his beliefs. The doctors, meanwhile, seem so sure of themselves. But of course, the movie says, no one can ever be completely sure, and thus superstition becomes a matter of reasonable doubt. Meanwhile

Christian Slater, Tara Reid, and Stephen Dorff.
the clocks stop, the wind howls, and we are encouraged to believe - or at least not to disbelieve - our own eyes. Father Moore knows what he saw. So do I: propaganda disguised as entertainment.

ANDY NOWICKI

If a man goes to church every Sunday, that's fine, and it may even be commendable. However, if that same man claims to see God actively working in his life in certain tangible events, if he baldly states something like, "I believe that God gave me this job/blessing/hardship for a reason," then he is regarded with some suspicion; at best, he is seen as a little weird, and his proclivity for God-talk is viewed as slightly tacky.

But it is even worse if that same man refuses to swallow materialist ideologies or give assent to theories that implicitly or explicitly denigrate the Christian point of view. If he states a belief in what has come to be called "Intelligent Design," rather than accepting wholeheartedly the notion that complex life arose through a series of mutations that occurred entirely at random, then (say our cultural commissars) he must be a dunce or a fanatic, and he cannot be seen as credible or intellectually honest, no matter how sober his demeanor or scholarly his discourse. And if one's faith prompts him to agitate for a particular change in the law, such as an end to legalized abortion, then secularist opinion-shapers invariably deride him as a rav:ening "theocrat" in sheep's clothing, someone who wants to "impose his morality" on everyone else. To the secularists, only a thoroughgoing secular man, or a spineless, toothless Christian who bows down to the superiority of secularism on every subject except ones that are utterly theoretical and irrelevant, has any right to influence the political process; this extreme exclusion of all non-secularist opinion from the public square is what the secularist understands as "separation of church and state."

A. O. SCOTT – New York Times

As Ross Douthat, an astute blogger and journalist, has pointed out online, "the horror movie is the most conservative and religion-friendly genre in Hollywood, and the message of devil-related movies, in particular, is almost always that science is wrong." But the means by which this message is delivered is a bit unusual, not only for its didacticism, but also because the movie’s climactic arguments are as much a plea for open-mindedness and pluralism as a fire-and-brimstone sermon on the nature of evil. Rather like the promoters of intelligent design, the filmmakers present a mild, almost relativistic argument, according to which the reluctance of scientific experts to rule anything out makes anything possible, and therefore likely to be true.

David Edelstein  Slate.com

The religious horror picture The Exorcism of Emily Rose (Screen Gems) is the latest and tackiest assault on the reality-based secular community—just the kind of propaganda that's not supposed to be coming from ultraliberalcommi:iewlag Hollywood. It goes even further than the religious horror picture Signs, which suggests that if you don't believe in God you can't possibly protect your kids from demonic aliens. This one says that if you believe in medical science over prayer, you not only can't protect your kids, you suppress the spiritual antibodies they need to fight the devil. Take a pill and you're all Satan's.

The movie is basically a blood-soaked Christian martyr tale (complete with stigmata) that masquerades as a Rashōmon-like courtroom drama.

Derrickson claims in interviews that Rashômon is one of his favorite movies and that The Exorcism of Emily Rose gives both sides of the court battle their due. If you believe that, I have a grilled cheese sandwich with the image of the Virgin Mary that you might want to buy. We do get flashes—almost subliminal ones—of the prosecutor's version of events, but he's a close-minded prig whose mere facts are far outweighed by extended sequences that leave no doubt whatsoever of Emily Rose's demonic possession.

For all its cheap ghost-movie effects, the film aspires to something larger: the idea—one of the chief talking points for proponents of Intelligent Design as their "scholarship" is shot down—that even if we can't scientifically prove the existence of the Almighty (and the demons who try to undo his work), we must open ourselves to that possibility and recognize it as valid. Certainly it is as valid as that other, godless way of looking at the world. And it's more imperative: We dismiss the battle for our souls at our peril.

ROGER EBERT  Chicago Sun-Times

What is fascinating about "The Exorcism of Emily Rose" is that it asks a secular institution, the court, to decide a question that hinges on matters the court cannot have an opinion on. Either Emily was possessed by a demon and Father Moore did his best to save her, or she had a psychiatric condition and he unwittingly did his best to kill her. The defense and the prosecution mount strong arguments and call persuasive witnesses, but in the end it all comes down to the personal beliefs of the jury. A juror who does not believe in demons must find the priest guilty, if perhaps sincere. A juror who does believe in demons must decide if Emily Rose was possessed, or misdiagnosed. In a case like this, during the jury selection, are you qualified or disqualified by believing one way or the other?

Somehow the movie really never takes off into the riveting fascination we expect in the opening scenes. Maybe it cannot; maybe it is too faithful to the issues it raises to exploit them. A movie like "The Exorcist" is a better film because it's a more limited one, which accepts demons and exorcists lock, stock and barrel, as its starting point. Certainly they're good showbiz. A film that keeps an open mind must necessarily lack a slam-dunk conclusion. In the end Emily Rose's story does get told, although no one can agree about what it means.

Michael Atkinson  The Village Voice

Possession thrillers are natural billboards for Mel Gibson–style Catholicism, but the new film, which prosecutes a priest (Tom Wilkinson) for his "negligent" role in a college girl's gone-wild self-abuse and eventual death, has a distinctly Bush-era, end-times vibe. Fools will take it semi-seriously, but more importantly, first-time director Scott Derrickson knows how to cut ghoulishderiveder shocked shots, and the film's wintry palette is effective.