PDF | American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty

by Michael W. Cuneo
A guided tour through the burgeoning business of exorcism and the darker side of American life

There is no other religious ritual more fascinating, or more disturbing, than exorcism. This is particularly true in America today, where the ancient rite has a surprisingly strong hold on our imagination, and on our popular entertainment industry. We’ve all heard of exorcism, seen the movies and read the books, but few of us have ever experienced it firsthand.

Conducted by exorcists officially appointed by Catholic archdioceses and by maverick priests sidestepping Church sanctions, by evangelical ministers and Episcopal charismatics, exorcism is alive and well in the new millennium. Oprah, Diane Sawyer, and Barbara Walters have featured exorcists on their shows. The *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, and other publications have charted the proliferation of exorcisms across the United States. Last year, the Archdiocese of Chicago appointed its first full-time exorcist in its 160-year history; in New York, four priests have officially investigated about forty cases of suspected possession every year since 1995.

*American Exorcism* is an inside look at this burgeoning phenomenon, written with objectivity, insight, and just the right touch of irony. Michael W. Cuneo attended more than fifty exorcisms and interviewed many of the participants—both the exorcists who performed the rituals and the people from all walks of life who believed they were possessed by the devil. He brings vividly to life the ceremonies themselves, conjuring up memories of Linda Blair’s astonishing performance in the 1973 movie *The Exorcist* and other bizarre (and sometimes stomach-churning) images. Cuneo dissects, as well, the arguments of such well-known exorcism advocates as Malachi Martin, author of the controversial *Hostage to the Devil*, self-help guru M. Scott Peck, and self-professed demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren of *Amityville Horror* fame.
As he explores this netherworld of American life, Cuneo reflects on the meaning of exorcism in the twenty-first century and on the relationship between religious ritual and popular culture. Touching on such provocative topics as the “satanic panics” of the 1980s, repressed memory, and ritual abuse, American Exorcism is a remarkably revealing, consistently entertaining work of cultural commentary.

From the Hardcover edition.

Amazon.com Review

In 1973, the film version of The Exorcist seared Linda Blair's head-spinning, vomit-spewing rendition of demonic possession into the popular consciousness. The movie's popularity, according to sociologist and anthropologist Michael W. Cuneo, tapped into Americans' deepest spiritual anxieties and helped spawn a "booming business" for Catholic, Protestant, and freelance exorcists that shows no signs of slowing. American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty begins with a cultural history of exorcism from the 1960s to the present day. Then the book offers a wealth of case studies, based on the author's firsthand observation of dozens of contemporary exorcisms performed by New Age entrepreneurs and clerics of Christian traditions. But Cuneo's explanation of exorcism's popularity--that the rite allows believers to absolve themselves of responsibility for problems, including "depression, anxiety, substance addiction, or even a runaway sexual appetite," by offering assurance that "Indwelling demons are to blame"--seems merely a pretext for his scathing judgment of the whole phenomenon. "Personal engineering through demon expulsion: a bit messy perhaps, but relatively fast and cheap, and morally exculpatory. A thoroughly American arrangement." Cuneo's judgment may or may not be correct, but his research appears sloppy ("widely quoted" sources go unidentified, and sweeping cultural observations are unsubstantiated by footnotes). And his prose is littered with smug double-entendres such as "The pop culture industry cast its spell, so to speak, and an obliging nation fell into line." In both its argument and style, American Exorcism is every bit as lazy and sensationalistic as the phenomenon it purports to criticize. --Michael Joseph Gross

Product Description

A guided tour through the burgeoning business of exorcism and the darker side of American life

There is no other religious ritual more fascinating, or more disturbing, than exorcism. This is particularly true in America today, where the ancient rite has a surprisingly strong hold on our imagination, and on our popular entertainment industry. We've all heard of exorcism, seen the movies and read the books, but few of us have ever experienced it firsthand.

Conducted by exorcists officially appointed by Catholic archdioceses and by maverick priests sidestepping Church sanctions, by evangelical ministers and Episcopal charismatics, exorcism is alive and well in the new millennium. Oprah, Diane Sawyer, and Barbara Walters have featured exorcists on their shows. The New York Times, Los Angeles Times, Time, and other publications have charted the proliferation of exorcisms across the United States. Last year, the Archdiocese of Chicago appointed its first full-time exorcist in its 160-year history; in New York, four priests have officially investigated about forty cases of suspected possession every year since 1995.

American Exorcism is an inside look at this burgeoning phenomenon, written with objectivity, insight, and just the right touch of irony. Michael W. Cuneo attended more than fifty exorcisms and interviewed many of the participants--both the exorcists who performed the rituals and the people from all walks of life who believed they were possessed by the devil. He brings vividly to life the ceremonies themselves, conjuring up memories of Linda Blair's astonishing performance in the 1973 movie The Exorcist and other bizarre (and sometimes stomach-churning) images. Cuneo dissects, as well, the arguments of such well-known exorcism advocates as Malachi Martin,

As he explores this netherworld of American life, Cuneo reflects on the meaning of exorcism in the twenty-first century and on the relationship between religious ritual and popular culture. Touching on such provocative topics as the “satanic panics” of the 1980s, repressed memory, and ritual abuse, *American Exorcism* is a remarkably revealing, consistently entertaining work of cultural commentary.

*From the Hardcover edition.*