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The Folk Piety of William Peter Blatty:  
*The Exorcist* in the Context of Secularization

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# The Folk Piety of William Peter Blatty: *The Exorcist* in the Context of Secularization

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## Abstract

William Peter Blatty's novel *The Exorcist* has been linked to changes in lived religion in the United States and to a popular revival of demonology and exorcism ministries. This article considers the historical context in which the novel was written and suggests that *The Exorcist* presents an early critique of the secularization narrative by referencing the folk piety of the American life-world. Peter Williams has described American religion as a dialectic between ecclesiastical religion and popular religion. With this in mind, I argue that *The Exorcist* represents a cultural moment in which the perceived decline of supernaturalism inspired a resurgence of folk piety. To audiences in the early 1970s, the medley of Catholic demonology, popular occultism, and parapsychology in *The Exorcist* came as an appealing antidote to rationalized religion and a secular social order.

Film and literary critics have spent a great deal of ink attempting to explain the phenomenon surrounding William Peter Blatty's novel *The Exorcist* and the subsequent film adaptation. In 1971 and 1972, the novel spent fifty-five weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller lists (Winter 1996). The movie adaptation in 1974 was even more successful, and news accounts report lines as long as 5,000 people waiting to see the film (*Time* 1974). This sort of success for a horror film was unheard of at the time, particularly because horror was considered a "ghettoized" genre (Hoppenstand 1994: 35). Numerous critics have interpreted Blatty's story as demonological metaphor used to address a variety of fears lurking in the American collective unconscious: fears of the counterculture of the 1960s, women, and youth, to name a few. However, *The Exorcist* has also attracted the attention of several scholars of contemporary religion. Douglas Cowan (2008) argues that *The Exorcist* inspires the reaction it does because of a deeply embedded cultural fear rooted in Christian demonology. Christopher Partridge (2006: 240) includes *The Exorcist* in his two-volume *The Re-Enchantment of the West* as an example of demonic "occulture." In her ethnographic study of media and the religious worlds of American teenagers, Lynn Schofield Clark (2003) found that a generation later, *The Exorcist* continues to influence popular ideas about the supernatural. Finally, in his ethnographic study of Christian exorcism, Michael Cuneo (2001) credits Blatty with a massive revival of popular demonology and exorcism ministries.

I dissent from psychoanalytical readings of *The Exorcist* and argue that it is very much a story about religion. However, it is not, as some have claimed, an attempt to evangelize through horror. Many people know that Blatty based his story on actual events and that his character Father Karras, a Jesuit scientist suffering a crisis of faith, reflects Blatty's own experience of Catholicism. *The Exorcist* depicts Blatty's life-world, which, while heavily influenced by Catholic doctrine, is also shaped by religious pluralism, scientific positivism, and popular belief in the paranormal. *The Exorcist* is a depiction not of ecclesiastical Catholicism but of *folk piety*. Robert Wuthnow (1987: 187–188) describes folk piety as an "ideological form" that, unlike formal religion, is extra-ecclesiastical. The symbols of folk piety are drawn from a variety of sources and incorporate beliefs about divine or supernatural intervention in the realm of everyday experience. Thus *The Exorcist* features the traditional Catholic symbols of demons and exorcism; however, it also features eclectic symbols such as psychic research, Ouija boards, and Asian ascetic practices. This eclecticism reflects not only Blatty's life-world, but also that of many Americans in the late 20th century. Peter Williams (1989) argues that American religion can be thought of as a sort of dialectic between formal religion and extra-ecclesiastical religion or folk piety.

I argue that *The Exorcist* had such cultural significance because it portrayed contemporary American folk piety at a historical moment when a narrative of secularization had become a dominant cultural myth. A number of scholars have suggested that secularization theory has often functioned as a sort of myth or an ideology rather than an accurate model of religious trends (Cassanova 1994; Stark 1999; Swatos and Christiano 2000). When Blatty's novel was published, the decline of religion was a reigning paradigm not only for sociology, but also for the general public. *The Exorcist* was written in 1969, only three years after *Time* magazine ran its famous cover asking, "Is God Dead?" A Gallup poll taken in January 1970 indicated that 75 percent of survey respondents thought that religion was losing influence. This is the highest percentage ever recorded since Gallup began this poll in 1957 (Saad 2009).

I argue that *The Exorcist* came as a declaration of folk piety at a time when Americans were looking for an antidote to the narrative of universal secularization. Several scholars have cited a connection between *The Exorcist* and a resurgence of Christian demonology (Clark 2003; Cuneo 2001; Partridge 2006). This could be because *The Exorcist* presented supernaturalism and folk piety as a valid alternative to ecclesiastical religion, which had become rationalized, privatized, and disenchanting. As Partridge (2006: 238) puts it, the demonic has a unique ability to stir up "the latent supernaturalism of a supposedly secular Western heart."

Cassanova (1994) helpfully points out that the secularization thesis takes two distinct forms: the decline of religion thesis and the privatization of religion thesis. The decline of religion thesis assumes that religion and particularly supernaturalism will gradually fade out of the modern world in favor of scientific rationalism. Interestingly, Gorski and Altinordu (2008) argue that attempts to measure this thesis have been biased by an effect they term *pastoralism*. That is, secularization is often measured by "priestly standards of good and true religion" rather than deviant or popular religion. This bias is attributed to the fact that it was concerned churchmen who first began collecting religious data (Gorski and Altinordu 2008: 65). Because of this pastoralist bias, folk piety has become something of an Achilles' heel of the decline of religion thesis. Wuthnow (1987) argues that folk piety has defied predictions that it is incompatible with modernity. Similarly, Stark (1999: 268) cites an increase of "highly magical" folk traditions in Asia as evidence against the secularization thesis. *The Exorcist* demonstrates that one does not need to travel to Asia to find a vital and magical folk tradition. Although few of Blatty's characters practice "good and true" religion, it is difficult to conclude from this story that Americans had ceased to believe in the supernatural. In addition to being a story of possession, the United

States of the *Exorcist* abounds with new religious movements, psychics, and popular occultism.

The privatization of religion thesis argues that religion will become increasingly understood as subjective as it can no longer be integrated with alternative interpretations of life. Furthermore, religion will become depoliticized as it assumes a new place within the secular order. *The Exorcist* presents several challenges to this theory. First, the story reminds readers that claims of the supernatural are not subjective: The demon is real whether anyone believes in it or not. Furthermore, an extensive battery of scientific tests is unable to arrive at an alternative explanation. Second, Blatty's story points out that religion and science are not as differentiated as might be assumed. After all, Father Karras is both a priest and a psychiatrist. In seeking a "scientific" explanation, Karras explores the possibility of parapsychological phenomena such as psychokinesis. Parapsychology, which played heavily in the case on which Blatty based his story, remains an interstitial sphere between religion and science. Finally, *The Exorcist* is deceptively political. Two chapters are preceded by pages of quotations that juxtapose passages from the gospels with news accounts describing the horrors of the 20th century. This device is a reminder that Americans continue to interpret political events not only through the lens of religion, but also often through the lens of supernaturalism.

The message of *The Exorcist* was in a sense phenomenological. Some members of audiences viewing the film in 1973 experienced fainting, vomiting, and even nervous breakdowns. These reactions—which have been largely ignored by film critics—were not caused by some subconscious cultural fear but rather by a very conscious fear of demons and the supernatural. The fear itself was the indictment of the secularization narrative.

#### THE EXORCIST PHENOMENON

*The Exorcist* is considered to have paved the way for later best-selling horror writers. Stephen King allegedly once told Blatty, "You know, in a way, you're my father" (Brock-Servais 2000: 50). However, in King's own book about the horror genre, he called *The Exorcist* part of the "Humorless Thudding Tract School of horror writing" and expressed a wish that Blatty never write another novel (King 1981: 282). Blatty had originally been a comedy writer, but after *The Exorcist*, he wrote only thrillers with Catholic tropes. *The Exorcist* was a wildly successful novel, and in 1983, Blatty sued *The New York Times* for nine million dollars, claiming that it had negligently left his sequel *Legion* off the best-seller list (Brock-Servais 2000).

The movie adaptation in 1973 was arguably even more successful than the novel. King (1981: 167) described the phenomenon surrounded the film as “a two month possession jag.” A *Time* article from 1974 tells of 8:00 A.M. screenings of the film and lines 5,000 people long. One theater manager estimated that each screening of the film caused an average of four blackouts, six episodes of vomiting, and numerous early exits (*Time* 1974). *The Guardian* quoted another manager as saying, “My janitors are going bananas wiping up the vomit” (Malcolm 1974). A report that appeared in the *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* in 1975 claimed that the film had induced in some viewers “cases of traumatic neurosis and even psychosis” (Partridge 2006: 240).

Descriptions of theater audiences for *The Exorcist* are somewhat reminiscent of Durkheim’s (1995 [1912]) notion of “collective effervescence” and perhaps point to an implicit religious function. Several accounts describe a sort of melting pot effect, in which the screening temporarily united diverse groups of people. The *Time* article commented, “Most audiences, however, tend to be young and to contain a far higher than average proportion of blacks and, in some cities, people of Spanish origin. ‘Voodoo, you know,’ a black file clerk said matter-of-factly” (*Time* 1974).<sup>1</sup> Cosimo Urbano (2004: 33) quotes another review, which added:

If the message doesn’t pull people together, the experience of it does. I, for one, spoke to more Puerto Ricans during my two hour wait in front of a New York theatre than I did the entire two years I lived in New York. And the vomit-splattered bathroom after the show (you couldn’t even get near the sink) may well be the closest the Melting Pot ever comes to blending literally.

In fact, several scholars have described a screening of *The Exorcist* as a sort of rite—in some ways, a religious rite (Ingebretson 1996; Ursini and Silver 1994). The fact that *The Exorcist* could have this effect on an audience points to its quasi-religious function and supports a reading of the phenomenon as a manifestation of folk piety.

After the 1970s, *The Exorcist* continued to be an influence on American film, American culture, and American religion. Priests and Catholic religious items were now *de rigueur* in horror films (Clark 2003; McDannell 2007). The long-term effect of *The Exorcist* on American culture became apparent in 1991, when Republican Senator Orrin Hatch read from the novel during Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas’s televised confirmation hearings (Slovick 2009).

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Baker (2008) does show data indicating a higher belief in religious evil among African-Americans. However, he attributes this not to Afro-Atlantic religions but to the history of racism and oppression experienced by African-Americans in the United States, which has influenced the view of evil within black Protestantism.

*The Exorcist* also created a moment in which the dialectic of ecclesiastical and extra-ecclesiastical religion as described by Williams (1989) was in serious flux. The church suddenly found itself confronting a resurgence of folk piety. Ursini and Silver (1994: 158) note that in the film's wake, few priests could escape the question "Have you seen *The Exorcist*, father?" Cowan (2008: 172–173) indicates that Gene Siskel saw the film with a priest who feared that it would start a rash of "pseudo-possession." This in turn presented the church with an opportunity to reassess its relationship with supernaturalism. Many Catholics were opposed to *The Exorcist* phenomenon and wanted to continue a tradition of rationalist apologetics in which the demonic was understood as metaphorical. Speaking on Blatty's novel, Father Richard McBrien, chair of the theology department at the University of Notre Dame, dismissed the very notion of a personal devil as "premodern and pre-critical" (Cuneo 2001: 60). Two reviewers from the Jesuit-run *America* magazine called *The Exorcist* "sordid and sensationalistic" (Cuneo 2001: 60). The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Office for Film and Broad-casting rated it as A-IV (morally unobjectionable for adults, with reservations). On the other hand, many conservative Catholics embraced *The Exorcist*, apparently seeing it as an opportunity for evangelism. *Catholic News*, the official newspaper of the Archdiocese of New York, described the film as "a deeply spiritual film" (Cuneo 2001: 11). The conservative Catholic journal *Triumph* and the official journal of the Vatican, *Civiltà Cattolica*, also gave positive reviews. In March 1990, conservative Cardinal John O'Connor actually read from the novel in St. Patrick's Cathedral and incorporated it into a homily (Cuneo 2001). However, this move also implicated the church in the same charge that was made against Blatty: that of using supernatural horror to evangelize. *New Yorker* film critic Pauline Kael asked, "Are American Catholics willing to see their faith turned into a horror show? Are they willing to accept anything just as long as their Church comes out in a good light?" (Cuneo 2001: 11).

### THE CRITICAL RESPONSE

Strangely, the critical response to *The Exorcist* largely ignored the cult phenomenon surrounding the novel and film. Negative critiques have labeled Blatty a sort of lowbrow evangelist, while positive evaluations tend to interpret his portrayal of the demonic as a metaphor for some unconscious cultural fear. The common denominator appears to be that critics will praise *The Exorcist* as long as it is not about religion. Colleen McDannell (2007) notes that many critics objected to the film precisely because it was actually about exorcism rather than using exorcism as a metaphor for a social issue. This disconnect seems indicative

of the broader distancing between the intellectual elite and the popular religion. The critics were apparently ready to pan anything that defied a narrative of secularization.

Many critics attacked Blatty's novel for its overtly religious nature. Blatty is frequently criticized for attempting to evangelize through his horror novels. Kael called Blatty "the apostle to *The National Enquirer* and to *Cosmopolitan*" (McDannell 2007: 203). S. T. Joshi is by far the harshest critic on this point. He writes:

I am under a severe handicap in discussing William Peter Blatty, for as an atheist I find his brand of tortured Catholicism nearly incomprehensible. . . . Blatty is not merely a writer who happens to be Catholic; he is, like Arthur Machen, ardently striving to convert his readers to Catholicism and rid them of a godless secularism that he feels is undermining modern society (Joshi 2001: 51).

Joshi's chief complaint involves Blatty's belief that the supernatural forces in *The Exorcist* and *Legion* might actually exist, and he accuses Blatty of using fiction to advance his beliefs covertly. According to Joshi (2001), this distinguishes Blatty from H. P. Lovecraft (an atheist horror writer) and places Blatty's work more in line with that of fringe theorists such as Charles Fort and Erik von Danniken.

Although some of the Jesuits Blatty consulted while writing *The Exorcist* had such an agenda, it does not appear that Blatty himself saw his writing in this way. McDannell argues against the idea of Blatty as an evangelist, noting that none of the characters in *The Exorcist* convert to Catholicism. This is somewhat unusual, especially considering that in the case on which Blatty based his story, the possessed child did convert to Catholicism from Lutheranism as part of his exorcism.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, in *The Exorcist*, Chris MacNeil does not keep the medal she is given by Father Karras but returns it to Father Dyer, perhaps indicating that she wants nothing more to do with the church (McDannell 2007).

Another common interpretation of horror in general and Blatty's work in particular is that the horrific elements of the film serve as a metaphor for a larger cultural fear, often a subconscious one. For example, Linda Bradley (1995: 44) argues that stories about possession are more popular than ghost stories because the actual concerns of possession stories are "domestic, psychosexual, and biological." Barbara Creed (1993) offers a feminist reading of *The Exorcist*, arguing that the film enforces Julia Kristeva's notion of the female as "abject." Possession, in this reading, is an excuse to exhibit female behavior that is monstrous and perverse and has sexual undertones. These psychoanalytical

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<sup>2</sup> Officially, the Catholic Church has never denied the rite of exorcism to non-Catholics (Dallen, Gratsch, and Elmer 2003).



readings often cite Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny" (2003), which attributes the uncanny experience of fear to an encounter with ideas that have been repressed. In the case of *The Exorcist*, the object of repression may be something perennial, as in Creed's feminist reading, or it may be some social phenomenon specific to the early 1970s. The second reading is a move from psychoanalysis to psychohistory.

Stephen King offers one of the earliest psychohistorical interpretations. He has argued that Regan, the possessed girl in *The Exorcist*, plays on a fear of youth that was gripping the United States in the 1970s as the result of the counterculture of the 1960s. America's youth appeared to be "possessed" by something culturally alien. According to King (1981), this is why *The Exorcist* was not successful in West Germany but *Night of the Living Dead* was. Several theorists have supported King's analysis (Greenberg 2004; Iaccino 1994; Phillips 2005). Harvey Greenberg adds to this theory that it was not possible to portray actual children or adolescents as monsters in the early decades of the horror genre, because it was feared the audience would be "repelled by the repudiation of youthful innocence." He argues that the success of *The Bad Seed* (1956) and *Village of the Damned* (1960) paved the way for *The Exorcist* (Greenberg 2004: 136). Jonathon Crane (1994: 69) notes that the late 1960s and 1970s saw numerous horror films portraying "evil in the home" including *Alice*, *Sweet Alice* (1976), *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and *The Omen* (1976).

Stephen Prince (2004: 2) interprets these "demon child films of the 1970s" as indicative of sociological conflicts within prevailing gender roles and the institution of the family. However, he suggests that there is something more at play here than subconscious social fears. Prince notes that the 1974 horror film *It's Alive* features a ferocious infant-monster that has been mutated by the use of fertility drugs. He then asks why *The Exorcist* is universally regarded as more frightening than *It's Alive*. If horror movies could be reduced to repressed sociocultural forces, then logically the two films should be equally frightening (Prince 2004).

Noel Carroll also dissents from this psychoanalytical reading of horror films, noting that many people fear demonic possession on a conscious and literal level. He writes, "Should we then suppose that a screening of *The Exorcist* (1973) in the church basement to an audience of Catholics who believe in possession will evoke no terror or horror? Not very likely" (Carroll 2004: 263). This observation acknowledges the (seemingly hard to ignore) Catholic views of Blatty and his Jesuit mentors. Cowan also notes that *The Exorcist* appeals more to religious and cultural beliefs than to repressed psychodrama. Cowan describes his own experience watching the film when he was fifteen: He spent most of the film in the movie theater lobby and was unable to sleep after watching it. He writes, "In

retrospect, it was not so much what was happening on the screen that bothered me; it was my own deeply embedded cultural fear that such things might actually happen” (Cowan 2008: 168). Cowan then describes showing the film to his undergraduates, who were not frightened by it at all. He attributes their lack of fear to the fact that his students had no knowledge of Catholic demonology.

#### THE EXORCIST AS A REFLECTION OF BLATTY’S LIFE-WORLD

In assessing *The Exorcist* phenomenon, it is important to consider Blatty’s biography and the circumstances under which the story was written. There is little evidence that he saw his work as evangelical or as an apology for ecclesiastical Catholicism. Blatty wrote of his own religion: “I’m a relaxed Catholic. I think Catholicism is as close to the truth as any organized religion has come, and I look forward to the day when the more daring of the theoretical physicists nudge Catholicism into some sort of amalgamation with the philosophic insights of the Eastern religions” (Winter 1996: 85). While Blatty is clearly aligned with Catholicism, his references to theoretical physics and Asian religions indicate a use of eclectic symbols associated with extra-ecclesiastical religion or folk piety. Although *The Exorcist* depends heavily on Catholic symbols, Asian metaphysics<sup>3</sup> and scientific epistemologies are also apparent. Thus what *The Exorcist* depicts—and what I argue is so appealing to audiences—are the elements of Blatty’s own life-world.

The story in *The Exorcist* is compelling in large part because it is based on actual events (Cowan 2008). In fact, a sort of cottage industry has emerged researching the original case on which Blatty’s story is based. Not only is the novel based on a true story, but virtually every detail in it is based on something Blatty either personally experienced or researched. The characters were apparently based on Blatty himself or on his acquaintances, the supernatural manifestations of possession were taken from a Jesuit mentor with an interest in demonology, and the milieu of popular occultism referenced in the novel draws on Blatty’s own experiences in the 1960s.

On August 20, 1949, *The Washington Post* published an article about a fourteen-year-old boy in Mount Rainier, Maryland who had been successfully exorcised. The article stated that the boy had been given full medical and psychiatric analyses at both Georgetown University Hospital and St. Louis University (Jesuit institutions) before the possession was deemed genuine. A Jesuit in his fifties had successfully exorcised the boy after twenty to thirty

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<sup>3</sup> Chris MacNeil’s secretary practices Transcendental Meditation and chants the Daimoku, the mantra of Sokka Gakkai International. MacNeil also relates a story of seeing a man levitate in Bhutan (Blatty 1971: 29, 71).

performances of the rite of exorcism, during which the possessed boy spoke in Latin and shouted obscenities at the exorcist. A Protestant minister who had attempted to help the boy reported objects moving by themselves. The exorcist confirmed these phenomena, and this attracted the attention of the Society of Parapsychology's laboratory at Duke University, which dubbed it "the most impressive" case of poltergeist phenomena they had ever investigated (Brinkley 1949: 6–7).

Blatty, then a student at Georgetown University, had heard about the case even before the article appeared in *The Washington Post*. Apparently, one of the priests involved in the exorcism was being billeted on the Georgetown campus. This unnamed priest relayed the story to a Father Gallagher, one of Blatty's professors, who spent time discussing the case and the paranormal with his students (Baer 2008). At some point, Blatty tracked down the exorcist, whom he identifies as Father Bowdern. At the time, Blatty proposed writing a nonfiction account of the exorcism. Bowdern supported him in this and sought permission from Cardinal Krol, the archbishop of Bowdern's diocese, and from the boy's family to release details to Blatty. When the requests were denied, Blatty resolved to novelize the story, changing the gender of the possessed out of respect for the family (Baer 2008).

After graduating from Georgetown University, Blatty joined the Air Force and was assigned to the psychological warfare division. Blatty is fluent in Arabic and later worked for the U.S. Information Agency in Beirut (Brock-Servais 2000). In the mid-1950s, Blatty won \$10,000 on Groucho Marx's quiz show *You Bet Your Life* and used this money to quit his job to pursue writing (McCabe 1999). Before writing *The Exorcist*, Blatty had written primarily comedy, both novels and screenplays. His most successful novel had been *Which Way to Mecca, Jack?*, which was a humorous reflection on his time in Beirut. He did not begin writing *The Exorcist* until twenty years after publication of the article in *The Washington Post*. Curiously, Richard Woods (1971) indicates that a popular interest in demonology was already underway when Blatty began writing his novel. Woods describes an increase in possessions in America, England, France, Latin America, the Indies, and Africa starting in the late 1960s. It is unclear whether this is a coincidence or whether a "demonic zeitgeist" was what finally convinced Blatty to begin writing *The Exorcist*.

The demon in *The Exorcist*, identified as Pazuzu, is also derived from Blatty's own experience and research. The opening scene of both the novel and the film is set in Iraq and is clearly informed by Blatty's time in the Middle East (McDannell 2007). In 2000, I attended the premiere of the rerelease of *The Exorcist* at the South by Southwest music and film festival in Austin, Texas. I sat directly behind Blatty, who took questions after the premiere. Someone asked why he had chosen

Pazuzu as the demon. He answered, “Because I saw it when I was over there [presumably Beirut] and it scared the hell out of me.” Blatty responded to all questions in this manner: Everything was based on personal experience; nothing was symbolic. However, I suspect that Blatty’s knowledge of Pazuzu comes primarily from *The History of the Devil*, first published in 1900 by Paul Carus. This book features a sketch of the famous statue that depicts the Chaldean “demon of the southwest wind,” which was used to repel disease (Carus 1969 [1900]: 43–44). This statue has a loop through its head, just like the amulet of Pazuzu found by Father Merrin in *The Exorcist* (Blatty 1971: 6). It is entirely possible that Carus was the inspiration for the name Father Karras. It is mentioned in the novel that Father Karras has written a paper on the Black Mass (Blatty 1971: 82).

Rhonda Brock-Servais quotes an interview with Father Thomas Bermingham, a Jesuit who acted in *The Exorcist*. Bermingham claims that he encouraged Blatty to novelize the Mount Rainier exorcism to alert the general public to the reality of spiritual evil. Bermingham also apparently tutored Blatty in exorcism and demonology for two years, telling him, “I don’t want another *Rosemary’s Baby*” (Brock-Servais 2000: 20–21).<sup>4</sup> In studying demonology, Blatty probably read Carus and certainly read Traugott K. Oesterreich’s *Possession and Exorcism* (1974), which Father Karras consults in *The Exorcist*.<sup>5</sup> As a result of Blatty’s education in demonology, the story contains several elements of classical exorcism that were not present in the Mount Rainier case. In 1865, a famous exorcism of two brothers occurred in Illfurth, a village in Alsace, France. The boys vomited things such as yellow foam, feathers, and seaweed and contorted their bodies into seemingly impossible shapes. Theobald, the older of the boys, could reportedly predict when people would die (Taylor 2006). All of these elements appear in Blatty’s novel, and what audiences remember most about the film are contortions and green projectile vomit. In fact, the contortion in which Regan bends backwards so that her head nearly touches her ankles, which was graphically depicted in the film adaptation, is a common trope of exorcism narratives. This position is sometimes referred to as “the hysterical arch” (Taylor 2006: 13). In the early stages of her possession, Regan predicts the death of the astronaut during the dinner party, thus also referencing the Illfurth exorcism (Blatty 1971: 83).

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<sup>4</sup> This comment is interesting because the film adaptations of these two novels, both dealing with children and the demonic, are frequently juxtaposed in film studies (Crane 1994; Hoppenstand 1994; Partridge 2006; Winter 1996). Whereas William Friedkin employed Jesuit actors and consultants in making *The Exorcist*, Roman Polanski consulted Anton LaVey, the founder of the Church of Satan, for help with *Rosemary’s Baby* (Partridge 2006).

<sup>5</sup> The foreword to the 1974 edition of *Possession and Exorcism* explains that it has been reprinted precisely because there was such a demand for it after publication of *The Exorcist* (San 1974).

The character Chris MacNeil, an actress and single mother, was based on Blatty's former neighbor, Shirley MacLaine. (Blatty essentially reversed the phonemes in the second part of the last name.) MacLaine is quoted as saying, "Of course I was Chris MacNeil. Bill used the French couple who ran my house in the book. He used J. Lee Thompson [a British director] as the basis for the director, and the first séance I ever went to, he arranged at my house" (McCabe 1999: 23). The film adaptation was apparently MacLaine's idea, and she was considered for the part of MacNeil. When a deal could not be worked out in time, MacLaine went on to make *The Possession of Joel Delaney*. Enough people knew about the relationship between Blatty and MacLaine that rumors began to spread that MacLaine's daughter had received an exorcism. MacLaine claims that the original cover of the novel was a photo of her daughter that Blatty had taken and then distorted (McCabe 1999).

The use of a Ouija board is a non-Catholic manifestation of folk piety that also drew on Blatty's own experiences. The Ouija board that Regan finds had origin-ally been purchased by her secular mother, who had experimented with it in an attempt to "access her unconscious" (Blatty 1971: 40). By 1971, Ouija boards had become popular among high school and college students (Wright 1971: 12). Blatty himself had experimented with a Ouija board in an attempt to contact his departed mother (McDannell 2007). Interestingly, the original Mount Rainier exorcism was also rumored to have involved a Ouija board. Troy Taylor (2006) identifies the possessed boy as "Robbie Doe" and states that Robbie allegedly used a Ouija board with his Aunt Tilly, who died shortly before the symptoms of possession began.

Bob McCabe (1999: 26) comments that "[f]or all of its paranormal elements, *The Exorcist* was, ironically, a work of realism." Although Blatty had a more thorough knowledge of Catholic demonology, none of the supernatural elements of *The Exorcist* would have been unfamiliar to an American audience. This is why, despite the story's fantastic elements, it is not considered science fiction. By writing about the supernatural elements of his own life-world, Blatty called attention to a tradition of folk piety that, despite claims of secularization, audiences recognized to be a strong presence in American religion.

#### *FOLK PIETY AND THE DECLINE OF RELIGION THEORY*

Folk piety alone was not enough create *The Exorcist* phenomenon. The larger significance of *The Exorcist* as a cultural moment is that it presented a sort a counternarrative to the secularization myth. Folk piety—particularly belief in the demonic—offers a challenge both to the decline of religion theory and to the privatization of religion theory as described by Cassanova (1994).

The folk piety of *The Exorcist* challenges the decline of religion theory, primarily by circumventing the “pastoralist bias,” as described by Gorski and Altinordu (2008), that religion can be measured only by using the criteria of the ecclesiastical elite. Weber (1955: 158) argued that church apologists had a hand in bringing about “the disenchantment of the world” as they defended their doctrines through rationalization, banishing the supernatural to an increasingly transcendent role. Thus, supernatural religion is almost by definition extra-ecclesiastical religion. In *The Exorcist*, not only is belief in the supernatural alive and well, but the experience of the supernatural is sometimes necessary to maintain one’s faith.

The result of ecclesiastical rationalization is disenchanted religion, which in *The Exorcist* is portrayed through the Jesuits. Ironically, the extensive education of the Jesuits of Georgetown University seems to leave them less effective priests. When MacNeil tells a guest at the dinner party that she is not a Catholic, the guest responds, “Oh well, neither are the Jesuits” (Blatty 1971: 71). The demon comments on Karras’s skepticism: “No, nothing would prove anything at all to you, Karras. How splendid. How splendid indeed!” (Blatty 1971: 232). Not surprisingly, this educated attitude toward the demonic has since been supported by survey data. Analysis of the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey indicates that people with more education are less likely to believe in “religious evil” such as the existence of hell, the devil, or demons (Baker 2008: 213).

The problem is that it is hard to maintain faith in a disenchanted religion. Father Karras’s crisis of faith arises not only from the problem of theodicy, but also from the quotidian drowning out the possibility of the miraculous. His reasons for his waning faith include “[t]he need to rend food with the teeth and then defecate” and “[s]tinking socks.” Karras meditates with despair on the gulf of time that separates him from the miracles of Christ and the absence of supernatural signs in the modern world. Within Karras’s disenchanted worldview, the Eucharist, the primary mystery of the Catholic faith, is described as having “the papery taste of despair” (Blatty 1971: 54–55).

Blatty is able to portray Karras’s dour perspective so convincingly because of his own crisis of faith. Most of Blatty’s biographers are quick to point out the parallels between the lives of the author and of his character. Karras is an Italian American struggling to care for his impoverished and aging mother. Blatty is the son of Lebanese immigrants; his father abandoned the family, and his mother raised her children in extreme poverty, selling homemade jelly (Shakir 1996). McDannell (2007: 206) notes that Blatty was, much like Father Karras, “a Mediterranean outsider who had made it.” The antidote for rationalized religion can come only from the supernatural. Like Karras, Blatty longed for a sign. Blatty is quoted as saying, “Miracles can definitely strengthen faith, and if my bed in the dormitory wasn’t going to float a foot or two some night, at least this case of

possession might serve the same function if some of the events I'd learned about proved to be true" (Baer 2008: 181).

Blatty's search for a miracle is reflected in *The Exorcist* through various elements of American folk piety that exist outside of rationalized ecclesiastical religion and thus defy the decline of religion narrative. The most obvious of these is exorcism itself, a form of Catholic supernaturalism that has been largely suppressed within ecclesiastical Catholicism. The Ouija board, with which Blatty also experimented, is another element of folk piety drawn from outside Catholicism. Finally, the novel contains references to Black Masses and covert Satanic practices. While this is not an inherently supernatural belief, the fear of Satanic cults, which was common in the 1960s and 1970s, also contradicts a narrative in which religion is in decline.

### *Exorcism*

Cowan argues that that *The Exorcist* indicates what he terms a "sociophobic"—that is, a socially constructed fear—based on Christian tradition. He points out that the Gospels and the Book of Acts are rife with stories of exorcism carried out by both Jesus and the Apostles (Cowan 2008). By contrast, there are no exorcisms in the Old Testament; and even in the apocryphal Book of Tobit, the demon Asmodeus is repelled by unpleasant odors rather than faith or ritual (Tobit 8:2–3). Belief in possession and exorcism began as an important feature of Christian doctrine but was increasingly relegated to the very fringes of ecclesiastical Christianity. This move on the part of the church has aided a narrative of secularization in which supernaturalism is in decline. However, this is only another example of the pastoralist bias. There is strong evidence that belief in the demonic is very much alive in the realm of extra-ecclesiastical religion.

In 1614, the rite of exorcism appeared in the *Rituale Romanum* compiled under Pope Paul V. Father Karras consults this book, and a passage from it appears in *The Exorcist* (Blatty 1971: 246). Presumably, the rite as it appears in *Rituale Romanum* is a consolidation of popular forms of exorcism that had emerged over the preceding millennium and a half. Sarah Ferber (2004) describes how European Catholicism during the 16th century had a rich culture of local exorcists. These practices invited attacks from Protestants who characterized exorcists as conjurers. They also caused the Catholic Church to worry about the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of exorcism. Ferber (2004: 17) quotes the Spanish Franciscan reformer Pedro Ciruelo: "In order to create greater confusion, the devil has invented certain exorcisms quite similar to those used by the Holy Catholic Church against demons who are reluctant to abandon

human bodies.” Therefore the sanctioned rite of exorcism as described in the *Rituale Romanum* already represents a degree of ecclesiastical rationalization.

Although the Catholic Church still recognizes the literal reality of the devil and the efficacy of exorcism, exorcism gradually became more a theoretical than a practical matter. The threat of supernatural evil is invoked less often in modern liturgy, and Catholic encyclopedias take pains to distinguish exorcism from magic and to acknowledge the authority of medical science. These rationalizations have placed the church’s intellectual elite at odds with popular Christianity. The struggle over who may perform exorcisms and how they may be performed reflects the larger dialectic between ecclesiastical and extra-ecclesiastical religion.

An example of the decline of exorcism can be seen in the Catholic rite of baptism. Technically, baptism is a form of exorcism, although this function is now largely forgotten. According to Dallen, Gratsch, and Elmer (2003), the liturgy of baptism has changed further to emphasize purification from original sin rather than the exorcism of demonic forces. In the Latin liturgy, “*a potestate tenebrarum*” (freedom from the power of darkness) was changed to “*ab origine culpae labe*” (freedom from original sin) (Dallen, Gratsch, and Elmer 2003: 553). Similarly, anointing with oil has become an optional part of the rite. The original function of anointment in Catholic baptism was as a form of exorcism, possibly adapted from Mark 6:13, which juxtaposes casting out demons, anointing the sick, and healing (Mitchell 1966).

Although Martin Luther certainly believed in a personal devil, the intellectual elite have increasingly attacked the idea of the demonic as “premodern.” This pattern can be seen from the natural religion of Herman Reimarus in the 18th century to the demythologization of Rudolf Bultmann in the 20th century (Woods 1971). The Catholic encyclopedias of the 20th century perpetuate the doctrine of possession and exorcism but only through carefully worded apologies. The *Catholic Encyclopedia*, first published in fifteen volumes from 1907 to 1912, goes to great lengths to assert that exorcism is neither superstition nor magic:

[I]n ethnic religions, and even among the Jews from the time when there is evidence of [exorcism’s] being vogue, exorcism as an act of religion is largely replaced by the use of mere magical and superstitious means, to which non-Catholic writers at the present day sometimes quite unfairly assimilate Christian exorcism. Superstition ought not to be confounded with religion, however much their history may be interwoven, nor magic, however white it may be, with a legitimate religious rite.

The *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, written nearly a hundred years later, continues to emphasize that exorcism is not magic: “Exorcism is nothing more than a prayer to God (sometimes made publicly in the name of the Church,



sometimes made privately) to restrain the power of demons over men and things.” The curious use of the phrase “nothing more than a prayer” seems to be a reaction to the idea that exorcism is somehow magical or mysterious. The article goes on to emphasize the church’s recognition of the hegemony of the scientific establishment: “Both modern Biblical scholarship and current psychological theory and practice are inclined to admit a supernatural explanation only when a natural explanation has been proved impossible” (Dallen, Gratsch, and Elmer 2003: 551, 553).

Thus while the ecclesiastical church still acknowledges the rite of exorcism, it does so in an increasingly guarded way. The church’s seeming embarrassment over supernatural doctrines lends support to the decline of religion thesis. However, numerous surveys indicate a strong and growing popular belief in supernatural evil. The 1998 Southern Focus Poll indicates that nearly 59 percent of respondents believed that “people are sometimes possessed by the Devil” (Rice 2003: 98). Gallup polls show that belief in the devil rose from 55 percent in 1990 to 70 percent in 2004 (Winseman 2009). In the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey, 75 percent of respondents indicated that Satan “absolutely” or “probably” exists. Nearly 70 percent indicated that demons absolutely or probably exist (Baker 2008). The 2008 Pew Forum survey indicated that 70 percent of Americans believe that demons are active in the world (Pew Research Center 2008). Jennifer Robinson of Gallup concludes that “[m]ajorities of Americans of every political inclination, region, educational level, and age group said they believe in the devil” (Robinson 2009). Almost twenty years before any of these studies were conducted, Blatty had already put a face on America’s popular belief in the demonic. This disconnect between rationalized religion and folk piety is reflected in *The Exorcist*, in which Chris MacNeil, a secularist, is convinced that her daughter is possessed, while Father Karras, a Catholic priest, tries to persuade her that there is a scientific explanation.

### *Ouija Boards*

Another aspect of supernaturalism that is prominent in *The Exorcist* is the Ouija board. The most common type of Ouija board was patented by William Fuld in 1892. On February 23, 1966, Parker Brothers bought Fuld’s trademark, and the next day, *The New York Times* reported that Parker Brothers’ president planned to double production of the board (Ellis 2004).<sup>6</sup> Unlike exorcism, the Ouija board is strictly an aspect of popular occultism, having no place in the Catholic tradition.

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<sup>6</sup> Although no credit is given, the title of Ellis’s chapter, “The @#\$%&! Ouija Board,” is a line from *The Exorcist*.

Nevertheless, there is a connection between Ouija boards and exorcism. Bill Ellis (2000) argues that the ritual of using a Ouija board shares a structural parallel with the ritual of exorcism: Both practices are regarded as potentially dangerous and involve detecting, engaging with, and dismissing an otherworldly presence. The church's attempt to control popular interest in Ouija boards also parallels the effort to regulate exorcism in the 17th century. Contacting dead loved ones through Ouija boards became popular in the United States during World War I, in the way that Spiritualism had gained popularity after the Civil War. Pope Pius X commissioned J. Godfrey Raupert to warn American Catholics about these practices. In 1918, Raupert wrote in the *American Ecclesiastical Journal*, "So rapidly has this practice spread in this country that there are few families to-day who have not come in touch with these experiments in some form or another" (Ellis 2004: 181). From a pastoralist perspective, a secularist such as Chris MacNeil who uses a Ouija board to contact her subconscious would not be considered a religious person. However, the prevalence of Ouija boards and other forms of popular occultism in the 20th century indicates that supernaturalism was not in decline at all. Indeed, at the same time that Gallup polls reported the widespread belief that religion was losing influence, priests were writing with concern about "the occult revolution" (Woods 1971).

### *The Black Mass*

In *The Exorcist*, at a dinner party hosted by Chris MacNeil, the Jesuits begin to discuss urban legends about Black Masses. One of them comments, "I heard a statistic once about something like possibly fifty thousand Black Masses being said every year in the city of Paris. . . . It's just something I heard" (Blatty 1971: 72). The idea that 50,000 Black Masses occur every year in Paris is an early example of what James T. Richardson and Massimo Introvigne (2007: 96) call "a folk statistic." Rumors of Satanic cults began in the late 1960s, coinciding with the emergence of new religious movements and the murders carried out by the Manson Family (Victor 1993). In *The Exorcist*, MacNeil mentions hearing rumors of "witch cults" in Los Angeles (Blatty 1971: 72). By the 1980s, folk statistics about Satanic cults had become increasingly common and were disseminated through talk shows and other popular media (Goode and Ben-Yahuda 1994). Cowan (2008) includes popular belief in Satanic conspiracies among the elements of the Christian sociophobic of *The Exorcist*.

Much like Ouija boards, stories of Satanists and Black Masses were quite popular when *The Exorcist* was written. Such rumors appear even to have been common among educated Catholic clergy. Woods, a professor at Dominican University, writing in 1971, comments:

Throughout the present century, newspaper accounts from practically every European and American nation have reported on occasion that a Black Mass or similar festival has been performed in a deserted church or graveyard, in warehouses and brownstone flats and chic penthouses overlooking the East River. There is little doubt such things really occur; several college students of my acquaintance have mentioned at least hearing of such goings-on—even in frat houses and dormitories (1971: 136).

Similarly, Malachi Martin, a former Jesuit, presents an incredibly graphic account of a Black Mass in his 1976 book *Hostage to the Devil*, in which a transsexual is lured to a private party and raped by an entire congregation of Satanists, acquiring a possessing demon in the process. This story was presented not as fiction or rumor but as documented fact (Martin 1976).

Popular fear of Black Masses might exist independently of supernaturalism, as in Woods's description, or it might be directly tied to a belief in demonic supernaturalism, as in Martin's. Like popular interest in exorcism or use of Ouija boards, popular belief in the Black Mass is not a measure of religious practice from a pastoralist perspective. However, the widespread belief that thousands of Satanists hold meetings throughout the world is entirely inconsistent with a decline of religion narrative. Thus the use of folk statistics is one more way in which the elements of Blatty's life-world contradict the pastoralist bias.

#### *FOLK PIETY AND THE PRIVATIZATION OF RELIGION THEORY*

The other variant of the secularization thesis is the privatization of religion theory, that is, the claim that religion will become increasingly relegated to a subjective sphere within a differentiated secular order. *The Exorcist* also reveals contradictions in this theory, using simple examples from the American life-world. One of the most interesting scenes in the novel is MacNeil's dinner party, which is attended by an astronaut, a senator, several Jesuit priests, and a Catholic New Ager. Together, the guests represent the spheres of scientific technocracy, politics, ecclesiastical religion, and folk piety. This seems a little like the premise of a joke, and the glib dialogue during this scene hints at Blatty's earlier work as a comedy writer. It is likely that the scene is based on Blatty's own experience of parties in Georgetown and Hollywood. What is significant is that the guests do not confine themselves to their respective fields of expertise. Instead of privatization, there is a confluence of religion and politics, science and magic. Furthermore, the guests do not seem able to speak with authority on their own fields. The astronaut confesses that he does not know what "space" is, to which a Jesuit responds, "You should" (Blatty 1971: 76). MacNeil describes how she thought she saw a man

levitate in Bhutan and asks, “Is that possible?” Rather than speaking conclusively, the Jesuit dean answers, “Who knows? Who knows what gravity is? Or matter when it comes to that?” (Blatty 1971: 71). This scene suggests that despite the cultural ideal of a secular order in which experts speak with authority from within their own differentiated spheres, this is not the way the world actually works. In reality, knowledge is dedifferentiated, and religion frequently becomes muddled with other spheres.

The folk piety of *The Exorcist* challenges the privatization of religion thesis in two ways. First, folk piety approaches the supernatural through epistemologies that are neither religious nor secular but interstitial. These interstitial epistemologies are depicted in *The Exorcist* through Father Karras’s attempts to evaluate Regan’s possession “scientifically” and through references to parapsychology. This aspect of folk piety challenges the notion that religion and science can be neatly separated. Second, there is ample evidence that popular belief in the demonic is an influence on politics and politicians. The political aspects of folk piety are only hinted at in *The Exorcist*. However, they become more apparent in an analysis of the cultural legacy of the film.

#### *Religion and Science in The Exorcist*

Father Karras is both a Jesuit and a psychiatrist. While this combination embodies the malaise of a disenchanting Catholicism, it also contradicts the idea that religion can be privatized. As much as Karras desires to keep his roles as priest and psychiatrist separate, he is ultimately unable to do so. Instead, he finds himself analyzing Regan’s possession through mixed epistemologies that are neither purely religious nor purely scientific. As with virtually all elements of *The Exorcist*, these mixed epistemologies are taken from Blatty’s own study of exorcism. At one point, Karras sprinkles Regan with holy water, not as part of an exorcism but as an experiment. He later reveals that the “holy water” was actually tap water—a placebo (Blatty 1971: 273). This experiment is a trope that Blatty likely came across through his studies with Father Bermingham. An exorcist in South Africa did similar experiments in 1906. The exorcist reportedly sprinkled a possessed girl with both holy water and tap water, using the tap water as a control. The South African exorcist also hid holy objects such as saint medals in the room to find out whether the girl could detect their presence (Taylor 2006).

When psychology and medical science fail to explain Regan’s condition, Karras turns to parapsychology. The distinction between parapsychology and the supernatural that appears in *The Exorcist* was a point of serious discussion for some Christians both in the Mount Rainier case and during the occult revival of the 1960s and early 1970s. According to *The Washington Post*, the Mount Rainier

exorcism attracted parapsychologists from Duke University. Taylor identifies the family pastor in the Mount Rainier exorcism as Luther Schulze. Schulze, an evangelical Lutheran, apparently had a keen interest in psychokinesis.<sup>7</sup> He originally diagnosed Robbie as a case of unconscious psychokinesis rather than possession, and it was Schulze who contacted Joseph Banks Rhine, the founder of Duke University's parapsychology laboratory (Taylor 2006). The same initial diagnosis is made by Father Karras, who interprets Regan's possession as a mental illness compounded by psychokinetic and telepathic ability. He attempts to explain this theory to an exasperated MacNeil: "Apparently inner tension of the mind can sometimes trigger some unknown energy that seems to move objects around at a distance. There's nothing supernatural about it" (Blatty 1971: 238). Similarly, Mary Jo Perrin, the Catholic New Ager at McNeil's dinner party, says that she believes she has a psychic gift but adds, "It isn't occult. In fact, to me it seems natural; perfectly natural. Being a Catholic, I believe that we all have a foot in two worlds" (Blatty, 1971: 86).

The distinction between psychic ability and the supernatural was a topic of concern for many Christian thinkers in the late 1960s. In his book *Christianity and the Occult* (1971), J. Stafford Wright expounds to his readers the difference between psychic and occult phenomena. He writes, "Psychic speaks of apparently nonphysical yet human powers . . . the word occult on the other hand, suggests contact with spirit powers, consequent magic, and witchcraft" (Wright 1971: 69). Lisa Schwebel (2004) claims that the Catholic Church has long recognized the existence of psychic abilities, or "psi," and regards the phenomenon as morally neutral. She argues that this is why Pope Benedict XIV (1675–1758) reaffirmed the rule of Gregory IX (1170–1241) that visionary experiences on their own are not cause to promote a candidate to beatification and canonization: Unexplainable experiences happen to both the wicked and the pious.

Certainly, popular belief in psychic ability qualifies as a manifestation of folk piety. As is the case with exorcism and Ouija boards, parapsychology evokes a tension between ecclesiastical religion and popular religion. However, parapsychology also falls within the purview of scientific inquiry. Robbie Doe was investigated by Lutheran pastors, Jesuit psychiatrists, and parapsychologists from Duke University. Such a case presents a serious challenge to the division of labor between religion and science that the privatization of religion thesis assumes.

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<sup>7</sup> Survey data indicate that Lutherans might have an unusually high rate of paranormal belief in comparison to members of other mainline Protestant denominations (Orenstein 2002).

*Religion and Politics in The Exorcist*

Both the prologue and Book Three of *The Exorcist* are introduced by selections of quotes that juxtapose the New Testament with accounts of gruesome events in modern times. The prologue is introduced by three quotes. The first is from Luke 8 in which the Gerasene demon tells Jesus his name is "Legion." The second is a transcript of an FBI wiretap in which members of Cosa Nostra describe hanging a man from a meat hook and torturing him for three days. The third is a quote from Dr. Tom Dooley (a Catholic) describing Communists murdering and torturing priests, teachers, and children. Beneath this quote are three words: Dachau, Auschwitz, Buchenwald (Blatty 1971: 1). Book Three also has three quotes, which are arranged in a chiasmic structure. The first quote is from John 6, "They said, 'What sign can you give us to see, so that we may believe you?'" The second, from a 1969 issue of *Newsweek*, describes a brigade commander in Vietnam announcing a contest to see who can make the unit's 10,000th kill. The final quote is also from John 6: "You do not believe although you have seen . . ." (Blatty 1971: 218).

The significance of the first triad of quotes seems clear: The name of the demon is "Legion" because it is manifested every day through man's inhumanity to man. Cosa Nostra, Communist atrocities, and Nazi death camps are all faces of the demonic. The second triad is more ambiguous. How is faith in Jesus related to atrocities in Vietnam? The answer appears to lie in Blatty's search for the miraculous. For Blatty, the reality of possession would be a cause for joy as much as fear, because it would confirm the metaphysical truth of Catholicism. McCabe (1999: 15) writes of Blatty's faith, "If the devil (or his minion) had indeed proven to have been within that boy, then surely the existence of such evil must lead to an acceptance of the reality of good?" Therefore, if the horrors of the 20th century are evidence of the demonic, then by extension, they may also be evidence of divine benevolence.

It is unclear whether Blatty's equation of current events with the demonic is metaphysical or merely symbolic. However, there is evidence that many Americans do see political causes in terms of a supernatural order. A research note by William Swatos analyzed survey data from activists who supported the National Federation of Decency in their picketing on August 6, 1984, against the sale of sexually explicit magazines by 7-Eleven convenience stores. The survey's most significant finding was that almost the entire sample agreed that the objectionable magazines represented the agency of the devil. Swatos (1988: 80) concludes, "This means that 98% of the respondents believe in an active personal 'transcendent' force of evil directly involved in pornography. . . . Pornography

represents an agency of personal evil immediately present in the neighborhoods of the respondents. The Devil is enfleshed in the middlecore centerfold.”

This infiltration of popular demonology into the political sphere is now being called *political religion*. Jason Bivins (2008) argues that Hell Houses, the Left Behind novels, and the evangelical comic tracts of Jack Chick are all manifestations of a political religion that posits demonological causes for political decline. It is now even possible for American politicians to engage in exorcism without serious damage to their careers. In 1994, current Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal wrote a piece for the *New Oxford Review* describing his own participation in an exorcism at a prayer meeting of charismatic Christians while he was a student at Brown University. Jindal, who had converted to Catholicism in his teens, later was accepted by Harvard Medical School (but declined the offer), and his description of weighing his faith against his scientific education sounds remarkably like Father Karras (Blow 2009). Although Blow, a *New York Times* editorialist, seemed somewhat bemused by Jindal’s description of exorcism, it does not appear to have affected Jindal’s political career. As of this writing, it is possible to buy a T-shirt that reads, “Bobby Jindal 2012.” Certainly, Max Weber could never have predicted a 21st century presidential candidate who has participated in banishing demons.

### CONCLUSION

*The Exorcist* and the phenomenon surrounding it by no means disprove a theory of secularization. Rather, secularization theory helps to account for *The Exorcist* phenomenon. Blatty’s interest in the supernatural and the popular appeal of his story seem to have been a reaction to what Cassanova (1994: 17) calls the “mythical account of a universal process of secularization.”

Warren Goldstein has argued for a dialectical model in which secularization and sacralization occur simultaneously. He writes, “Religious movements in the direction of rationalization and social movements in the direction of secularization, spawn religious countermovements in the direction of sacralization and dedifferentiation” (Goldstein 2009: 175). It is with this in mind that we should approach *The Exorcist* as a cultural moment. The authentic folk piety depicted in *The Exorcist* likely appealed to audiences in the early 1970s because it was a welcome alternative to rationalized religion and a cultural myth of universal secularization. *The Exorcist* fueled a resurgence of folk piety as the sort of religious countermovement described by Goldstein. Much as Blatty hoped to restore his faith through an encounter with the demonic, American evangelicalism appears to have been energized by popular demonology. In the 21st century, in which charismatic deliverance ministries offer to cast out demons

and evangelicals interpret global politics and domestic policies in terms of spiritual evil, it is clear that God is not dead. Neither is the devil.

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