

satan's playground

With evil so much in the news these days, it's no wonder that exorcisms are on the rise.

John Zaffis is a pleasant chap with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard and impeccable manners. He lives on a cul-de-sac in Stratford, in a neighborhood with neatly trimmed hedges and impeccable yards. He is kind, enthusiastic and devoted to his wife and three children. You would not know to look at John Zaffis that he has seen Satan face-to-face thousands of times.

Zaffis is an expert on paranormal phenomena—that is, all things that natural laws cannot explain—but he is particularly well versed in demonic possession and exorcism. He has the video- and audiotapes, photographs, manuscripts, artwork and arcane tomes he believes prove the physical existence of evil. Most of this material is shoe-horned into a two-room office built onto the side of his house, behind the garage.

As one enters this sanctum, one steps out of everyday Stratford and into a timeless world of the spirit, an alchemical wonderland of gargoyles, skulls, beads, religious icons, runes, dolls, miniature knights in armor and thousands of old books. Tucked in a far corner is a desk on which sit a state-of-the-art computer and video screen—the headquarters, so to speak, of Zaffis' Paranormal and Demonology Research Society of New England (www.prsne.com).

"I work harder at home, at night and on weekends, than I do at my regular job [as a quality control inspec-



tor]," says Zaffis. "If I were doing this sort of thing a hundred years ago, I'd have been burnt or hung."

In his 28 years of investigating paranormal phenomena, Zaffis, 46, estimates that he has worked on more than 12,000 cases. He has also sat in on, or assisted with, 65 exorcisms "of pure possession," as opposed to the more common levels of demonic possession called "infestation" and "oppression."

And that's 65 exorcisms and counting, because Zaffis remains active in the field. In nearly three decades, he has worked with some of the most prominent exorcists in the world, including the late Malachi Martin, who wrote what is generally regarded as the definitive text on the subject, *Hostage to the Devil*, an all-points bulletin on the whereabouts of Satan. In addition, Zaffis has worked with priests, lapsed priests, bishops, deacons, ministers, Buddhist monks and rabbis.

Though he more often tackles "benign" paranormal activity, such as ghosts, poltergeists, hauntings, near-death experiences, ESP, past-life regression and channeling, his

by Alan Bisbort

exorcism expertise seems to be more in demand than ever these days.

"Exorcism is a more talked-about subject in the last three or four years than I can ever remember, and more people are seeking help," says Zaffis. "Before this, they thought they were going crazy or beyond help. When otherwise sane people preface what they are going to tell me with, 'John, you're going to think I'm nuts,' I pay attention."

Yes, exorcism is back in a big way. In fact, lost in the rubble of Sept. 11 was a news story that on a normal day would have vaulted into the tabloid stratosphere, along with Florida shark attacks and Gary Condit. On that day, both ABC News and CNN reported that Mother Teresa had been given an exorcism just prior to her death—while she was in a coma—in a Calcutta hospital.

The implications are obvious: If Mother Teresa can be inhabited by Satan, what kind of nastiness is going on inside you and me?

The new wave of exorcisms come in every shape and size, and most bear little resemblance to the familiar depiction of them in the book and film version of William Peter Blatty's *The Exorcist* (1973). They have been taken up most notably by

knowledge of the language suddenly start speaking in Latin, that makes you take notice. I've seen people exhibit superhuman strength. I've witnessed one woman in Connecticut, a small woman, maybe 5-foot-1, who'd had 13 exorcisms, and at one of them she busted out of a straitjacket, broke a pew, and it took four large men to restrain her."

During a recent exorcism he witnessed and helped arrange, Zaffis says the possessed person began dry-heaving and that the room was filled with an odor so vile that the six people in attendance had trouble breathing. At the end, after the demon had been expelled, they all heard popping sounds, like static electricity.

"All the electrical devices began blinking and there was a smell of ozone in the room, just like after a lightning strike," he recalls. "This was a sign of a successful exorcism. The subject felt drained, empty. That's because something was gone."

Cuneo says he has witnessed some of the same things. He has, for example, seen a 250-pound accountant from Long Island put a diminutive pastor in an airplane spin worthy of Wrestlemania (and then not remember any of it later). He has seen a "mass deliverance" in Wheaton, Ill., where 600 people groveled in their Sunday best—moaning, groaning, spitting, vomiting into plastic buckets and simulating sex acts.

"If I were doing this sort of thing 100 years ago, I would have been burnt or hung," says demonologist John Zaffis, *opposite*.

evangelical Protestants, who in New England include mainstream denominations like Lutherans and Episcopalians. In the South and Midwest, Pentacostal "deliverance" ministries are flourishing, and exorcisms are also now performed by rabbis and Buddhist monks. They take place as often in the homes of the possessed as they do in religious sanctuaries.

Most surprisingly, perhaps, exorcisms have even been accepted by a few mental-health-care professionals as a safe, quick and effective means of expelling "demons of addictions galore: alcohol, cigarettes, bitterness, anger, despair," says Michael Cuneo, a professor of anthropology and sociology at Fordham University and author of a new book called *American Exorcism: Expelling Demons in the Land of Plenty*. "But 50 percent of all expulsions are for the demons of sex."

After spending two years on the road researching his subject, Cuneo, a transplanted Canadian with a sunny disposition, calls exorcism "a flourishing industry."

"A few years ago in the Bronx, colleagues told me, 'Mike, did you know that exorcisms are being performed?'" Cuneo told a recent gathering at R. J. Julia's Booksellers in Madison. "My curiosity was piqued, I was between semesters and book projects, so I gassed up my Bonneville and hit the road to see for myself. I toured the United States and had absolutely no difficulty uncovering exorcisms of every imaginable stripe. There's even a pocket of exorcism activity going on within minutes of this bookshop."

This, of course, comes as no surprise to Zaffis, who says he has witnessed remarkable things here in Connecticut. "I've never seen anyone's head turn around 360 degrees but I've seen them spit and bite and vomit and speak in tongues," he says. "When individuals with low education who have no prior

And he's come to Monroe, Conn., to visit with Bishop Robert McKenna of Our Lady of the Rosary Chapel, one of the most prominent and respected persons in the field of exorcism. McKenna showed him a video of the demonic possession of "The Wolf Man," a fellow unable to control his urge to get on all fours and howl like, well, a wolf.

"If people are absolutely convinced that they are demonized, then only an exorcism will suffice," says Cuneo. "I did not go into this research with any preconceived notions, and I was prepared to report anything I saw. I did not see spinning heads, tongues licking navels, levitating bodies, moving objects—and yet I would be the only person in the room who didn't. The most common responses to me would be, 'Satan didn't want you to see, Michael, because you're a writer' or 'Michael, you must have become demonized.' And then they would offer to exorcise me, show me the handcuffs, ropes and chains. I'd say, 'Thanks, I think I'll take a rain check.'"

Mike Roberge, of Danbury, operates his own Internet clearinghouse on all things demonic, called The Demonologist (www.demonologist.com). Roberge, 33, has been immersed in the spirit world since he was 14, and his Web site currently averages 6,000 to 7,000 hits a month. He has arranged 20 exorcisms, assisting with eight.

"A demonologist is one who studies the capabilities of the demonic," he says. "I don't consider myself one, because a true demonologist must work through a church. But I listen to anyone who seeks my help, and I'll do anything that I feel is necessary to help them. I first find out what they've done about their problem and what they are doing now. Some are clearly psychological problems or chemical dependency, but even

these are tricky because you have to ask, 'Is the paranormal causing the dependency or vice versa?'"

There are "red flags" that Roberge looks for when determining if the person is, indeed, possessed. "They have information about things they could not otherwise know, like deep personal things about me, or they speak in languages they have no prior knowledge of," says Roberge, who tapes conversations of those who might be possessed. "The only way to understand it sometimes is to play it backward, to find out if they are speaking English or Latin backward. Also, the person possesses immense, almost superhuman strength."

Like Roberge, Zaffis does not stop to ponder the sociological reasons why exorcisms are on the rise. Most who come to him have already sought help for themselves or a loved one—typically through a mental-health practitioner or prayer—without positive results. They then turn to Zaffis because of his extensive experience investigating and documenting the paranormal. He is a trusted name in a field rife with charlatans and con artists.

"People are often at the end of their ropes when they contact me about exorcism," Zaffis explains. "They have exhausted all avenues. But mental illness must first be ruled out—bipolar disorders, psychosis, too—before demonic possession can even be presumed. This is not to say these things can't go hand in hand with demonic possession. I've seen people who suffer from mental illness and have something going on as well on the supernatural level."

Typically, Zaffis gets a query by e-mail or a phone call.

"I have several phone conversations before I go out to investigate a case," he says. "If I do go out, I'll visit two or three times to see if I can record something by video or tape recorder. If someone reports that their lights keep going out, I will check all the wiring to make sure it's not a short. Or if there's banging in the walls, I'll check the heating and plumbing systems. If it's noises above their heads, I'll check the attic for animals. I rule all other things out before I investigate it as paranormal and then I try to document it before I approach a member of the clergy for assistance, if it's needed."

Though he's a practicing Roman Catholic, Zaffis does not necessarily approach the Roman Catholic clergy for an exorcism.

"The Roman Catholic Church is the most secretive about exorcisms, and it is the least willing to give them," says Zaffis. "I've seen just about every kind of exorcism there is: Roman Catholic, Buddhist, Jewish, Protestant. Some might call it deliverance or faith healing in a Fundamentalist congregation. An awful lot has to do with belief systems. Do they work for everybody? No. And several may be needed in some cases."

"Even now, the hardest exorcisms to get are through the Roman Catholic Church," agrees Cuneo, raised Catholic in Toronto. "They constitute only a minuscule fraction of the number performed. The Catholic Church goes to great lengths to rule out all other explanations, like fraud, psychopathology, schizophrenia."

The *Catholic Almanac* officially defines exorcism as "a rite in which evil spirits are charged and commanded on the authority of God and with the prayer of the Church to depart from a person or to cease causing harm to a person suffering from diabolical possession or obsession." The Catholic rite itself includes the following elements: the Litany of Saints, recitation of the Our Father, one or more creeds as well as other prayers, specific prayers of exorcism, the reading of Gospel passages and use of the Sign of the Cross. An updated "Ritual Romano" for the rite of exorcism was issued Jan. 26, 1999 by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments.

"I prefer to use the Roman Catholic clergy, if possible," says Roberge, himself a practicing Catholic. "They are the most heavily trained in the exorcism rites. But it is the piety of the person performing the exorcism that is most important. I have a Baptist minister in Atlanta who does some stuff for me."

Although exorcisms in the Roman Catholic Church are mandated to be performed by a priest delegated by "the bishop of the place," Rev. Robert McKenna never has been one to wait for official church approval. In fact, he has openly defied the church on this issue, and many others, for years, and in 1974 was dismissed from the Dominican order. McKenna is deeply bothered by the modernizing of Catholic Church rituals that

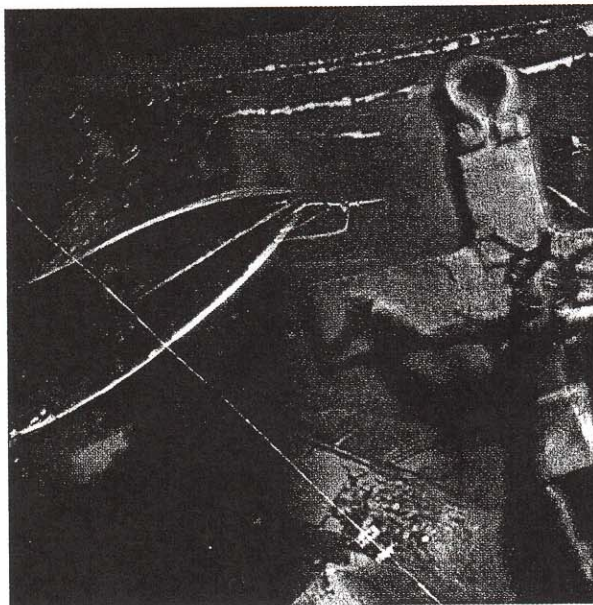
resulted from the Second Vatican Council in the mid-1960s. In 1973, he joined the Orthodox Roman Catholic Movement (ORCM), composed mainly of disaffected priests who wanted to restore Catholic traditions. Years ago, a traditionalist French prelate consecrated him as Bishop McKenna, a title he now uses. And, for the past 28 years, he has, according to Cuneo, "been a fixture within what has come to be known as the underground traditionalist movement of American Catholicism."

In his late 70s now and slowing down, McKenna has regularly performed exorcisms, many out of his Monroe chapel. The Orthodox Roman Catholic Movement bought the chapel in 1973 and it provides safe haven for this sort of activity.

"I am an exorcist by default," says McKenna. "The average Catholic priest

did not want to hear about these sorts of cases, so people began coming to me for help. I don't want to pass judgment on the non-Catholic clergy, but I can tell you that most Catholic clergy today barely believe in the devil.

"Demonic possession is a veritable plague, and it seems to be getting worse as time goes on," McKenna continues. "People are letting the devil in the door, sometimes innocent, through playing around with a Ouija board or Tarot cards."



If they don't become outright possessed, they become obsessed. Anyone can be a victim of the devil, whether they are Christian or not. There are even innocent people that I have seen who have had hexes or curses put on them, sometimes even by members of their own family."

McKenna is hardly alone in his beliefs here in Connecticut, according to Cuneo. Not only are McKenna and renowned demon chasers Ed and Lorraine Warren based here, but one of the nation's most respected psychiatrists, M. Scott Peck of New

nationwide television four years ago when they shared with viewers the specifics of an exorcism rite that was presided over by none other than Bishop McKenna. They appeared with McKenna on ABC's "PrimeTime Live" on April 22, 1998, to assist with a televised exorcism. Hosted by Diane Sawyer, the show featured a segment called "The Devil Within" that focused on a teenage girl, allegedly possessed by demons, being exorcised by McKenna.

As a result of Klimek and Banever's TV appearance, the

Words found on the farmer's back could only be read in a mirror.

Preston, author of the phenomenal best seller *The Road Less Traveled*, has been a driving force in lending exorcism what Cuneo calls "middle-class respectability" and in opening the door to viewing exorcism from a scientific perspective, perhaps even as a therapeutic tool. Peck's book, *People of the Lie* (1983), made it clear that he had dealt with individuals in his private practice who he felt were possessed by evil. One chapter, "Possession and Exorcism," even details two successful exorcisms in which he participated.

To Peck, "evil people" are characterized by an "absolute refusal to tolerate the sense of their own sinfulness." They have "crossed over the line." Because these "evil people" lead lives of such deeply disguised pretense, they could very well be among the leaders of a community or church.

Cuneo credits Peck with giving exorcism a cultural legitimacy. "Here you have the best-known psychologist in the world admitting to having participated in exorcisms and calling them an essential form of therapy."

Peck continued to explore exorcism after publication of his book. He conducted conferences on the subject of evil and, he told Cuneo, "tried to establish a network of exorcists and sympathetic psychiatrists." The effort never panned out, and Peck expressed his frustration to Cuneo, saying that "while many Americans seem open to the possibility of diabolic possession, most of the country's intellectual and religious elites . . . have seemed determined to keep the door shut."

Other respected professionals have embraced exorcism as well. These include Dr. Joseph Klimek, director of medicine at Hartford Hospital and a professor at UConn's School of Medicine, and Jennifer Banever, a registered nurse in Farmington who was named "Mother of the Year" by *The Hartford Courant* in 1994 for her work with international adoption programs.

Klimek and Banever are co-founders and board members of Hostis Oratonem Per Expulsio (aka HOPE), which translates as "Expulsion of the Enemy Through Prayer." HOPE is dedicated to researching and treating individuals "beset with paranormal phenomena, including demonic infestation, oppression and possession."

HOPE, according to its Web site, has documentation of over 400 cases of demonic possession, though when contacted for this article, both Klimek and Banever declined to be interviewed. They did, however, issue this statement: "Unfortunately, we must respectfully decline your offer to interview us, because HOPE has discontinued all operations and we are no longer in the business of investigation, spiritual counseling, or arranging prayers or exorcisms for the public."

Though reticent now, Klimek and Banever weren't shy on

HOPE Web site was inundated with queries, from the merely curious to the wits-end desperate. In a posting on their Web site, they basked in their newfound notoriety: The appearance "hurled our fledgling organization into national prominence. Our Web site hits increased from five a day to over 1,000 a day. In the three days directly after the show was televised we had over 50,000 hits, as people . . . logged on to learn more about Satan, his minions and exorcism."

The most noteworthy result, however, apparently came weeks later when HOPE members were introduced to Dr. Rama Coomaraswamy, who appeared one Saturday morning at Our Lady of Rosary Chapel in Monroe, to assist at an exorcism being conducted by Bishop McKenna.

"Dr. Rama" was also a "very special friend" of Malachi Martin, the reigning scholar on exorcism in North America until his death in 2000, as well as a prolific author and former Vatican official who had broken with the church. An admiring account of Klimek and Banever's encounter with Coomaraswamy and Martin at a New York City restaurant was posted on the Web site: "We listened slack-jawed as they rapidly wove the conversation past the demise of the Jesuit community, Satanism in the church today and sacramental defilement. They ended up with the observation that demonic possession is increasing at a rapid rate due in part to the fact that many priests today do not believe in Satan."

Whether prodded by Martin and others, or responding to increased demand, the Catholic Church now has 12 official exorcists nationwide. This may not seem like much, but as early as the mid-1990s, it had only two.

"Robert McKenna and Malachi Martin are part of a larger movement of traditional priests who have broken with the Roman Catholic Church," explains Cuneo. "They are like spiritual gunslingers. They believe that the Catholic Church is beyond repair. Father McKenna was once a parish priest, but he now believes that the papacy is an apostate office. He and others in the breakaway movement are completely schismatic. They get their own bishops to sanction their activities. They have dynasties and lineages of bishops that are absolutely independent of the Church."

Lorraine Warren tells of an exorcism attempt that required the intercession of the indomitable Bishop McKenna. As she tells it, before McKenna arrived on the scene, the earlier attempts were so grueling they'd caused Ed Warren to suffer a heart attack (from which he eventually recovered). The episode took place in western Massachusetts, and involved a French-Canadian farmer named Maurice

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◀ 55 Theriault who was said to be possessed, or cursed, by the devil.

"We were called by Father Homer Boyer of Warren, Mass., who was educated in seminaries before Vatican II," recalls Lorraine Warren. "He'd learned about exorcism in theory but had never experienced it in actuality. He knew the Theriault family only through purchasing produce from them. They were quiet, pious, attended Mass regularly, but terrible things were happening to them. Father Boyer went to their house to pray with them, which was the worst thing he could have done. That only provokes the spirits."

During the visits, Boyer witnessed levitation, spontaneous fires, objects moving and blood coming from Maurice Theriault's eyes. He even found messages written on the farmer's back that could only be read with a mirror.

"Father Boyer didn't see himself as an exorcist," says Lorraine Warren. "He was an old-fashioned parish priest. He was dumbfounded."

Not knowing what to do, the priest happened to pick up the Warrens' book, *The Demonologist: The Devil in Connecticut*, while browsing at a bookshop.

Shortly after that, he turned on the television to find the Warrens being interviewed on a Boston talk show. He contacted them and asked them to help with Theriault.

The Warrens began investigating the case, employing UConn graduate students who were assigned to stay with the Theriaults around the clock to document all the ways the spirits were manifesting themselves. They arranged for Maurice to be placed in a psychiatric hospital for observation, and to be evaluated by medical doctors.

"We needed documentation, because otherwise the Catholic Church would not sanction the exorcism," explains Lorraine Warren. "This surpassed anything in *The Exorcist*. We met with the bishop in Worcester, Timothy Harrington, who was so moved by Maurice's plight that he performed a spontaneous exorcism on the spot."

It seemed to work; however, the following Sunday, when Maurice arrived at Mass, a strange thing occurred.

"He got to the top of the church's front steps, which were quite steep, and just as he was about to enter the church, he somersaulted backwards down the

steps," recalls Lorraine. "He was not injured."

A second exorcism was required, this time performed by Father Boyer, assisted by the Warrens. It was not successful either.

At this point, Bishop McKenna was called in. He performed a third exorcism that seemed to do the trick. The video footage is grainy, but a transformation seems to be taking place. Maurice's skin seems to clear, the wounds to heal.

"That's the positive part of exorcism, the return to prayerful life," says Lorraine. "But what happens in some cases is that all that attention that the victim got is taken away and they go back to a mundane existence. Some can't handle it, and they open doors again for the spirits to re-enter."

This, she says, is what happened in Maurice Theriault's case. One day some months later, the Warrens returned home from a lecture to find a message from Maurice on their phone machine. It said, "I need you."

Earlier that day, Lorraine recalls, her husband had had a strong feeling that Maurice was in trouble. Now he contacted Nancy, Maurice's wife, and learned that Maurice had told her he was going to commit suicide. Although Ed was able to intercede in time, Maurice eventually did succeed in killing himself.

"He waited for Nancy to come home, shot her arm off with a rifle, then put her on the couch, and sitting opposite her, put the rifle barrel in his mouth and pulled the trigger," says Lorraine. "Maurice was cursed. Could Ed have done anything? It is a question that will haunt us to the end of our lives."

While remaining somewhat skeptical, Cuneo does not dismiss the usefulness of exorcism out of hand.

"It is cathartic, there's some visceral relief and it can be therapeutic. It is a very complex subject," Cuneo explains haltingly. "Do demons exist or not? Did I see conclusive evidence of demonic infestation? No. But I did see a lot of exorcisms that I thought were positively beneficial to the persons receiving them. They walk away, at least for the short term, feeling relieved."

Not all worked out this way. Cuneo is still haunted by the exorcism performed in 1999 on a man in Kansas City who, while writhing and delivering up his demons, was shouting about how he stalked women and children and thought that Satan was commanding him to have sex with them. The exorcism seemed to relieve him of his obsessions, and he was allowed to leave, with no guarantee that there would be any follow-up.

"I asked myself how confident I was about my responsibility as a citizen in this situation. I was in an ethical dilemma: Is

this man a danger?" says Cuneo, who followed the man outside to the parking lot. "I asked him to have coffee with me. We talked for three hours and I felt better about his prospects."

Even so, Cuneo still has reason to doubt.

"I was glad when he contacted me eight months later, to tell me that he was doing better," says Cuneo.

Mike Roberge believes that, for some, the biggest problems occur after the exorcism.

"The person is still open for possession in the future," he explains. "They have to change their lifestyle and they need counseling. I continue to contact them for six months afterwards to find out how they are doing. After one exorcism, 70 to 75 percent of them are fine. The rest will open themselves to possession again."

One of the impediments that Zaffis and Roberge often face is skepticism, a reality that Zaffis has come to accept.

"I'm used to dealing with skeptics, some of whom attend an exorcism and still say, 'Yeah, so?' Can I prove the effectiveness of an exorcism from a scientific point of view? No. But I'm not here to prove or disprove it. I've seen with my own eyes, over and over again, that some-

thing, somehow was accomplished, that these people were helped. I tell the skeptics, 'You've witnessed it and still choose not to believe, and that is your choice.'"

Perhaps the most surprising source of skepticism comes from the clergy.

"I've had more phones hung up on me by priests and ministers," admits Zaffis. "I've gone right to rectories and ministers' homes to get them to help a member of their congregation. They are not prepared to handle the situation. But I don't take it personally."

Zaffis lectures at libraries and college campuses on demonic possession, and he will stay until he answers the last question, from even the most incurably curious or incorrigibly skeptical. Perhaps most remarkably, he and Roberge take no fee for their services.

Zaffis explains his openness: "There's nothing about demonic possession to hide. To pretend that it's secretive and shameful is to do exactly what Satan wants. Don't get me wrong. I get scared. To Satanists, I'm a threat. Some of the conversations I've had with them would blow your mind. They end up asking me, 'Why can't you just leave us alone?'" ■