

## The Newsletter of The North Texas Skeptics



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## A Skeptical View of Exorcism and Deliverance (Part I)

By Danny Barnett

The image on the theater screen shows two Roman Catholic priests battling a demon that has invaded the body of a young girl, forcing her to commit unspeakable acts of violence and depravity. The demon responds by hurling obscenities, vomiting on one of the priests, causing the entire room to shake and buckle, spinning her head 360 degrees, and levitating over her bed. When holy water is splashed on her, it inflicts physical wounds on the girl's body. Still, the priests continue in their efforts to expel the demon. This is exorcism, Hollywood-style, as depicted in the movie adaptation of William Peter Blatty's 1970 novel, *The Exorcist*.

What many people may not be aware of is the fact that exorcism is a very real part of an increasing number of Christian churches. Once the exclusive property of the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches, exorcism has gained an increasing number of practitioners and believers in Protestant and Charismatic churches throughout the past 30 years. Deliverance ministers – the new breed of exorcists produced by the recent movement – have been quietly casting out what they claim to be evil spirits that inhabit their followers. Is this just a passing fad? Does exorcism stand to hurt more people than it helps? Or is there something to this business of deliverance after all?

At this time, I should mention that the terms exorcism and deliverance are interchangeable in that they both refer to the practice of casting out evil spirits. There are very slight, largely academic differences in that exorcism in the classic sense tends to be more ritualized and formal. The best example of this is the ritual for "Exorcism of the Possessed" in the *Rituale Romanum*, the official book of Roman Catholic rituals, which has been used by Catholic clergy for centuries and was first printed in 1614. Deliverance, on the other hand, is a bit more informal, although over the years deliverance has adopted its own rules and rituals concerning expelling demons, but even these rules can vary somewhat from one practitioner to another.

### An Evening with Bob Larson

One thing that I learned about exorcism/deliverance was that it isn't performed in the same high-profile atmosphere typical of many faith healing crusades. While faith healers such as Benny Hinn and Peter Popoff supposedly heal the sick and enable the lame to walk in packed megachurches and convention centers, deliverance ministers maintain a low profile, expelling demons from the afflicted in small churches and prayer groups located throughout America. However, there is usually an exception to every rule, and in the world of deliverance, that exception is Bob Larson.

I have heard Larson perform exorcisms on disturbed individuals who were supposedly demon-possessed ever since the late 80s when I was first exposed to his radio program *Talk Back with Bob Larson*, which is currently heard throughout the United States and Canada. These deliverances were few and far between, and they were performed over the telephone. Until 1996, such exorcisms played a minor part in Larson's ministry, which also tackled issues such as UFOs, gangs, the New Age movement, teen suicide, and so on. However, in 1996, Larson released his own manual on deliverance, *In the Name of Satan*, which was written in order to document Larson's 25-year battle to expel demons from their innocent victims. This was soon followed by a series of videotapes detailing the highlights of an extensive exorcism performed by Larson on a lady simply identified as "Linda" whom Larson ministered to in his Denver office.

Throughout 1997, Larson performed an unprecedented number of exorcisms on *Talk Back with Bob Larson*. Some were done over the telephone, while a few were performed in Larson's office. His subjects included a woman with multiple personalities, a father and son duo who were supposedly afflicted with animal demons as a result of a generational curse, a martial-arts student who was possessed as early as age 7, and a woman who had threatened to jump off a third-floor balcony with her baby in her arms.

Finally, on March 13, 1998, Larson conducted what may have been the first public deliverance in America. As a live audience of approximately 300 watched him in Minneapolis, Bob performed exorcisms on those who claimed to be afflicted with evil spirits. The demons bellowed and screamed as Bob cast them out. As a result of the overwhelming feedback he got from those who attended the event and those who weren't able to make it, Bob announced that he would be performing additional public exorcisms throughout Canada and the United States. His schedule included a stop in Arlington, Texas, where Larson would perform a public deliverance at the Workman Junior High School on May 15, 1998. It was an opportunity to witness exorcism first-hand that I couldn't resist.

After negotiating rush hour traffic under the hot Texas sun, I arrived at the Workman Junior High School on Friday night at 7:00. As I stepped inside and headed towards the auditorium, I noticed that there were tables mobbed by people trying to buy Larson's books and videotapes. I stepped into the auditorium, which easily seated 1,000, only to find that it was already jam-packed. After exploring a bit, I found an unoccupied seat and quickly climbed in after making sure no one had staked a claim on it.

Fifteen minutes after I arrived, the auditorium was standing room only, with people standing in the back and spilling into the aisles. I later learned that people were being turned away because of the overcrowding. The lucky ones who got in were wearing all sorts of clothes – business suits, blue jeans, weekend clothes, "WWJD" shirts, overalls, "Lord's Gym" shirts, military uniforms. One couple even showed up in what looked like traditional Mennonite dress.

I noticed that a lot of people who were attending the exorcism brought their children along to watch the proceedings. Many people proudly carried copies of *In the Name of Satan* that they had just purchased from the vendors. Three videocameras from the Dallas-based Daystar Television Network, a newcomer to Christian broadcasting which already had a reputation for broadcasting some pretty weird stuff, were there to capture the action for Christians throughout America to behold. Arlington police officers were on hand to make sure things didn't get out of control.

For approximately 30 minutes, we were led in song by members of the Arlington Baptist Temple, which sponsored Larson's Metroplex appearance. Finally, almost an hour after I arrived, Bob Larson took the stage to enthusiastic applause. One of the first things he did was to relate a parable of a bear fighting with an alligator. If you had to guess who would win, the first thing you'd need to do is figure out what terrain they were fighting on. If they were fighting on land, the bear had an overwhelming advantage; but if they were fighting in water, the alligator would certainly have the upper hand. He explained that spiritual warfare was pretty much the same: "What the Devil tries to do is to get us on his territory." The object of spiritual warfare in general and deliverance in particular, therefore, was to get believers on God's terrain where the Devil would be powerless.

Larson also took some time to advertise his various releases, offering a "Demon-Proofing Protection Pack" that consisted of some of his books and videotapes. Separately, they would sell for \$240, but the entire package was being offered for one night only at the low price of \$99. "If it's too costly now," Larson reminded the audience, "think about how costly it will be if you don't have it."

A short sermon was given, with the microphone cutting out at 8:00. Larson stated, "This is not the last time strange things are gonna happen." After a short prayer to bind various demons, Larson brought a long-haired Hispanic woman named Blanca to the stage. Larson explained that Blanca was the woman who had threatened to commit suicide with her baby daughter last year, then led her in prayer to renounce a curse of witchcraft that had still plagued her. The entire audience prayed, with people around me speaking in tongues and in some cases even *growling* in tongues. When the prayer was finished, the audience applauded as Blanca returned to her seat.

Now it was time for Larson to get busy with the main event. Stepping off the stage and into the audience, he confronted a middle-aged Caucasian woman with brunette hair and a floral dress. (Her name was never revealed.) Larson commanded the demon in this woman to come to attention and identify itself. After some initial difficulty, the demon identified itself as Death. Larson told Death, "Death, you will not have this woman."

"Yes, I will," Death replied in a strong Texas accent.

Shortly afterwards, the subject's fist raised. "You're not gonna hit me with that fist," Bob countered. "I command an angel of the Lord to take that arm right now. Take it! I command an angel of the Lord to take that arm right now. Pull it back. Pull it back." Larson then commanded Death to tell him who is King of Kings and Lord of Lords, to which Death kept replying, "I hate you."

"Of *course* you hate me," Larson responded to the demon. "It's the greatest compliment you could possibly pay me, but that's not the question. The question is – *come* to attention, Death! *Come* up! *Come* up, Death! *Who* is King of King [sic] *and* Lord of Lords? *Who*?"

"Sssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssssatan."

Bob then rebuked Death for lying to God. Directing two male assistants to bring the woman onto the stage, Larson then prayed that "The Angel of Life" would hug her, thus tormenting the demon. Calling on Death to be judged in the name of Jesus, Larson repeated the question. Finally, the demon stuttered and uttered the word "Jesus."

"I command you to tell me, in the name of Jesus Christ, I command you to tell me – what is your legal authority?" Bob demanded. "*What* is it? *Tell* me!"

"B-B-Blood," the demon stammered.

"*What* blood?"

"*Baby's* blood!"

A deathly hush fell over the entire auditorium. I didn't know what was meant by that statement. Did this woman have an abortion? Did she kill a child at some time in her past? Neither Bob nor Death elaborated, so I kept watching the confrontation.

"Has she confessed that sin?" Bob finally asked the demon.

"Y-Yes!"

"Then she *has* confessed it!" thundered Larson. "*And* it's under the blood of Jesus, and once under the blood of Jesus, you have NO right to hold it before any child of God! When Jesus forgives, it's as far as the East is from the West, as high as the heaven is above the earth, so great is His mercy! And he has removed our transgressions from us!" The audience erupted in cheers and applause as Bob railed against Death, informing it that it had no legal right to trouble that woman any further. Soon, Death was driven from the body of the woman by forcing it to say "I go now to the pit," a euphemism for Hell. The demon shrieked and cried out as it was commanded to leave by Bob. The unidentified woman, having finally come to her senses, wept and fiercely hugged Bob as the entire audience applauded, praising Jesus for the victory. Bob declared, "A demon is nothing if you stand up to it in the name of Jesus!"

This was just the beginning. Throughout the night, Larson ministered to three other individuals. One of them was a white teenage boy named Ryan who growled at Larson and bared his hands at the exorcist as though they had claws on them. Bob tormented the demon by laying a Bible on Ryan's head, but the demon continued to growl at the exorcist.

Turning away from Ryan for a while, Bob turned his attention to a woman named Rosa who hissed at Larson and went into contortions. "You *fool!*" the demon in Rosa screamed. "*You* can't stop me! I'm the Devil!" Bob identified Rosa's demon as Snake. As Larson ministered deliverance to Rosa, at one point he took his Bible and walked around Rosa, holding the Bible at the same elevation as Rosa's head, and calling for a "spiritual python of the Holy Ghost" to wrap around her and torment Snake.

As a follow-up, Bob reminded the demon of the Genesis account where, as a result of deceiving Eve in the Garden of Eden, the Snake was cursed to crawl on its belly and eat dust throughout life. Bob then forced the writhing demon to its knees and commanded it to lie face down and eat the dust. "Eat it!" Bob shouted at the demon, who refused to fall on the floor and kept hissing and writhing.

Finally, Rosa was called back into consciousness and Snake was forced into the background for a moment. As Larson tried to get Rosa to renounce the curse placed on her, the demon apparently made Rosa shout, "Shut up, Rosa!" She then started speaking in what Larson identified as a "demoniac tongue." Finally, Snake shouted, "I have to kill her!" As Bob led the audience in a vocal prayer to deliver Rosa from the demon, Snake finally left. Rosa cried, thanked Jesus, and hugged Bob as everyone applauded.

Turning his attention back to Ryan for a moment, Bob explained that Russell Williams, the pastor of Arlington Baptist Temple, informed him that Ryan's father was a witch. In terms of deliverance, this was very serious; Ryan could have inherited a demon of Witchcraft from his father while still in his mother's womb. Before he could get much further, however, Larson was interrupted by a screaming man not too far away from me. "*It's dark! I can't see!*" was all I could make out from the man, who was sobbing and shouting uncontrollably. Larson directed aides to escort the man out of the auditorium and calm him down but declined to perform deliverance on him; "We have to keep things decent and in order."

After being flagged down by an audience member, Bob then stepped down and confronted a red-haired woman in a black dress who apparently had an angry look on her face. As they talked for a moment, I looked down at my notes. According to Larson, the woman raised her arms and made some sort of gesture of Satanic worship. Suddenly, the fire alarms went off in the auditorium. As I looked around to see what was going on, I noticed that not a single person was headed for the exits. Instead, everyone was cheering, clapping, shouting, shaking tambourines and speaking in tongues. Soon the entire audience broke into a spontaneous chant of "Jesus! Jesus! Jesus! Jesus!" that lasted for only about a minute, but seemed like it went on and on.

After a lengthy offering session, Larson returned to Ryan and led him in prayer to renounce the curse of witchcraft that he suffered from. After the prayer, Bob and Ryan prayed to expel the demon of Witchcraft that took up residence in Ryan. The audience was led in shouting "Go!" at the demon, which was soon cast out. Bob and an assistant then hugged Ryan as the audience cheered.

Finally, Bob turned back to the red-haired woman, whose name was D.J. She appeared to be completely confused as to where she was. According to Larson, she had appeared to be in a trance the entire night until now, when she regained her senses. Bob informed her that she wasn't ready for an exorcism yet and counseled her to appear at a Spiritual Warfare Workshop that he would be conducting in July at a church in Richardson. He finally led D.J. in a prayer for salvation, and the entire audience applauded enthusiastically as D.J. cried and embraced Bob.

Such was my first visit to what was being touted as an actual exorcism or deliverance. For those who attended the event, it was a chance to see the power of God on display, a rare opportunity to see spiritual warfare in action. The growls, the hissing, the strange voices, the cries of agony, the tears streaming down the faces of those who had been set free as Bob cried and embraced them – all of this was apparently accepted without question by Bob and the faithful. One thousand true believers can't be wrong, right?

Or *can* they?

## History of Deliverance in America

The origin of the modern exorcism/deliverance movement in America can probably be traced to two separate phenomena. Thomas B. Allen covered the details of an exorcism performed in 1949 in his 1993 book *Possessed: The True Story of an Exorcism*. The subject of the exorcism was a teenage boy from Maryland whom Allen identified by the pseudonym of Robert Mannheim. A report on the exorcism was also printed in the *Washington Post* on August 20, 1949. In addition, William Peter Blatty wrote a book in 1970 called *The Exorcist* that was based on the account printed in the *Post*.

According to Allen, the first signs that Robbie was the victim of demoniac invasion were incidents of poltergeist activity in Robbie's Mount Rainier house, such as dishes flying or his bed bouncing. Soon, mysterious scratches appeared on Robbie's face and body without any known cause. On the advice of their Lutheran minister, the Mannheim family sought the assistance of a Roman Catholic priest who attempted an exorcism. Robbie severely wounded the priest by slashing his arm with a broken bedspring, thus ending the ritual. In response, the Mannheims moved to St. Louis, where they acquired the services of Father William S. Bowdern, S.J. Over the next few weeks, Bowdern performed a lengthy exorcism on Robbie with help from a team of his fellow Jesuits. The exorcism finally concluded in a high-security room on the fifth floor of the Alexian Brothers Hospital in St. Louis. Since then, Robbie has reportedly had no further problems with demoniac invasion.

At the same time that Bowdern conducted Robbie's exorcism, healing revivals were beginning to spread throughout America. Names such as A.A. Allen, William Branham, Jack Coe, and Oral Roberts were becoming familiar to an increasing number of Americans who were convinced that these men had the power to heal the sick and cast out demons in the name of Jesus. Known in today's vernacular as "faith healers," they were also known as "deliverance evangelists" back in the 1950s. More than a few of them taught that sickness, rather than being caused by viruses or genetic defects, were actually caused by demons. Banish a demon from a sick or crippled believer, and the infirmity associated with that demon will also vanish.

A.A. Allen was one of the most controversial deliverance evangelists in the 50s and 60s. He traveled throughout the United States and abroad, conducting huge miracle crusades until his death in 1970. Casting out demons was his specialty. A reporter for the *Sacramento Bee* caught Allen ministering to a young boy stricken with encephalitis at a 1956 crusade in Sacramento, California. Allen seized the boy and shrieked, jumping up and down, "You foul, filthy demon, I rebuke you...evil spirit, I command you to leave this boy...Thaynnnnun kewjeezuss!" Allen also displayed what were supposedly the bodies of demons that once afflicted people; he kept them in glass jars for all to see, but the *Sacramento Bee* hinted broadly that these specimens were nothing more than grotesque animals one would see at a fly-by-night carnival.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1960s, an Englishman named Derek Prince made his presence felt in the United States. Educated in Eton College and King's College in Cambridge, Prince held a Fellowship in philosophy at King's College for nine years before working as a missionary and religious speaker. Although he also preached on divine healing and other issues of interest to Christians in the charismatic movement, he quickly developed a reputation for his teachings on exorcism.<sup>2</sup> One of his closest American associates was Don Basham, a native of Wichita Falls, Texas, who also gained a reputation for casting demons out of individuals. These two men were among the first to use the term *deliverance* to refer to a methodical, calculated effort to expel demons from afflicted individuals as opposed to using the same method that faith healers use to cure infirmity or disease.

In 1973 – the same year that the film adaptation of *The Exorcist* was released – Baptist minister Frank D. Hammond and his wife, the late Ida Mae Hammond, released a new book on deliverance called *Pigs in the Parlor*. This book was certainly not the first to deal with exorcism; Don Basham had already released two books on deliverance called *Can a Christian Have a Demon?* and *Deliver Us From Evil*; in addition, Derek Prince and some other authors wrote books on the subject. However, *Pigs in the Parlor* was different from its predecessors; it presented itself as a manual on how to diagnose demoniac invasion, how to classify demons, how to train and prepare for deliverance, and how to actually perform deliverance.

*Pigs in the Parlor*, which was heavily influenced by the teachings of Derek Prince, is based upon approximately six years of experience that the Hammonds accumulated in casting demons out of the afflicted. It contains many case studies of apparently demonized individuals, some of them very young children, who all underwent deliverance at the hands of the Hammonds. Ida Mae Hammond also dedicated an entire chapter of the book to schizophrenia, which she claimed was actually a cluster of particular demoniac spirits rather than a mental disorder caused by chemical imbalances. This book became one of the best-sellers of all time in regards to exorcism, having undergone 32 printings to date since February 1973 with over one million copies in print, including an edition in Spanish.

Since the early 1970s, personalities such as Bob Larson, Pat Brooks, Win Worley, Eddie Smith, and Stan Martek started waging their own battles against demons. When the panic over alleged incidents of Satanic Ritual Abuse (SRA) hit America in the mid 1980s, a new personality in deliverance surfaced. Her name was Rebecca Brown, and her particular claim to fame was that she had taken on a vast underground cult of devil worshippers identified as The Brotherhood. Brown claims to have persuaded Elaine, a high priestess in the cult, to leave the movement and undergo an exorcism. In her book *Prepare For War*, Brown discusses other deliverance sessions she has conducted, including one involving a Christian woman named Martha who grew up Buddhist. As soon as Martha converted, according to Brown, demons tried to kill her:

Under demonic control she drank lye, and when that did not kill her, made several other attempts to commit suicide. She told me that she could not read the Bible because every time she tried to do so, her hands, under demonic control, ripped up the Bible and threw it across the room.<sup>3</sup>

The practice of deliverance in Protestant and Charismatic churches was kept relatively quiet, though not necessarily private; those who practiced it worked on their subjects in small churches and prayer groups throughout America. As for exorcisms performed by Roman Catholic clergy, they continue on to this day; however, a *Chicago Tribune* story placed the average number of exorcisms performed by Catholic priests at two or three per year,<sup>4</sup> and Thomas B. Allen noted that at least one priest was discouraged from making a career out of exorcism.<sup>5</sup>

There have been a few comparisons between the modern deliverance phenomenon and the healing revivals that helped spur its growth. Today, there are still some faith healers such as Charles and Frances Hunter who attribute some afflictions to demons and even use some expulsion techniques similar to those used by deliverance ministers. Bob Larson compared exorcism to healing when he addressed those who came to his public deliverance in Minneapolis:

In Acts, the tenth chapter says Jesus Christ went about doing good and *healing* all who were oppressed of the Devil. In the strictest sense, spiritual warfare is an act of *healing*, not exorcism. I only use the term *exorcism* as a practical definition. It's really spiritual *healing*, and that's what it's all about; He *healed* people who were oppressed of the Devil.<sup>6</sup>

Lowell D. Strieker, a graduate of Princeton University and author of *The Gospel Time Bomb*, offers a slightly different perspective:

Deliverance is the dark side of healing. Instead of invoking the goodness of God through faith to obtain temporal benefits, the believer attempts to cast out evil spirits, seen as the cause of all unwanted experiences. All physical and mental conditions, according to this mythical notion, are evil spirits, whose names are, for example, the spirit of hernia, the spirit of leukemia, the spirit of backache, and so forth.<sup>7</sup>

Today, exorcism/deliverance has developed its own core of principles and beliefs that deal with diagnosing demon possession, identifying demons, and casting them out, although varieties still exist among practitioners. I will cover these topics in Part II, and I will also present a skeptical rebuttal to deliverance, presenting case studies of what happens when deliverance gets out of control - and who gets hurt when all Hell breaks loose.

1 For a more thorough treatment of A.A. Allen's 1956 crusade in Sacramento, consult: Morris, James. *The Preachers*. 1973; St. Martin's Press; New York, NY. pp. 16-22

2 Harrell, David Edwin. *All Things Are Possible*. 1975; Indiana University Press; Bloomington, IN., pp. 184-185

3 Brown, Rebecca. *Prepare For War*. 1992; Whitaker House; Springdale, PA. pg. 316

4 Salopek, Paul. "Korean Exorcism, Bare-Knuckle Style." *Chicago Tribune*, August 28, 1996.

5 Allen, Thomas B. *Possessed: The True Story of an Exorcism*. 1993; Doubleday; New York, NY., pp. 199-200

6 Sermon by Bob Larson on March 13, 1998 in Minneapolis, MN. Recorded on: *Miracle in Minneapolis - Part 1* (audiocassette). 1998; Bob Larson Ministries; Denver, CO.

7 Streiker, Lowell D. *The Gospel Time Bomb*. 1984; Prometheus Books; Buffalo, NY. pg. 116

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## The third eye

By Pat Reeder

I'm kicking off this column with an apology and a blatant plug.

First, I apologize for missing last month's deadline, which necessitates us sending you a longer May/June issue this month (although I had plenty of help from all the people who failed to submit articles in May, which is to say, everyone in the world). But I have a good excuse: my wife, skeptic babe Laura Ainsworth, is performing in a play, and for the past eight weeks, I've had to fit my usual crushing workload around her daily rehearsal schedule, which has left no time to write a column.

This brings us to the blatant plug: Laura is playing Emily Dickinson in Wingspan Theater's production of "Alice in Bed" by Susan Sontag, weekends through June 20 at Teatro Dallas, downtown at Commerce and Central. It's funny, moving, thought-provoking and beautifully performed (especially by Laura, he noted objectively). And I can attest to this because I've seen this play more times than my teenage niece has seen "Titanic." It's based on the life of Henry and William James' bedridden sister Alice, so there are lots of ideas for skeptics to chew over, and it's gotten excellent reviews from local critics. But let's be blunt: we need more butts in the seats. So get down there and support one of your own. It's not expensive, and there are even "pay-what-you-can" performances. Call 972-504-6218 for information and reservations. And remember: I'm making a list of every subscriber who fails to attend, and I plan to come to each of your houses personally, ring your doorbells and run.

Okay, let's go on to the goofy news!

That happy medium (and if I had his income, I'd be happy, too) James Van Praagh was all over the news in the past month. Aside from his usual high-dollar live seminars and talk show appearances to flog his best-selling book, he was the subject of a feature in the Dallas Morning News' Today section; he appeared twice on ABC's "Politically Incorrect," apparently to relay political bon mots direct from Churchill; and Cher credited him with helping her "talk" to Sonny Bono before his funeral. Through Van Praagh, Sonny even told her what to wear to his own funeral, which explains why she didn't go with the see-through Bob Mackie number.

But the most amusing of all of Van Praagh's countless TV appearances (he truly puts the "media" into "medium") is one you never saw, and thanks to Skeptic magazine's Michael Shermer for spreading the word about it via a press release. The NBC TV affiliate in Denver sent a tape of one of his "spirit sessions" to Shermer for evaluation. Shermer reports that he got 10 hits, 24 misses, and most of the hits were from obvious warm and cold reading ploys (oddly enough, for all his success as a "medium," he's really not that impressive: most competent stage mentalists could do it better, but there's not as much money in admitted trickery).

But Shermer says that what really tripped up Van Praagh was a moment when he asked the technicians to turn off his microphone so he could go to the bathroom. Thinking it was off, he reportedly asked his test subject, very quickly and quietly as he walked by, "What is your sister's name?" She said, "Jan." Then, 10 minutes into the "reading," as he was supposedly relaying messages from the spirits, he suddenly asked, "Is your sister's name Jan, or Janet, please?" And

amazingly enough, it was!

If I'd known there was that much money in repeating things that people have already told you, I would have put all my pet parrots on the road as spirit mediums years ago.



Speaking of unlikely media hogs, the Virgin Mary has been popping up in the press more than the current Madonna. First came news that an image of the Blessed Virgin had been spotted at the La Conga Supermarket in Jersey City, in the frost on the glass door of the burrito freezer. Hundreds of people flocked there to see it, burn candles and leave messages (and burnt offerings, or maybe those were just overcooked microwave burritos). After several days, the image had faded. But I bet if they'd unrolled all the burritos, they could've found a tortilla with Jesus on it.

Meanwhile, thousands of people have been flocking to Dodge City, Kansas, to see Margarita Holguin Cazares' plaque of the Virgin Mary which allegedly weeps blood. The Catholic Church would not take a stand either way on its authenticity, but they did run some tests. A CAT scan found no hidden reservoirs inside the plaque; however, a DNA test revealed that the blood on Mary's eyes was an exact match for Mrs. Cazares' blood. The chances of it being anyone else's blood were put at one in 795 million, daunting odds even for O.J.'s lawyers. Naturally, this did not dissuade the faithful, one of whom said that the fact that Mary's blood is identical to Mrs. Cazares' just makes it all the more miraculous. You know, I have a picture of Sherlock Holmes, and it just started weeping, too.

(By the way, I've always wondered: what exactly is the message allegedly being conveyed by statues of Mary that weep blood? That she needs Visine? And how come nobody ever has a statue of Al Capone that sweats bullets? Just askin'.)

In other weird religious news, after receiving bomb threats, the Manhattan Theater Club canceled plans to produce "Corpus Christi," a new play by Terrence McNally about a gay Christlike character who has sex (offstage) with several of his male disciples (I've also heard rumors that he turns water into white wine and holds the Last Supper at Hunky's Hamburgers on Cedar Springs). Then, after a lot of other playwrights threatened to yank their new plays, the producers recanted and said the show would go on with beefed-up security guards.

I'm torn on this one: while I certainly find it hard to identify with devout Christian bombers, I think it would have been nice if the producers hadn't canceled the show out of intimidation, but instead canceled it just because it sounded like a really trite, stupid, pretentious piece of drivel. No wonder the only things that run for more than a week on Broadway these days are Disney musicals and revivals.

In a related brouhaha, a music minister at a Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama, barred a high school senior from singing Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide" at her baccalaureate service because Stevie Nicks is a Satan-worshipping witch. So she sang a Marilyn Manson tune instead. No, wait, that's wrong: she just left and didn't sing at all. For the record, Stevie Nicks denied that she is a witch, blaming it on an erroneous story that keeps getting repeated by the media year after year. She should've turned that reporter into a frog when she had the chance.

Lest you think that Christians have cornered the market on silliness this month, I direct your attention to Sena, Thailand, where the mayor attempted to end six months of drought by filling the local fire station with more than two dozen giant phallic symbols, the largest one a 10-footer, for use in religious rituals to appeal for rain. But the phalluses backfired (and by the way, don't you hate it when your phallus backfires?) when no rains came, and locals blamed them for a spate of fires. The mayor was forced to remove all his phalluses (save one, I assume), a job so big, they had to fly in Lorena Bobbitt to supervise it.

Meanwhile, nearly 20,000 people gathered in southern India to watch a 65-year-old monk eat. Devotees of Sahaj Muni, a monk in the Jain sect of Hinduism, believe he has godlike powers, and, one hopes, good table manners. He claims to have gone for a full year without eating (he lost 65 pounds, so expect to see this diet pop up in Cosmo soon), and the crowd gathered to see him consume his first meal since May 1, 1997: a combination of spices and ground peas mixed in water. He really didn't want to end his fast, but who can resist a meal like that?

And in Cambodia, hundreds of people are flocking to the Tonle Sap River, where a turtle appears every day. Locals believe it's a "magic turtle." They let it swim in tanks of water, which turns the water holy, then they drink it to cure diseases. One man claimed he couldn't walk until he drank the turtle water. And now he can walk...only veeeeery slowly. (I can just hear the Cambodians now: "Do not mock the turtle!!")



In Milan, Italy, the ex-wife of fashion heir Maurizio Gucci is on trial for allegedly arranging his murder. The prosecutor revealed that Gucci and his ex-wife were both very superstitious and fought a "war of psychics." Gucci was convinced that she was paying her psychic to beam bad vibrations at him, so he covered his walls with talismans against the evil eye, and hired his own psychic to beam the bad vibes right back. Unfortunately, his highly-paid psychic never saw the hit man coming. Wonder if it's the same psychic who used to work for Princess Diana?



Well, as long as I'm putting something in to offend everybody, let's review some news that proves legitimate scientists can occasionally be as wacky as tarot card throwers.

The directors of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists met in Chicago to discuss whether nuclear tests by India and Pakistan meant they should move the hands forward on the "Doomsday Clock," one of the dumbest pieces of pointless symbolism ever cooked up by supposedly logical scientists. They currently have it sitting at 14 minutes to midnight, or nuclear annihilation. The very idea that they could predict such a thing from newspaper headlines runs counter to any definition of rationalism. To give you an idea of how good they are at prognosticating, they moved the hands closer to oblivion upon the election of Ronald Reagan, who went on to help end the Soviet threat without firing a single nuke. And it's been sitting at 14 minutes till midnight since 1995. No wonder the Spice Girls' 15 minutes of fame seem so long.

Besides, why worry about the bomb when you can worry about being conked by a giant asteroid! Thanks to the movies "Deep Impact" and "Armageddon," asteroids have replaced volcanoes and killer viruses as the paranoia du jour. This was aggravated recently when asteroid expert Clark R. Chapman told Congress that our asteroid tracking is so lax, a mile-wide asteroid could hit us tomorrow, and we'd never see it coming (that asteroid needs a Hollywood press agent). He said the odds of that happening in the next year are one in several hundred thousand, but that's still better than the chance that your next poker hand will be a royal flush. With my luck, I'd get the royal flush, and THAT'S when the asteroid would hit.

Of course, even if NASA knew a killer asteroid was coming, that doesn't mean they'd tell you, buckaroo. In fact, they just instituted new guidelines for astronomers: to help prevent a panic, anyone who thinks he spies an asteroid on a collision course with Earth must spend 48 hours rechecking his data, then inform NASA, which will spend another 24 hours checking it out, then tell the public. That should leave you just enough time to kiss your asteroid goodbye.

From the "Your Tax Dollars At Work" Department comes news that two Trinity University physics professors used a spectroradiometer to determine that a wet T-shirt doesn't offer nearly as much protection against UV radiation as a dry T-shirt (and no protection whatsoever against wolves). Based on research that must've been conducted during spring break, they determined that the SPF of a bleached cotton T-shirt drops from 15 to 5 once it's wet. I'll let you know when they determine the SPF values for mud and Jell-O.

The National Science Foundation gave a \$170,000 grant to a University of Illinois professor to study why some people are angered by tasteless jokes while other laugh at them. The study required students to tell dirty jokes about Jews, sex or flatulence to other students and write down their reactions. As a taxpayer, I have a reaction that they probably wouldn't want to write down.

The Lancet reports that earlier medical studies suggesting that being left-handed can shorten your life were incorrect. It's true that there are very few elderly left-handers, but it seems that the researchers neglected to take into account that at the time those people were young, lefthanded kids were routinely forced to become right-handed. So the lefties did not die young...unless they accidentally stabbed themselves with a pen while trying to write right-handed.

And now, so there are no hard feelings, let's finish by spotlighting some of the great miracles of our age which we owe to scientists:

Male skeptics suffering from a lack of female companionship (not that there are any of those) will want to note a new study in the Archives of Sexual Behavior which indicates that human pheromones do attract women. Men who secretly added the pheromones to their aftershave claimed to get 400 percent more intercourse and over 50 percent more kissing, petting and affection...if you can believe that men who secretly add pheromones to their aftershave tell the truth about their sex lives.

If even pheromones don't work for you, science has another alternative: an Italian electronics firm has invented a "Tamgotchi for adults." It's a computer game called the "Virtual Woman." They claim it reacts just like a real woman: if it's pouty, you give it attention, send it flowers, etc., and it warms up and does a striptease for you. Yep, just like every real woman I've ever known!

All those scientific breakthroughs, and I haven't even mentioned Viagra yet! Better living through chemistry, indeed!

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