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Caroline Fraser
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Ancient and Modern Exorcism, alias Laying on of Hands, Denounced¹

By Caroline Fraser

Exorcism Today

Suddenly, Susan emitted some strange guttural sounds and fell to the floor. She started thrashing about, as if in some sort of seizure. Susan's sister must have recognized what was happening, for she ordered us to gather around and place our hands on Susan's prostrate body. I refused to budge from my position and froze in horror. I will never forget the first comprehen-

sible sound that came from Susan; she screamed my name with such an urgency that the chill still travels down my spine whenever I recall this moment.²

The exorcism described above was witnessed by Piyush Jindal, also known as Bobby Jindal, the governor of Louisiana. In a 1994 article, "Beating a Demon: Physical Dimensions of Spiritual Warfare," in the Catholic journal *New Oxford Review*, Jindal recalled watching as his friend Susan was restrained by her sister and members of a campus group, University Christian Fellowship. The incident apparently took place at Brown University, when Jindal was an undergraduate. In the article, Jindal distances himself from the event—"I wanted to rescue my friend from these horrible people who were holding her down and ridiculing her dignity"—while acknowledging that he prayed for Susan's salvation and experienced what he believed were supernatural forces. He describes his prayers being blocked by a sensation of "physical force distracting me."

While hedging his bets, claiming not to know whether he actually witnessed "spiritual warfare," he describes how friends there that night were converted to Catholicism; he reports that "Susan claimed" that the exorcism healed her of recently diagnosed skin cancer. "I do not have the answers," he concludes, "but I do believe in the reality of spirits, angels, and other related phenomena that I can neither touch nor see."

So do millions of other Americans. In the *New York Times*' "By the Numbers" blog—for an entry written the day after Governor Jindal's "Howdy-Doody-meets-Mister Rogers response" to President Obama's 2009 address to Congress—Charles M. Blow noted that a 2005 Gallup poll found that over 40% of Americans believe "that people on this earth are sometimes possessed by the devil."³ Blow also cited a recent Pew poll: Almost 70% of Americans

purported to believe “that Angels and demons are active in the world.” He suggested that Jindal’s dalliance with exorcism was unlikely to raise eyebrows in the governor’s home state of Louisiana, a place “steeped in voodoo and hoodoo customs,” noting that in 1994, the year that Jindal’s article was published, two sisters from Arcadia, Louisiana, were tried on charges of blinding a third. They had gouged out their sibling’s eyes, they later explained, because she was “possessed by a demon.”⁴ The blinded woman, whose eyes were found in a church trash can, defended her sisters, who were convicted of aggravated assault in Dallas, Texas, where they had fled from the pursuing spirit. The victim argued that a demon had, in fact, taken hold of her; their lawyer asserted that a white Texas jury could never hope to understand their cultural and religious background. “I don’t think they realized that these things are real,” the attorney said.

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The Louisiana sisters had every constitutional right to believe in this extreme hoodoo form of exorcism (hoodoo is a combination of Haitian practices and Catholicism). Indeed, exorcism itself—a rite of the Catholic church for centuries—is protected, along with all other religious beliefs, under the First Amendment.

As the statistics cited above suggest, exorcism is universally popular, not only in Christianity but in virtually every faith. Forms of it exist not only in the Catholic church but in Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches, among other Protestant sects. There are Zen techniques of exorcism, and the practice surfaces in Hindu and Buddhist traditions, as well as in Islam. The dybbuk—a doomed soul that may become attached to a living person—looms large in Jewish folklore: Tales tell of rituals designed to evict the spirit through the afflicted person’s small toe. Scientologists believe that alien beings known as “Body Thetans” have colonized all humans and must be exorcised through expensive techniques known only to the Church of Scientology.

People love to believe that evil can be driven out—of the temple, of the church, of their bodies and minds. Exorcism is a dramatic, theatrical, and highly entertaining act, possibly one of the most

diverting rituals ever devised to enliven dull religious services.

But as I have written elsewhere, while the right to religious freedom of belief is absolute, at least in this country, the right to act on those beliefs is limited by law.⁵ In the Louisiana blinding case, the law clearly prohibited the sisters from acting on their beliefs to the extent that they did.

But the law is not always so clear. In June, 2009, a judge in Gwinnett County, Georgia, dismissed charges of child cruelty and false imprisonment against a mother who had, over the course of three days, handcuffed her teenaged son to a chair and withheld food and water from him for twelve hours at a time, as part of an exorcism. Doctors testified that the boy suffered from the onset of schizophrenia. The judge said, “I’m going to have a hard time believing you’re going to get anybody to say in Gwinnett County, Georgia, that Satan doesn’t exist.”⁶

The devil must have his hands full down south: Another recent exorcism case in Texas—also involving a teenager—touched off legal wrangling that lasted fifteen years, traveling all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Spiritual Warfare, Texas-Style

Over the weekend of June 8-9, 1996, Thomas and Judy Schubert left their three teenagers—Amy, Laura, and Joseph—in the care of their local church in Colleyville, a suburb of Dallas-Fort Worth. (Amy, then 18, was also left in charge of her siblings). The church, Pleasant Glade Assembly of God, was part of the Pentecostal movement, to which the family was utterly devoted: In 1992, the Schuberts had taken their children on a missionary trip to the African nation of Cameroon, and Tom Schubert was an ordained pastor in the faith. In 1996, the night before the Schuberts left, Pleasant Glade held a youth “lock-in,” a popular overnight event at many churches, in which young people are physically locked into the church or church grounds where they may stay up all night, playing games, eating, and engaging in supervised religious or educational activities.

The lock-in took place on the night of Friday, June 7, and Laura Schubert—then 17 and the Schubert’s middle child—spent the entire night at the church with youth pastor Rod Linzay and various

other teen members, preparing for a garage sale the following day. During the lock-in, one of the members of the youth group who was praying in the darkened sanctuary reported to the pastor that he had seen a demon “by the sound booth.”⁷ This report, accepted unquestioningly by the pastor, set off a frenzied period of “praying for each other and slaying each other in the Spirit,” according to a later account written by Tom Schubert, based on what Laura told him. Asserting that “this battle is not over yet!” Linzay apparently instructed the children to “get them!” He sent the children around the church with bottles of oil and instructions to anoint “everything.” Linzay’s wife Holly reportedly heard the phone ringing and told the children that there was a demon on the other end of the line and “she heard it breathing.” This continued until 4:30 am, when the children began winding down from exhaustion and Linzay claimed he had seen a cloud “of the presence of God” fill the church.

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Pentecostalism is one of the fastest growing Christian groups on earth, with 115 million adherents. Within that movement, the Assemblies of God denomination is the largest—now the fourth largest Christian organization in the world—boasting some 300,000 churches and over 57 million followers around the world.

Their beliefs and practices include the inerrancy of scripture, speaking in tongues, baptism in the Holy Spirit, miracles, and so-called divine healing. Their services are characterized by declarations of prophecies, casting out of demons, glossolalia, and fainting episodes, in which church members fall unconscious: This experience is what is meant by being “slain in the spirit.” They engage in what they term “spiritual warfare,” an active driving out of demons through forms of exorcism.

Thus, Pleasant Glade’s youth pastor was within the mainstream of his chosen religion and profession in encouraging the young people under his care to battle what he saw as actual demons that had taken possession of the Colleyville church.

As that weekend in 1996 unfolded, Laura Schubert spent hours at the church, got little sleep, and ate virtually nothing. During the Sunday morning services on June 9th, she got up in front of the con-

gregation and declared her intention to become a missionary like her father. The service, according to her sister Amy, lasted well into the afternoon. Youth members delivered testimonies of the battle they had fought in the early hours of Saturday morning. Tom Schubert later wrote:

There were “amens” and applause for the kids’ bravery under fire....Supposedly Joseph was down on the floor for over two hours with kids and adults all around him praying. Amy says that it got weird. The kids were making strange moans and praying loudly and wildly. Amy had to call her boyfriend to cancel their lunch and told us that she hung up very quickly so that he would not hear the noises being made by the youth group. Amy was stunned by the service....By 2:30 pm most of the people had left to go home. Joseph was still on the floor with the group praying for him....Laura says that Holly was [standing] over Joseph and saying that she saw demons coming out of Joseph. Holly said to Laura that she saw a vision of the claw of a demon coming out of Joseph’s neck and on his back. She told Laura that she saw in a vision Laura...on a mountain with large knives, cutting a path for the demon to leave Joseph.

After these frightening disclosures, Laura attended the Sunday evening service as well. Near the close of that service, she told a girl standing near the altar with her that she was not feeling well. Then she collapsed. Church members gathered around her, and seven youth members were encouraged to hold her down, with her arms crossed across her chest, as she fought “wildly.” She cried out that Satan was trying to get at her, writhed, hallucinated, clenched her fists, foamed at the mouth, and made guttural noises. She was sweating heavily, and members took part in “laying hands” on her, holding her pinned to the floor for two hours.

Nobody at the church called for medical assistance, believing that this was a spiritual event. Although some members later testified that they thought Laura was just trying to attract attention, their actions suggested they believed a demon was present.

Laura said later, “I was being grabbed by my wrists, on my ankles, on my shoulders, everywhere.

I was fighting with everything I had to get up, I was telling them, no. I was telling them, let go, leave me alone. They did not respond at all.”

As the evening wore on, Laura was eventually lifted to her feet and walked around the church with her arms draped over others’ shoulders. Then she was isolated in a Sunday school room.

Laura later testified that she was restrained in the Sunday school by force and only allowed to get up when she complied with repeated demands that she say “the name of Jesus.” (Pentecostals believe that persons under demonic possession cannot utter the name; thus, an ability to say the word is evidence of freedom from possession). Finally she did so, and the youth group—including Laura—went to McDonald’s for dinner.

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Medical specialists later observed that Laura may have been suffering from hypoglycemia, or low blood sugar, brought on by exhaustion, dehydration, and lack of food. The condition, they pointed out, can cause the types of behavior she exhibited, including writhing, clenching of fists, gritting of teeth, and delirium.

Tom and Judy Schubert returned from their trip the following Tuesday, and the next day, June 12, Laura attended a weekly Youth Service meeting—again under the leadership of Linzay—during which there was another episode. At the end of the service, Laura curled up on the floor in the fetal position, saying that she wanted to be left alone.

She later testified that a male church member approached her, trying to put his arm around her shoulders: “I tried to scoot away from him. He scooted closer. He was more persistent. Finally, his grasp on me just got hard...before I knew it, I was being grabbed again.”

Believing that Laura was speaking to “unseen spiritual attackers,” eight church members again restrained her against her will, held in a “spread eagle” position, with teens holding her arms and legs while she begged to be released. This time, she said, she feared that “somebody was going to break [her] leg.”

The senior pastor of Pleasant Glade, Lloyd McCutchen, was called into the youth room to ad-

minister prayers; he put his hand on Laura’s forehead and repeated the name of Jesus.

Laura’s parents were eventually called. They arrived at the church to pick up their daughter and took her to Bennigan’s for dinner. Laura did not tell them about her bruises, scrapes, and rug burns that night and never sought or received medical treatment for physical injuries. The Schuberts only discovered the extent of her trauma—physical and psychological—in the days after these events occurred.

Later that month, on June 27, Laura was taken to see a psychologist, after suffering from nightmares and fears that a demon was “in her room at night.” Slated to begin her senior year of high school later that fall, she dropped out after a single day. She began mutilating herself with sharp items—more than 100 times over the next few years—and lived in isolation at home, suffering from agoraphobia, sleeplessness, and weight loss. She attempted suicide and was institutionalized for brief periods on several occasions. She was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder which doctors traced to her experiences at the church, citing its “hyper-spiritualistic environment.”

Thus, Laura’s chief symptoms and suffering arose from the mental anguish caused by the exorcisms—the episodes of being physically held against her will—and not from her physical injuries per se: This would be an important fact in the litigation to come.

In August 1996, after twice meeting with McCutchen to discuss what happened to his daughter, Tom Schubert wrote a letter to the senior pastor, protesting her treatment on religious grounds; Schubert was troubled by the fact that an exorcism had been practiced on Laura—a “certified baptized believer”—who, he argued, could not have been “demon possessed” according to Assemblies of God doctrine.

That attitude, expressed in letters and affidavits, foreshadowed the confusion that would arise later over the nature of the dispute. Was what happened to Laura a religious dispute or a physical assault? In one letter to McCutchen, he described his daughter’s injuries as the fallout of spiritual warfare:

As missionaries we can not [sic] get into local church affairs. We will leave it to you to investigate if you feel it is necessary. You may

not feel that anything too serious has happened....What those kids went through during a night of spiritual battle was just as hurtful as what Laura faced in Africa. Laura knows that Demons are bigger and more dangerous than Cameroonian soldiers with machine guns. Pray for her. She went through a war and is now a casualty, feeling abandoned by her own troops at the frontlines as an injured soldier. She deserves a purple heart because she fought a good fight, though she took a hit from friendly fire.

Later that year, Laura and her parents filed a civil suit against Pleasant Glade, McCutchen, Rod and Holly Linzay, and several other church members for negligence, intentional infliction of emotional distress, false imprisonment, assault, battery, and child abuse.

Six years of preliminary litigation followed, to determine which claims, if any, could be pursued and what testimony would be allowed at trial. A 1998 ruling in the case prohibited “religious” claims—barred on First Amendment grounds—but allowed Schubert to pursue the false imprisonment and assault claims; it prohibited discussion at trial of demonic possession or any testimony about the religious aspects of the case, including exorcism.

At the 2002 trial, the church’s attorney, David Pruessner, argued that Schubert suffered from a “pre-existing personality disorder” and was a narcissistic attention seeker. He told the jury: “Laura Schubert breathes in attention the same way we breathe in air.”⁸

William Wuester, Schubert’s attorney, noted, however, that prior to the exorcisms she had been a model student, had held a job, and had paid for her own car. “I don’t know how many times a woman has to say ‘no’ before she is believed,” he said at trial. “How many times does she have to say, ‘Get away. Don’t hold me. Let me up. No!’?”

In the end, the jury awarded Schubert \$300,000 in damages for pain and suffering, loss of earnings, and medical expenses, finding McCutchen, Linzay and his wife, and other church members liable.

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The legal victory, however, was short-lived. In 2005, the Second District Court of Appeals eliminated the share of the damages covering loss of

earnings, cutting the award to \$178,000, while upholding the judgment in favor of Schubert. Three years later the Texas Supreme Court, in a 6-3 decision, overturned the judgment, finding that the case involved “an ecclesiastical dispute over religious conduct” and that Pleasant Glade and its staff and members were protected by the First Amendment.

David Medina, the justice writing for the majority, ruled that any attempt to circumscribe or control religious activities would have “an unconstitutional ‘chilling effect.’”⁹ Going further, the ruling asserted that plaintiffs cannot recover for psychological damages done by religious beliefs or practices: “Because providing a remedy for the very real, but religiously motivated emotional distress in this case would require us to take sides in what is essentially a religious controversy, we cannot resolve that dispute.”

Chief Justice Wallace Jefferson, in his dissent, vehemently criticized that opinion as “overly broad” and “inconsistent with U.S. Supreme Court precedent and extend[ing] far beyond the protections our Constitution affords religious conduct.” The case, he wrote, “is not about beliefs or ‘intangible harms’—it is about violent action—specifically, twice pinning a screaming, crying teenage girl to the floor for extended periods of time.” He emphasized the fact that the jury who decided the case had heard “almost nothing about religion during the trial due to the trial court’s diligent attempt to circumvent First Amendment problems.” The jury was thus considering a case “about secular, intentional tort claims” which lay “squarely within our jurisdiction.” He expressed his fear that, as a result of the dismissal, any wrongdoer “need merely allege a religious motive” in order to deprive a Texas court of jurisdiction to compensate an individual who has been harmed for emotional damages.

Schubert’s attorneys petitioned the U.S. Supreme Court for review. The American Jewish Congress filed an *amicus curiae* brief arguing that the Texas court’s decision undermined “voluntariness” as the underpinning of all law based on the First Amendment’s religion clauses. The moment that Schubert withdrew her consent to the laying on of hands, the brief argued, was the moment when those restraining her committed “tortious,” or wrongful, acts:



Photo copyrighted and taken by Tony Kail of an epileptic child undergoing exorcism in Kenya. Kail is the founder and director of Worldview Consulting (see www.cultcrime.org), which provides training to law enforcement, health care providers, and forensics professionals on ritual crimes, magico-ritualistic cultures, and transcultural communication. He has done field research in Africa on the abuses to “witch children” and reports on his work at www.mganga.org.

At that point, the laying on of hands had to stop. After her withdrawal of consent, the leaders of the church could no more “lay hands” on a protesting Schubert, though a member of their church, than they could go out on the street, seize the nearest Jew or Catholic and “lay hands” on them to drive out demons possessing them.¹⁰

In January 2009, however, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case. The Texas decision stands.

What’s the Matter with Texas?

Entertaining though they may be in the context of Hollywood films or Dan Brown-style bestsellers, real exorcisms are dangerous. In July 2008, 18-year-old Rayoung Kim was found dead in the bedroom of her home in Fairfax County, Virginia. According to a report in the *Washington Post*, a medical examiner found that she had died from “blunt force trauma and asphyxiation,” and investigators believe she may have been smothered during the

performance of an ancient Korean religious ritual exorcism known as “kut,” in which a shaman attempts to drive out an evil spirit.¹¹ Kim may have suffered from a mental illness, a source of shame in many Asian societies.

A scholar familiar with the exorcism ritual described it as an elaborate sequence of chanting, dancing, lighting of candles and offerings of food and money, as well as the application of physical force, while the shaman attempts to push the spirits out through the stomach and throat of the afflicted person.

In 1996, a California woman died during such an exorcism: Sixteen of her ribs were broken and her heart was crushed. According to the *Post*, the mother of the Korean-born perpetrator of the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre went to several congregations, seeking someone to perform the ritual on her son.

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Despite such occasional bizarre events, deaths and grievous bodily harm from exorcism are uncommon in the U.S. But the practice is a growing threat in countries that lack strong civil and legal institutions. The Associated Press reported recently that over the past decade some 15,000 children in Nigeria—often orphaned, ill, disabled, or the poorest of children who are scapegoated by their communities—have been accused of being “witches” by Christian ministers in just two states.¹² Around a thousand have been murdered. Heeding the Bible verse, “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus 22:18), pastors perform violent exorcisms, and children have been imprisoned, beaten, starved, tortured, and set on fire.

Because of the extraordinary popularity of evangelical and charismatic sects on the continent, which have attracted millions of people in countries offering few social services and little economic hope, these groups compete for attention and adherents. The churches are often supported with funding and missionaries by their American counterparts, who know little about the role that superstition and witchcraft play in African societies. In many African countries, the dramatic exposure of “child witches” brings in donations and wins converts. Parishioners pay pastors for exorcisms of their children.

Among 200 cases investigated by children’s advocacy organizations and reviewed in the AP report, one child had a nail driven into her head. Another survived her mother’s attempt to saw open her skull.

Sarah Palin is just one of the Americans who have heedlessly and irresponsibly encouraged this kind of activity: In a YouTube video widely distributed during the 2008 campaign, Palin appeared at the Wasilla Assembly of God church, which she attended for many years, and was anointed by Thomas Muthee, a Kenyan Pentecostal pastor who boasted about defeating a local witch, Mama Jane, in spiritual battle and driving her out of his village.

In the 2005 footage, he lays hands on Palin, beseeching God to install her in the governor’s mansion. In their petition to the Supreme Court of Texas, Pleasant Glade’s attorneys cited Palin as an example of the millions of successful Pentecostal followers who have pursued their beliefs “without any visible sign of emotional distress.” They did

not acknowledge the thousands of cases in which distress has been caused—physical and emotional—by those same followers.

Therein lies the problem with the Texas decision. The “sweeping immunity” granted by it goes beyond the First Amendment’s protection of religious liberty and introduces a permissiveness regarding religious behavior—as opposed to belief—that has become all too accepted in American culture and American law in recent years. In Chief Justice Jefferson’s words, the Texas decision may “sanction intentional abuse in religion’s name.” It makes an inappropriate distinction between physical and emotional damages in a case that clearly seemed to the jury—which did not consider religious issues—to be one of assault and false imprisonment.

The mind, after all, is a part of the body: It can be as injured by physical assault as an arm or a leg. One wonders why Justice Medina, in his majority opinion, was so quick to dismiss the claim of false imprisonment, so blithe in his determination that Schubert suffered “only intangible, emotional damages,” and so strangely confident in claiming that “we can imagine circumstances under which an adherent might have a claim for compensable emotional damages as a consequence of religious motivated conduct, [but] this is not such a case.”

What would constitute such circumstances? What would the Texas Supreme Court have made of the case had it taken place anywhere but in a church, in a public school, for instance, or a Girl Scout camp? What role was played by the religious beliefs of the judges, both on the Texas Supreme Court and on the nation’s highest court?

These are uncomfortable questions to ask, but as long as the Texas decision stands, they will linger, far more unsettling—and potentially destructive—than any demon.

¹Those schooled in Christian Science rhetoric will recognize this as a play on one of Mary Baker Eddy’s most startling weekly Bible lesson titles: “Ancient and Modern Necromancy, alias Mesmerism and Hypnotism, Denounced.”

² Bobby Jindal, “Beating a Demon: Physical Dimensions of Spiritual Warfare,” *New Oxford Review*, Dec. 1994, pp. 19-20.

³ Charles M. Blow, “Bobby Jindal, the Exorcist,” *New York Times* 28 Feb. 2009. Web. 16 Nov. 2009.

⁴ Trial in Woman’s Blinding Offers Chilling Glimpse of Hoodoo,” *New York Times* 25 Sept. 1994.

⁵ See Caroline Fraser, *God’s Perfect Child: Living and Dying in the Christian Science Church* (New York: Henry Holt, 1999), p. 283.

⁶ “Charges Dropped in Gwinnett Exorcism,” WSBTV 25 June 2009. Web. 22 Nov. 2009.

⁷ This and following quotations are from documents filed in *Pleasant Glade Assembly of God v. Schubert*, 991 S.W.2d 85 (Texas 2008). These documents can be found online:

<http://www.scotusblog.com/wp/petitions-to-watch-conference-of-11609/>

⁸ For this quotation and the following from William Wuester, see Darren Barbee, “Woman Gets \$300,000 in Exorcism Suit,” *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* 23 March 2002. Web. 22 August 2009.

⁹ Justice David Medina is a controversial figure in Texas. Appointed by Republican governor Rick Perry in 2004, he was indicted in 2008 by a grand jury for arson and his wife for evidence-tampering in the burning of their home in a Houston suburb, a fire initially believed to be arson by investigators. According to the *Dallas Morning News*, “initial investigation focused on six people close to the justice, and was fueled by a trail of financial troubles for Mr. Medina’s family. In 2004, the Medinas failed to pay nearly \$10,000 in county and school district taxes, resulting in a lien on their home. A year later, a mortgage company attempted to seize the couple’s home, claiming they had not made a payment in four months.” (See Emily Ramshaw, “Texas Supreme Court Justice David Medina Indicted in Connection with Fire,” *Dallas Morning News* 17 Jan. 2008). The arson charges against Medina were quickly quashed, dismissed by the Harris County District Attorney’s office for insufficient evidence, raising questions as to why they had been filed in the first place. A second grand jury indicted Medina’s wife again. When those charges were dismissed, Medina told reporters, “We’re thankful to God and to our friends throughout the country who prayed for us.” Following a complaint filed by Texas Watch, a judicial watchdog group, Medina now faces ethics charges for using \$57,000 in campaign funds to

reimburse himself for commuting between his home and Houston.

¹⁰ American Jewish Congress *amicus curiae* brief filed in the petition for writ of *certiorari*, *Schubert v. Pleasant Glade Assembly of God*, 08-592 Supreme Court of the US, 2008. See <http://www.scotusblog.com/wp/petitions-to-watch-conference-of-11609/>

¹¹ Tom Jackman, “Fairfax Teen May Have Died in Korean Exorcism,” *Washington Post* 22 Oct. 2009. Web. 20 Nov. 2009.

¹² Katharine Houreld, “African Children Denounced as ‘Witches’ by Christian Pastors,” *Associated Press*, 18 Oct. 2009. Web. 22 Nov. 2009.

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Caroline Fraser has written on unique American religions and other topics for *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The New Yorker*, and other publications. She is the author of two books, *God’s Perfect Child: Living and Dying in the Christian Science Church* (Metropolitan, 1999) and *Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution* (Metropolitan, 2009). She holds a Ph.D. in literature from Harvard University.

Laura Schubert Pearson: On a journey to empowerment and understanding

By Rita Swan

Like Laura Schubert, my husband and I suffered an injury from religious practices and filed a civil suit against the church and church actors. We know what it feels like to be in litigation for many years and finally to lose—to have the courts say that everything Christian Science practitioners did and said about our dying baby was an expression of their sincere religious belief and therefore not actionable or that holding an adolescent girl down on the floor for hours when she is screaming to be let go cannot be redressed by the courts because exorcism is a time-honored religious practice.

So, I felt a deep empathy for Laura and was very pleased when she agreed to talk with me by phone.

Her poise, wisdom and accomplishments startle the listener immediately. She has come so far from where she was a decade ago.

In 1996 and for years afterward, she suffered a personality disintegration after being subjected to exorcism at Pleasant Glade Assembly of God



Church as Caroline Fraser has described. She attempted suicide once and mutilated herself with sharp items more than a hundred times. She had to be hospitalized three times for a total of 13 days. She dropped out of her senior year of high school after only one day. She was declared disabled by mental

health professionals and began drawing disability payments from Social Security.

Laura's experience confused and frustrated all of her family because their whole lives had been built around the church. They felt betrayed and bewildered. Her brother Joey, who had been a straight A student, was so anxious about his sister that he wanted to be at home with her all the time.

Laura's father, Tom Schubert, was an ordained Assembly of God minister himself and explained to her that, according to their church doctrine, Christians could not be possessed by demons. He had to tell her that many times as she continued to hallucinate, but eventually she understood that she had been abused by adults at the church and there was no excuse for it.

Her family's extravagant, dependable support was the most significant factor in Laura's recovery. Both her parents were very nurturing. Tom assumed many of the burdens of the lawsuit they filed and buffered his daughter from some of the intrusiveness and emotional pain of tort litigation.

Laura became driven by a desire to "understand [her] predators." She got an associate of arts degree in criminal justice and then a bachelor's degree in human services from Mercy University in Georgia.

She works full-time as a direct-care counselor for children and teens at Harbour Psychiatric Hospital.

She is happily married and the mother of two girls and a boy.

Even though the Texas Supreme Court overturned the jury's award to her, she found the lawsuit "empowering." Nothing can change the fact that a jury of her peers said she had been wronged by the church and its agents.

Her ordeal compelled her father to a radical re-evaluation of his faith. He resigned his ordination and his church membership. He had to start over in a new career at age 45, but multiple spinal fractures and surgeries resulting from osteoporosis eventually forced him to leave his work as manager of an auto parts store and take Social Security disability.



He has used this time to earn two graduate degrees in counseling and a master's degree in psychology from Jacksonville State University. He shares Laura's passion to understand the psychology of human behavior and to help others suffering emotional trauma.

About CHILD, Inc.

A member of the National Child Abuse Coalition, CHILD is dedicated to stopping child abuse and neglect related to religious beliefs, cultural traditions, or quackery. CHILD provides research, public education, and amicus briefs. It lobbies for equal protection of children within its limits as a tax-exempt organization.

For more information on CHILD and a membership application form, visit our web page at www.childrenshealthcare.org. You may also contact us by phone at 712-948-3500 or by e-mail at childinc@netins.net.

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