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**INVESTIGATING THE INVESTIGATORS:
ED AND LORRAINE WARREN,
AMITYVILLE, AND THE SMURL FAMILY HAUNTING**

ANTONIO SIMON, JR.

INTRODUCTION

Though it may strain the credulity of modern readers, the practice of attempting to contact the dead remains very much in fashion. One of the most popular forms of this activity today is ghost hunting. When approached as a serious undertaking, the act constitutes the seeking out of the ghosts of the dead. Scripture expressly forbids this, equating it with infidelity to God on the level of adultery.¹

Ghost hunters and other self-styled experts go by many names—spirit mediums, channelers, clairsentients, angel intuitives, paranormal investigators, and so on. Categorically, these people search out paranormal activity for the sake of finding it. They do not offer explanations as to why phenomena are occurring, or offer solutions to get it to stop. They are, in a sense, trophy hunters. The only reason they investigate cases is to be able to discuss them later with acquaintances.

Others purport to offer practical solutions. Many individuals and groups working in this field profess to be secular, but some claim an adherence to religious beliefs. As to the latter, images of soothsayers, yogis, gurus, witch-doctors, Reiki and Chakra healers, white witches, *babalawos* and *curanderos* may spring to mind. However, among them are those who purport to be Christian faith based.

That a ghost hunting outfit can call itself Christian is paradoxical. Not only do their practices contravene the tenets of the faith, but they also commit a number of grave sins.

Under this heading of Christian ghost hunters are some who call themselves “demonologists.” The goal of this term is to have the listener associate the religious subtext in “demon” with the clinical expertise embedded in the root “-ologist.” They would have one believe that a demonologist is not just some amateur with an interest in studying demons, in the same manner as one does not think of a podiatrist as a person whose hobby is looking at feet.

Like all those others whose job titles are given above, the demonologist is driven by profit motive. That they might profess to be Christian or even Catholic, or utilize Catholic methods of deliverance, is disingenuous. They know Catholic priests are the preeminent religious ministers for spiritual deliverance. They also know that, in the public consciousness, Catholic priests are also considered the go-to ministers when all other methods of deliverance fail.

¹ Leviticus 20:6; 20:27.

Anyone who approaches the calling as a profit-making enterprise should be regarded with suspicion. Christ commanded his apostles: "Heal the sick... cast out devils; freely have you received, freely give."²

A person who regards this calling like a day job usurps God's authority. Such conduct is like when a person sells something that is not his but keeps the profit to enrich himself. There is a word for this. It is *simony*, named after Simon Magus, a first-century sorcerer who attempted to buy from the Apostles the power of conferring the gifts of the Holy Spirit.³

The personal gain need not be monetary. When this work is done to accumulate fame or personal advantages, the actor's motivations fatally undercut his claims of charitable intent, experience in the matter, and ability to deliver what he promises.

No treatment of this subject matter would be complete without discussing Ed and Lorraine Warren. Ed billed himself as a demonologist, while Lorraine touted herself as a clairvoyant. The couple achieved notoriety following their investigation of the Lutz family. The story of this purported haunting served as the inspiration for the 1979 film, *The Amityville Horror*.

THE LUTZ FAMILY HAUNTING

In 1975, George and Kathleen Lutz moved into a Dutch Colonial home located in the suburban neighborhood of Amityville, New York. The home was previously occupied by Ronald DeFeo, Jr., who had murdered six of his family members there a year before the Lutzes' arrival.

Shortly after moving in, the Lutzes began experiencing strange phenomena. George would inexplicably rise from bed at 3:15 each morning, the time the DeFeo murders purportedly occurred. Kathy suffered injuries on her body from no perceptible origin. On at least one occasion, she was levitated from her bed. Their daughter, Missy, began speaking with an invisible entity named "Jodie."

Commenting on the events within the Lutz household, the Warrens have maintained that the haunting was indeed real, and that it was on a level that surpassed many paranormal experiences the couple had witnessed throughout their careers.

THE SMURL FAMILY HAUNTING

The Smurl family haunting was another case of demonic activity the Warrens investigated. The events at this home in West Pittston, Pennsylvania would inspire Robert Curran's book, *The Haunted*, and a 1991 film by the same name.

The home was a duplex built in 1896. Following the devastation of Hurricane Agnes in 1972, the Smurl family moved from Wilkes-Barre to the home in question. John and Mary Smurl bought the property and moved into one half. Their son, Jack, moved into the other half with his wife, Janet, and their children.

² Matthew 10:8.

³ Acts 8:18-20.

January 1974 saw the beginning of a string of bizarre occurrences. Jack's television inexplicably exploded in flames. The family awoke one morning to find the newly-remodeled bathroom in shambles. The sink and bathtub were damaged, and the woodwork looked as though a large beast had clawed it. Loud footfalls were heard on the stairs and in the attic when no one was there. Drawers opened and closed seemingly by themselves. Toilets flushed with no one in the room. Radios would turn on by themselves even when not plugged into electrical outlets.

As time passed, the phenomena appeared to intensify. The family reported awful smells and the sensation of being touched by something or someone unseen. Dawn, the daughter of Jack and Janet, claimed she saw people floating in her bedroom. By 1985, John and Mary would hear offensive language coming from their son's adjoining unit, but each time, the younger Smurl couple would roundly deny it was them who were shouting.

In February of 1985, Janet heard someone calling her name from the basement. Two days later, a black shadow in the shape of a five-foot tall man appeared to her in the kitchen, then walked through the wall and vanished. Mary Smurl claims to have experienced the same apparition. All the while, the house was unnaturally cold, even for winter in the northeastern United States.

Ed and Lorraine Warren became involved 1986. They brought along Rosemary Frueh, a professed psychic. The three concocted a theory that the resident spirits had lain dormant until the youngest of the Smurl children attained puberty, and that the spirits drew upon this "energy." With the help of another spirit medium, Mary Alice Rinkman, they claimed to have identified the ghosts of three humans and one demon. The Warrens attempted on a number of occasions to make contact with these spirits, with the intent of provoking them to appear.

Life in the Smurl house became hazardous. Shannon was flung down a flight of stairs. The family dog was beaten by unseen entities. Jack was levitated into the air. On another occasion, Jack was attacked by a hideous creature in the guise of an old woman that has been likened to a succubus. Janet, in turn, was assaulted by what was later thought to be an incubus.

The Smurls moved out in 1988.

ANALYSIS

The Amityville haunting came under scrutiny shortly after it gained media attention. The Lutz family lived at the home from 1975 to 1977, when the subsequent owners, Jim and Barbara Cromarty purchased it from them. The Cromarty family claimed never to have experienced any strange goings-on.

In September of 1977, Jay Anson's *The Amityville Horror* was published by Prentice Hall. The book was an immediate best-seller, due in no small part because it was marketed as a true story. The sensation the book caused gave rise to crowds of trespassers on the Cromarty property wanting to see for themselves whether the stories were true. This so frustrated the Cromarties that they sued Anson, his publisher, and the Lutzes.

William Weber, DeFeo's defense counsel, also pressed legal action against the Lutzes. He claimed the Lutzes had cheated him out of the book deal; and furthermore, that the story was fictional. In the midst of this legal crossfire, Weber asserted he and the Lutzes had fabricated everything over several bottles of wine.

The Smurl haunting has also been discredited as a hoax. On the one hand, it has been dismissed as a planned publicity stunt. This line of thought maintains that the Smurls had been working with media companies all along to drum up public interest in the release of the book and subsequent film. Such was the opinion of several of the family's neighbors.

Despite the disturbances that allegedly occurred in the house, and the Smurls' remarks that police were called there on occasion, no police reports connected to their address were kept. The inference is that neither the residents nor their neighbors called the police because there was never a need to, and this was so because nothing out of the ordinary occurred there.

Moreover, towards the close of these events but before the Smurls moved out, the house had become a "tourist attraction" for curious onlookers. This does not comport with the narrative of an aggrieved family suffering under phenomena they do not understand. Rather, it points to profit motive. Assuming nothing preternatural occurred in their home, the Smurls may have chosen to partner with the Warrens after recognizing the box office success of *The Amityville Horror*, whose record as the highest-grossing independent film would not be surpassed until 1990.

On the other hand are those who claim the accounts are simply false. Critics have pointed out inconsistencies in the accounts given by members of the Smurl household as proof that the story was fabricated.

The Smurls were approached by Professor Paul Kurtz of State University of New York at Buffalo. Kurtz was the chairman the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal. He offered the family a paid week's stay in a hotel, complete with security guards, and paid psychological examinations of the family. In return, the Smurls would have to permit him to investigate the house. The family declined, and similarly turned down interviews with the *Wilkes-Barre Sunday Independent* newspaper.

There were also discrepancies between what proof the Warrens claimed they had collected and what they actually had. In a 1986 press conference, Ed Warren asserted that he had documented proof of paranormal activity in the house. He identified an audiotape of bizarre sounds and separate video footage of a shadowy mass moving about the home. When asked who had custody of the tapes, Ed responded that he had given them to a television company whose name he could not recall. Later, he said he had given them to the Church, but when Church officials were questioned on the tapes, they replied they had no such objects in their possession.

Also in 1986, the Smurls expressed they were weary of the constant media attention. Yet, they were interviewed on a televised Philadelphia talk show, *People Are Talking*. What is more, they were co-authors of the book on their experiences along with Robert Curran and the Warrens, which, when released in 1988, was still riding the wave of publicity.

Critics panned the book. The *Wilkes-Barre Times Leader* newspaper in particular noted how one-sided the narrative was presented, and that they expected better of Curran, who had up to that point build his career on objective news reporting.

Father Alphonsus Trabold was asked to weigh in on the Smurl matter, due in part to his involvement in Amityville and the lesser-known 1974 investigation of the Hinsdale haunting in New York State. An exorcist and professor of theology, he was known for his interest in psychic phenomena. He taught courses on the paranormal at St. Bonaventure University.

Trabold opined that something out of the ordinary but less than demonic might have been at work in the Smurl home, notwithstanding that he never actually set foot there. When pressed, his answers became guarded. He speculated that psychokinesis might be to blame, or barring that, mental illness in one or more of the residents.

This hypothesis was dubious. Trabold was a proponent of pseudoscience; in particular, of extra-sensory perception (ESP) and parapsychology. During a 2003 interview, he expressed his lifelong interest in magic, the occult, and witchcraft, but from an academic perspective. In his personal opinion, he believed all power was from God, as there could be no other source, and that people should not be hasty to judge unexplainable activity as demonic.

Prior to Trabold's work on the Smurl case, he and Alex Tanous had collaborated on Hinsdale. Premised upon Tanous's psychic abilities, the two claimed the Hinsdale house was site of a half dozen murders.

Tanous worked with parapsychologist Karlis Osis to conduct several out-of-body-experience experiments throughout the 1970's and 1980's. These studies would later be criticized as unscientific. The data have been interpreted as failing to support the reality of out-of-body experiences. More to the point, the studies fail to demonstrate Tanous had perceptive capabilities beyond those of a normal human being. Thus, Tanous's credibility was called into question, as was Trabold's judgment on the hauntings he investigated.

Throughout the affair, the Catholic Church took the family's claims seriously but nonetheless adopted a cautious approach. While the Smurls seemed sincere in their description of the events, the diocese was hesitant to state that preternatural activity was the cause of their distress. Reverend Gerald Mullally, chancellor of the Scranton diocese, told reporters at the time that the Church was seeking a concrete explanation for what happened in the home. Ultimately, Bishop Robert McKenna would oversee a number of exorcisms at the Smurl house, with the last occurring in 1989.

After the Smurls moved out in 1988, the *Times Leader* ran a follow-up story on the haunting. Reporters interviewed the residents of the duplex, who related that no one had experienced any paranormal occurrences while living there.

OBSERVATIONS

Subsequent to the Lutz investigation, the Warrens put forth their opinions on the paranormal. One such theory is that the presence of malevolent spirits causes regions of the place they haunt to become much colder than the surrounding areas, creating so-called "cold spots," as was also experienced in the Smurl haunting.

The explanation given for these cold spots is that demons and evil ghosts "feed" off the energy of people and objects in their vicinity. Much like how the vortex in a bathtub drain will pull things toward its center, the cold spot draws energy into it to fill a void. Alternatively, the cold spot has been described as a door through which spirits can enter the material world.

In light of what is known about spirits, it becomes clear that the Warrens' theories do not hold water. Let it be made clear: demons can indeed produce these results, but their reasons for doing so are not as the Warrens posit.

Spirits—as well as the souls of the deceased—do not require sustenance. They possess no alimentary organs. They do not degrade, and so they do not need to replenish themselves by eating. These facts directly contravene the Warrens' theory that cold spots feed off of the contents of the material universe. Moreover, spirits are already in the world, and so they do not require portals to get here.

The Warrens have also devised a method of diagnostic investigation to determine the presence of spirits. This method was utilized in both the Lutz and Smurl investigations. Because of the high profile nature of these cases, the Warrens' method was quickly disseminated into public awareness. Their system has been emulated by others who have followed in their profession. Unfortunately, it has served to mislead many.

The practice involves using jeers, challenges, insults, prayers, and just about anything else the investigator believes might prompt a response from the resident entity. Sometimes, the investigator uses the personal effects of the deceased person they are attempting to contact. At first blush, this approach presents raises several troubling issues. It presupposes that the entity is of human origin—i.e., a disembodied human spirit. It is all too easy for a demon to convincingly disguise itself as a human being, even as a deceased loved one appearing to those still alive. Furthermore, provoking the spirit in its environs will only make the situation worse for those who reside there; it will do nothing toward making the spirit leave. And then, as seen previously, the Warrens' method tends to involve the aid of a psychic medium. While the majority of those who bill themselves as mediums are charlatans, a rare few who exhibit true preternatural abilities do so through recourse to actual demonic power.

The Catholic Church's position, backed by Scripture and centuries of tried-and-true experience, is staunchly against the Warrens' methods. Human beings have no business attempting to speak to spiritual beings with the exception of God, the saints, and the holy angels; and the only permissible means is through prayer. It is well to keep away from ghost hunters and self-styled paranormal specialists. The true experts in this field are ordained Catholic priests.

Note, however, that not all priests are created equal. Just as all physicians have some understanding of how the body works but specialists know more about their field than anyone else, the same is true with priests. It may take some asking around to find a priest with a solid background on the topic, but their word on the matter is more definitive than that of laypeople with New Age ideas or high-tech gadgets.

END OF REPORT