

The Korean exorcist meets the New Zealand Justice system

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The trial and appeal of Korean exorcist Luke Lee began with a dead body and ended with a victory for religious freedom.

The arrest of Korean immigrant Luke Lee in 2001 was headline-generating material. Pastor Lee, founder of the Mt. Roskill Lord of All's church was charged with manslaughter when a woman, Joanna Lee, died during an exorcism.¹ As the trial unfolded a bizarre tale of daily exorcisms emerged, generating media analogies with the bile-spewing, head rotating rituals in *The Exorcist*.

If ever there was a case that called into question religious freedom, this was it. While the judge, Justice Paterson, announced that Lee was not on trial for his religious beliefs, outside of the court room Lee's repeated announcements that the deceased would rise from the dead compelled public comment and often amusement. Moreover, Joanna's consent to a demeaning and - as it turned out - lethal ritual challenged the Courts to decide whether they would respect her religious choice.

As a researcher of extreme religion and altered states I was fascinated by Lee's case - I had seen such behaviour and activities many times before but never with such tragic consequences. I was keen to interview him. A series of bureaucratic obstructions and University ethical

considerations delayed me from getting in touch with Lee and it was not until 2005 that I finally made contact with him via email. At this stage Lee had ceased to believe that Joanna would rise from the dead, but continued to maintain his innocence.

This is his story followed by a discussion of the religious issues.

Lee and his church

At thirty-one years of age Lee had a vivid conversion experience, after being involved in some shady business dealings in South Korea. Leaving his wife and children in Korea, Lee came to New Zealand in 1994 to study at the Assemblies of God Advanced Ministry of Training Centre in Auckland. Two years later, he re-married, this time to Korean New Zealander Joyce Lee to whom he later had a daughter Hannah. After completing his training he preached in South London for six months, and then returned to Korea where he faced conviction for fraud and was imprisoned for a year for defaulting on his compulsory national military service. After his release Lee believed that God called him back to New Zealand, and he moved to Mt. Roskill, traditionally known as Auckland's Bible Belt. He became an

Assemblies of God pastor and founded the Lord of All's church, attracting almost twenty followers, mostly Korean.

Korean Pentecostal Christianity is much more exuberant than its Western equivalent, usually incorporating shamanistic rituals of freeing people from evil spirits accompanied by thunderous sounding prayer.² For Lee and his followers, exorcism was a normal activity – the earth is swarming with demons. While the practice of exorcism is in keeping with Assemblies of God culture, Lee's exorcisms were relatively plentiful and vocal. His all night prayer-chanting sessions, which took place in his home, involved participants making grunting noises, screaming at the top of their lungs, playing horns, trumpets and drums, and blowing whistles to keep demons away.

In October 2000, 37-year old Joanna Lee (no relation to Lee) joined the church. Not much is known about Joanna. Her parents were divorced and Police have been unable to contact friends and family. She had met Lee when he was in Korea in 1999 and was so impressed by his devotion that she came to New Zealand to get healing from him. A former member described Joanna as a quiet introvert who was Lee's best follower, always striving to fulfil his requirements.³ On the night of 9 December both Joanna and Lee had been fasting for several days when, according to Lee, Joanna lay on the floor of his lounge, told him how much she loved Jesus, and complained that demons were killing her. Lee suggested a 'prayer session' and she agreed.

The exorcism

Having been with the group for six weeks and having previously been exorcised by Lee, Joanna would have known the physical force Lee's exorcisms involved. As Lee believed that demons usually live in a person's stomach, he would press on the person's stomach, chest and throat to drive

the spirits up through the person's mouth. Lee divined that Joanna had around twenty demons and did not anticipate a quick deliverance.

Joanna was a small woman. While six other members beat drums, blew horns, and chanted incantations building up to loud roars and screams, Lee sat on Joanna's stomach and chest and bounced up and down. Over five hours later, Lee believed that there was one particularly belligerent demon left that had lodged in Joanna's throat and was going to kill her. He held her neck hard for several minutes. Joanna struggled to pull Lee's hand from her neck and cried "no, no", but fellow members thought this was the demon speaking and held her arms and legs down. Finally, according to Lee, the demon told him that he was leaving. A few seconds later, Joanna closed her eyes and did not move again. Blood was coming out of her mouth where she had bitten her tongue.

According to Lee, God then spoke to him and told him that Joanna was still alive. So he went to bed and got up on Sunday to prepare for his church service as normal. But Joanna never woke up and for five days members prayed intensely for her to come back to life. Lee quoted from the Bible and members sang and danced, blew into her mouth, and Lee shouted at Joanna to rise up.

Around the fifth day members thought they saw Joanna's finger moving and observed that her blackened skin appeared to be regenerating (in fact this was the decaying skin peeling off to reveal a pink layer underneath). They believed that a great and wondrous miracle was occurring in front of their eyes. Lee told followers to get a video camera to film Joanna's resurrection, which would be international news. One of the members also invited Edwin Muir (a neighbour who sometimes joined them) to visit, and Lee asked him to be the group's media representative. Instead Edwin called

the police. Lee was arrested and charged with manslaughter.

When the arrest became national news I rang the Criminal Investigation Branch of the Police and the District and High Courts to find the name of Lee's lawyer. Nobody could supply a name. I found out later that although Lee initially had a lawyer, Lorraine Smith, he believed that God told him that he didn't need her, so he dropped her from his case. At this stage, Lee was on remand at Mt. Eden prison where he reportedly continued his exorcist activities.

The trial

The trial began on 26 November 2001 before a jury of five men and seven women at the High Court in Auckland. The crown alleged that Lee killed Joanna by strangling her. An interpreter was present for Lee. Lee mounted no defence as he believed that Joanna would rise from the dead. He questioned no witnesses and called no witnesses, and did not testify on his own behalf. The only time he took part in his trial was to deliver a closing message.

Some of the crown's evidence was damning. Joanna had three fractures to her ribs and breast bone. Followers testified of painful exorcisms that interfered with their ability to breathe. However, one of the Crown's star witnesses, Sun Kyoung Park, opened up a possible defence by saying that Joanna had willingly consented to the exorcism.

The pathologist, Dr Simon Staples, also gave evidence that gave room for a plausible defence. Staples testified that he could not determine the cause of death because Joanna's body was so decomposed, but thought that the cause could have been pressure to a small area of nerve tissue next to the carotid artery, which blocked the blood to the brain or nerves, rather than blockage of airways as would happen by

strangulation. This suggested that Joanna's death was relatively quick and opened up the possibility that Lee, or any non-medically trained person, might not have realised that the pressure that caused the death was dangerous.

Of particular interest, from the perspective of religion, was that the Crown called another Pentecostal exorcist, Bill Subritzky, to suggest that Lee's actions went beyond those normally associated with deliverance. Subritzky, who claims to have done thousands of exorcisms, said that it was only necessary to lightly press hands on a possessed person (unless the person was, for example, about to jump through a plate glass window). To a jury unfamiliar with Pentecostal beliefs and practices this evidence may have been convincing but to those who have observed the overtly aggressive nature of their exorcisms, there was room for questioning. Former Vatican professor and exorcist Malachi Martin cites physical strength as one of the most important prerequisites for being an exorcist⁴ – a surprising requirement for lightly touching people on the head.

When the Crown Prosecutor Aaron Perkins gave his summing up, Lee wept openly. Rejected by his colleagues and followers and publicly ridiculed as a cowboy exorcist, he waited for a miracle to vindicate him. The only person who supported him was his wife Joyce who had been in the bedroom with her daughter during the fatal exorcism. She too believed that Joanna would be resurrected.

On the last day of the trial, Lee, Bible in hand, pleaded with Justice Paterson and the jury to give him more time for Joanna to come back to life, prophesying the resurrection would occur before the following Monday. It was now almost a year since Joanna's death, her body had been cremated, and two earlier dates Lee had predicted for her resurrection had passed uneventfully. Nevertheless, Lee likened himself to the great Biblical prophets whose

faith had been tested. The devil, he said, killed Joanna. This seemed only to confirm Perkins' statements to the jury that Lee had lost touch with reality.

In his summing up Justice Paterson, while acknowledging Lee's right to practise exorcism under section 15 of the Bill of Rights Act, gave two directions to the jury that made a guilty verdict almost inevitable. Ordinarily in an assault the Crown has to prove that the accused's actions were objectively dangerous, but Justice Paterson removed this requirement and advised the jury that the amount of force Lee used was irrelevant. More importantly in relation to religious freedom, on the basis of a United Kingdom 'public interest' policy, he also removed the requirement that the Crown prove that Joanna did not consent to the exorcism.⁵ Therefore even if Lee had only applied force that was unlikely to cause death and Joanna had consented to this force, Lee was still guilty.

The jury took four hours to find Lee guilty of manslaughter. He was sentenced to six years in prison – a sentence intended to deter both him and other exorcists.

The appeal

In prison Lee realised that he had made a mistake by not launching a defence, and in 2004 he began efforts to appeal his case. He recalled that he had been in shock at the time of Joanna's death and had read passages of the Bible that led him to believe that he should be passive. Also, other Christians who used the same practices did not want to give evidence.

The appeal, led by Nicolette Levy, raised an important issue for freedom of religion in that it highlighted the issue of whether Joanna's right to consent to the exorcism should be respected. Levy compares a

person agreeing to being exorcised with a person consenting to tattooing, body piercing or cosmetic surgery: they consent to risks because they hope for a successful outcome.

The aim of liposuction is a flatter stomach; the aim of exorcism is a clean soul....[We] can consent to the former which causes serious injury and carries serious risks, so why should exorcisees be denied the same right?⁶

Levy also observes that the law accepts a person's right to refuse medical treatment for religious reasons – even when this makes their death likely or certain – and contrasts this with the Court's non-recognition of the right to consent to exorcism.

The Court of Appeal agreed and stated that the jury should have been directed to consider whether Joanna had consented, and the fact that Lee did not have a lawyer placed a greater responsibility on the judge when guiding the jury. On 7 April 2005 Lee's conviction was overturned and a retrial ordered. By this stage, however, most of the witnesses had returned to Korea. Lee was in Korea too – during the appeal he finished his sentence and was deported.

Discussion

In my communications with Lee he did not come across as a brutal man. He was humble, respectful, and willing to help, repeatedly thanking me and praising God. However, he still perceived himself as a holy hero, asking me not to boast about him to anyone.

Lee seems to fit the profile of a person prone to hyperaroused religious altered states of empowerment in which the individual becomes vehement and manic and appears to be delusional (although they are not

delusional by psychiatric standards because their beliefs are shared by their subculture). This state is usually brought on by excessive spiritual activities. Typically, the person is a male, under fifty, who has experienced a crisis-based conversion, is absorbed by his own spirituality, and tends to dominate others.

My own view of Pentecostal exorcism – and I have witnessed at least twenty exorcisms during my research on the Pentecostal movement – concurs with investigative researcher Joe Nickell’s observation that possession is often indistinguishable from bad acting.⁷ Even so, such acting out can be therapeutic, giving both the exorcist and the possessed an opportunity to release negative – especially aggressive – impulses they would otherwise be unable to express. Were Lee’s exorcisms as aberrant as the Prosecution implied? I don’t think so. However, Pentecostal exorcists are more extreme than those in other denominations. For example, Catholic exorcist Father John Rea doesn’t see exorcism as a big deal; usually he just tells the ‘demon’ to go. ⁸

An aspect of the case that New Zealanders struggled to understand was the submission of Joanna, on whose possible consent the appeal centred. Joanna’s submission reflects deeply patriarchal Korean Christianity. Also, Joanna was devoted to Lee and may have perceived the ritual as a way of intensifying her relationship with him. The gender dynamic of her exorcism is typical. Exorcists are almost always male and the possessed are usually female. (If the afflicted person is a male the exorcist usually divines that a female transmitted the demon, e.g. that his mother spoke to a fortune teller during pregnancy.)

It is interesting to contrast Lee’s deterrent sentence with the lenient treatment other self appointed exorcists have received in New Zealand courts. In 1998 Paul James

Martin was charged with causing grievous bodily harm during an exorcism. Although Martin is Pakeha, he claimed to be possessed by a Maori curse, Makutu. Despite psychiatric evidence that Martin was capable of more psychotic acts, the judge unreservedly accepted testimony on Makutu and gave Martin a two-year suspended sentence. Another case involved Janice and Lindsay Gibson of the Apostolic church, who in 1995 were charged with killing their son during an exorcism. They were found not guilty by reason of folie a deux, a psychotic syndrome where two people in close proximity share the same delusions.

In the end at least one of Lee’s prophecies came true: that he would be acquitted eventually. I don’t know how Lee responded to having his conviction overturned as I lost track of him at this stage. However, I like to imagine that Joanna – who died in sacrificial style beneath a wooden cross decorated with a crown of thorns – would have some consolation in knowing that by her death she advanced the law on religious freedom.

Epilogue

The Court has issued a Bench Warrant for Lee’s arrest in the event of his return to New Zealand, at which time a retrial may take place.

Footnotes

1. I refer to Luke Lee and Joanna Lee by their English names as these are the names by which New Zealanders know them. Their Korean names are Yong Bum Lee and Keum Ok Lee respectively. The church’s name ‘Lord of All’s’ is correct, although in some documents it is changed to “Lord of All”. I am indebted to Lee’s appeal lawyer, Nicolette Levy, who generously gave me legal information that helped me to understand the case.

2. Cox, H. (1995). Fire from heaven: The rise of Pentecostal spirituality and the reshaping of religion in the twenty-first century. New York: Addison-Wesley.
3. Stickley, T. (2001, Nov. 28). Exorcism victim fought – witness. New Zealand Herald.
4. Martin, M. (1992). Hostage to the devil: The possession and exorcism of five contemporary Americans. San Francisco: Harper.
5. Trial ruling of Paterson J. on issue of consent. (2001, Dec. 3). In the High Court of New Zealand Auckland Registry. T10974. The Queen v Yong Bum Lee.
6. Submissions of counsel for appellant on substantive appeal. (2005, March 15). In the Court of Appeal of New Zealand. CA 437/04. Between Yong Bum Lee (appellant) and the Queen (respondent).
7. Nickell, J. (2001). Exorcism! Driving out the nonsense. Skeptical Inquirer, 25(1), 20-24.
8. Samson, A. (1999, Feb. 4). Exorcist priest drives out demons eye to eye. The Dominion, p. 1.

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