



SUPERNATURAL LAW: REGULATING THE PARANORMAL CALL FOR PAPERS

The law has always relied on its own kinds of ghosts. Lost precedents are invoked by courts; forgotten doctrines reappear to support unlikely arguments; and the invisible hands of long-dead founding fathers continue to guide the powers of today's governments. But does the law *believe* in ghosts? Does its reach extend to that which cannot be seen, proven, or explained? The law is, in principle, concerned with the normal—with order, evidence, and reason—but can it, or should it, concern itself with the *paranormal*? Who decides what counts as “normal” or “paranormal,” and might law itself be one of the forces that draw and police that boundary?

Even to sceptics, no area of the law appears entirely free from the supernatural. Historically, both public and private law have engaged with the unseen and the inexplicable. One can find statutes prohibiting appeals to divine intervention for the death of a monarch,¹ criminal prosecutions of individuals accused of witchcraft or conjuration,² and wills invalidated if given under the influence of spirits.³ Yet, even today, the supernatural continues to haunt our legal systems.⁴ Modern examples abound: defendants claiming that crimes were committed under demonic command;⁵ property owners legally required to

¹ See for example Act Against Traitorous Words 1554 (1 & 2 Ph. & M. c. 9), making it treason to “pray or desire that God will shorten the Queen’s days or take her out of the way.”

² See for example the case of Helen Duncan, discussed in B. Abdy Collins, “Spiritualism and the Law”, 8(3) *Modern Law Review* 158 (1945). Duncan was tried under the *Vagrancy Act* 1824 (5 Geo. IV Cap. 83), which in its relevant section (still in force), states, “Every person pretending or professing to tell fortunes or using any subtle craft, means or device, by palmistry or otherwise deceive and impose on any of His Majesty’s subjects... shall be deemed a rogue and a vagabond within the intent and meaning of this Act.”

³ See for example *In re Randall*, 99 Me. 396, 59 Atl. 552 (1904).

⁴ Examples of academic discussions on the subject from a legal perspective, include: Rodolfo Sacco, “Supernatural and the Law”, 23 *National Italian American Bar Association Journal* 19 (2015); José Manuel González Pellicer “¿Casualidad o Causalidad?” 16 *Revista de Derecho de la UNED* 365 (2015); Javier García Oliva & Helen Hall, “Exorcism and the Law: Are the Ghosts of the Reformation Haunting Contemporary Debates on Safeguarding versus Autonomy?” 180 *Law & Justice* 51 (2018); Christine A. Corcos (ed), *Law and Magic: A Collection of Essays* (Carolina University Press, 2010); Rostam J. Neuwirth, “Law and Magic: A(Nother) Paradox?”, 37 *Thomas Jefferson Law Review* 1 (2014); Christopher L. Henry, “The Truth (Of the Matter Asserted) is Out There: Law and the Paranormal Outside the First Amendment” 21 *Barry Law Review* 195 (2016); Daniel M. Warner, “Caveat Spiritus: A Jurisprudential Reflection upon the Law of Haunted Houses and Ghosts”, 28 *Valparaiso University Law Review* 207 (1993); Blewett Lee, “The Fortune-Teller”, 9(4) *Virginia Law Review* 249 (1923); Blewett Lee, “Psychic Phenomena and the Law”, 34(6) *Harvard Law Review* 625 (1921).

⁵ See Lawrie Reznick, *Evil or Ill? Justifying the Insanity Defence* (Routledge 1997).

disclose “hauntings” to potential buyers;⁶ and legislative proposals addressing the legality of exorcisms performed on minors.⁷

We invite chapters that explore how law responds to, regulates, or resists belief and behaviour in matters that cannot be proven. What role has law played historically in shaping society’s understanding of the paranormal? With what intentions has it intervened and which values and ideologies has it sought to uphold? What can we learn from law’s engagement with the paranormal? And what should law’s role be today? We are interested in contributions exploring these questions across times, cultures, geographies, and legal systems.

Potential topics include (but are not limited to):

– **Acts of God**

How does the law conceptualise and allocate responsibility for events beyond human control? What does it mean, legally and theologically, to label something an “Act of God”?

– **Haunted houses and psychologically impacted properties**

What values does law uphold when it requires sellers to disclose a property’s haunted reputation? What role do courts play when they balance subjective belief, economic harm, and cultural understandings of place?

– **Demonic possession, exorcism, insanity**

When defendants claim supernatural influence or possession, what should be the role of law in assessing responsibility and mental capacity? Should law be drawing the line between psychiatric insanity and religious belief? What role does law play when it regulates some religious rituals to the exclusion of others?

– **UFOs and extraterrestrial encounters**

How do governments and international law respond to claims of contact or threat from non-human intelligences?

– **Witch-hunting and moral panics**

How should we conceive of law’s professed belief in the supernatural, as evidenced by witch hunts and trials? What continuities can be identified with law’s responses to other (supernatural) moral panics?

⁶ See for example *Reed v. King*, 193 Cal. Rptr. 130 (Cal. Ct. App. 1983); *Stambovsky v. Ackley*, 572 N.Y.S.2d 672 (N.Y. App. Div. 1991).

⁷ See the Exorcism of Children (Prohibition) Bill, presented to the House of Commons on 15 February 2001. The Bill defined an exorcism as “any rite or ceremony the purpose of which is, or purports to be, to rid an individual of a menacing or oppressive condition or thing.”



- **Miracles and the regulation of faith**
How does law engage with claims of miracles, divine healing, or supernatural intervention in public or commercial contexts? Where and how does the law draw the line between belief, performance, and deception in industries built on the paranormal?
- **Funerary rituals**
What funerary rituals does the law permit and which ones does it forbid? What are the reasons for distinguishing between one group and another? What role should the law play in prescribing funerary practices?
- **Cults and secret societies**
What are the legal boundaries between religious freedom, social cohesion, and public safety when dealing with secretive or spiritually extreme groups?
- **Urban legends, superstition, dreams**
How do superstition and myths influence legal decision-making or public policy? Should the law always strive to appear rational? How does the law handle unverifiable or “spectral” forms of evidence (e.g., spiritual testimony, dreams, spectral influence)?
- **Sacred sites**
How does property and environmental law recognise or exclude the spiritual significance of land, objects, or ancestral presence? In which ways does law accommodate belief in the paranormal?
- **Psychics and intelligence gathering**
During the Cold War, both the United States and the Soviet Union reportedly experimented with psychics and remote viewers for espionage and intelligence work. What legal questions arise when states engage the paranormal in matters of secrecy, security, and evidence?
- **Ghosts, memory, and legal history**
In what ways do the “ghosts” of past decisions, doctrines, and injustices haunt contemporary law? Which paranormal concepts does the law uphold?

We welcome submissions from legal scholars of all legal cultures and disciplines - property law, insurance law, criminal law, international law, constitutional law, animal law, human rights, and beyond – who are interested in considering how their area of expertise



encounters the *paranormal*. We particularly encourage contributions from those who may never have written about the supernatural before but wish to reflect on how law defines, regulates, or denies the existence of the inexplicable. In selecting contributions, we will favour chapters that engage in theoretical reflections regarding the relationship between the law and the paranormal, or that have a clear thesis/theory, as opposed to descriptive chapters.

Submission instructions and timeline

Please submit an **abstract** of no more than 500 words, accompanied by a **two-page CV**, by 13 January 2026. Submissions should be sent in a **single pdf document**, with “Supernatural Law” as the subject of your email, to Dr Marina Lostal, Dr Sophie Duroy, and Prof Joel Colon-Rios: ml20391@essex.ac.uk; sophie.duroy@essex.ac.uk; joel.colon-rios@essex.ac.uk.

Authors of selected abstracts will be invited to prepare full draft chapters of approximately 8,000 words, which will be presented at a hybrid/online (tbd) workshop in **September 2026**. Selected chapters are expected to be published in an edited volume on the topic, which will be submitted for consideration to major academic publishers.

Important dates

Abstract submission: Tuesday 13 January 2026 by midnight (London time)

Notification of decisions: Friday 13 February 2026

Workshop and first draft due: mid-September 2026