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## Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen

Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016. 325 pages,  
\$29,95, ISBN (paperback): 978-1-4813-0490-0

DOUGLAS E. COWAN

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MRS. MCCARTHY:

But this rubbish [the vampire film] is just an excuse for blasphemy—  
and, and scantily-clad women. Isn't that right, Father?

LADY FELICIA:

We rather enjoyed Virgin Vampires at the Odeon last month.  
Isn't that right, Father?

FATHER BROWN:

It raised some interesting theological questions.  
("Mask of the Demon," Father Brown Series 4, episode 1, Arizona  
PBS [Aug. 4, 2016])

This bit of dialogue presents some familiar themes: horror film as trash;  
horror film as religious; horror film as a viable form of entertainment in  
a secular and sophisticated modern world. How quickly the results of  
academic study come to be so casually reflected in popular culture!

It seems only right to go back and look again at what is now a classic in the field of the intersection of religion and film, Douglas E. Cowan's oft-cited 2008 *Sacred Terror*.

Cowan, a specialist in the sociology of religion, lays out a series of questions that form the real core of his study. What is horror film? Horror cinema is defined as an art or craft dedicated to "generating, elevating, and manipulating the fear response" (p. 20). What is fear? It is the very thought of whatever can "make us shiver, scream, and seek comfort beneath the bedclothes" (p. 19). What are we afraid of in this modern and secular world? Whatever one's culture teaches one to fear; thus, what Cowan calls a Sociophobic. In this work, Cowan focuses on what religion teaches us to fear (as opposed to natural disasters, terrorism, or the vagaries of politics).

Cowan takes as his authority on the definition of religion William James's "belief [in the] 'unseen order' and...that the supreme good lies in adjusting ourselves [to it]" (p. 61). Fear, then, is caused by the threat of failing to conforming to the "supreme good," whatever that might be at any time, in any culture. Fear is the genesis of religion itself, according to Rudolf Otto's 1923 *Das Heilige (The Idea of the Holy)* (pp. 22-24). Cowan breaks down his study of the horror film according to six important fears which religion is supposed to help negotiate:

- fear of change in the dominant sacred order;
- ambivalence toward religious institutions and sacred spaces;
- fear of death, of failing to die, of returning from death, and of being buried alive;
- fear of being invaded by evil;
- fear of fanaticism;
- and fear of the temptations of the flesh.

Most discussion concentrates on Western European religion; but Cowan is careful to point out the cultural specificity of religious fear in Asian, Caribbean, and ancient Egyptian religions and of the ways these traditions are abused and exploited by western cinema.

Chapters three through seven analyzes each of these fears and the ways they are used, abused, and generated by historical and contemporary movements in society. For example, anti-Catholicism literature goes back into the eighteenth century and is one of the bases for the nunsploitation films and exorcism films.<sup>1</sup> In the horror film, as Cowan demonstrates, fear of the Catholic church is expressed in the failure to maintain its purity or ritual power: exorcisms fail to expel satanic evil, the cross fails to fend off the vampire, horrible things happen behind the high walls of the convent.

Although the fears cross the sub-genres of the horror film, some genres are associated more strongly with specific fears: vampires are infected with immortality and an insatiable desire for blood; zombies are reanimated to provide unpaid labor; mummies are never allowed to die in the first place, but subjected to ritual or other tortures to keep them alive as guardians of a sacred place—or a sacred person.

Fear of other religions, other 'sacred orders,' runs throughout the horror film. These sacred orders include old, suppressed religions with fearsome practices such as human sacrifice (*Wicker Man*). One fear is that the other order will seek to regenerate itself through the body of a woman (*Rosemary's Baby*). Whether it is Witchcraft, Vodou, or Satanism, fear of the infiltration or even upending of the dominant sacred order informs many a horror film.

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1 This anti-Catholicism is not limited to the horror film; it can be seen equally in the torture and burning by the Inquisition in the historical adventure film, the 1947 *Captain from Castille* and in the big belly, greasy black locks, cruelty and cowardice of the Spanish governor of the 1942 pirate film, *Black Swan*.

The value of Cowan's discussion lies not only in its argument and content; the organization is also a strong recommendation. Each chapter starts out with a scene from a film, then a discussion of the religious problem represented. Included are comparands, historical and sociological reviews, survey data, and summary.

Cowan's discussion is peppered with diction sure to leave the reader in stitches. Horror films are "where washed-up filmmakers go to die" (p. 57). Vampire films "have departed from the Christian technology of salvation to which [Bram] Stoker [had originally] staked them..." (p. 39).

Horror films first appear in 1856 when "Frankenstein first lurched in front of Thomas Edison's kinetoscope" (p. 8). Fear of the temptation of the flesh is represented by fetishized nuns, "beautiful, buxom, in full make up with impeccably French-tipped fingernails" (p. 24).

While he lures the unsuspecting reader into the complexities and meaningfulness of his analysis, Cowan forbears to put off younger or general readers with the otherwise all-too-frequently-encountered jargon: there are a few references to 'sociophobics' and 'metataxis' (taken from geology); 'polysemous', 'nomos', 'theotokos', 'taphophobia', and 'imbricated' come up only once each. Cowan knows his audience, especially undergraduate students, who will profit by his good communication skills and attention to films they have seen: they will learn that the forms of popular culture they are interested in are deserving of serious examination because they are products of that society; that what a serious examination of horror films reveals is society's greatest concerns regarding religion, religious institutions, and religious clergy, which themselves are trusted to negotiate society's greatest fears concerning death and salvation.

Crisply organized and well written, *Sacred Terror* is an excellent introduction for general readers and especially undergraduates to the academic study of horror, the basic concerns of religion, and how religion informs film. Strongly recommended.

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