

The background of the book cover is a vertical, slightly blurred photograph of a forest. The trees are thin and light-colored, possibly birches or aspens, with some bare branches visible. The lighting is warm, with a yellowish-gold glow from the top, suggesting sunlight filtering through the canopy. In the lower right corner, there is a dense thicket of red, dried branches or leaves. A single, thin, red snake is coiled vertically on the left side of the cover, its head pointing downwards.

Mike Duran

CHRISTIAN HORROR

*On the Compatibility
of a Biblical Worldview
and the Horror Genre*

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By Mike Duran

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Even when they explore the darkest depths of the soul or the most unsettling aspects of evil, artists give voice in a way to the universal desire for redemption. Pope John Paul II, Letter to Artists

Introduction

TO MOST, THE TERM “CHRISTIAN HORROR” probably seems like an oxymoron. Perhaps for good reason. Whether it’s the gratuitous blood and gore of the typical slasher film, the blatant sadism of torture porn, the occult themes so prevalent in much of the contemporary horror genre, paranormal elements like ghosts or demons, or simply the “family friendly” branding of today’s Christian media, it’s not difficult to understand the disconnect between those two words — *Christian* and *Horror*.

Nevertheless, there are very good arguments to be made that “horror” is an eminently biblical genre and that Christian artists should be at the forefront of reclaiming it.

The idea for this work had its genesis at a Christian writer’s conference in nearby Orange County, California. I was attending a workshop on the state of the Christian fiction market hosted by an acquisitions editor representing one of the top Christian publishers in the business. The editor mentioned T.L. Hines’ then-newly released novel *Waking Lazarus* (Bethany House Publishers, May 1, 2007). The story is about a man who dies, is resuscitated multiple times, and as a result, discovers he possesses clairvoyant-like powers. The Publishers Weekly review described the book as “inspirational suspense” [\[1\]](#) (a term almost as ambiguous as “Christian horror”). During his lecture, the editor referenced Hines’ novel as horror, with this caveat: “Christians don’t like the word ‘horror,’ so the book is labeled as *Supernatural Suspense*.”

As a result of this aversion to the term ‘horror,’ inspirational publishers have resorted to substituting a variety of genre labels for stories that naturally fall into that category. *Suspense*, *Mystery*, *Supernatural Suspense*, *Inspirational Suspense*, *Thriller*, *Supernatural Thriller*, *Chiller*, and *Spiritual Warfare* are all terms that have been used to avoid the dreaded “horror” label.

This avoidance of the term “horror” is quite fascinating. Why do Christian authors, readers, and publishers (namely, the conservative white evangelicals who comprise the bulk of the Christian market) eschew the term “horror”? Why must the Christian fiction industry resort to semantics in order to market horror-themed novels? And could it be that novels with religious horror elements reveal both the natural fit of those elements and the contrivances of a market which evokes such semantical dances.

Point being, *while horror is thematically compatible with a Christian worldview, it is incongruent with the particular worldview of contemporary evangelical readers.*

Of course, the current horror genre is a broad and varied palette, and many subgenres can be found therein. In fact, it has been suggested that the horror genre is the most diverse of all genres. For example, there's psychological horror, cosmic horror, slashers, monsters (including vampires, werewolves, mummies, zombies, etc.), ghosts, paranormal, haunted houses, sci-fi horror (space aliens, mad scientists, experiments gone awry, etc.), the occult (Satanism, witches, spells, curses, Ouija boards, voodoo, etc.), the devil, demons, and demonic possessions, and Gothic horror, just to name a few. Horror is often unfairly pigeonholed into primarily the gore or slasher variety (which is perhaps one reason why evangelicals have such a difficult time embracing the label). Many immediately associate the mention of horror with depictions of serial killers on psychopathic rampages and the ensuing, obligatory, blood and guts. Nevertheless, horror tales exist on a broad spectrum. Robert Wise's film adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* has little in common with the *Saw* franchise, though both could accurately be labeled horror. Ray Bradbury's *The October Country* is worlds away from *The Hills Have Eyes*. For my purposes, when I refer to the horror genre I'm thinking in more generic terms, the broad swath of horror expressions in film and literature, and not primarily the in-your-face gore of today's slasher flick.

What I will be arguing for in this work is not a new sub-genre ("Christian horror") as much as for a rethinking of the objections that have made the term seem so oxymoronic. As the famed Japanese director Akira Kurosawa simply put it, "The role of the artist is to not look away." This essay is an appeal for Christian artists — novelists, poets, musicians, filmmakers — and Christian consumers to "not look away," even when our eyes gaze upon the truly horrific.

I. Religious Themes in Horror

ONE NEEDN'T LOOK FAR TO discover an obvious, if not ubiquitous, conjunction between religion and the horror genre.

At *The Journal of Religion and Film*, in his essay *The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films*, Bryan Stone writes,

...from the earliest Faustian dramas to vampire legends and accounts of demon-possession to more recent apocalyptic nightmares, horror films have tended to rely heavily on religious themes, symbols, rituals, persons, and places. [2]

Of course, not all “religious themes, symbols, rituals” etcetera, are inherently “Christian.” Some “religious themes” found in contemporary horror are antithetical to orthodox Christianity, involving Voodoo, Satanism, and various forms of Spiritism, New Age, or occult themes. Also, some, if not much, of the religion found in the horror genre are simply plot contrivances rather than positive affirmations of specific religious claims. Which is why Stone concludes:

While explicitly religious markers (priests, crucifixes, Satan, demons, etc.) are *conventional* in horror film, they are *merely* conventions — unhinged from a compelling moral vision and lacking the symbolic power required to engage us at the deepest level of our being and to shape our values and behavior. [3]

Nevertheless, *much contemporary horror hews closely to a Judeo-Christian worldview*. [4] Whether it's in reference to angels and devils, heaven and hell, or simply the iconography of faith (like crucifixes, sacred texts, rosaries, and statuary), religion has taken firm root in the genre. While some (like Stone) view this reliance on religious themes as primarily symbolic and lacking “a compelling moral vision,” it's possible to extrapolate more intrinsic connections.

In his article, *Hellboy, Evil and the Cross* for *Christianity Today* magazine, film critic Stephen Greydanus notes that despite cinematic trivialization, religious terms and imagery can be signposts to a greater reality, testifying to “the historical

hegemony of Christianity in Western culture.”

Even if such movies give us no more than evil to fight against, evil itself is a signpost of sorts pointing to goodness and God. A world without God is a world in which good and evil are meaningless concepts, in which there are no monsters or demons, only differences and misunderstanding. The moment you contemplate that the Devil hates you and has a horrible plan for your life, the jig is up.

Crosses and rosaries and such, even when seen as no more than talismans, are likewise signposts, tacitly attesting the historical hegemony of Christianity in Western culture. We may live in a post-Christian civilization, but it is still post-*Christian*, and the place of Christianity in the collective imagination remains unique. Americans may increasingly be sliding vague ‘spirituality’ to organized religion, but crystal skulls and sankara stones don’t do it for us like the ark of the covenant and the Holy Grail — or the cross. [5]

Indeed, Christianity in Western culture has shaped classic horror [6] tropes more than any other single worldview or philosophy.

Perhaps at its most basic level, horror requires an ultimate Good to frame Evil; *horror is horrific precisely because it is a perversion or defamation of something good, pure, normal, right, and/or true*. Or as Greydanus puts it, “A world without God is a world in which good and evil are meaningless concepts.” At a more basic level, horror intersects religion because they both appeal to a supernatural view of the world and grapple with existential questions about life, being, and nature. (This is a subject I’ll explore more in detail in the following chapters.) Whatever the reasons, religious themes are replete in classic and contemporary horror.

In his seminal essay, *Supernatural in Horror Literature*, H.P. Lovecraft traces horror stories back to “the earliest folklore of all races.”

As may naturally be expected of a form so closely connected with primal emotion, the horror-tale is as old as human thought and speech themselves.

Cosmic terror appears as an ingredient of the earliest folklore of all races, and is crystallised in the most archaic ballads, chronicles, and sacred writings. It was, indeed, a prominent feature of the elaborate ceremonial magic, with its rituals for the evocation of daemons and spectres, which flourished from prehistoric times, and which reached its highest development in Egypt and the Semitic nations. Fragments like the Book of Enoch and the Claviculae of Solomon well illustrate the power of the weird over the ancient Eastern mind, and upon such things were based enduring systems and traditions whose echoes extend obscurely even to the present time. [7]

Whether in the ancient Jewish *Book of Enoch* or “elaborate ceremonial magic... from prehistoric times,” horror and religion naturally seem to conjoin themselves.

For example, many, including Lovecraft, have suggested that the epic poem *Beowulf* is one of the earliest horror stories ever written. Possibly the oldest surviving long poem in Old English, *Beowulf* is often cited as one of the most important works

of Old English literature. Though the story is in essence a pagan myth, most believe it was originally written down by a Christian monk who incorporated Christian elements into the tale. Thus, *Beowulf* is often seen as a mash-up of Christian and pagan elements. One author explains:

Overall, *Beowulf* contains many pagan themes and concepts, but yet it also contains many references to Christianity. This is very similar to the England of this time period, because even though it was Christianized, it still had many pagan tendencies. Although the concepts of paganism as compared to Christianity may seem very dissimilar, these two aspects of Anglo-Saxon life came together to create a form of Christianity that was different than that of mainland Europe. This combination between pagan concepts and Christianity is demonstrated in *Beowulf*. It was a Christian author that wrote for a Christian audience. [8]

As such, there are many Christian themes and biblical references in the ancient story. One project sponsored by Pace University for the ongoing research of the story notes,

There are several Biblical references in *Beowulf* that are quite interesting. Grendel is referred to as a descendant of Cain: “the hostile-hearted creature, Gods enemy, guilty of murder” (2.4). In addition, there is a reference to the *Great Flood* that took place in Genesis: “the origin of ancient strife, when the flood, rushing water, slew the race of giants they suffered terribly: that was a people alien to the Everlasting Lord. The Ruler made them a last payment through waters welling” (3.2). In this reference to the biblical flood, the author of *Beowulf* is suggesting that the sword’s creators were descendants of those that caused God to bring on the flood perhaps even suggesting that they were descendants of Cain. However, earlier in the passage these same giants are referred to with reverence: “There came into the possession of the prince of the Danes, after the fall of devils, the work of wonder-smiths” (2.2). Once again there is a contrast between the pagan and Christian cultures, as the same “giants” are referred to with honor and contempt in succeeding paragraphs. [9]

There are other Christian references and allusions in the epic poem. At the end of the story, *Beowulf* gives up his own life to save others, possibly symbolizing the sacrificial death of Christ. Some have suggested that the three monsters *Beowulf* faces resemble the devil. Also, when *Beowulf* is getting ready to battle Grendel, he says, “May the Divine Lord in His wisdom grant the glory of victory to whichever side he sees fit.” And when he has cut off Grendel’s arm he proclaims, “If God had not helped me, the outcome would have been quick and fatal.” Later, when faced with the dragon and believing that he will probably be killed, he says, “Because of my right ways, the Ruler of mankind need never blame me when the breath leaves my body.” In the end, though *Beowulf*’s funeral is pagan in origin, it celebrates the life of “a gracious and fair minded King.”

The *Seven Deadly Sins*, also known as the “capital vices” or “cardinal sins,” was an educational tool used in medieval times to teach Christian ethics. Yet this moralistic

compendium has long ago traversed the boundaries of the Church, taken root in our collective unconsciousness, and influenced pop culture in numerous ways. The *Seven Deadly Sins* became a source of inspiration for writers and artists, from medieval works such as Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to modern works such as David Fincher's film *Se7en* and the manga/anime series *Fullmetal Alchemist*. Furthermore, classics like *Dante's Inferno*, relied on the list to conjure some of the most macabre, disturbing images in Christian literature. The souls encountered in the *Inferno* are each being punished in accordance with the "deadly sin" they were most guilty of in life.

Classic horror, though not always explicitly "Christian," often co-opts such biblical themes, using the disturbing to explore the boundaries of existence and the human psyche. Painters like Rogier van der Weyden and Hieronymus Bosch often employed grotesque imagery to illustrate moral and religious principles in their art. In literature, Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* was not simply about a monster, but about a creator and his creation, and the inherent problems of tinkering with the natural order (a theme subsequently explored by many B sci-fi and horror films during the Atomic Era). *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, are all morality plays of one sort or another. In fact, it could be argued that one of the most classic horror tales, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, is a conspicuously "religious" novel.

The religion of *Dracula* is both the antithesis of the undead curse and the vampire's only possible means of salvation. In the novel, the protagonists pray, quote Scripture, seek God's guidance, and ultimately prevail. If Count Dracula is meant to symbolize the devil, then it is clearly Stoker's intent to show that the evil one is resisted through the power of God. And unlike much contemporary vampire fiction, Christianity is not minimized or mocked in *Dracula*. Rather, our heroes display an unabashed reliance upon the God of Scripture and His Son, Jesus Christ.

At one point in the novel, the wonderfully eccentric vampire hunter Van Helsing proclaims, "...the devil may work against us for all he's worth, but God sends us men when we want them" [10] and exhorts his comrades "that it is in trouble and trial that our faith is tested. That we must keep on trusting, and that God will aid us up to the end" [11]. Van Helsing not only sees the vampire hunters as "ministers of God's own wish" representing "the old knights of the Cross," but his prey as the monstrous defamation of God Himself.

"Thus are we ministers of God's own wish. That the world, and men for whom His Son die, will not be given over to monsters, whose very existence would defame Him. He have allowed us to redeem one soul already, and we go out as the old knights of the Cross to redeem more. Like them we shall travel towards the sunrise. And like them, if we fall, we fall in good cause." [12]

Madam Mina, having succumbed to Dracula's allure, proclaims from her cursed estate,

"God grant that we may be guided aright, and that He will deign to watch over my husband and those dear to us both, and who are in such deadly peril. As for me, I am not worthy in His sight. Alas! I am unclean to His eyes, and shall be until He may deign to let me stand forth in His sight as one of those who have not

incurred His wrath.” [13]

Stoker’s *Dracula* brims with explicit Christian content and a biblical worldview. Unlike many trends in contemporary vampire mystique, Stoker’s vampire is not glorified, romanticized, or portrayed as anything but a vile, hellish being, the spawn of Satan, a creature cursed and damned. Dracula is the antithesis of a resurrected saint.

Even more fascinating, Stoker’s *Dracula* contains a possibly redemptive resolution. As Mina plummets toward Darkness, her husband Jonathan vows to kill the vampire, staking it through the heart and sending it to hell. Mina pleads with Jonathan to, if possible, slay the vampire first so that the Count may find redemption (the lore being if the vampire dies before it is staked, it is freed from its curse). The climactic scene unfolds as follows:

But, on the instant, came the sweep and flash of Jonathan’s great knife. I shrieked as I saw it shear through the throat. Whilst at the same moment Mr. Morris’s bowie knife plunged into the heart.

It was like a miracle, but before our very eyes, and almost in the drawing of a breath, the whole body crumbled into dust and passed from our sight.

I shall be glad as long as I live that even *in that moment of final dissolution, there was in the face [of Dracula] a look of peace, such as I never could have imagined might have rested there.* [14] (emphasis added)

Literary critics often note the Christian allegory inherent in *Dracula*, not just in its overtly religious symbolism (crucifix, communion wafer, holy water, etc.), but ultimately in the collision of Christian ethics with Darwinian evolution, a topic that would have been of great interest to its Victorian audience. [15] Either way, in *Dracula*, religion plays a pivotal role; not only is Mina saved from the curse, but the vampire is stopped through the faith and hope of “the old knights of the Cross.”

Another classic horror film (and book) which relies heavily on a Judea-Christian worldview and religion is *The Exorcist*. Taken from the bestseller by William Peter Blatty, the 1973 film adaptation was the first explicit horror film to be nominated for an Academy Award. It is often referenced as the best horror movie ever made. What makes *The Exorcist* so unnerving is not just a symbolic gesture to religion that is “unhinged from a compelling moral vision.” On the contrary, the story hinges upon the notion of a very real God and a very real devil.

Both the writer and the director have attested to the importance of the Judea-Christian worldview to the story.

In an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*, William Friedkin, director of *The Exorcist*, suggested that the film worked specifically because he was “a believer.”

“I made that film as a believer,” [Friedkin] said... speaking to students at Loyola Marymount University’s School of Film and Television. “The reason that all the sequels to *The Exorcist* are rotten chunks of excrement [is] because they are made by non-believers. And what they all attempt to do is to defrock the story and to send the thing up.” [16]

Friedkin appears to imply that the sequels to *The Exorcist* were uninspired because their makers were “unbelievers” who stripped the story of genuine religious content or a biblical worldview. Perhaps this is why, in another interview, Friedman saw the film as less a horror movie than a film about “the mystery of faith.”

I did a movie about the mystery of faith. We never thought we were doing a horror film. [17]

The story’s author, William Peter Blatty, made a similar connection. In his interview with Huffington Post in 2011, Blatty responded thus to the following question: “Why do you think the story of ‘The Exorcist,’ in its many forms, has resonated so much for so many people?”

BLATTY: I can only guess based on what has been written by others.

Obviously, of course, a popular novel has to be a page-turning read. Second, everyone likes a good scare, so long as we know we’re not really threatened.

And third — and most importantly, *I think* — *because this novel is an affirmation that there is a final justice in the universe; that man is something more than a neuron net; that there is a high degree of probability — let’s not beat around the bush — that there is an intelligence, a creator whom C.S. Lewis famously alluded to as “the love that made the worlds”* (emphasis added). [18]

Interestingly, the author of *The Exorcist* attributes the force and longevity of the story not to its shocking depictions of demon possession, but to its worldview. Juxtaposed against the snarling, cursing, head-spinning, projectile-vomiting victim, was “an intelligence, a creator,” a “love that made the worlds.” *The Exorcist* inferred both a very real God and a very real devil which, according to the author, makes the story work. In fact, the story worked so well that the government of Tunisia banned the film on the grounds that it presented “unjustified” propaganda in favor of Christianity. [19]

Another interesting intersection between religion and cinematic horror can be seen in the B-movie Hammer horror films of the 1950s and ‘60s. Hammer films have had significant influence on the shape of contemporary horror. While much of the religion portrayed in the films is rather campy and clichéd, it is worth noting the unabashed faith of one Terrence Fischer. Fischer directed several of the early, most important Hammer films (*The Curse of Frankenstein*, *Horror of Dracula*, *The Mummy*, and *The Curse of the Werewolf*). What makes Fischer’s influence so fascinating is that he was a high-church Anglican whose entries depicted demons, vampires and creatures of the night who are virtually made helpless before the irrevocable power of the cross. Scenes of said monsters cowering before crucifixes, even bursting into flames at their touch, are commonplace in Fischer’s celluloid depictions.

In his biography, *Terrence Fischer: Horror, Myth and Religion*, author Paul Leggett writes,

For Fischer Christianity is a religion of forgiveness and redemption and it alone

has the power to overcome evil and lead to goodness.

...Fischer clearly believed that not all religious expressions are equally true or beneficial. ...he nonetheless took religion seriously and saw it as either an expression of God's grace or the Devil's malevolence. [20]

Fischer famously referred to his films as "morality plays" that reflected his belief in "the ultimate victory of good over evil." The real horror was not in the fanged, hairy atrocities the protagonists battled, but in the "Devil's malevolence" and its defamation of "God's grace." For the Anglican director, the vampire was the spawn of Satan, defeated not merely through fictional conventions, but through faith in Christ's blood. Perhaps this is why *Dracula* star Christopher Lee noted that the clear moral vision of Fischer's movies was one reason "the Church doesn't object to these films..."

Another classic British horror film that relies heavily upon religion is *The Wicker Man*. The film was remade rather unsuccessfully (in 2006). The original (1973), however, has become a cult classic, being reissued in the UK in a 4 DVD 40th Anniversary edition. The story is about a Christian policeman, played by Edward Woodward, who's sent from the Scottish mainland to investigate the disappearance of a young girl on the remote island of Summer Isle, only to uncover a thriving, yet bizarre pagan community. Though over forty years old, the film has remained relevant for contemporary film-goers and believers.

One reason for its continuing relevance is the rise of paganism in 21st century culture. The original film took painstaking care to research and represent ancient pagan practices and rites, including the burning of the Wicker Man effigy at the film's climax. Whereas paganism was once considered archaic and in decline, a vestige of primitive man's ignorance and fear, which made the thriving pagan cult in the original film such an anomaly, the 21st century has seen it resurface with striking vigor. Whether in New Age thought, Neopaganism, pantheism, Druidism, or Wicca, the list of modern pagan thought and movement continues to expand. This rise in paganism — both in loose belief and active practice — has contributed to *The Wicker Man*'s ongoing relevance.

Secondly, the film's strength is in its portrayal of the antithetical nature of paganism and Christianity. In fact, the actual horror elements of the film are in the collision of these two very different worldviews.

Pluralism has become a powerful paradigm in contemporary Western culture, causing many to draw less distinctions between truth claims and religions. Nowadays, it is not uncommon for people to view once incompatible religions (such as Christianity and paganism) as part of some vast mythological umbrella. *Christianity is just one of many ways to god*, people say, often ignoring the illogic of the statement. In this sense, *The Wicker Man* does a number of things that is rather difficult to pull off in contemporary culture — it portrays a distinct difference between paganism and Christianity. A distinction, in fact, that has deadly consequences for one of the parties in the film. The movie serves as a warning against spiritual naiveté and complacency while illustrating the stark, very real differences, between world religions. *In The Wicker Man, not only is religion and horror not incongruent, it is the incongruence of specific religions that is the actual horror.*

Further evidence of the compatibility of a Judea-Christian ethic and worldview with the horror genre can be seen in one of the most prolific horror writers of all time. Writing in *The Gospel of Stephen King*, CNN contributor John Blake compiles evidence suggesting that the master of horror has a distinct “religious sensibility” that influences his work.

...there is an actual body of literature devoted to [Stephen] King’s religious sensibility. Several pastors and authors say King displays a sophisticated grasp of theology in his books, and his stories are stuffed with biblical references and story lines taken straight from the Bible. [21]

Blake traces this back to King’s “hard-nosed Methodist upbringing, as well as the literary influences of notable Christian authors.

In one interview, King said he was shaped by C.S. Lewis, author of “The Chronicles of Narnia,” and J.R.R. Tolkien, author of “The Lord of the Rings.” Both Lewis and Tolkien were devout Christians who layered their fiction with Christian themes.

Blake notes that King “describes himself as a Christian on his website and elsewhere” and, in fact, goes so far as to suggest that Stephen King has written several novels which could be considered explicitly “Christian.”

In his article for Christianity Today, *Stephen King’s Redemption*, Paul F. M. Zahl offers a virtual checklist of Christian themes in King’s novels.

In his 1989 preface to *The Stand*, King summarized his epic apocalypse as a “long tale of dark Christianity.” His novel *Desperation* (1996) turned on the meaning of 1 John 4:8 for a boy who had just been converted through a Methodist minister. “It seemed to me that most people who are writing novels of supernatural suspense are very interested in evil, and the evil side resonates for them,” King said about *Desperation* in an Internet interview. “And I wanted to see if I could create a strong force of good and desperation, as well. So it’s a very Christian novel in that way, too. It’s going to make some people uncomfortable, I think.” Last year came *The Girl Who Loved Tom Gordon*, with its heroine guided by God through a hellacious misadventure in the North Woods. God’s intermediary becomes a Red Sox pitcher who himself credits the Lord with all his “saves.” Last winter’s *Storm of the Century* was a teleplay about collective guilt interpreted through the story of Legion in Mark 5 and Luke 8. [22]

By way of example, Zahl quotes from Part 4 of *The Green Mile* (“The Bad Death of Edward Delacroix”):

Only God could forgive sins, could and did, washing them away in the agonal blood of His crucified Son, but that did not change the responsibility of His children to atone for those sins (and even their simple errors of judgment) whenever possible. Atonement was powerful; it was the lock on the door you closed against the past.

Apparently, the “master of horror” has a serious religious streak.

Movies involving demonic activity, possessions, and exorcism have found continued popularity. One Entertainment Weekly reviewer traced a recent spate of such films back to *The Exorcism of Emily Rose*, writing,

...the film was heavily targeted to the evangelical market. They’re not the first audience you think of when you talk about over-the-top horror films, but to evangelical audiences, *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* wasn’t just a horror bash — it was practically a documentary. And it opened the floodgates to a rash of exorcist films that have been playing out the primal clash of good and evil ever since. [23]

Some of those other films include the found-footage film *The Last Exorcism* (2010), *The Rite* (2011), *The Devil Inside* (2012), *The Conjuring* (2013), and *Deliver Us from Evil*. (2014), all of which include some form of “the primal clash of good and evil.” Mostly, this occurs between someone with a traditional Western perspective of God, Christ, and Scripture “clashing” against the devil. Rarely are exorcisms portrayed as purely psychological in nature, void of belief in the divine and the demonic.

Along this line, *Paranormal Activity* was one of the most profitable releases of its year (2009). The low-budget film follows an unmarried couple who are being harassed by a demon from her childhood. Though not always orthodox in their portrayal, demons make regular appearances in fiction and cinema. In all of these cases, the entities are framed by many elements consistent with a biblical worldview — they are deceptive, objectively evil, non-physical, and attach themselves to the human host for unnatural ends.

These examples are just the tip of the proverbial iceberg. Pop culture is littered with more or less explicit, but clearly biblically-informed, concepts and imagery.

The film *Jacob’s Ladder* (1990) is one man’s surreal journey from hell to heaven involving angels, demons, and assorted grotesqueries. The movie *Frailty* (2002) is about a father who claims to have had a vision from God that instructs him and his sons to seek and destroy demons from a list of names provided by an angel. *Event Horizon* (1997), though often classified as science fiction, conceives a starship that opens a dimensional gateway to hell, turning its crew insane in the process. In fact, the concepts of heaven and hell, angels and demons, have now come to be considered basic tropes in many horror stories. *The Omen* speculates about the Book of the Revelations’ Antichrist while numerous other films incorporate the biblical idea of Armageddon, the end of days, the rapture, or a global apocalypse. The continued interest in zombie lore has spawned what some call “Zombie theology,” in-depth musings about the continued popularity of zombies and how the genre speaks to what it means to be human, society’s obsession with unbridled consumption, and the nature of the soul. *The Machinist* (2004) and *The Number 23* (2007) are both macabre tales that illustrate the effect of suppressing sin and guilt, and the redemptive power of confession.

And the list goes on.

Frankly, religious themes in horror is not a subject that requires much persuasion. It is easy to see that a Judeo-Christian worldview — one that involves ultimate Good and real Evil, heaven and hell, sin and redemption, angels and devils, Christ and Satan

— is part and parcel of the horror genre. Perhaps a more provocative question would be “why.” *Why do religious themes fit so naturally in horror-themed stories?* To understand this, we must look at the many horror elements explicit in a Judeo-Christian worldview and the Bible.

II. Horror Themes in Religion

ONE ARGUMENT FOR THE COMPATIBILITY of the horror genre with a Christian worldview is the amount of horror tropes which find their genesis in Holy Writ. Of course, we must be careful not to conflate the horrific with the horror genre. Many terrible things can appear in non-horror related art — evil, rape, murder, fear, sadism, torture, suicide, death, decay, abandonment, isolation, loss, etc. In theory, any genre can contain some elements of horror. This, however, speaks to the malleability of the horror genre in general. Not to mention the fact that many horrific things naturally intersect real and imagined events.

Likewise, the world as framed by Judeo-Christian theology contains innumerable terrors and mysteries. In this way, *the Bible can be seen as foundational to many classic horror motifs.*

In defining the horror genre, the *Horror Writers Association* cites the Bible as part of the essential canon of horror. From *What is Horror Fiction?*:

...horror can deal with the mundane or the supernatural, with the fantastic or the normal. It doesn't have to be full of ghosts, ghouls, and things to go bump in the night. Its only true requirement is that it elicit an emotional reaction that includes some aspect of fear or dread. Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* is therefore just as much a horror novel as Stephen King's *Salem's Lot*. Tim LaHay's *Left Behind* series is just as full of horror as Dan Simmons' *A Winter Haunting*. By this definition, the best-selling book of all time, the Bible, could easily be labeled horror, for where else can you find fallen angels, demonic possessions, and an apocalypse absolutely terrifying in its majesty all in one volume? [\[24\]](#)

As we'll see, there are many instances of biblical horror — events, people and stories that could easily fall into the genre. This is not a coincidence.

Perhaps the greatest example of biblical horror is the single act that uniquely defines the Christian faith — the crucifixion of Christ.

In our age, the crucifix symbol has been glamorized and sanitized; it is

brandished by rock stars and imprinted upon bumper stickers and T-shirts. Nevertheless, *the cross was a horror in its time, a symbol of disgrace, shame, and torture.*

Many have illustrated the gruesome medical details concerning the practice of crucifixion. In *The Horror of Roman Crucifixion*, Stephen M. Miller frames the process like that of “butchering an animal.”

In this life, we’ll never know for certain all the grim details about how Jesus died — things, such as what kind of whip the Romans used to beat Him, exactly where the Romans nailed the spikes, and the exact cause of death. The fact is, crucifixion is a bit like butchering an animal. Each butcher has his own technique. Likewise, each Roman executioner’s technique may have been somewhat distinctive. [25]

These techniques included being lashed, sometimes to the brink of death, having “a heavy, wrought-iron nail [driven] through the wrist” nailing the victim to the cross, after which the individual suffered massive blood loss and “shock, exhaustion, asphyxiation, [before] finally [dying of] heart failure.”

Indeed, the ghastly details of a crucifixion are why some consider Mel Gibson’s *The Passion of the Christ*, a horror film. But while some condemned the movie for, what they considered, gratuitous violence and scenes of torture, the historic evidence of crucifixion seems to corroborate Gibson’s vision. In fact, roughly 700 years before Christ, Isaiah prophesied about the Suffering Servant in rather gruesome imagery:

...his appearance was so disfigured beyond that of any human being and his form marred beyond human likeness (Is. 52:14).

Other Old Testament verses have traditionally been interpreted to predict the piercing of the Messiah’s hands and feet (Ps. 22: 16) and the plucking of the beard from His face (Is. 50:6). Yet the most horrific element of the crucifixion of Christ is perhaps not the physical torment inflicted, but the spiritual reality which demanded it. In a more poetic stroke, the prophet Isaiah wrote again about the hoped-for Messiah,

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed. (Isiah 53:4-5)

The terminology used for the Messiah here is arresting — He “bore our suffering,” was “punished by God,” “stricken” and “afflicted,” “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities.” The apostle Paul summarized what transpired on the cross this way:

God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. (II Corinthians 5:21)

Two important biblical doctrines intersect at the cross of Christ and His redemptive work. Both of these doctrines comprise what could be considered to involve horror or the grotesque: The Fall of Man and The Substitutionary Atonement. These powerful biblical doctrines are wedded at the cross.

Man's sinful estate and all of its subsequent fruits were judged at the cross of Christ where "him who had no sin [was made] to be sin for us." So great was this pouring out of wrath upon the Son that He cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). Christ, who often claimed to be in perfect union with the Father (Jn. 10:30), was abandoned at the cross. It is impossible for us to comprehend the anguish, suffering, and despair Jesus must have experienced. *The substitutionary atonement of Christ may in fact be the most horrific concept in all of Scripture.* Not only does it speak to our moral and spiritual fallenness, it places the consequences and weight of that Fall upon a sinlessly perfect God.

British evangelist and Bible scholar G. Campbell Morgan once suggested that the Bible could be divided into three specific movements: 1.) Creation, 2.) Desecration, and Re-creation. Or to put it another way: 1.) Generation, 2.) Degeneration, and 3.) Regeneration. In this framework, Desecration and Degeneration are precursors to Re-creation and Regeneration. In God's economy, it was human degeneracy which prompted Christ's redemptive act.

Scripture portrays the Fall of Man — Desecration / Degeneration — as the root of all human horrors. Also labeled Original Sin, Christians came to see all of humanity as tainted by the Fall. Adam and Eve's disobedience and their ouster from Paradise is a toxin at the root of our generational tree. We have been dehumanized by sin. No one can escape its drag, nor the coming judgment it demands.

The themes of fallenness, sin, and judgment are axiomatic in Scripture. In his award-winning *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, Cornelius Plantinga Jr. writes this about "sin" and its multitude of manifestations in Scripture:

The Bible presents sin by way of major concepts, principally lawlessness and faithlessness, expressed in an array of images: sin is the missing of a target, a wandering from the path, a straying from the fold. Sin is a hard heart and a stiff neck. Sin is blindness and deafness. It is both the overstepping of a line and a failure to reach it — both transgression and shortcoming. Sin is a beast crouching at the door. In sin, people attack or evade or neglect their divine calling. These and other images suggest deviance: even when it is familiar, sin is never normal.

[\[26\]](#)

Not only does the Bible *not* shy away from showing us the sin and utter depravities of man, even the greatest of Bible heroes are not exempt from its claim. Whether it's Noah's drunkenness, David's adultery, Samson's lust, Israel's whoredoms, Peter's denial of Christ, or Saul killing Christians, the Bible is very clear to reveal all human beings as deeply flawed... even those it calls saints. Furthermore, there are unflinching depictions of judgment upon sin in Scripture. The Flood of Noah,

the plagues of Egypt, the Canaanite extermination, Ananias and Sapphira, the Great White Throne judgment, the fiery return of Christ to judge the nations, and hell itself are terrible glimpses of a holy God's divine right to wield the gavel.

But *it is the Father's judgment of the Son for the sin and salvation of the world which ultimately melds horror and redemption.* As Karl Barth put it,

If we seek Christ's beauty in a glory which is not that of the Crucified, we are doomed to seek in vain... In this self-revelation, God's beauty embraces death as well as life, fear as well as joy, what we call "ugly" as well as what we call "beautiful." [27]

At its heart, *the Greatest Story Ever Told is, in part, a horror story.* He Who was Perfect voluntarily became Flawed. The Beloved became the Outcast. The Spotless Lamb became the Scapegoat. The Sinless One became the Sin Offering. The Innocent One was pronounced guilty. Or as Barth put it, the supremely Beautiful became the terrifyingly Ugly.

In his classic treatise on horror, *Danse Macabre*, Stephen King divides tales of horror into two basic groups:

...those in which the horror results from an act of free and conscious will — a conscious decision to do evil — and those in which the horror is predestinate, coming from outside like a stroke of lightning. The most classic horror tale of this latter type is the Old Testament story of Job, who becomes the human Astro-Turf in a kind of spiritual Superbowl between God and Satan.

The stories of horror which are psychological — those which explore the terrain of the human heart — almost always revolve around the free will concept; "inside evil," if you will, the sort we have no right laying off on God the Father. [28]

This paradigm of "inside evil" and "outside evil" comports well with a biblical worldview. Often portrayed as the "unholy trinity" of the world, the flesh, and the devil, much of the horror genre mines humanity's war against internalized and externalized evils. Some tales concern the monsters within. Other tales concern the monster without. Either way, the crucifixion of Christ forces us to face the reality of evil within and our sinful condition. Here we are confronted with the idea that a divine law has been broken or breached, that something sacred has been violated, that "inside evils" and "outside evils" threaten us, and that judgment awaits. These concepts are part and parcel of both Scripture and the horror genre.

Another major horror trope which finds root in Scripture has to do with supernatural agents such as angels, Satan, and demons. Of course, a belief in angels or devils is not exclusive to a Judeo-Christian worldview. Many faiths have detailed beliefs in good and evil spirits of various sorts. Nevertheless, the Bible is foremost in describing a hierarchy of invisible beings, both good and evil, who interact with our world, serving God or resisting His aims. This worldview is an integral component of both the religious traditions of the Western world and much of the horror genre.

According to Scripture, the origins of sin actually predate man, going as far back