



“Do I Look Like Someone Who Cares What God Thinks?”

Rethinking the Relationship between Religion and Cinema Horror

Douglas E. Cowan

Renison College, University of Waterloo

Abstract: Contrary to much popular and academic opinion, cinema horror is replete with religion. Through the analytic lens of sociophobics, this paper argues that horror movies disclose overwhelming social ambivalence toward the religious traditions, beliefs, practices, and mythic histories which we confront on a daily basis, but only minimally understand.

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[1] Though relatively few of its products ever see widespread theatrical release, horror films constitute one of the most resilient and enduring of cinema genres, commanding a large and often sophisticated fan base, employing equally sophisticated writers, artists, and filmmakers, and supporting thriving theatrical release and direct-to-DVD markets. Even film franchises that have departed from their

original premises or even that have been repudiated by their originators continue to produce installments that are eagerly awaited by fans, who hotly debate the films' relative quality. While a number of commentators have noted the ubiquitous nature of horror in the arts writ large, their appraisal of the importance of cinema horror has been varied, to say the least. For some, horror films are the artistic expression of social strain, and are thematically limited to particular times and places (Hendershot; Jancovich; Skal). Others have located cinema horror's appeal in, among other things, a Freudian return to narcissistic infantilism (Wexman), a psychosexual transition from masturbation to procreation (Twitchell), or the adolescent performance of stereotyped bravado and gender roles (Zillman and Weaver). Though he refers mostly to slasher films and does not consider the numerous other entries into the genre, Jonathan Lake Crane describes them as "sadistic swill" (4) and "atavistic tripe" (4), movies filled with "purposeless scenes of graphic mayhem" (5), and representing, in short, "the blood sport of contemporary cinematic shock" (2).

[2] Crane's somewhat hyperbolic rhetoric and vast overgeneralizations about the state of the genre notwithstanding, what few have concentrated on is the presence of religion in cinema horror (for a recent exception, see Paffenroth). In his review of Rupert Wainwright's *Stigmata* (1999), for example, Ron Burke wrote, somewhat surprisingly, that "you do not expect to find religion and spirituality in a horror film" (¶1). Despite what commentators like Burke may believe, though, cinema horror is replete with religion. Whether expressed in a secretive Egyptian priesthood using its occult power to ensure the return of *The Mummy's Ghost* (Le Borg 1944), Amanda Donahoe's biting devotion to a pre-Christian snake god in Ken Russell's *The Lair of the White Worm* (1988), the cross-and-holy-water that ultimately defeat the vampire Baron in *The Brides of Dracula* (Fisher 1960), or Steve Beck's nervy reinterpretation of the Charon myth in *Ghost Ship* (2002), religion has been a staple of

cinematic horror since Georges Méliès brought Mephistopheles to the screen in 1896. When Joseph, the spoiled protagonist in Fritz Lang's monumental *Metropolis* (1927), begins to understand the horror on which his city is built, he envisions it as Moloch, an Ammonite god to whom children were apparently sacrificed in great numbers. When cinema horror brings the "end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it" to the silver screen, it just as often wraps it in the apocalyptic cloak of religious belief as the laboratory coat of secular science (Cowan). "They had their two thousand years," proclaims the leader of a Satanic insurgency in Janusz Kaminski's *Lost Souls* (2000): "Now it's our turn."

[3] Real life horrors, from the jungles of Guyana (Jonestown, 1978) to the upscale suburbs of San Diego (Heaven's Gate, 1997), confront us with religion's power to motivate participants in ways that outsiders are often at a loss to understand. In reel life, this power is reflected in films as diverse as Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), John Schlesinger's *The Believers* (1987), John Llewellyn Moxey's *Horror Hotel* (1960), and Clive Barker's *Lord of Illusions* (1995). Though few viewers might accept the existence of a three hundred year-old witch living with her coven in the foggy backwoods of Massachusetts (*Horror Hotel*), how many would have believed the willingness of several hundred people to commit suicide on behalf of religious convictions concerning an alien spacecraft hiding in the tail of the Hale-Bopp comet? Or, that audiences around the world would give credence to the story of three university film students lost in the fictional "Black Hills" of Maryland, allegedly victims of the Blair Witch? To this day, though, with over \$135 million in revenue, *The Blair Witch Project* (Myrick and Sanchez 1999) retains the record in cinema history for the greatest return on capital investment.

[4] Temptation, particularly sexual temptation, just as often reveals the powerlessness of religion in

society, the fear that faith will ultimately fail and prove unable to counter the demands of the flesh. “Nunsplotation” films, for example - Sergio Grieco’s *The Sinful Nuns of St. Valentine* (1974), Bruno Mattei’s *The Other Hell* (1980), Nigel Wingrove’s *Sacred Flesh* (2000), and Lucio Fulci’s *Demonia* (1990) - all probe the deeply ambivalent relationship between the sacred and the profane, especially as it is negotiated among those who have set themselves apart for the religious life. In these films, when the devil comes calling, he almost inevitably appears in the flesh.

[5] When the religious is considered in the context of cinema horror, however, it is often dismissed as cheap set dressing at best or proactive derogation at worst. Reviewing *The Exorcist* (1973) for *Film Quarterly*, for example, Michael Dempsey calls it “the trash bombshell of 1973, the aesthetic equivalent of being run over by a truck” (61). On a larger scale, the often acerbic film critic Michael Medved contends that Hollywood has simply “gone too far” in what it offers the movie-going public (xvii), especially in terms of “the self-destructive nature of Hollywood’s underlying hostility to organized religion” (xviii). Christian missiologist Bryan Stone asserts that “other than pornography, horror is the film genre least amenable to religious sensibilities,” arguing that “it offends, disgusts, frightens, and features the profane, often in gruesome and ghastly proportions” (§3). Here, though, Stone implies an equation between “religious sensibilities” and “traditional religious institutions or their belief, value, or behavioral systems” (§18). It is worth asking why religion (either as a human and social phenomenon, or as a constant in cinema horror) should be linked either implicitly or explicitly to anything like “traditional religious institutions”—by which I assume Stone means Christianity, with perhaps a passing nod to Judaism and Islam. There was a time when temples of Innana were the “traditional religious institutions,” when human sacrifice among the Aztecs was part of “traditional religious behavior.” More importantly, in making this argument Stone simply attributes a kind of crass

commercialism to the filmmakers, writers, and producers of cinema horror, as well as a certain credulity to its consumers. He never considers why religious symbols might be chosen as opposed to others, or why religion might prove so effective in establishing and maintaining the narrative frame of cinema horror. Put bluntly, if Burke has not accurately appraised the content of cinema horror, Stone never stops to ask why religiously oriented horror movies work. Contending that religious elements are there simply “to render a pseudo-religious feel” (¶18) to a film and then rejecting these on the basis of some theological normativity is simply an inadequate explanation for the ubiquitous presence of religion in cinema horror. Similarly, in pointing out that “terror has no need to abuse the sacred; it is enough to make even the most minor of holidays a potential massacre” (15), Crane avoids the question of why religiously oriented cinema horror is so common.

[6] I propose taking the religious elements in horror cinema seriously, locating them within the analytic domain of “sociophobics” (Scruton). While recognizing the emotional and physical aspects of fear as a human universal, sociophobics contends that what we fear, how we express those fears, and how those fears are ultimately resolved are socially and culturally conditioned. Put simply, what scares one group of people in one place or time may have little or no effect on another group at another time, and the differences in conditioning are significant. Fear of witches in the Middle Ages, for example, contributed enormously to the various witch hunts that occurred across Europe and parts of North America. Yet, while we may apply the term “witch hunt” to any number of late modern phenomena (Joseph McCarthy’s House Committee on Un-American Activities is one of the most obvious examples), the fear that witches are actually casting evil spells or entering into pacts with the Devil are rather less common today than when the Court of Oyer and Terminer spread fear throughout the colonies (cf. Barner-Barry).

[7] In his introduction to *American Horrors*, film scholar Gregory Waller contends that “horror films have proven to be among the most significant documents in America’s public debate over the status of the independent woman in a society still dominated by men” (5). Creatively misreading Waller for a moment, I consider religiously oriented cinema horror as a significant material disclosure of deeply embedded cultural fears of the supernatural. An equally entrenched ambivalence about the place and power of religion in society functions as the principal means of negotiating those fears. As a pop culture exercise in sociophobia, cinema horror provides a window into both the cultural stock of knowledge on which those fears depend and the various cultural discourses they support. As Stephen King writes in *Danse Macabre*, which remains one of the most insightful analyses of the horror genre, “When the horror movies wear their various sociopolitical hats—the B-picture as tabloid editorial—they often serve as an extraordinarily accurate barometer of those things that trouble the night-thoughts of a whole society” (131). Put differently, what scares us reveals important aspects of who we are, both as individuals and as a culture.

[8] In terms of cinema horror, then, the salient question is: When there are so many other scary things around, why is religion so often used to tell or to embroider a scary story? Contra Stone and others, one of my central arguments is that the issue of cinema horror is not one of secularization, i.e. that horror movies disclose to us the abandonment, minimization, or denigration of religious belief. Rather, horror films disclose an overwhelming social ambivalence toward the religious traditions, beliefs, practices, and mythologies with which we are confronted and in which we are often still deeply invested, being distinctly unwilling to relinquish what we just as often only minimally understand.

Sociophobic and Sacred Terror: A Taxonomy of Cinema Horror

[8] As Chibnell and Petley point out in their introduction to *British Horror Cinema* (2-3), part of the task of cinema analysis is “to isolate recurring motifs and patterns which suggest the deep cultural strains and tensions into which these films were tapping.” If humans are pattern-seeking creatures, then sociologists are among those who strive to identify and explain the meaning behind the patterns. With that in mind, I would like to offer a brief sociophobic taxonomy of cinema horror, one that identifies the religiously-oriented “fear factors” of the genre. It is important to bear in mind that these taxons are hardly discrete categories, and one may certainly identify more than one operating in any given cinematic product. That said, seven particular themes emerge.

[9] First, there is the *fear of a change in the sacred order*. At its most banal level this is the reaction provoked when someone suggests moving the communion table or placing the day’s announcements after the sermon when they have always come before. At the other end of the spectrum, however, is the fear that an entire religious tradition might be overthrown from within, supplanted by another, more powerful faith, or reveal itself as impotent in the face of challenge. Amounting to a tectonic shift in sacred orders, there are three principal ways in which this fear manifests in cinema horror: inversion, a change that emerges from within a particular tradition (e.g., the angel Gabriel’s “second war in heaven” in *The Prophecy* [Widen 1995]); invasion, the forcible replacement of one tradition by another (e.g. Stuart Wright’s *Dagon* [2001]), and insignificance, the change that results when a religious tradition has neither meaning for its participants nor power to face those who would challenge its dominance. Together, these constitute what I call the *metataxis of horror*, a change in the taxonomy of the sacred as the engine of horror.

[10] Second, there is *fear of sacred places*, and, derivatively, the fear that those places that we regard as sacred will no longer retain their power. One of the metataxes of horror is the insignificance of a dominant religious tradition, translating cinematically into the absence of God in the presence of the demonic, and sociologically into ambivalence toward established religious institutions. In this case, the practical aspect of that fear is the onscreen decay of landmarks devoted to a God who either no longer cares about us, or about whom we no longer seem to care. Hammer horror films, for example, are filled with ruined churches and moldering sanctuaries, and even films that have little overt religious emphasis often employ the fear of sacred places to establish the level of threat experienced by the characters. In both *28 Days Later* (Boyle 2002) and *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* (Witt 2004), zombie films that rely on the trope of medical or bioweapons research spun out of control, the church is one of the first places of refuge sought by those seeking to escape the ravaging hordes. In each case, though, churches provide only putative sanctuary, and the films' characters are in no less danger within the walls than without.

[11] Third is the *fear of evil externalized and/or internalized*. This taxon, of course, embraces possession and exorcism narratives such as William Friedkin's groundbreaking *The Exorcist* (1973) and its host of imitators, and, lately, films such as Scott Derrickson's *The Exorcism of Emily Rose* (2005). There are also a number of subtler variations on this theme. Films like *Rosemary's Baby* (Polanski 1968), *Lost Souls* (Kaminski 2000), *End of Days* (Hyams 1999), or Richard Donner's *The Omen* (1976) all trade on what I call the *naziresis of evil*, the birth or proposed birth of a child dedicated to the overthrow of the dominant religious order. In the case of Western cinema horror this often means Christianity, but there are instances that draw on and invert popular Western notions of

other religions. The *Wishmaster* franchise (e.g., Kurtzman 1997; Sholder 1999), which will be discussed in more detail below, is based on Arabic legends of the *djinn*, fire demons believed to grant wishes to those who sought their power. Far from Barbara Eden's portrayal of Jeannie or Robin Williams' delightful bottle-dweller in Disney's *Aladdin*, these *djinn* embody the maxim, "Beware of what you wish for."

[12] Fourth, following on the fear of evil externalized, people more generally *fear the supernatural gone out of control*. Facilitating the successful negotiation of the boundaries that separate the sacred from the profane - or, the mundane, in the case of horrific technology such as the *Hellraiser* puzzle box - is one of the principal ritual functions of religious belief and practice. Often, though, this negotiation masks an underlying conflict between technology that is culturally sanctioned, such as the sacred scriptures of the socially dominant religion, and that which is forbidden, such as H.P. Lovecraft's fictional *Necronomicon* in *The Dunwich Horror* (Haller), the "Grand Grimoire" in *Warlock* (Miner) or *The Nine Gates of the Kingdom of Shadows* in Roman Polanski's *The Ninth Gate*. Films that treat the technologies and practices of magic explore both the central place of human activity in the manipulation of those technologies and the concept of culturally authorized magical practice. Just as many religious traditions have elaborate ritual restrictions on who may approach the benevolently sacred and under what circumstances, such films also establish religious boundaries for the horrifically sacred and include significant consequences for those who breach the limits.

[13] Fifth, what some scholars point to as the origin of human religious consciousness, is the *fear of death, of dying badly, and, perhaps most importantly, of not remaining dead*. This, then, is the cinema of ghosts, vampires, mummies, zombies, and other sundry reanimated corpses. At its heart, this is the

cinema of the soul. All but ubiquitous in horror cinema, the soul - whether tormented, at rest, or the object of some supernatural conflict - is an explicitly religious concept, one that makes little sense apart from the various religious frameworks in which it comes embedded. For millennia, arguably, human cultures around the world have sought to placate the dead, ritualizing the process of burial, theologizing the fate of those who have died, and working both to ensure their safe passage to the other side and to prevent their return to this one. When these rituals fail, when accepted theology proves inaccurate or inadequate, when the dead either refuse to go or insist on returning, we are faced with one of humankind's foundational sociophobics, one that demonstrates precisely the ways in which these particular fears are socially and culturally constructed. In *John Carpenter's Vampires* (1998), for example, the origin of the undead is located in a failed attempt at exorcism in medieval Poland; in Ricky Lau's *Mr. Vampire* (1985), one of a host of Hong Kong vampire films combining religious mythology, horror set pieces, and kung fu, it is the poor *feng shui* of the burial that results in reanimation. Though there are obvious similarities in these two films, the precise nature of the problem is staked to particular cultural beliefs and social dynamics.

[14] Sixth, there is the *fear of fanaticism*, that is, the power of religion to motivate in ways those not privy to particular beliefs can scarcely understand. Films such as *Lord of Illusions* (Barker 1995), *The Believers* (Schlesinger 1987), and *The Ninth Gate* (Polanski 1999), for example, demonstrate how modern horror cinema draws on deeply embedded stereotypes of the "cult" as a religiously threatening Other and "cult members" as vicious drones ready and willing to do the bidding of their charismatic leaders. A number of variations on this theme have appeared over the years; the "witches' coven," which is usually linked somehow to Satanism, is a familiar setting for horror fans. Even more overtly, however, in films such as *The Seventh Victim* (Robson 1943), *The Devil's Rain* (Fuest 1975), and *The*

Devil Rides Out (Fisher 1968), sundry groups of Satan worshipers - a number of whose leaders bear a not-surprising resemblance to Church of Satan founder Anton LaVey - attempt to turn the deed to Earth over to the Devil. In order to make similar narrative points, *The Believers* uses Santeria and *Lord of Illusions* a non-specific, though vaguely Manson-like group. While these various stories are often played out in the context of explicitly supernatural events, these films illustrate the decidedly human nature of evil. For example, though its theatrical trailers presented *Stigmata* as a possession narrative, *The Exorcist* for an MTV generation, the film instead demonstrates the potential for evil that is incarnate in human institutions. Whether this potential manifests institutionally or individually, these films often reiterate the Promethean desire to usurp the prerogatives of the Divine and the willingness of others to follow those who would challenge the gods.

[15] Seventh, and finally, there is *fear of the flesh*, and the powerlessness of religion in the face of temptation. If horror is one axis of transgression across the cultural domains of religious belief and practice, when horror is eroticized its effects are intensified significantly. In straightforward temptation narratives such as *Devil's Nightmare* (Brismée 1971) and *Kiss Me, Kill Me* (Farina 1973), heterosexually and homosexually oriented tales of vampire lust (*Rape of the Vampire*; *The Nude Vampire*; *Shiver of the Vampires*—all by Jean Rollin [1967, 1970, 1971]), or the so-called “nunsplotation” films of directors like Sergio Grieco (*The Sinful Nuns of St. Valentine*), Bruno Mattei (*The Other Hell*), Nigel Wingrove (*Sacred Flesh*), and Jean Rollin (*Demoniacs*), the horrific and the erotic have always shown themselves in intense, symbiotic relationship.

The Absence Of God and The Metataxis Of Horror

[16] More often than not, popular discourse views “religion” as a synonym for “goodness,”

“decency,” and “morality,” often located in a cosmology that is ultimately positively disposed toward human welfare. Yet, religion is not always a force for good in society and negative social effects need not indicate false or inauthentic religious practices. Many critics may dismiss horror films that have at their core some depiction of religiously motivated torture or human sacrifice, for example, arguing that this does not accurately represent “religion” or that such themes denigrate authentic religious impulses. Consider, though, the religiously motivated torture that marked the various inquisitions of the Medieval Roman Catholic Church, or the Aztec practice of human sacrifice as a way of ensuring the protection of the war god, Huitzilopochtli. Despite overwhelming historical evidence to the contrary, the misperception that goodness, morality, and decency are necessary components of religious belief continues to provide a significant grounding for much analysis of cinematic horror. In point of fact, offence, disgust, and the difference between the sacred and the profane are all culturally constructed experiences. Looking at the nature and construction of the sacred through the lens of the horror film raises certain questions about the ambivalence of religious belief and practice as a social good, as well as the presence or absence of a benevolent deity in the context of these films. As an example of the first “fear factor” discussed above - the fear of a change in the sacred order - I now consider these defining moments from two films in the *Hellraiser* series.

“Do I Look like Someone Who Cares What God Thinks?”: The Absence of God

[17] In the *Hellraiser* films, the first of which was based on Clive Barker’s novella *The Hellbound Heart* (a not insignificant double-entendre; cf. Barker 1986), the main supernatural antagonists are called Cenobites, that which remains of human beings when they have been imprisoned or *hellbound* by their own attachments, whether to pleasure, to pain, or to fear. Not

unlike many vampire narratives, Cenobites cannot enter our world from theirs unless invited, specifically when a small puzzle box known as the Lemarchand configuration is opened. “The box,” intones Pinhead (Doug Bradley), the leader of the Cenobites in the first film (Barker 1987), “You opened it. We came.”

[18] Throughout the first four films (of the current eight) we can see what might be called an escalation of insignificance. In each installment, though the film’s construction of reality is clearly based on dominant Western understandings of heaven and hell; the presence of God is diminished and the church is presented as incapable of resisting the challenge presented by the Cenobites. In the fourth installment of the series, for example, *Hellraiser: Bloodline* (Smithee), when one of the main characters encounters Pinhead for the first time, he exclaims in terror, “Oh, my God!” To this, Pinhead replies: “Do I look like someone who cares what God thinks?” The obvious answer is “Well, no, not really.” But the more important question here is: Why? Why don’t you seem to care what God thinks?

[19] One reason is that the presence of the demonic in horror films does not necessarily or even frequently translate into the concomitant presence of either the angelic or the divine. Indeed, in most of these films God is notably absent, or God’s power appears to have been decidedly usurped. Supernatural events and phenomena very often precipitate the films’ narrative crises, circumstances that draw explicitly on the dominant Christian understanding of the “unseen order” (James 61). Yet despite this, the supernatural, at least in the form of divine intervention, plays only a limited role in their resolution. Almost inevitably, humans must rely on their own resources and ingenuity to resolve these crises. They must effect their own salvation, and films

that do insert some kind of unimaginative *deus ex machina* to save the day are decried for that by legions of horror fans (e.g., *Bless the Child* [Russell 2000]; *Omen III: The Final Conflict* [Baker 1981]). It could well be argued that God, at least as deity is colloquially understood in what we might very loosely call “the Christian West,” is little more than the cultural backdrop against which the real action in horror films is played out. Even in a film like *The Exorcist*, the central resolution of which is predicated on the action of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent deity, it is not the power of the divine but the self-sacrifice of the human that ultimately frees the possessed Regan. As I have noted, the *Hellraiser* Cenobites cannot cross over from their world to ours unless they have been summoned, wittingly or not, by a human being. And only a human can send them back.

[20] The problem here, though, is that the demonic is a dyadic concept that only really makes religious sense in oppositional terms with the angelic / divine. It is therefore important that these narrative crises are predicated on a religiously oriented universe. Indeed, it may be that one of the things that makes this particular kind of horror horrifying is precisely the apparent absence of God in the face of supernatural evil - and a concomitant longing for the return of the omnipotent Divine in the face of the apparent secularization of late modern society. The comfort of God’s presence has been taken away, but the terrors and hazards from which, for millennia, we believe God’s presence protected us are still very much alive and kicking, slashing, rending, and brutalizing. That is, rather than a loose backdrop against which a multitude of cinematic horrors are played out, the practical absence of benevolent deity is the lynch-pin that allows these films to succeed as horror and as cinematic comment on the fear of secularization and our ambivalent attempts to retain belief in an omnipotent and omnibenevolent deity.

“Demons to Some, Angels to Others”: The Metataxis of Horror

[21] In the title film of the *Hellraiser* series, the female lead Kirsty (Ashley Laurence) first encounters Pinhead and his Cenobites and asks, not unreasonably, “Who are you?” To this, Pinhead replies cryptically, “We are explorers in the further regions of experience... demons to some, angels to others.” His response points to the central tension of what I am calling the *metataxis of horror*—the inversion or reversal of accepted religious taxonomies as a means of invoking the horrific. That is, are they demons or are they angels? Or, are they one and the same, depending on the angle from which they are viewed and the person doing the viewing? Does it matter?

[22] In this sense, as a number of scholars have pointed out (see, for example, Beal; Creed; Freud; Kristeva), the monstrous is a product of reflection and inversion, of difference that is ultimately rooted in similarity, a similarity (or familiarity) without which the horrific meaning is either lost or rendered hopelessly sterile. The Cenobites reflect and invert the passions and fears by which they have been chained. They are not different from who they were in life, they exist now in the “further regions” of the experiences they sought, the pleasures, pains, or fears that defined them. In many cases, their appetites are the source of their enslavement—a concept deeply embedded in a variety of religious beliefs. In her brief discussion of the *Hellraiser* films, Freeland suggests that these “horrific tortures are visited upon people who are in some significant sense bad (‘sinners’) and *deserve* it” (264). Yet she fails to note that many of those who become Cenobites seek out the “further regions of their experience” and that there are not a few innocent bystanders caught up in the supernatural fury.

[23] Metataxis, then, is not simply a function of suffering, but also of desire. Dracula, for example, is a compelling character precisely because he is so often portrayed as attractive, sophisticated, and sexy, something which could be said for many of the cinematic vampires who have followed. Despite Pinhead's disturbing appearance, he possesses a studied urbanity that almost belies some of the horror of which he is master. In fact, Freeland has a wonderful endnote that is almost certain to pass into the folklore of cinema horror genre: Neil Gaiman, the artist and author of the popular *Sandman* series of graphic novels, once remarked that "at a formal dinner party of movie monsters, Pinhead would be the only one who knew what fork to use" (299 n.12).

[24] It is not insignificant in terms of metataxis that while those who have commented on the *Hellraiser* series inevitably (and, I would argue, incorrectly) refer to their costumes as "S&M black-leather garb" (Freeland 253), only one, Kane, has noticed that "cenobite" is an explicitly religious term. The Roman Catholic Church has two monastic orders: the eremitic (those who live as hermits) and the cenobitic (those who live in religious community). The *Hellraiser* Cenobites invert a number of the characteristics of these orders. Pinhead's costume resembles a medieval cassock, and an initial draft of the screenplay included a scene in which individual Cenobites are seen in something resembling medieval monastic cells. Indeed, in Barker's novella, the Cenobites are introduced as "theologians of the Order of the Gash. Summoned from their experiments in the higher reaches of pleasure, to bring their ageless heads into a world of rain and failure" (1986: 4). When Frank, one of the central protagonists, has completed his ritual preparations for their arrival, Barker notes that "No cardinal, eager for the fisherman's shoes,

could have been more diligent” (1986: 5). Once again, even “the Order of the Gash” is polysemous, drawing one’s attention (alternately or simultaneously) to: (a) the medieval religious practice of mortification; (b) the various wounds and scars the Cenobites display; and, (c) since the process of becoming a Cenobite is one of death and horrific rebirth, the British use of “gash” as slang for “vagina.”

[25] Desire as the engine of horrific metataxis is hardly limited to the *Hellraiser* franchise. Both the *Wishmaster* series (e.g., Kurtzman; Sholder), which presents the Arabic legend of the Djinn in much more terrifying aspect than the humorous, wish-granting genie-in-the-bottle of popular culture, and *The Prophecy* franchise (e.g., Spence 1998; Widen 1995), with its premise of a second war in heaven, invert popular conceptions and expectations of the unseen order to horrific effect.

[26] In *Wishmaster*’s dark retelling of the legends of the genie, the Djinn reflect the reality of the wishes that he is required to grant, while horrifically inverting the wisher’s expectations. Still forced to grant three wishes when summoned from the heart of a magical ruby, the completion of the Djinn’s obligation permanently opens the door between their world and ours. “Make your wishes,” says the Djinn (Andrew Divoff), menacingly drawing out the sibilants, knowing that with each wish granted his power increases. In the establishing sequences, for example, set in twelfth-century Persia, the Djinn is asked to “show me wonders.” In an orgy of special effects, people suddenly turn to stone, trees, or hybrid monsters; strange creatures erupt from the viscera of others; skeletons tear their way free from their bags of flesh and attack at random. Later, in the main story, when one character wishes for a million dollars, the scene cuts to his mother signing

a flight insurance policy, followed by her plane exploding on takeoff. When the Djinn asks a retail clerk if she would like to remain beautiful forever, he grants the wish by turning her into a mannequin. And, when the main character, Alexandra (Tammy Lauren), wishes “to know what you are,” the Djinn traps her in his gem-world, forcing her to use her second wish to escape.

[27] While belief in the Djinn may run a little on the thin side in late modern Western society, in a 2000 survey of more than eleven hundred Americans, “77 percent answered ‘Yes’ to the question: “Do you believe angels, that is, some kind of heavenly beings who visit Earth, in fact exist?” Moreover, “belief in angelic beings cuts across almost all ranges of education, income, and lifestyle” (Shermer 244). During its nine-season run (1994-2003), CBS’s *Touched by an Angel* was one of the most popular shows on television.

[28] If the message of these pop cultural representations of angels is the traditional “be not afraid,” then the angelic proclamation in *The Prophecy* is “Be afraid. Be very afraid.” Resentful of God’s loving preference for “talking monkeys” (i.e., human beings), the angel Gabriel (Christopher Walken) leads a second war in Heaven, an apocalyptic conflict designed to assert what he considers the rightful place of the angelic in the courts of the Almighty. Rather than help those in pain, he keeps them barely alive to serve him as ghouls, getaway drivers, and general gofers. Rather than guard the souls of the righteous, he seeks the darkest soul imaginable - that of an American military officer who committed a range of atrocities during the Korean War - to serve him in his final conflict with God. It is Thomas Dagget (Elias Koteas), however, a police detective and former Catholic seminarian, who reveals the film’s central metatext—an inversion that is both cinematic and biblical, making it all the more horrifying. Talking to

Catherine (Virginia Madsen), a schoolteacher in rural Arizona unwittingly caught up in the conflict, he says:

DAGGETT

You ever read the Bible, Catherine? You ever notice how, in the Bible, when God needed to punish someone, make an example, or whenever God needed a killing, he sent an angel? Did you ever wonder what a creature like that must be like? Your whole existence spent praising your God, always with one wing dipped in blood. Would you ever really want to see an angel?

Coherence and Resonance: Religion's Rightful Place in the Horror Film

[28] If, as Burke suggests, religion is rare in horror films, or, as C. Fred Alford opines, horror movies are vapid in terms of their religious content (Freeland 2), or if, as Stone contends, they are “merely conventions” to impose a “pseudo-religious feel” (¶3), then there is little more to say about them. Watch them, enjoy them—and then forget them.

[29] Instead, I hope I have demonstrated here that the religious elements in many horror films not only provide narrative coherence, but sociophobic resonance with significant portions of the audience for whom they are produced. If these elements were removed, or if their presence is not taken seriously, then any narrative sense the stories have would simply disappear. Moreover, they would lose precisely the quality that gives their horror meaning and makes their meaning horrific. Put differently, in order to appreciate the fullness of horror that these films have to offer, to really focus on the fears their lenses both generate and reveal, and to understand ourselves more fully thereby, the religious underpinning of cinematic horror must be explored more deeply

and much more intentionally than has occurred to date.

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