

Religion & Horror Webinar Teaching Resources

[YouTube Link](#) – released October 2022

Overview:

It is October, the time of year when Americans celebrate Halloween and indulge their fascination with all things haunted, hideous, and horrifying. And what is a common theme in the monster movies and spirit possession thrillers that are so popular this time of year? Religion! Whether we are reading novels by Stephen King, revisiting classic films like *The Exorcist*, or watching new television shows like *Midnight Mass*, religion is everywhere in the horror genre. It is the source of inspiration for many of the characters, plots, and imagery that make horror so compelling. At the same time, many Americans learn about religious people, ideas, and practices through horror. Join us for a thought-provoking discussion with an interdisciplinary panel of experts who will help us understand the enduring power of religion and horror in American popular culture.

Host:

Melissa Borja is Assistant Professor in the Department of American Culture and core faculty member in the Asian/Pacific Islander American Studies Program at University of Michigan. Dr. Borja researches and teaches about religion, migration, race, ethnicity, and politics in the United States and the Pacific World, with special attention to how Asian American religious beliefs and practices have developed in the context of pluralism and the modern American state. Her book *Follow the New Way: Hmong Refugee Resettlement and Practice of American Religious Pluralism* (Harvard) is forthcoming.

Panelists:

Douglas E. Cowan is Professor of Religious Studies and Social Development at the University of Waterloo. He specializes in religion and film, television, and popular culture. His more recent works include *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Baylor), *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television* (Baylor), *America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King* (NYUP), and *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Myth and Religion Shape Fantasy Culture* (California University Press). For many years he was a co-general editor of the premier journal of new religions study, *Nova Religio*, and chair of the New Religious Movements Group of the American Academy of Religion. He is a former Director of the Joint Laurier-Waterloo PhD Program in Religious Studies.

Erika Engstrom is Director of the University of Kentucky School of Journalism and Media. A nationally known gender and media scholar, Dr. Engstrom holds extensive administrative experience, having previously served as the associate dean of the multidisciplinary Greenspun College of Urban Affairs and as acting general manager of the campus radio station, KUNV-FM, at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Areas of academic administrative expertise include enrollment management, event coordination, scholarships, and faculty development. She has

published books and articles on the portrayal of gender, weddings, and religion in mass media including the book *Television, Religion, and Supernatural: Hunting Monsters, Finding Gods* (Rowman & Littlefield).

W. Scott Poole is Professor of History at the College of Charleston. Dr. Poole is the author or co-author of nine books, including *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting* (2011; revised edition 2018) that won the John Cawelti award for best textbook dealing with popular culture. He is a Bram Stoker Award nominee for his 2016 biography of H.P. Lovecraft, *In the Mountains of Madness*. His most recent book is *Wasteland: The Great War and the Origins of Modern Horror* (2018) looks at the lives of directors, artists, and writers who collectively created the culture of contemporary horror. *Wasteland* was chosen for “notable book” lists by *The New York Post*, *The Toronto Free Star*, and the *Indie Booksellers* “Indie Next” list. Poole’s work has appeared in *the Washington Post*, *PopMatters*, *Jacobin*, and *People’s World*, as well as in academic essay collections including, most recently, *The Oxford Handbook of Edgar Allan Poe* (2019).

Resources:

Books

- [*The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination* by Douglas Cowan](#)
- [*Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* by Douglas Cowan](#)
- [*Television, Religion and Supernatural: Hunting Monsters and Finding Gods* by Erika Engstrom](#)
- [*Religion Across Television Genres* by Erika Engstrom](#)
- [*Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and Haunting* by W. Scott Poole](#)
- [*Dark Carnivals: Modern Horror and The Origins of the American Empire* by W. Scott Poole](#)

Movies and Television Shows

- *The Exorcist*, 1973
- *King Kong*, 1931
- *Supernatural*, 2005-2020
- *Passion of the Christ*, 2004
- *It*, 2017

Other Published Teaching Resources:

- [*Sociology of Religion: Movie Watching and Written Responses*](#)
- [*Religion, Literature, and Film: Global Pursuits of Meaning*](#)
- [*The Sanctification of Fear: Images of the Religious in Horror Films*](#) from Bryan Stone
- [*Religion & It’s Monsters*](#) by Timothy Beal
- [*Designing a Course Integrating Critical, Genre-Based Pedagogy, Horror Literature, and Religious Studies*](#) by Nathan Fredrickson

Teaching Resource 1 – Assignment (Whole Video)

After watching the Religion & Horror video answer the following questions based on the information provided in the video.

1. In what ways do the panelists see the intersection of religion and the horror genre?
2. What are some of the major themes that the panelists mention when talking about how horror and
3. How do religion and horror mix in American culture?
4. After watching the video, what are other examples of religion and horror you can think of?

Teaching Resource 2 – Assignment (video clip and episode of Supernatural - Netflix)

For this assignment, watch the short clip from the Religion & Horror video, then watch this episode of Supernatural. After watching both and taking notes, answer the following questions.

Clip: 10:00-20:00

Text: *Television, Religion and Supernatural: Hunting Monsters and Finding Gods* by Erika Engstrom

1. What examples of religion do you notice in the episode?
2. Who is the hero? Who/what is the villain? How is the hero able to defeat the villain?
3. After answering the earlier question, how does this example shape our beliefs, understanding or perception of both the heroes and the villain?
4. How does popular culture, like television, shape our understanding of religions?