

Spirituality: From *South Park* to *Star Trek*
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Who I am and how I got here, or, from traditional academia to watching movies and calling it work...

Twenty-five years ago, I started off expecting a conventional career in academia, which often meant learning more and more about less and less until you arrive at the point where you know everything there is to know about absolutely nothing. Then something happened.

“Do I look like someone who cares what God thinks?” or, scary stories and the problem of “real” religion...

I can pinpoint the exact moment that the direction of my intellectual life changed, when the questions I thought were important didn’t seem so anymore, and why I’ve done what I’ve done for the past two decades, and why I think that matters.

But, first, a quick question about Scientology...

Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen

One simple premise: what we fear, why we fear, how we express and resolve our fears are socially and culturally constructed. This is *sociophobics*, the social constructions of fear.

Two simple questions: (a) what *religiously oriented* fears does cinema horror show us or reveal about us? And (b) why *religion* when there are so many other scary things around?

One simple guideline: “we have to learn to look at ‘bad’ films, they are so often sublime” (Ado Kyrou, *Le surréalisme au cinéma*).

All of this depends, of course, on what we mean by “religion.” How would you know it when you see it? How would you explain the concept of “religion” to someone else?

Religion is always and everywhere perspectival. It depends on who is doing the looking, and from whence they look.

- Familiarity Bias
- False Consensus Effect
- Availability Heuristic

“The life of religion is the belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good depends on harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto” (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*).

Religion vs. the religious imagination...

While all religions emerge as products of the religious imagination, not all aspects of the religious imagination ultimately take their place in the world as lived religions. Far more of them come to us through myth and legend, fable and fairy tale, short stories and pulp

novels, film and television, literary horror, weird fiction, graphic storytelling, and the visual arts.

Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television

Another simple premise: what we hope for, how we imagine hope, and the questions we put to our search is, like fear, socially constructed and culturally shaped; this is *sociospera*, the social construction of hope.

Fear and Hope: the double helix of our religious DNA

Questions are more important than answers, because answers are ephemeral, questions are forever. Think about religious questions: properly human questions. We ask them not because we are religious, but because we are human.

“We need stories... we need stories to understand ourselves... we are the only creature who does this unusual thing of telling each other stories in order to understand what kind of creature that we are” (Sir Salman Rushdie).

Revolutions in human storytelling, or, how stories make us human...

- The historical horizon (ca. 3000 bce)
- The axial age (ca. 800-300 bce)
- The Copernican revolution (16th c.)
- The Darwinian revolution (19th c.)
- The “Sonny” revolution (21st c.)

Memories are the engine of experience...

Stories are the well of memories...

By taking seriously the stories we tell each other, we continue the process of being (and becoming) human.

Suggested Reading, or, a shameless attempt at self-promotion...

Cowan, Douglas E. *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008.

----- *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television*. Waco, TX, Baylor University Press, 2010.

----- *America’s Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

----- *Magic, Monsters, and Make-Believe Heroes: How Religion Shapes Fantasy Culture*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2019.

----- *The Forbidden Body: Sex, Horror, and the Religious Imagination*. New York: New York University Press, 2022.

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