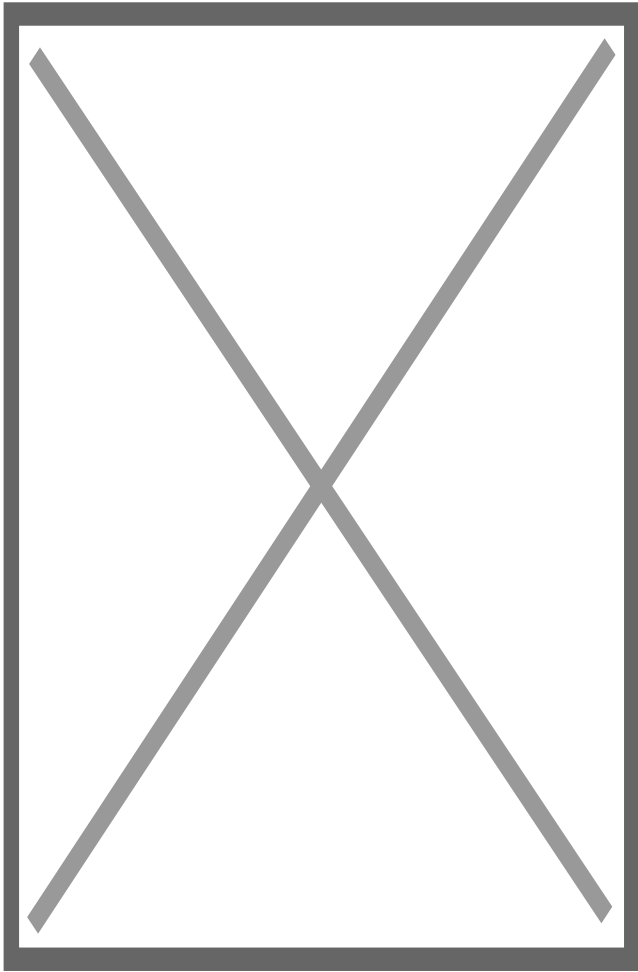


When monsters preach

In the mythological universes created by horror films, Jesuit priest Ryan Duns finds insights about God.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [October 2025](#) issue

In Review



Theology of Horror

The Hidden Depths of Popular Films

By Ryan G. Duns, SJ
University of Notre Dame Press

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

Some horror films are not just surprisingly religious but thoroughly Catholic and sacramental, and shockingly orthodox. In 1968, *Dracula Has Risen from the Grave* depicted a young man, a sincere atheist, who is deeply at odds with the faithful monsignor whose niece is the love of his life. Ultimately, the two men ally to defeat Dracula, who perishes to the Latin words of the Lord's Prayer, as the now-converted young atheist devoutly crosses himself. Leaving aside the splattering blood and gore, this would almost fit into a conservative Sunday school class.

By no means are all horror films so didactic, but most teach fundamental ideas that are broadly theological about the existence of the evil and monstrous, commonly of a supernatural quality, and at least by implication, of the larger cosmic good that can overcome those forces. Darkness reveals light. Horror represents a setting in which the transcendent and the numinous are still present, even after they have been so thoroughly excluded from mainstream discourse. In a secularized world, horror becomes a site of displacement where we can still find vestiges of what was once the consensus normality of the spiritual. Central to horror is the idea of the monstrous, the malevolent transcendent, suddenly intruding into the established familiar order, utterly disrupting it: the *metataxis* threatens the *taxis*.

Although fashions change in the specific forms of horror that appeal at any given moment, the genre continues to flourish, and scholars of religion inevitably contemplate the quite weighty theological lessons that people learn from these productions. Among several recent books, I think of Douglas E. Cowan's *Sacred Terror: Religion and Horror on the Silver Screen* (Baylor University Press, 2008) and the collection of essays edited by Brandon R. Gafius and John W. Morehead, *Theology and Horror: Explorations of the Dark Religious Imagination* (Lexington Books, 2021).

If Ryan Duns is not breaking new ground, he offers a fresh and appealing take on the topic, one that grows out of his practical experience as a college teacher. Most horror productions are, after all, targeted at teenage or young adult audiences, and students already have a sense of the mythological universe that they represent, whether or not they have viewed any particular movies. Few can be wholly ignorant of Freddy Krueger, even if they have never seen any manifestation of *A Nightmare on Elm Street*. As a demon in our cultural consciousness, Freddy (like Michael Myers of the *Halloween* franchise) has an immediacy that older counterparts like Asmodeus or Apollyon have long lost. Significantly, both Michael and Freddy retain their fright potential 40 years or more after their original appearance, suggesting a remarkable staying power. These are our demons now.

Duns's book is divided into three sections. The first, "Monstrous Being," outlines the metaphysical framework and assumptions underlying horror films. "Infernal Icons," the following section, becomes more avowedly theological and christological, applying those approaches to such films as *I Am Legend*, *A Nightmare on Elm Street*, and *Candyman*. The final part, "Dark Graces," explores the idea of diabolical irruptions into our normality. Each section is grounded in a discussion of several horror films. Although the 15 selected movies include some undisputed classics (*Rosemary's Baby*, *The Exorcist*, *Night of the Living Dead*), these are in no sense chosen to represent any kind of canon, and any horror fan would have their own rival listings. Duns's choices unabashedly represent films that he happens to enjoy and that he finds useful as teaching tools, and those criteria are perfectly valid. (The last chapter concerns *The Exorcist*, as if the priest author could have chosen anything else!)

In each case, Duns offers a detailed and often surprising reading of the film, commenting shrewdly on moments and themes that we might otherwise be tempted to dismiss as generic conventions. A central motif of *The Blair Witch Project* is mystery, and Duns uses that idea to undergird a general discussion of the concept of the mystery that lies beyond the rational—and how that can lead to encountering the Divine. Portraying as it does the incarnation of a child of Satan, the assumptions of *Rosemary's Baby* "presuppose and are parasitic on deeply held Christian beliefs," which leads Duns to explicate doctrines of incarnation.

I learned a lot from this rewarding book, but several questions inevitably arose. First, the content is entirely American: Might a transnational focus have produced other insights? Also, due to the author's background and academic setting, Christian and Catholic approaches predominate, but some explicit discussion of other theological stances might have been helpful. Jews were deeply involved in making many of the films Duns discusses, including those with ostensibly Christian settings, and some recent horror productions are explicitly rooted in Jewish backgrounds and Jewish folklore: I think of *The Unborn* (2009) or *The Possession* (2012). And what about the Muslim world, with its theologies and folk demons? The excellent *Under the Shadow* (2016) has an Iranian Shi'ite setting, and Sunni Turkey has a booming horror industry, with its long-running *Sijjin* franchise. Some kind of explicit interfaith comparison would have been provocative.

Also, focusing so much on theology in its Judeo-Christian manifestations makes it hard to discuss one area of the genre that has for decades enjoyed an enormous vogue, namely, folk horror. However diverse individual treatments might be, folk horror films usually address such themes as the sanctity of the land and of venerated places of worship, the continuing power of ancient deities, and how those ancient realities continue to return to life despite all our best efforts at suppression and forgetting. Bidden or unbidden, nature strikes back. Some folk horror productions even associate those suppressed pagan realities with female religious power. Taken together, that is quite a potent theological package, which would offer rich materials for an enlightening college course.

Despite these gaps, *Theology of Horror* has much to teach, both in the author's approaches to particular titles and in the wider lessons he draws from any one film. Beyond its undoubted contribution to theological discussion, the book will stir fevered conversations among horror fans who are immersed in the genre.