# To what extent do horror films serve as propaganda or slander, in relation to the involvement of the Catholic Church in cases of the supernatural?

Horror movies have long fascinated audiences with their chilling depictions of the supernatural, often weaving tales that blur the line between fiction and reality. However, beneath the surface of these terrifying narratives lies a deeper question regarding their portrayal of institutions like the Catholic Church, which has historically been linked to cases of the supernatural. This essay will critically examine the extent to which horror films serve as propaganda or slander in their depiction of the Church's involvement in such phenomena. By analysing the thematic elements and representations within these films, I will explore whether they reinforce or undermine the Church's authority and beliefs in the context of the supernatural.

To frame the discussion, it is essential to define and understand key terms as provided by the Oxford English Dictionary. The "supernatural" is described as something "belonging to a realm or system that transcends nature" (OED, 2024). This concept underpins the narratives of a subgenre within horror films, where unexplained phenomena are attributed to forces beyond the natural world. Propaganda is the "systematic dissemination of information, especially in a biased or misleading way, to promote a particular cause or point of view" (OED, 2024). In the context of horror films, I will be raising the questions about whether these works intentionally promote specific narratives regarding the Catholic Church's role in supernatural events. Lastly, "slander" is understood as an act "to defame or calumniate; to spread slanderous reports; to speak evil of" or to "spread false statements or malicious misrepresentation of someone or something" (OED, 2024).
These definitions will guide the exploration of whether horror films unjustly depict the Catholic Church as a malevolent or incompetent force in relation to supernatural occurrences, thereby functioning as a form of slander.

The relationship between the horror genre and religion is deeply intertwined. In his book *The Sanctification of Fear,* Bryan Stone (2001) suggests that the horror genre itself represents a loss of confidence in the institutions associated with the religious, particularly in a world filled with chaos and uncertainty. However, biblical scholar Steve A Wiggins sees it differently. In *Holy Horror: The Bible and Fear in Movies*. Wiggins (2018) notes that "horror loves religion" highlighting how religious themes and symbols are frequently invoked within the genre. This connection is not merely incidental; rather, Wiggins asserts that horror and religious belief “feed off each other” whether the links are subtle, with reference to broad religious themes such as sin and the nature of evil or overt with depictions of priests dispelling evil spirits with holy relics and prayer. This symbiotic relationship is evident in the way horror films often draw on religious narratives to heighten their impact, tapping into deeply ingrained fears and beliefs. Wiggins (2018) further emphasises this point by stating that "the Bible is a book of horror" referencing the Bible's depictions of extreme violence; stories involving discussion of babies being cut in half, people being tortured, and brutal executions to name a few. These biblical horrors provide a rich source material for filmmakers, who adapt these themes to create narratives that resonate with audiences on a primal level. He compares the plot of *The Shining* with the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac to demonstrate how horror "freely borrows" from religious texts, using their inherent terror to amplify the horror on screen. The voices in Jack Torrance's head urging him to murder his family in *The Shining* could echo the voice of God commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. This ‘borrowing’ from religious story creates a deeply disturbing and psychologically complex narrative that demonstrates how religion can become both a tool and a target within the horror genre, shaping and being shaped by the terrifying stories that unfold on screen.

It could be argued that there were three specific horror films that marked a significant transformation in the horror genre – *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), *The Exorcist* (1973) and *The Omen* (1976). The explicitly religious themes within these films brought a new era of religious terror and could potentially have had a catalytic role in the 'satanic panic’ that cut across America in the 1980’s.

*The Exorcist* stands as one of the most iconic horror films of all time, renowned for its unsettling portrayal of demonic possession and the Catholic Church’s battle against evil. The film is steeped in religious symbolism with themes of faith and redemption woven throughout its narrative. Central to the story is the ritual of exorcism, an ancient practice of removing a malevolent spirit, depicted as the ultimate weapon against the demonic forces that possess the young girl, Regan. The figure of Father Merrin, a seasoned exorcist, embodies the Church's spiritual authority, while the younger Father Karras grapples with his waning faith, symbolising the modern crisis of belief. The frequent use of religious imagery - crucifixes, holy water, and prayers - reinforces the gravity of the spiritual battle depicted on screen.

The death of Father Merrin at the hands of the demon could be interpreted as a potent symbol of the overwhelming power of evil, potentially suggesting that the demonic forces can be stronger than the Church itself. This defeat of an experienced and devout priest, who represents the Church’s authority and spiritual strength, undermines the traditional belief in the Church’s absolute power over evil. Moreover, the fact that the demon is not fully defeated by the end of the film further emphasises the notion that faith and the Church’s rituals might not be sufficient to combat such profound malevolence. This lingering presence of evil challenges the audience to question the effectiveness of religious institutions and the very nature of faith in the face of overwhelming darkness.

*The Exorcist* polarised Catholic leaders; there were those who praised the reminder to the public of the reality and dangers of the devil, while others condemned it as ‘pornography’ and a study of ‘embarrassing superstition’ (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023). The involvement of clergyman in *The Exorcist* further stresses the close relationship between horror films and religious belief. Following the film's release two Jesuit priests, who starred in the film, were overwhelmed with phone calls and letters from individuals desperately seeking their assistance. *The Exorcist* had created ‘unprecedented demand’ for demon expulsion, but the Catholic Church still regarded exorcism to be an embarrassment (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023). A study conducted by the University of California offers an intriguing perspective on this issue. In 1964, they found that 37% of Americans believed Satan to be a literal entity. However, by 1972, the year *The Exorcist* was released, this figure had risen to 50% (cited in Laycock & Harrelson, 2023, p.3). This notable increase suggests a potential correlation between the film and belief in the devil and highlights the powerful impact that horror films can have on the public's perception of religious rituals and the supernatural. Additionally, Father Thomas Bermingham, a former teacher of *The Exorcist’s* author William P Blatty, served as a religious consultant for *The Exorcist;* a position he repeated for the creation of *The Amityville Horror* (1979) (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023). His role in these productions demonstrates the filmmakers' efforts to purposefully ground their terrifying narratives in authentic religious practices, further blurring the line between fiction and reality in the minds of audiences. This could all be seen as evidence that horror films of this nature may function as a form of propaganda, subtly shaping societal beliefs about the supernatural and the role of the Catholic Church.

However, I believe that it is more notable that these films perpetuate negative stereotypes or exaggerations through the depictions of religious practices and beliefs (Beal, 2008). Films involving exorcism frequently portray priests and clergymen as vulnerable to harm, both physically and psychologically. It’s difficult to find examples in this genre where these religious figures emerge from exorcisms unscathed, suggesting a recurring narrative in which the Church’s representatives are portrayed as overmatched by the forces of evil. For instance, in *The Devil Inside, The Exorcism of Emily Rose* and *The Rite,* priests suffer injuries and crises of faith, highlighting the immense toll that confronting demonic forces takes on them. This repeated depiction could be interpreted as slanderous; while the Church is positively positioned as a beacon of hope and the last line of defense, it is also characterised as a potentially faltering force, implying that the Church’s power is insufficient in the face of supernatural evil, thereby undermining its authority and spiritual efficacy in such matters.

Crane (1994) notes in his book *Terror and Everyday Life* that horror films like *The Exorcist*, and others of the same nature, are concerned with proving that Satan and ‘his cohorts’ can be just as violent as the killers that we see in the ‘slasher’ horror genre. It was this view, and the increasing popularity of supernatural horror films, that catapulted the careers of the husband and wife ‘team’ of Catholic paranormal investigators, Ed and Lorraine Warren. The couple had been working in the realm of the supernatural for years before their rise to fame, founding the New England Society for Psychical Research (NESPR) in 1953, and were well known for their ‘faith based’ investigations and ‘ghost busting’ (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023). As the Catholic Church remained cautious of exorcism, with only a handful of priests formally trained in the practice, Ed and Lorraine Warren became ‘back door exorcism brokers’. While they lacked official Church authority, though they claimed otherwise, they leveraged their connections with sympathetic clergy to facilitate these exorcisms and positioned themselves as intermediaries between the public’s cry for help and the Church’s hesitant response (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023).

The Warrens were the inspiration of many horror films, including those within what is commonly known as ‘The Conjuring Universe’, all of which dramatise their real-life cases and collectively made a monumental $2.2 billion. The series began with *The Conjuring* (2013) where the Warrens help the Perron family, who were being terrorised by a malevolent spirit in their farmhouse. After conducting a thorough investigation of the house, the Warrens determined that it was plagued by a powerful spirit. They provided the family with spiritual guidance, performed cleansing rituals and eventually arrange for an exorcism, despite not having official Church sanction. The film portrays the Warrens as courageous figures who use their tremendous faith as a weapon to protect the innocent in the battle against dark forces.

The other films in the collection follow a similar narrative; with families reaching out for help and the Warrens arrive to say prayers, perform exorcisms, cast out demons and ultimately walk away victorious. Lorraine Warren is often depicted with her rosary clutched in her hands, particularly during disturbing scenes, drawing attention to the Catholic rituals, faith and divine intervention that are portrayed as the ultimate defense against evil.

The Warrens themselves could certainly be seen to serve a propagandistic role for the Catholic Church by reinforcing the idea that supernatural evil, specifically demonic possession, is a genuine and pervasive threat that only the Church can combat. In an interview with *The Chicago Tribune* Ed Warren warned that although Ouija boards and rock music are ‘spiritually dangerous’, films like *The Exorcist* and *The Amityville Horror* are of vital importance for audiences because they are an accurate depiction of ‘what happens’ when dealing with the demonic (cited in Laycock & Harrelson, 2023, p.92). Arguably, this perspective highlights the approach taken in retelling their experiences through film; using these narratives to convey a specific, cautionary message about the dangers of the supernatural and the need for the Church in combatting it. Their investigations often dismissed or overlooked alternative explanations for the disturbances they encountered, such as psychological issues or abuse, instead framing these events within a strictly religious context. Moreover, there have been claims that the Warrens encouraged family members of the ‘possessed’ person to exaggerate their experiences to fit the narrative of a demonic activity (Laycock & Harrelson, 2023). This could all be interpreted to be an act of scare mongering - amplifying fears of the supernatural. By focusing almost exclusively on the demonic and potentially manipulating the truth, these films promote a worldview where the Church’s involvement is not only necessary but the only viable solution, reinforcing its authority.

The approach of using fear to draw people to the Church does not originate with the Warrens. Wiggins (2021), in his contributions to *Theology and Horror: Exploration of the Dark Religious Imagination,* asserts that religious literature has long been used as a ‘tactic of fear’. The tales of early Christians or the brutal assassinations of Saints and martyrs attest to this horror standard. The Bible itself serves as a source for instilling fear, as seen in the narrative of a queen who is thrown from a tower, trampled to death by horses, and eaten by dogs. Her transgression? Worshipping the ‘wrong’ God. These vivid and brutal depictions of divine retribution are also likely intended to reinforce religious conformity and encourage adherence to sanctioned beliefs.

Despite the efforts of the Warrens to favour the authority of the Church, the films based on their experiences arguably present a slanderous portrayal, similar to that of *The Exorcist,* where darkness and evil appears to be considerably more powerful. A notable example is the Annabelle doll, along with the other cursed artefacts that the Warrens collect and lock away as they are deemed too dangerous to be left in the world. These objects are contained after the exorcisms are performed and not destroyed. This raises the question, if the Warrens’ abilities, their faith and the Church’s abilities were as absolute as they suggest, wouldn’t these malevolent forces be completely defeated rather than merely contained? This recurring theme in the films suggests a world where evil persists, subtly undermining the idea that divine power can fully triumph over darkness and complicating the religious message that they portray.

In conclusion, the depiction of the Catholic Church in horror films reveals a complex connection between propaganda and slander, shaped by the inherent fascination with the supernatural and religious themes. While the films discussed in this essay heavily draw on Catholic rituals and beliefs to create compelling narratives of spiritual warfare, they simultaneously cast doubt on the Church’s ability to fully overcome the forces of evil. This duality could be reflective of the broader cultural ambivalence towards religious authority, where the Church is both a glorified beacon of hope and subtly undermined as a faltering institution in the face of supernatural malevolence. The involvement of real-life figures who blend religious faith with scandal, further complicates this portrayal. Ultimately, while horror films serve to propagate the notion of the supernatural as a serious and pervasive threat, they often do so at the cost of portraying the Catholic Church as an institution struggling to maintain its authority and efficacy in cases of the supernatural.

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