

○ REVIEW OF KIM PAFFENROTH, *GOSPEL OF THE LIVING DEAD*

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Richard Walsh reviews Kim Paffenroth's *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Visions of Hell on Earth*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press; 2006.



Zombies are dead humans come back to ‘life’ because of scientific or imperialistic hubris or, quite rarely, because of a supernatural judgment (e.g. in *Day of the Dead*). ‘Alive’, they are automatons without higher functions, turning the living that they bite or otherwise infect into zombies themselves. The typical zombie movie focuses on a small group of human survivors struggling to remain alive in the face of this zombie apocalypse. Much of the intrigue, however, arises from the humans’ internecine conflicts.

For Paffenroth, the zombies’ automaton-character and their cannibalism are Romero’s chief symbolic investments, but, like all monsters, zombies are inevitably liminal beings threatening tenuous social constructs. Zombies obscure the line between life and death and, as zombies were once living humans, the line between (the living) us and (the dead) them. Therefore, zombies are the most human of monstrous others: ‘In the end, Romero is asking what is a smart zombie, other than... a human being, a bestial slave to its appetites that struggles to be more? Or what are we, other than... slightly smart zombies, a tribe of deranged, self-destructive cannibals preying on one another?’ (7).

This ethical issue is what intrigues Paffenroth, although he does mention in passing metaphysical issues like the zombies’ ‘perverted version of the Christian idea of bodily resurrection’ (12). His interest leads naturally to a major motif in the book, the focus on the movies’ social criticisms of racism, sexism, materialism (consumerism), and violent individualism. Paffenroth labels these critiques ‘broadly Christian’ (22), a move that situates his work within fairly common forms of religious liberalism.

Thereafter, Paffenroth moves to neo-orthodox ground by describing these ills as sin and the zombies and selfish humans that embody them as sinful. Fresh from his recent work, *The Heart Set Free: Sin and Redemption in the Gospels, Augustine, Dante, and Flannery O’ Connor*

(Continuum, 2005), he compares the zombie movies' theological vision specifically to Dante's understanding of sin. The zombies, 'the walking damned', are the denizens of Dante's *Inferno*, 'the suffering race of souls who lost the good of intellect' (22). Unfortunately, humans in the movies can also be quite zombie-like, acting without reason or addictively and selfishly devouring others. Therefore, Paffenroth claims that the movies offer a vision of 'original sin' (or, at least, the ubiquity of sin) and a Dantesque understanding of punishment in which sin is its own reward and hell is of the sinner's own making.

Chapters on five specific zombie films - four by Romero and one remake by Zack Snyder - elucidate Paffenroth's claims. In each chapter, Paffenroth provides a synopsis of the movie and an analysis of the movie's social criticisms. The guiding motif, however, is the Dantesque lessons in sin that Paffenroth finds. Accordingly, Paffenroth plays Virgil as he guides the reader on a tour through Romero's *Inferno*.

Romero's low-budget *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) previews hell and original sin. Zombies attack a young girl and her brother in a cemetery - a post-apocalyptic vision of the U.S.'s end. Only the girl escapes to a farmhouse where she and other survivors seek refuge. Thereafter, each of these survivors dies violently, most at the hands of humans or loved ones who have become zombies. The last survivor is shot when a zombie-killing, trigger-happy posse arrives at the farm house. For Paffenroth, none of this surprises if one takes original sin seriously; therefore, he concludes, 'Romero may not think that Christianity has the cure for sin, but he would at least have to admit that it has the diagnosis right...' (42). That interpretation, one typical of Christian apologetics, is Paffenroth's thesis, and it leads him to describe *Night of the Living Dead* as Romero's most nihilistic movie even though it is the only movie in which the zombie hordes are ultimately defeated.

In the *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), a mall - in which zombies, the 'ideal mallgoers', and humans shop inanelly - replaces the farm house as refuge. Here, Paffenroth claims the movie depicts humans as 'pre-zombies', 'temporarily capable of some free choice, but fast frittering that free choice away on addictive habits like materialism and violence' (69). Paffenroth, that is, uses this movie to discuss sin's addictive nature and its ability to reduce humans to their basest urges or to zombies. An orgy of violence - including human groups shooting at one another - ends the movie, but Paffenroth finds this movie more hopeful than *Night* primarily because an interracial couple escapes in a helicopter.

In *Day of the Dead* (1985), the place of refuge is a military bunker where scientists experiment on zombies which they treat as potential slave labor. As scientists and the military struggle for control, sabotage and accidents bring about the predictable orgy of violence. As the final interracial trio tries to escape, zombies near, but suddenly the female lead wakes on a beach leaving the whole story poised ambiguously between dream and reality. For Paffenroth, this movie depicts the more deadly sins in the lower reaches of the *Inferno*: perversions of reason, pride, and the lust for domination. Meanwhile, the experimental treatment of the zombies and the humanity of 'Bub', the 'zombie with a soul' (82), make meaningful distinctions between humans and zombies increasingly difficult.

The 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead* is much more hopeful, providing a number of characters who typify the partial victory of reason and virtue. While the message that sin is destructive continues, Paffenroth compares these good 'pagans' to the inhabitants of Dante's limbo. They

live the best people can without God. Nonetheless, no help arrives from above; therefore, Paffenroth concludes, 'Without faith and hope, even love fails' (113).

Day of the Dead was to be the last instalment in Romero's zombie trilogy, but he returned with *Land of the Dead* (2005). Now, the refuge is a city divided between the have-nots and the wealthy, led by a tyrant, who lives in a high rise in a walled compound. This Romero movie offers a telling critique of a society that bases its wasteful lifestyle upon the exploited and disenfranchised (both humans and zombies). This exploitation makes this movie, in Paffenroth's estimation, a vision of the deepest abyss of hell. Of course, in the depths of hell lies the way to Dante's *Purgatorio*. While Paffenroth makes only allusive mention of this matter, he does assert that this movie is Romero's most hopeful, primarily because the zombies bring about the end of the compound's exploitive society. Moreover, in this movie alone, zombies and humans find a way to live together (by leaving each other alone). For Paffenroth, then, this final zombie movie suggests that we, like these zombies, may 'learn to be human and humane' (132).

While that hope is common in religious liberalism, Paffenroth's use of Dante, as we have seen, points instead to Christian apologetics. This agenda is most evident in the volume's overall trajectory - from nihilism to hope - and in the discussions of *Night of the Living Dead* and in the remake of *Dawn of the Dead*. In Paffenroth's analysis of both movies, he infers that human reason and effort are insufficient. We will not learn to be human and humane alone. For Paffenroth, then, the zombie movies proffer a 'painful wake-up call from our sinful reveries' (136) and indict the underestimation of human depravity (43). They teach us that we, on our materialist own, are zombies.

In addition to the book's tour of hell structure, then, Paffenroth's work shares another theological element with Dante (as well as with the structure of St. Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*, where reason lifts one up to faith, and the Gothic cathedral, whose towering structures rose to meet heavenly light filtering through stained-glass). Succinctly, at a certain point, human reason and effort can go no farther (Virgil's role in *The Divine Comedy* and Paffenroth's role here) and then divine grace must take over (Beatrice and, then, the Virgin Mary in Dante). Divine grace, however, never quite arrives in Paffenroth's analysis of Romero's movies. Here, only moments of secular grace occur, and, for Paffenroth, these are far too fragile.

I found myself wondering as I read Paffenroth why the divine grace did not arrive. Perhaps, it does not arrive because Paffenroth does not believe in it, although I think that highly unlikely. Perhaps, grace does not arrive because Paffenroth plans another book. More likely, grace does not arrive because it does not befit zombie movies (see, e.g., 160n52, 162n24) and because Paffenroth genuinely loves zombie movies. That love is the book's saving grace, for it allows Paffenroth's work to avoid being a heavy-handed tract and to avoid the blatant apologetic that interprets a piece of secular art as revealing a problem to which the Christian message provides the answer.