



**Paffenroth, Kim.**

***Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Vision of Hell on Earth***

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Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

On March 4, 2010 I saw *The Crazies* (2010) which is the remake of George A. Romero's 1973 film of the same title, and while I thought the acting was above par, I was ultimately unimpressed with the movie itself. That evening I was speaking with my father and I mentioned that I had seen it. He asked how it was and I replied, "It was okay; your standard zombie flick." He had mentioned that the only horror movie to ever frighten him was Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) because of the manner in which the film's "hero," to use his term, fought throughout the movie only to be killed by a mob at the end for seemingly no reason. I had mentioned that Romero's films were full of subtext and social critique; a point I noted in brief but glowing review<sup>1</sup> of the recent film *Zombieland* (2009) on my blog at the end of last year. So perhaps it was only providence at work when I came across Kim Paffenroth's *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero's Vision of Hell on Earth* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2006) just a day later (although I wouldn't begin reading the book for another day and some hours) when zombie flicks were fresh on my mind.

Kim Paffenroth is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Iona College in New Rochelle, NY. *Gospel of the Living Dead* (hereafter *GOTLD*) is the first work of his that I've encountered and it masterfully exposes the subtext in Romero's (as well as related) films and brings it to the surface for the reader to see clearly. Written in 2006 Paffenroth's examination of Romero's work ended with his latest film up until that point, *Land of the Dead* (2005), but since the book has been

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<sup>1</sup> <http://rdtwot.wordpress.com/2009/12/31/year-end-movie-notes/>

written Romero released *Diary of the Dead* (2007) and later this year will release *Survival of the Dead*. There have also been a number of other zombie flicks released since the writing of this book such as *28 Weeks Later* (2007, the sequel to *28 Days Later* [2002], a film briefly mentioned by Paffenroth); *Resident Evil: Extinction* (2007, the follow-up to two previous *Resident Evil* films [2002 & 2004 respectively], also mentioned briefly in *GOTLD*, with *Resident Evil: Afterlife* slated for release later this year); the Robert Rodriguez directed *Planet Terror* (2007, which was one half of the double feature *Grindhouse*, also featuring Quentin Tarantino's *Death Proof*); *Day of the Dead* (2008, a terrible adaptation of Romero's 1985 original); as well as the aforementioned *Zombieland* (2009) and the remake of Romero's *The Crazies* (2010); plus some others. Given Paffenroth's clear love for the genre I'd be very interested to see him turn his attention to these films as well, perhaps in a sequel to *GOTLD*, or maybe even an updated 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

In *GOTLD* Paffenroth takes a look at Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968); *Dawn of the Dead* (1978); *Day of the Dead* (1985); the remake/adaptation of *Dawn of the Dead* (2004) directed by Zak Snyder; and finally *Land of the Dead* (2005). Paffenroth takes note of the remake of *Night of the Living Dead* (1990) but skips it because it is "too identical to the original to need further comment." (1) The introduction offers some basic characteristics of nearly every zombie movie, e.g., for some strange reason corpses start getting up and walking around again; zombies are autonomous and not under the control of another; zombies rapidly increase in number; they eat the living; the suspense in zombie films usually comes from the human interaction; etc. But he notes points of divergence as well such as zombies being slow in Romero's films but fast in *28 Days Later* and Snyder's *Dawn of the Dead*; they're afraid of fire in Romero's first two films but not in the later films just mentioned; and in most films zombies are imbecilic yet this isn't the case in *Land of the Dead* (and I'd add the more recent *Resident Evil: Extinction*).

But this all leads up to two more important points: The first concerns the symbolism or meaning of zombies, i.e., zombies unlike other movie monsters aren't the combination of multiple creatures or the offspring of gods and humans, nor are they supernatural beings like ghosts or demons, nor do they "straddle the threshold between human and nonhuman" (7) such as werewolves, and while there is a certain blame to be placed on science in some of the films, they aren't the creations of mad scientists like Dr. Frankenstein. No, what makes zombies stand out from the rest is that they truly are human, albeit undead humans, but humans nonetheless. As Paffenroth says, "what makes zombies more terrifying than other monsters is that this confusing resemblance of zombies to normal people never goes away. Unlike vampires, zombies do not sleep in coffins, and unlike werewolves, zombies do not go back and forth between their human and monstrous states: what is especially terrifying with zombies is that their monstrous state is their human state, it never transforms or goes away." (9) In other words, in zombies we see ourselves, or as Paffenroth says: "The real psychological terror of zombies, however, lies in the reverse prospect: it is not just horrible to watch zombies devouring humans, but it is more subtly

and insidiously horrible to imagine the human characters in the movies slaughtering hundreds of zombies who look, and, to some extent, still act, exactly like human beings.” (9)

The second and most important point concerns the social critique offered in zombie flicks and this is what occupies Paffenroth’s scholarly examination of the genre throughout the rest of the book. Each chapter offers a brief introductory remark followed by summary of the movie under discussion and then an analysis of the film and finally concluding remarks. It is here that Paffenroth shines as a communicator. His ability to accurately summarize Romero’s (and Snyder’s) work is uncanny. His descriptions are vivid and reconstruct the films with precision yet somehow manage to avoid feeling tedious. There’s a certain eloquence to Paffenroth’s prose that make his work seem more like a novel than a detailed study of the zombie films genre. In all of the films he finds to some extent or another, the overthrow of certain improper social conventions such as racism through the depiction of black protagonists such as Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* or the interracial friendship of John and McDermott in the original *Dawn of the Dead* or the interracial relationships between Sara and John in the original *Dawn of the Dead* and Andre and Luda in the 2004 remake; sexism with strong female characters such as Ana in the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* or the role reversal where men take up the stereotypical female fascination with shopping in the original *Dawn of the Dead* (see p. 60). In fact, the original *Dawn of the Dead* is a wholesale indictment of American consumerism and materialism, as Paffenroth notes that in the film “both zombies and humans are insane and insatiable consumers.” (57) *Land of the Dead* offers the clearest and most poignant critique of classism with Dennis Hopper playing the rich villain Kaufman, who kills and cheats in order to sustain his empire, yet refuses admittance into the kingdom for the Hispanic character Cholo (John Leguizamo) who does his dirty work for him.

But in this already lengthy review of Paffenroth’s book I haven’t even scratched the surface of the insight that he offers into these films. His most potent insights, in my opinion, are on the role of reason and faith in *Night of the Living Dead*. Romero undercuts both but Paffenroth thinks the critique is much more damaging to human reason than it is to faith. Below I offer a lengthy quote to bring out the strength of Paffenroth’s case:

With some exceptions, most modern religions, including most forms of Christianity, do not claim to be able to eradicate physical death, or even to avoid misfortune and suffering before death. Such a limitation is frankly admitted in the biblical book of Job, and in theological works such as *City of God* by St. Augustine (354–430), which makes clear that, exactly as in *Night of the Living Dead*, piety and prayer will not keep the faithful from being killed in war, and even subjected to worse wartime atrocities, such as rape, mutilation, and cannibalism. But reason and human ingenuity, it has often been claimed—as the doctor claims in *Night of*

*the Living Dead*, and as Ben seems to believe—will lead to material prosperity and physical wellbeing, if not all the way to immortality, then at least to a very long and healthy lifespan on earth. So if this movie claims that neither faith nor reason can physically save your life in a crisis, then it seems as though the claims of reason's proponents have been seriously undermined, while the claims of most believers in faith are unaffected, for the faithful do not claim such a power over physical death and adversity.

More importantly, I think, is the observation made above, that for all its cynicism, *Night of the Living Dead* presents us with a scenario that is not just compatible with the Christian idea of original sin, but a scenario that would have to turn out this way if we really believed in original sin. Here again, the optimistic claims of unaided human reason are far more unrealistic, according to Romero's film, than are the claims of religion. Reason and all the modern movements and concepts that grow out of it—the Enlightenment, modernity, and modern concepts of how people could be made to behave nicely and cooperatively by utilizing a supposed desire like enlightened self-interest—all of these simply ignore human sinfulness. So if one follows only the dictates of reason, one would be powerless and completely taken by surprise when people start behaving in accord with what is called, in Christian theology, the *libido dominandi*, the innate "lust for domination," which the survivors in the farmhouse display with a vengeance. 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, in counterdistinction to its major modern detractors and competitors. And Christians would have to admit that, although they must disagree with Romero's denial of a cure, he has the diagnosis of sin more right than many modern thinkers and artists, and has compellingly presented it in all its power and horror. (42-43)

His reviews and commentary are enlightening to say the least and I have to admit that what I thought was being critiqued through these films didn't always prove to be the case. Paffenroth offered me a number of correctives. Oh, and did I mention that throughout the book he compares these films to the classic Italian epic Dante's *Inferno*? The parallels he draws are brilliant and thought provoking. But if I had to quibble with anything in this book it would be two peculiarities:

1. Paffenroth is selective in the profanity he quotes without censorship, so for example, we find the word "shit" on pp. 62; 84; 95; 107; 111 (3x); 130; yet we see "F\*\*k," "f\*\*ks," and "f\*\*king" printed on pp. 21; 75; 96; 125. I can't understand why the one is any more

offensive and therefore deserving of censorship than the other, especially when they're simply being quoted from the films from which they come.

2. He at times offers seemingly useless and irrelevant information in parenthetical statements such as other films or television shows the actors he mentions have been in or were currently on at the time of his writing (see e.g., the comments about Ving Rhames on p. 94, or Jake Weber and Mekhi Phifer on p. 96, or Dennis Hopper on p. 120). At one point he brings Phifer's character Dr. Greg Pratt on *ER* into his analysis of his character Andre in the remake of *Dawn of the Dead* (p. 103). The connection, while interesting, was irrelevant and doubtfully in the mind of the filmmaker.

I'd complain about the end notes in this book but they actually don't bother me; in fact I was surprised to read through them and see that there's a whole world of scholarship on zombie flicks! A nice bibliography and subject index round out the volume and make it very easy for me to recommend to anyone who's a fan of zombie movies, but even (especially) to those who are fans of social critique through the medium of film.