

How Do We Distinguish the Holy from the Demonic? An Anthropotheistic Meditation on Mike Flanagan's *Midnight Mass*

Christoffer S. Lammer-Heindel

February 16, 2022

Midnight Mass is a seven-part horror miniseries, which was released by Netflix in 2021. It follows the strange and supernatural developments experienced by a small community on Crockett Island and the ensuing trials—psychological, spiritual, and physical—to which the islanders are subjected. We enter the life of the island community at a point when its parish priest, Monsignor John Pruitt, has been on pilgrimage to the Holy Land and is expected to return from his sabbatical for Sunday Mass. However, a newcomer, Father Paul Hill arrives in his stead, explaining that the elderly priest is recuperating from an illness on the mainland, and he is his temporary replacement.

In the first episode, we meet many of the main characters, including Riley Flynn, a prodigal son who has recently completed a prison sentence for killing a young woman while driving drunk years earlier (something which continues to haunt him); his devout mother and father, as well as his younger brother; his childhood sweetheart, Erin Greene; the extraordinarily unlikable religious zealot, Bev Keane; and Sheriff Hassan el-Shabbaz, the sole law enforcement official on the island.

The series creator, Mike Flanagan, developed the story over the course of almost a decade, initially conceiving of it as a novel, then a film, and later a miniseries. He unsuccessfully attempted to seek a production company beginning in 2014, and it was not until 2019 that Netflix announced that it would take it on. Set construction began that year and filming was to start in 2020; however, the COVID-19 pandemic shut down production until August 2020. This is significant because some viewers and critics have read the series as a commentary on the pandemic. For example, [writing for Vox](#), Aja Romano acknowledges that the story was conceived prior to the pandemic, but nevertheless argues that it is “a barely veiled allegory for the COVID-19 epidemic,” and that “Flanagan uses the plot of *Midnight Mass* as an allegorical stand-in for a broad range of extreme conservative reactions to the pandemic.” This is a misleading description of the film as a text, which conflates authorial intention with a subsequently imposed meaning. Of course, it is undoubtedly the case that the series lends itself to having additional meanings imposed on it because of the socio-political context within which it was released. This is not unusual, and sometimes unintended and unanticipated interpretations turn out to be the most culturally salient. Consider, for example, how

the meanings imposed on George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) were multiplied as a result of (1) casting Duane Jones, a black man, as the protagonist—an unanticipated development relative to when the script was written, since the character of Ben was to be a white “redneck”—and (2) the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968, months prior to the film's release, but well after filming completed in January of that year. The denouement of Romero's now classic film was inescapably and understandably received quite differently by audiences and critics in light of that act of political terrorism and violence.

In the parlance of textual criticism and ontology, it is helpful to distinguish between a work *being* an allegory (a condition of which is that the creator intended it to be an allegory) and the *ex post facto* act of *allegoresis*—i.e., a reader imposing an allegorical meaning on a work that was unintended by its creator (see Berek 1978). Allegoresis is not, in itself, problematic, but where a distinction of this sort can be drawn, it is useful to do so. In the case of *Midnight Mass*, such a distinction is needed if we are to appreciate the rich philosophical questions that it provokes. Not only does reducing or limiting it to an allegory concerning the pandemic ignore Flanagan's intentions and motivations, but, more importantly, it obscures what is extraordinary about the work: namely, that it performs a cinematic exploration of what Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) called the “malignant principle” within faith. Flanagan's series clearly has a meaning (or meanings) that transcend this moment in history, both at the level of intention (as evidenced by its pre-pandemic conception) and at the level of its complex critique of religiosity.

The Catholicity of Crockett Island

In an [earlier blog post](#), Tylor Cunningham offered an insightful meditation on the morally ambiguous meaning of *Midnight Mass*, helpfully distinguishing Romano's interpretation from his own, noting that they are diametrically opposed. Whereas Cunningham and I read this series as calling religiosity and religious faith into question, thus having the capacity to provoke intense self-examination on the part of religious “believers” and “unbelievers” alike (as well as everyone in between), Romano asserts that the show “erases atheists, agnostics, and people of other religions by emphasizing its Christian worldview.” It allegedly does so by transgressing norms and expectations associated with the horror genre and by centering and prescribing a “Christian worldview.” I agree with Romano that *Midnight Mass* superficially transgresses some elements of the horror genre, and I agree that it centers a Christian—and, specifically, a Catholic—worldview; however, it can be read as doing both in the service of performing a critique of religiosity that is strikingly similar to the one advanced by Feuerbach in *The Essence of Christianity*.

Flanagan's series is deeply and beautifully—but also, and more importantly—*terrifyingly* rooted in a sophisticated understanding of Catholicism and the Abrahamic religions' myth traditions. Yet it is not myopic. Even in the context of the very small and mostly homogenous community of Crockett Island, Flanagan finds occasion to present a diversity of viewpoints and explore various forms of religiosity. The most obvious examples include the following. In a pivotal moment in the series finale, Erin Greene gives expression to a conception of the human person that echoes the doctrine of not-self from Middle Way Buddhism. The efforts of Hassan, the sheriff, to raise his son as a pious and confident Muslim are addressed tenderly and with care; indeed, Hassan's faith is arguably presented as simultaneously both humane and religiously orthodox. By contrast, the faith of the other townspeople stands as a tragic example of how monstrously inhumane religiosity can become

when it *serves*, rather than *conditions* or *mitigates* the egoistic desire to avoid death. Finally, Riley Flynn serves as one of the chief protagonists of the story, and he is an atheist who explicitly rejects not only the Catholicism of his parents, but the blood of life offered by the priest, which would provide the condition for the possibility of an everlasting life. In so doing, regardless of our antecedent religious convictions, viewers identify with his action.

In a limited sense, Romano is correct to note that there is a “Christian worldview” operative within the series; however, it is important to note that it is the worldview of the *characters*, and it is not presented as prescriptive. That having been said, key plot points and foreshadowing are communicated in an esoteric way through the portrayal of obedience to, or deviation from, Roman Catholic liturgical rubrics. Moreover, characters explicitly discuss the nature and limits of their faith or the lack thereof. But where Romano sees this “effusive Christianity” as *overshadowing* the elements of horror that one would expect, given the show’s placement within that genre, I view these religious elements as necessary for drawing out the precise nature of the horror under examination: namely, the capacity for faith and transcendent hope to militate against our ability and willingness to love.

In this regard, *Midnight Mass* can not only be read as a cinematic exploration of the same theme explored within Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*, but it can be understood as doing so in a cinematically analogous manner. Feuerbach based his scathing criticism of Christian religion on a careful and sympathetic—even appreciative—examination of the cultic practices of the faithful. He did not caricature Christians, but rather delved into their doctrines and took seriously their forms of life and prayer. His critique was thus an *immanent* one: it was not imposed on religion from the “outside” in the manner of the New Atheists who often argue that religion can’t pass muster in relation to contemporary science, but rather one which turns on a recognition of the contradictions *internal* to faith. Feuerbach’s criticism is premised not on dismissing or ignoring lived religion but dwelling (critically) within it. A similar thing may be said about *Midnight Mass*. Flanagan avoids presenting a “generic,” simplified, or caricatured version of Christian life, and his own critical dwelling in and with Catholicism is evident throughout (see Bentz 2021). While this, in itself, is not unusual, for there are plenty of overtly “Catholic” films or characters within films—for example, *Calvary* (2014) and *The Exorcist* (1971), to name only two very different examples—neither is it unusual for television programs and movies to elide the issue of the specific denominational identity of the characters. (Discerning viewers of standard Hollywood fare will notice that the arguably more photogenic and aesthetically pleasing Anglican prayer books and hymnals are found in a surprising number of putatively Roman Catholic churches!) Eschewing this tendency, Flanagan carefully presents us with a community that simultaneously has a specifically and recognizably Roman Catholic identity and yet places them in a situation that raises questions concerning faith which are universal in scope (“catholic” in the original sense). The Catholicity of the “world” of the film serves to ground the central conceit and source of tension in the show—namely, the consumption of blood as the means of attaining the life everlasting—though this does not prevent the philosophical and theological questions that it raises from transcending its literal Roman Catholic context. Indeed, anyone who accepts a distinction between the holy and unholy will find that distinction uncomfortably challenged, for precisely what is in question on Crockett Island is whether its people have been offered a holy gift or demonic temptation.

Be Not Afraid

As the series unfolds, we learn that the elderly Monsignor Pruitt, under the influence of dementia, became separated from his tour group in the holy land. He finds himself lost, alone, and confused while in the midst of a violent sandstorm. Seeking shelter, he enters a long-buried cavern, unearthed by the wind. Inside, he encounters a terrifying figure. And Monsignor Pruitt dies.

There is no mistaking that the figure, which Monsignor Pruitt encounters in the cavern, *looks* like a demon. It fits our cultural archetype of a fallen angel, inspired by the etchings of Gustave Doré (1832-1883): a towering humanoid figure with expansive, bat-like wings (see Doré's "[Satan descends upon Earth](#)," from *Paradise Lost* and his illustration of [Canto 21, Line 70](#) of Dante's *Inferno*). But, as Fr. Paul points out on repeated occasions, scripture tells us that when humans encounter heavenly beings (often lumped together under the title, 'angel'), they find them terrifying. And rightly so! Far from the cute and recognizable *putto* of Italian art, the myths of the Abrahamic traditions describe the heavenly host in horrific details: the Seraphim are literally the "burning ones"; the Cherubim are four-faced beastly composites, with eyed wings; and the Ophanim are thousand-eyed, intertwined spinning wheels. Even the proper angels, or *malakhim*, though receiving less imaginative descriptions, can be inferred to be imposing and scary; within the myths and stories in which they figure, the people who find themselves in their presence must be told, "be not afraid" (see Genesis 15:1, 21:1 and 26:24; Luke 1:13 and 1:30).

Whatever the nature of the being that Monsignor Pruitt encounters—whether it be from heaven or hell or simply a profoundly bizarre evolutionary accident—it has what can only be described as a supernatural force or power, for it resurrects Pruitt. (Or is it a resuscitation? In a sense, everything of soteriological significance hinges on this distinction, and yet it isn't quite clear.) He awakens to a new form: much younger, stronger, and convicted. And thus we learn the lie that Fr. Paul has told to his congregation. He is not the temporary replacement for Monsignor Pruitt; rather, he *is* Monsignor Pruitt. He knows that he has died, and he knows that he now lives; and he lives with what he can only think of as a perfected body: his body as it was in the prime of his life (perhaps in his early 30s, in keeping with the medieval Christian presumption that we should, by all rights, be resurrected at the age of Christ when he was resurrected). Pruitt, by his own description, has experienced a "Damascus" moment and, fittingly, adopts the name Paul.

Pruitt returns to Crockett armed with what he takes to be the good news. The promise of Christianity has been fulfilled: namely, bodily death is not the end, and the resurrection of the body is possible for those who participate in the sacrament of the body and the blood (with a decided emphasis on the latter).

Resurrection of the Flesh

Of course, Father Paul's conception of the resurrection is, at best, an attenuated version of the resurrection as described by the Apostle for whom he is the self-appointed namesake. St. Paul held that corporate life outside the Body of Christ was a "body of death," and its principle of unity was the flesh (*sarx*); by contrast, he claims that the principle of unity within the Body of the Christ is spirit (*pneûma*), and by virtue of this fact, it is a body of life. In Pauline theology, "the society of believers constitutes the immediate and dynamic real presence of one who has become both spirit (*pneûma*) and Lord (*kýrios*)" (Kavanagh 1968), and the principal sacrament by which one enters the resurrectional life of Christ is through Baptism (see Romans 6). While classical Christian theology holds that believers participate in the life of Christ in this manner, becoming living members of the

living God, they also ascribe to a theory of *general bodily resurrection*. There are ambiguities within the tradition about what this means, but it standardly is taken to mean that, at some point after bodily death, we will be recreated or brought back to life with (or as) the bodies that we presently have (or are)—whether we want it or not, for this is the embodied condition under which all will be judged. (The question as to whether this implies a “gappy” existence and whether it comports with a philosophically coherent theory of personal identity is a matter for another time.)

What I wish to highlight here is that the resurrection available to the people of Crockett Island is a *mere* bodily resurrection. In all other respects, it is a resurrection that lacks the character of the resurrectional life in Christ that Paul preached: it has nothing to do with the transformation of the mind or heart (Romans 12:20), though Father Paul attempts to effect such transformations; nor is it essentially corporate in nature. While the climactic scene does involve the congregation gathering to receive the blood of life, it quickly becomes apparent that they are not a *unified body*, but a mere aggregate—literally, at times, a *heap*—of individual bodies. It is only because of the newly imposed demands for sustenance that these vampirically resurrected persons will be united as a community; in other words, they will be united by flesh (*sarx*), not spirit (*pneûma*). It is, nevertheless, a resurrection, and there is no ambiguity concerning what it will look like. Father Paul is present, in the flesh! Nor is there ambiguity about what is required to achieve it: those who drink of the blood of life, supplied through vampiric transmission, will live potentially forever in a state of vitality (certain conditions notwithstanding). There are, of course, some minor drawbacks associated with receiving the blood of life offered by Father Paul. For example, it makes one sensitive to sunlight, so the life everlasting promises to be one lived in darkness. But that’s a trifling matter and not without some scriptural basis, as the zealous Bev is keen to point out.

One of the central questions that the series provokes us to consider is whether *mere* life everlasting and the *mere* resurrection of the individual body, available as it is to the people of the island, constitutes a *holy* gift, and whether the pursuit of it can justify the suspension of what we (and they) know to be ethical and good. The viewer is led to believe that what is on offer is decidedly not holy; it is a promise and gift spawned by, and made effective through, the agency of an evil one. The “reward” for the people of Crockett Island is certainly psychologically enticing, but it is not good or worthy. Hence, the series provocatively asks us to consider whether it is proper to construe one’s faith and action in this life as ordered toward an everlasting reward. Is the proper object of one’s faith (i.e., trust, commitment, and devotion) the survival of the self and the continuation of life?

Death as the Condition for Resurrection

Contemporary Christians often couch their faith in just such terms: they look to “go to heaven”; they look forward to eternal life, to the glorification of their bodies in the kingdom to come. The Good News is understood to be the promise not merely that death no longer operates as the horizon of meaning within their lives—and I think it would be impossible to deny that this is, at the very least, the import of what St. Paul discerns as the Good News—but that death itself will die: i.e., that there will be no more death; that we will not *really* die, or if we do, it will be only temporary.

A doctrine of immortality—namely, that we are born or created but we will ultimately not die (usually on the condition that one has lived or worshipped correctly)—has always been an appealing temptation within Christianity, owing to the profound influence of Greek philosophical anthropology on the tradition. In his book, *Phaedo*, Plato depicted Socrates as ascribing to such a doctrine. This

is precisely why Socrates chides his friends for crying at his impending death: they erroneously believe that he will die, whereas he believes his soul will simply be released from its fleshy prison. Death, on the Platonic view, is a blessing and a cure for what ails us: namely, embodiment. On the part of many Christians, this Platonic conception of the afterlife has largely supplanted the more ambiguous and arguably more materialistic anthropology discernable within Hebrew scripture (consider Genesis 3:19: “you are dust and to dust you shall return”). But this has always been at variance with a doctrine of resurrection, which both Christianity and Islam explicitly affirm, and which is intimated at within Hebrew scripture. What distinguishes a doctrine of resurrection from a doctrine of immortality is that whereas the latter maintains one does not *really* die (your soul just leaves the body), the former acknowledges the reality of death but promises a “re-creation.” Dualism of the Platonic form has long been considered heretical within Christianity, associated as it was with Gnosticism in the time of the early church. It is nevertheless operative within contemporary Christian thought. (Despite the fact that Christians proclaim in their liturgies and creeds that Christ died, a large number of my students—most of whom are devout—are often surprised when I demonstrate to them that, as a matter of doctrine, the Catholic Church maintains that Christ truly *died*.)

Part of what makes *Midnight Mass* so interesting, as a cultural artifact, is that its creator recognizes this distinction and the reality of death within the broader Christian theory of salvation. Whereas most films (like most people) treat immortality and resurrection as synonymous, it is critical to the story that unfolds in the series that resurrection requires that one first genuinely dies. This, unfortunately, becomes the impetus for a large-scale bloody massacre.

What is portrayed within the story is the possibility of individual bodily resurrection after death. But, again, it has the character of a demonic temptation. The audience sympathizes with and identifies with those who *resist* this temptation and those who, upon receiving the “gift,” renounce it. And this is because we recognize that what is offered in and through such resurrection, and what is required to sustain it, is immoral. Flanagan thus leads us to a point where we find ourselves recognizing that the people of Crockett Island should renounce what seems like a divine gift (namely, life everlasting) for the sake of love, lest they renounce love for the sake of that putatively divine gift. (This is an intentional allusion to Feuerbach, which I shall return to, below.)

The Conflict Between Faith and Love

In additional ways, *Midnight Mass* is productively viewed through the lens of Feuerbach’s “anthropotheism,” which holds that all theology is ultimately a form of anthropology. According to this perspective, our religious conceptions of God ultimately amount to ways of coming into relation with our human nature, albeit in an alienated or estranged form. And because religious consciousness amounts to an *indirect* meditation on our nature under the guise of being a meditation on our relation to the divine nature, it opens the possibility of being self-thwarting. Feuerbach views the *moral* “essence” of Christianity, which is operative in the prayer-practices of the faithful, as being compatible with a secular and philosophical anthropology, or theory of the human person and our species-essence. This moral lesson is easily discerned but difficult to practice: it is the recognition of the holiness of love—i.e., the acknowledgement that unconditioned love is the *summum bonum*, the self-sufficient good and desirable *telos*, not only for the faithful, but for members of our species as such. The problem is that, as a *religion* or *faith*, Christianity induces

its adherents to withhold and condition their love. In short, when motivated by faith, people are willing to set aside the good that is testified to in their very being and species-consciousness.

Feuerbach's point is not that religion (or Christianity, specifically) have *accidentally*, or as a contingent historical fact, led people to act unethically or unlovingly, though he understands all too well that this has been the case. Rather, his claim is much stronger: so long as Christianity, or religion in general, consists in faith in a transcendent deity who is conceived as non-identical to our species-essence and its *summum bonum* (love), then its object of ultimate concern will be non-human and thus inhumane: it will direct its gaze to "God as God," i.e., "the God—the evil being—of religious fanaticism." In service to God, so conceived, the demands of faith stand in a contradiction to the demands of love.

All is Permitted

Interestingly, the work of the 19th-century Danish philosopher and Christian theologian, Søren Kierkegaard, can be brought in to set up and further establish Feuerbach's point. In *Fear and Trembling*, which he penned under the pseudonym, Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard meditates on the story of Abraham and Isaac. This leads him to discern that faith, by its strange and paradoxical nature, *requires* what he calls a "teleological suspension of the ethical." An old saw, which is inaccurately attributed to Dostoevsky, has it that "if God is dead, all is permitted [i.e., the moral law can be violated]." Kierkegaard's de Silentio suggests that what Abraham exemplifies, insofar as he stands as the paradigm of the faithful person, is precisely the opposite: taking oneself to stand in "an absolute relation with the Absolute" (i.e., God) involves exempting oneself from ethical norms. So, in other words, the trite claim of nihilism and moral licentiousness leveled by religious apologists against atheists has it exactly backwards: it is the faithful who transcend or bracket the ethical on the grounds that it is a hinderance and temptation.

This is a point which the contemporary philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, reiterates and extends to secular contexts in the film, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology* (2012): for those who take themselves to be agents of an absolute "Big Other," all is permitted. The Big Other—whether it be the Abrahamic God, the fascist State, the Stalinist notion of History, or so forth—is what induces people to become monsters: it is the zealots who assassinate their political enemies, wage wars, mortify their own and others' bodies, and rationalize the destruction of lives and entire peoples while maintaining a clear conscience.

On the view put forth in *Fear and Trembling*, what distinguishes an ethical person from a "knight of faith" (like Abraham) is that Abraham was willing to exempt himself from the moral law for the sake of God, the Absolute. Paradoxically, de Silentio argues, this simultaneously places the knight of faith *above* and *beyond* the ethical, yet it also serves as the condition for the possibility of receiving what is offered in this life with *joy*. An ethical person renounces what they desire and constrains their behavior in light of universal norms of conduct; by contrast, Abraham exemplifies one who only *seems* to renounce this life (his seems to give up his son Isaac, since he intends to kill him), but precisely because he believes steadfastly in God's promise, he never *really* gives up his belief that Isaac will go on to thrive, even as he draws the knife and places it to his son's throat. This is the potentially monstrous and insane form of subjectivity that animates faith. De Silentio refers to it as "the absurd," and it is in virtue of it that actions become acts of faith, borne out of a radically subjective commitment and trust that cannot be squared with an objective ethical orientation to life.

Now, Kierkegaard would be the first to claim that we shouldn't read the story of the binding of Isaac as expressing an unambiguous moral. To the contrary, its ambiguity is precisely why it is so insightful, and to neglect the ambiguity would be to miss what he presumes to be the rich transformative potential harbored within it. Indeed, de Silentio suggests it would be downright calamitous for someone to treat the story or the character of Abraham as a straightforward model, for God does not demand human sacrifice. (Arguably, from a mythological and functionalist perspective, this is a key point of the original story of Abraham and Isaac; by including that story within Genesis, the biblical redactors were differentiating themselves and their god from other peoples and other gods who *did* require ritualistic human sacrifice. To be fair to the Abrahamic tradition, Abraham's modeling of proper action is best expressed in his willingness to violate the norms of his fellow desert-dwellers and invite strangers into his tent.) Key to Kierkegaard's treatment of Abraham is that his ordeal reveals the *form*, or subjective movements, of faith, but not its *content* or proper object. There is no sense in which one can speak approvingly of faith *simpliciter*: everything hinges on the content, and—as a committed Christian who presumably accepted St. Paul's claim that "faith comes from hearing the message" (Romans 10:17)—Kierkegaard believes the content of God's will was disclosed in Christ's life and death, and it was summarized in his great command: love. So, while Christian faith *does* require the teleological suspension of the ethical, it turns out that the true and proper *telos* for which the ethical can be faithfully suspended is the love of others. But this, I think Kierkegaard would argue, is difficult, and one who sets about to love unconditionally will face trials that are formally and subjectively on par with Abraham's: their actions will be inexplicable to the community precisely because they transcend the ethical.

Unlike Kierkegaard, Feuerbach became an atheist. Nevertheless, he can be understood as also recognizing that faith requires a suspension of the ethical. The argument against Christianity and in defense of atheism, which he develops in *The Essence of Christianity*, is premised upon this notion as well as the attendant recognition that God is non-identical to love. It is this latter point to which we must now turn.

The Perverse Core of Christianity

Christianity, in Feuerbach's view, is contradictory. On the one hand, Christians have affirmed love in the most dramatic way: the New Testament claims not only that God became incarnate *out of* love, but (as 1 John 4:8 puts it) "God *is* love." Nevertheless, and on the other hand, religious people are hesitant to take that description of God as an *identity claim*. If they understood it to truly be a claim that *identifies* the divine with love, then they could, without logical contradiction, affirm its converse: Love is God. But this they do not do. While they believe that God can and does love us, ordinary religious people (and most theologians to boot) would be loath to claim that Love is God, for that would undermine the sense in which God remains transcendently Other. Feuerbach understands this impulse: as the object of faith, God must remain a pure object of the intellect, a completely transcendent and pure *subject*, non-identical to any attributes, including being loving. To have it any other way would be to open the door to the very anthropological perspective he is advancing. God must remain God; we must let God be God. As such, and in spite of the professed doctrine of the Incarnation, the concept of 'God' becomes intellectualized as the mysteriously incomprehensible and absolute Other. A devout religious consciousness cannot place limits on the limitless Absolute; to do so would be an offense to the divine nature as such. It is thus logically

necessary to assert that the God of faith and theology is at least, in principle, not constrained by the very moral command that is purported to have been revealed and issued by that God. Feuerbach takes this to be the fundamental perversion at the core of actual existing Christianity. What we *should* conclude from the Christian myth, but do *not*, is that “Love determined God to the renunciation of his divinity.... thus love is a higher power and truth than deity. Love conquers God. It was love to which God sacrificed his divine majesty.” In recognition of this mythopoetic revelation, Feuerbach claims we should imitate God: “As God has renounced himself out of love, so we, out of love, should renounce God; for if we do not sacrifice God to love, we sacrifice love to God...”

Beyond the logical point and his claim that there is a misinterpretation of the Good News, Feuerbach addresses the practical matter that religiosity stands in tension with the call to love precisely because it is an *identity*. “It is essential to faith to condemn, to anathematize,” he writes. “But so far as faith anathematizes, it necessarily generates hostile dispositions—the dispositions out of which the persecution of heretics arises.” Despite contemporary Christians’ protestations against identity politics, it is precisely the maintenance of the identity of the Body of Christ that has animated its most heinous crimes. Consider, as an example, the Albigensian Crusade (1209-1229) and the resulting extermination of the heretical Cathars and their protective Catholic neighbors during the Massacre at Béziers, which was initiated by the ironically named Pope Innocent III. It was the pope’s representative, a Cistercian monk, who allegedly initiated the massacre by uttering the command, “Kill them all. God will know his own” (see Strayer 1971)—a rationalization that has licensed innumerable atrocities ever since.

What motivated this and other crusades and inquisitions was a concern with maintaining the integrity of the Body of Christ. The Church concerns itself with orthodoxy and orthopraxy; that is to say, it polices the boundary between doctrine and heresy, between who is saved and who is damned. To *fail* to do this would be to threaten its unity, its catholicity (universality) and its apostolic mission. Truth, understood in doxastic terms, becomes a matter of at least penultimate concern, as does the purity of the membership within the community of believers. It is in recognition of this that Feuerbach claims that there is, within faith, a “malignant,” anti-humanistic principle—a principle of division, separation, and merely conditional benevolence—the very antithesis of unconditioned love.

The Secular is not the Profane

All of this plays itself out in some form within *Midnight Mass*. Bev Keane is, at least on a certain reading, a knight of faith in Kierkegaard’s term; she is willing to suspend the ethical for the sake of what she takes to be the first act in the final consummation of the kingdom of God. She is also a zealot who does not shy away from anathematizing and condemning. Father Paul is more conflicted, but he nevertheless lets his hope that life might become eternal lead him to act in opposition to the lives and loves of *this* life. He thus kills a wayward resident, and Bev and his circle of close disciples cover up the crime. And, indeed, it is Father Paul who, in the context of a beautifully frightening and passionate homily, gives expression to the Kierkegaardian-Feuerbachian notion that faith can (and he says ought to) lead the people of his parish to bracket their ethical scruples and concerns. As soldiers of the kingdom, they must keep their eyes on the prize.

In some sense, these are the questions that are put to viewers: How do we distinguish the holy from the unholy, the divine from the demonic? Are we willing to suspend the ethical, refrain from loving and caring for others in this life for the sake of something that transcends it and its limitations?

Flanagan successfully leads his viewers to the point of, at least implicitly, recognizing an anthropotheistic answer to these questions. The holy is *not* the supernatural satisfaction of the ego-drive to overcome death; rather, it is a lived secular faith, to use Martin Hägglund's term (2019), which affirms human life and being in its finitude and materiality. The demonic is what militates against this and satisfies the egoistic impulse; in other words, it is religious faith, or hope in eternity. And within religion, there is a conflict between our humanistic and life-affirming impulses and our anti-humanistic impulse to despair over the limits and nature of our mortal, finite lives. Although we may be tempted by a transcendently oriented faith and the promise of life eternal to bracket or suspend our concern for people in this life, such a move is sinful. It misses the mark in a most profound way.

Christoffer Lammer-Heindel is an Associate Professor of Philosophy and Academic Division Chair at Loras College, a Catholic liberal arts college in the Archdiocese of Dubuque (Iowa). He teaches courses on the "Masters of Suspicion" (Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche), as well as on the relationship of philosophy to myth and mythology.

Works Cited

- Bentz, Adam (2021). "Midnight Mass Director Explains the Show's Real Meaning." Screen Rant, <https://screenrant.com/midnight-mass-show-meaning-plot-mike-flanagan/>.
- Berek, Peter (1978). "Interpretation, Allegory, and Allegoresis," *College English* 40(2): 117-132.
- Cunningham, Tylor (2021). "Midnight Mass: Merits in Morally Ambiguous Media," The Blackwell Philosophy and Pop Culture Series Blog, <https://andphilosophy.com/2021/10/13/midnight-mass-merits-in-morally-ambiguous-media/>.
- Hägglund, Martin (2019). *This Life: Secular Faith and Spiritual Freedom*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Kavanagh, Aidan (1968). "The Theology of Easter: Themes in Cultic Data," *Worship* 42(4): 194–204.
- Kierkegaard, Søren (1983). *Fear and Trembling; Repetition*, trans., Howard Vincent Hong and Edna Hatlestad Hong. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ludwig Feuerbach (2011). *The Essence of Christianity*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Plato (1977). *Phaedo* (Second Edition), trans., G.M.A. Grube. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Romano, Aja (2021). "Why I Felt Betrayed by Netflix's Midnight Mass." *Vox*, <https://www.vox.com/21509362/netflix-midnight-mass-mike-flanagan-horror-religion>.
- Strayer, Joseph R. (1971). *The Albigensian Crusades*. New York, NY: The Dial Press.