

**Jesus Christ, Action Hero:  
Christianity Battles Evil in Canadian Horror Film *Jesus Christ, Vampire  
Hunter***

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This paper will investigate the ways in which *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter*<sup>1</sup>, the independent film from Ottawa, positions itself as a Christian testament. The film contains numerous references to popular culture and irreverent transliterations of traditional Christian symbols into contemporary cultural currency. It is through this play that the film validates Jesus Christ as the ultimate hero. *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* is a Christian text.

The plot centers around the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and the struggles he faces trying to get his ministry together and save the world against various threats. The main enemy is a group of vampires who can walk in the sunlight and are targeting members of Ottawa's lesbian community. Jesus must work to defeat the vampires, save the lesbians, and set the world right.

*Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* happily places itself in the context of Canucksploitation films. This is not David Cronenberg or Atom Egoyan. Instead it is in with the likes of other independent, Canadian horror films such as *Ginger Snaps*,<sup>2</sup> *Blood and Donuts*,<sup>3</sup> and *The Reflecting Skin*.<sup>4</sup> It is precisely this marginal position that enables *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* to explore Christianity and its relationship with popular culture in adventurous and creative ways.

*Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* includes many updates and reinterpretations of traditional, Christian symbolism. Part of the fun of the film is in this free play with images. It is also through this creative symbolism that the film makes many of its theological points.

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<sup>1</sup> *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter*. dir. Lee Gordon Dembre. per. Phil Caracas, Murielle Varhelyi, Maria Moulton, Ian Driskoll, and Josh Grace. Odessa Filmworks, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> *Ginger Snaps*. dir. John Fawcett. per. Emily Perkins, Katharine Isabelle, Kris Lemche, Jesse Moss, and Danielle Hampton. Lions Gate Films, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *Blood and Donuts*. dir. Holly Dale. per. Gordon Currie, Justin Louis, Helene Clarkson, Fiona Reid, and Frank Moore. Daban Films, 1995.

<sup>4</sup> *The Reflecting Skin*. dir. Philip Ridley. per. Viggo Mortensen, Lindsay Duncan, Jeremy Cooper, Shiela Moore, and Duncan Fraser. Telefilm Canada, 1990.

The film engages the viewer with transliterations of traditional, abstract concepts into contemporary, concrete examples. For instance, it is a basic Christian tenet that Jesus is both human and divine. In the film, he is a special guy, being the Son of God and having the divine power and prerogative to save the world, but he is still just a guy. Though Jesus first appears in traditional guise with belted robe and long, flowing hair, he soon cuts his hair and pierces his ears. As a second example, the concept of Jesus Christ being humanity's salvation in the struggle against the forces of evil is quite familiar. However, the image of normal-guy Jesus Christ in a kung fu fight with a vampire is a shockingly funny concretization of the abstract concept. A third illustration is the common Christian idea that saints aid Jesus in his work; however, in *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* it is masked, Mexican wrestling legend El Santos,<sup>5</sup> who fights by his side and is his friend when all others forsake him. For a last example, the "Sermon on the Mount" is delivered in a gazebo in an Ottawa park. Such symbol play can be found throughout the film.

To further illustrate the use of transliterated symbolism to comment on Christianity's role in the contemporary world, I would like to look closely at a particular scene, one that often makes audiences uncomfortable. After losing a friend in a fight with vampires, Jesus lies, bleeding, in the gutter. First a Catholic priest passes by, then a policeman. At last, however, someone helps him.

Clearly, this is a recasting of the story of the Good Samaritan from Luke 10:30, as the crazy-man-in-the-wilderness narrator indicates. The Jewish priest of the Gospel story finds his equivalent in the Catholic priest of the film. The Levite finds his counter-part in the policeman. The Samaritan, a foreigner and outsider, is updated as a transsexual streetwalker. She is

Quebecois, no less. Everything about her puts her on the margins of society: her gender, her occupation, her ethnicity, and her language. Yet she is the one who shows compassion.

What I find especially compelling about this scene is that the traveler in the parable is replaced by Jesus himself in the film, making Matthew 25:40 literally true: “. . .”Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”<sup>6</sup> Moreover, in the next scene the parallel between Jesus and his rescuer is reinforced when she tells him that she knows what it is like to be alone and despised by others. She is also ‘the least of these.’

Popular-film genre references abound as well. The film itself is a horror film. It is responding to *Buffy, the Vampire Slayer*,<sup>7</sup> not only with the title, but also with the concept of an unlikely hero in physical combat with monsters. Other cinemagraphic references in *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* include musicals, kung fu films, teen comedies, seventies exploitation films, like the *Shaft* movies,<sup>8</sup> and the Mexican wrestling films of Santo.<sup>9</sup>

The character of Jesus is presented as the ultimate hero by placing him in heroic positions in each of these culturally resonant styles. He gathers people together and performs miracles in a musical number. He defends himself against attacking atheists using kung fu. He gets a makeover and tries on many different outfits before finding the perfect look. He struts down the street to his own groovy soundtrack. And, of course, he wrestles with Santos by his

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<sup>5</sup> The “s” is added to avoid direct copyright infringement on El Santo. The homage is clear, nonetheless.

<sup>6</sup> *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Expanded Edition*. Eds. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973. 1206.

<sup>7</sup> *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (film). dir. Fran Rubel Kuzui. per. Kristy Swanson, Donald Sutherland, Paul Reubens, Rutger Hauer, and Luke Perry. Twentieth Century Fox, 1992. and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (television show). Warner Brothers, Mar. 10, 1997- May 22, 2001.; UPN Oct 2, 2001-present.

<sup>8</sup> *Shaft*. dir. Gordon Parks. per. Richard Roundtree, Moses Gunn, Charles Cioffi, Christopher St. John, and Gwen Mitchell. MGM, 1971. and sequels.

<sup>9</sup> *Santo contra el rey del crimen*. dir. Frederico Curiel. per. Santo, Fernando Casanova, and Ana Bertha Lepe. Peliculas Rodrigues S.A. [Mexico], 1960.; *Santo contra el cerebro diabolico*. dir. Frederico Curiel. per. Santo, Luis Aceves Castenada, and Augusto Benedico. Peliculas Rodrigues S.A., 1962.; *El Santo contra las mujeres vampiros*.

side. We get to see rock-and-roll Jesus when he takes the stage to sing blues with Blind Johnny Leper. And, true to the horror genre, Jesus successfully battles against monsters.

In his book, *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes; Freeing Jesus from 2000 Years of Misunderstanding*, Anglican bishop John Spong argues that the Gospels, rather than being literal historical records, use traditional Jewish imagery to show Jesus as a spiritual hero.<sup>10</sup> Spong writes, “. . . [S]acred God experiences of the Jewish past were wrapped liturgically and homiletically around the God experience found in Jesus of Nazareth. This was the highest compliment Jews could pay to Jesus. That was the deepest commentary they could write of what they believed they had met in Jesus.”<sup>11</sup> He goes on to write:

Because his first disciples were Jews, inevitably they reinterpreted their familiar Jewish liturgical festivals so that this Jesus became the content of those celebrations. They saw Jesus as Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, Solomon, Elijah, and Elisha, and yet he was in their minds greater than any or all of these heroes put together.<sup>12</sup>

I suggest that *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* is engaged in a similar project. Through the use of a variety of different cinematic styles and pop culture references, the film portrays Jesus as hero. Inversely, because Jesus succeeds in his position as a hero in each of these genre styles, the film also conveys the idea that Jesus is universally heroic. Give him a context, any context, and he will prove himself. He has something for everyone.

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dir. Alfonso Corona Blake and Manuel San Fernando. per. Santo, Ofelia Montesco, and Maria Duval. Filmadora Primamericana, 1961; and others.

<sup>10</sup> Thanks to Dave Ferris for this reference.

<sup>11</sup> John Shelby Spong. *Liberating the Gospels: Reading the Bible with Jewish Eyes; Freeing Jesus from 2,000 Years of Misunderstanding*. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1996. 326.

<sup>12</sup> *ibid.* 327.

The choice of enemy in the film is also important. Jesus fights vampires.<sup>13</sup> What is especially insidious about these particular blood-sucking fiends is that they can walk in the daylight. Evil can show its face in the world without reprisal, or even recognition. A prime example of this is the scene in Dominion Tavern, in which even Jesus is unaware he is surrounded by vampires.

Choosing vampires as the main antagonists, or Jesus as the best hero to defeat vampires, can be interpreted on several levels. Most basically, in the horror genre and in traditional vampire lore, Churches, priests, and symbols of Christianity ward off and destroy vampires. Jesus, as the source of Christian symbols, should be very effective. If Christianity works, Christ must work even better.

And, indeed, he does. He fights well, has good sleuthing skills, and when a stake pierces his heart, saving light streams from the wound. Is this “Let there be light?”<sup>14</sup> or “I am the Light of the world?”<sup>15</sup> Is this his sacred heart? Perhaps it’s all three? Clearly, there is theological meaning here. As a friend of mine said, “The sun can’t kill the vampires, but the Son of God can.”<sup>16</sup>

A second reason vampires make an interesting choice as antagonists is that the vampire aesthetic in Goth subcultures is often seen by concerned Christians as directly conflicting with Christianity. There are special ministries focused on Goths, and often the main

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<sup>13</sup> Though there are some atheists at one point, they are simply in the way, oblivious to the real danger, which makes a statement about atheism’s relevance within contemporary society and about its preoccupation with God as the enemy.

<sup>14</sup> Genesis 1:14. *New Oxford Annotated Bible*. 2.

<sup>15</sup> John 8:12. *New Oxford Annotated Bible*. 1299.

<sup>16</sup> Ferris, Dave. personal communication with author. Nov. 19, 2002.

focus of such ministries is vampire imagery.<sup>17</sup> The sentiment seems to be, ‘It’s okay if the kids dress in black, as long as they aren’t meditating on and emulating vampires.’ In *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter*, contrary to these concerns, the undead aren’t Goths; they are hipsters, even priests. Evil is not in the first place most would look. Though the packaging might be different, however, in the film vampirism is still in direct conflict with Jesus’ Christianity.

A third reason vampires make sense as enemies is, in a movie in which Jesus is at odds with oppressive church teachings, such as homophobia and strict adherence to dogma, it is fitting that he should also be battling the abuse of power vampirism represents.

Critics of contemporary Christianity have used the vampire metaphor to denounce the spiritual enslavement they see the Church as perpetuating.<sup>18</sup> A good example of this is the anarchist novel by J. G. Eccarius, *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire*.<sup>19</sup> Here Jesus Christ is a vampire who, after surviving an assassination attempt by the Roman state (they stuck a spear through his side, not his heart), has gone on to enslave people all over the world through mind-control. Christians are his victims and seek to make victims of others. There is a graphic novel by Henry Brooks and Nick Gonne that adapts Eccarius’ ideas and expands on them.<sup>20</sup>

Church of Satan criticisms of Christianity also sometimes present Jesus as vampiric. For example, Australian Goth magazine *The Fall of Because* ran an interview with Drew Stinton, a occult shop owner and member of the Church of Satan<sup>21</sup>, who says, “. . . I actually talk about

<sup>17</sup> Rodgers-Melnick, Ann. “Goths: Morose Outcasts in Dire Need of Acceptance.” *Pittsburg Post-Gazette Online*. Apr. 27, 1999. <http://www.post-gazette.com/headlines/19990427goths3.asp> accessed Nov. 22, 2002.

Stewart, Jimmy. “Don’t Be Afraid of the Dark: Finding God among the Goths.” *Thunderstruck: A Truckstop for the Soul*. <http://www.thunderstruck.org/goths.htm>

<sup>18</sup> Thanks to Lizzy Borden for suggesting these sources to me.

<sup>19</sup> Eccarius, J. G. *The Last Days of Christ the Vampire*. Gualala, CA: III Publishers, 1988.

<sup>20</sup> Brooks, Henry and Nick Gonne. *Christ the Vampire: The Comic Book*. Blaenau Ffestiniog, UK: Questing Beast, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> see his site under the name “Arnoume.” *666: Dark Truths Behind the Church*. <http://www.antichrist.com.au/intro.html>. accessed Nov. 1, 2002.

Christ being a Vampire. . . . Because [Christianity] teaches people to become parasitic. It's a parasitic religion. Christ is all about he wants you to drink his blood and eat his flesh. He gives you ever-lasting life in return, well, that's what the Vampire myth is based on.”<sup>22</sup> On his website Stinton has a list of correspondences between Christianity and Vampirism, such as the importance of blood, promises of eternal life, and, my favorite, that both the Holy Spirit and vampires appear as winged creatures, dove and bat, respectively.<sup>23</sup> In true conspiracy-theory fashion, he understands these correspondences to be proof that Christianity is evil.

In *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter*, Jesus is put in direct conflict with the selfishness of the vampiric quest for power. This is especially clear when Father Eustace explains why he chose to side with the vampires, “You really haven’t done anything that they haven’t, my Lord. You rose from the dead, so did they. You promised eternal life, so did they. But they offer so much more power.” Further, the film makes it clear that the character of Jesus is neither all-powerful nor questing for personal glory. In the “Sermon on the Mount” scene at the end of the film, Jesus tells the crowd: “Don’t just do it because I say so. You know what’s right. Think about it. . . . It’s the message that’s important, not the messenger. You don’t need me to tell you these things . . . . Trust yourselves.” This is a very different Jesus than the predator of the Vampire Christ conspiracy theories.

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<sup>22</sup> McLachlan, James. “Drew Stinton – Part Two.” *The Fall of Because*.  
<http://www.angelfire.com/zine/thefallofbecause/interviews/interviewdrewsinton2.html>.  
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<sup>23</sup> Arnoume. “The Vampire Christ.” *666: The Antichrist’s Almanac*.  
<http://www.antichrist.com.au/2000/0002/0002vampchrist.html>. accessed Nov. 1, 2002.  
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It's clear that *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* has rich symbolism and strong theological implications, but how much of this did the filmmakers intend? I sent a series of questions to Lee Gordon Demarbre, the director and producer, and to Ian Driscoll, the writer and an actor in the film.<sup>24</sup> One of the things I most wanted to know was whether they understand the film to have a legitimate theological message, or whether they intend it as a parody of religion? When asked how important the religious aspects of the film were, both Demarbre and Driscoll replied that they were "very important." Says Driscoll:

I wanted to write something that made some kind of intelligent comment on the place of religion in the modern world. Vampirism is a good metaphor for this, since most of the folkloric attributes of the vampire are inversions of the Catholic mass. Putting Jesus in conflict with a (non)belief system that parodies/inverts his own makes for a great dramatic dynamic. This idea comes through in a number of scenes, especially the bit at the end where Father Eustace explains his allegiance to the vampires. The idea that science is the new religion - based not on faith but on quantifiable fact - also comes through in the character of Dr. Praetorius (whose name is taken from the Promethean character in *Bride of Frankenstein*). However, the idea of the factual is brought into question by Mary's speech about the quantum nature of vampirism - I guess I consider quantum theory the spot where science and religion overlap, since uncertainty is one of its basic tenants, and uncertainty (or doubt) is the cornerstone of faith.

What kind of a character did they want Jesus to be? What did they understand to be important elements in their portrayal of him? Demarbre says:

The number one criticism about JCVH is that most people who watch the film wanted Jesus to have kept his beard on longer, and to have never changed out of his robes. These people would believe that two thousand years ago Jesus was setting fashion trends. The truth is that Jesus wore what he wore because everyone in society two thousand years ago was wearing robes and had long hair and beards. Our idea was that if the second coming were to come, that Jesus would blend into society, and not stand out. Blending in means getting jeans and a hair

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<sup>24</sup> The following quotes are taken from email interviews by the author. Many thanks to both Lee and Ian for participating.

Interview with Lee Gordon Demarbre. Nov. 20, 2002.

Interview with Ian Driscoll. Nov.20, 2002.

cut, and maybe ever getting some piercings . . . .Our Jesus is a little bit of John Travolta, Jackie Chan and Harry Knuckles (who is just Phil Caracas in real life).<sup>25</sup>

Driscoll says:

I think Phil was concerned mainly that his portrayal of Jesus be different from his other roles; that he adopt a more calm and quiet demeanor. I think the modernization of the Jesus character is akin to the reinterpretation of Shakespeare characters; a good character and an interesting story speaks to people regardless of how it's mounted. . . . Our Jesus is a man of the people. He's kind of hip, mostly square, but trying to fit it and communicate with people, because people are what matter to him. . . . I guess we started with Phil's alter ego, Harry Knuckles. And he's a blend of Shaft, James Bond and Bruce Lee, along with liberal doses of Jackie Chan, Buster Keaton, James Coburn, Rudy Ray Moore, Charles Bronson, Warren Oates, Woody Strode, Slim Pickens, William Holden, Franco Nero and Michael Caine. These guys were messiahs in their own right. Don't take the term "cult following" too lightly.

What religious messages do they hope audiences take away from the film? Demarbre says:

Our message is that no one, no matter who they are, can tell you what the Bible really means - that can be dangerous. It is up to you to make up your own mind about the teachings in the Bible. The real meaning is what you take out of the two testaments. This isn't a religious message, it's just a matter of interpretation. If you had to take a religious message out of the film, then maybe it's that God today, or Jesus today (if he were to come again) would probably and most likely be someone very different from who we think we know of him from the Newest Testament. He probably wouldn't wear robes or sandals, and even have a beard - he would look just like you or I and would fit perfectly into society.

Driscoll says:

I think my favourite line in the film is the one that sums up the film's message: "There's nothing deviant about love." It's there in the tagline. It's there in the sermon on the mount scene. It's there in the closing musical number ("Everybody Gets Laid Tonight"). There are real problems in the world. Don't get freaked out by two people loving each other.

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<sup>25</sup> Harry Knuckles is the protagonist of other film projects Odessa Filmworks produces. Phil Caracas is the actor that plays both Harry Knuckles and Jesus.

Clearly, Driscoll, Demarbre, and others involved with the film have considered its theological implications.

*Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* deserves interest as a response to mainstream, Canadian Christianity, but also as a religious work in and of itself. It both reflects Canadian popular culture and cultural representations of Christianity and contributes to them.

In much the same way John Spong argues that early Christians sought to place Jesus in the center of important Jewish narratives, *Jesus Christ, Vampire Hunter* utilizes and manipulates contemporary cultural tropes to present Jesus as the ultimate hero against evil. The Jesus of the film is a groovy, liberation-theology Christ and presents Christianity as an option for nice, cool kids. It is the clear linking of Jesus with heroism through the use of familiar, cultural references that validates and legitimizes his Christian message. Because he is a proven hero, his theology has meaning.

And, in the end, any Jesus that encourages Christians to respect love and to be nice to trans working' girls is a good Jesus by me.

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