

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019



America's Dark Theologian Stephen King: A Religious Imagination Explored

Podcast with **Douglas Cowan** (11 February 2019).

Interviewed by **Carmen Celestini**.

Transcribed by **Helen Bradstock**.

Audio and transcript available at:

<http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-dark-theologian-stephen-king-a-religious-imagination-explored/>

Carmen Celestini (CC): *Ok. Today I'm speaking with Dr [Douglas Cowan](#) about his recently published book, [America's Dark Theologian: The Religious Imagination of Stephen King](#). Welcome to the Religious Studies Project. What is the religious imagination to you?*

Douglas Cowan (DC): I think the religious imagination – specifically as it relates to [Stephen King](#) – is the idea, or the package of ideas, of how we articulate our evolving understanding of what [William James](#) called “the unseen world”. William James takes a lot of flak, but his is the definition of religion that I kind-of revert to. He called the life of religion the belief that there is an unseen order. And our supreme good – whatever that is and however we imagine it – is a function of our sort-of negotiation with that unseen world. The thing that makes it a valuable definition, I think, is that it avoids the “supreme being” problem: you don't have to believe in a god. It avoids the true or “real religion” problem, which is endemic in pop culture criticism of science fiction and horror. They go, “Well that isn't *real* Christianity.” It avoids that. And most importantly – and this is what's really important for Stephen King – it avoids what I've taken to calling the “good, moral and decent fallacy”: the belief that you can define religion according to goodness, morality and decency. Which is to say, if something is good, moral and decent, it is by definition religious. And if it is not good, not moral, not decent – flying planes into buildings, human sacrifice, demons and all that kind of thing – it is, by definition, false religion or occult. That is probably the single most endemic problem in Religious Studies. This belief that religion is, by definition – or *should*, by definition – be considered a good thing. And I think that is the one thing that Stephen King challenges in his writings from beginning to end.

CC: *Yes. So what are the criteria that you apply to this, and how you apply it to the Stephen King work?*

Citation Info: Cowan, Douglas and Carmen Celestini. 2019. “America's Dark Theologian Stephen King: A Religious Imagination Explored”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 11 February 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 18 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-dark-theologian-stephen-king-a-religious-imagination-explored/>

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019

DC: Basically all I did is, I started reading his books in order. I mean, the only way to answer that question is methodological. Basically, I just started with Carrie and read the books in the order that he wrote them. Not that that's the only way you have to do it, but I wanted to see if things change. I wanted to see how he starts dealing with questions of the unseen order. What does the unseen order look like for Stephen King? And does it, when it interacts, or intersects with sort of traditional understandings of religion, how does he basically say – because this is where the groundwork is for him – how does he basically say, “You think you have it figured out? Check this shit out!”?

CC: *Right. Exactly!*

DC: Because that is what he does! Every time you think you have it figured out, he says, “Here’s another option – and by the way this is no more or less viable than your story . . . your fiction.” Right?

CC: *So when you saw that arc happening, what do you think was predominant? The shock factor? The questioning factor? Or do you think it was symbol of his evolution and . . .*

DC: It's the questions. It's absolutely the questions. He doesn't . . . His thinking about religion doesn't really evolve. And I think the reason is . . . Like, if you're going to look at [HP Lovecraft](#): HP Lovecraft was a thoroughgoing materialist who didn't believe in anything that he was writing about.

CC: *Right.*

DC: Despite what people said, it's simply not true. So when he writes his horror stories – and there's a resurgence of Lovecraft right now – when he writes his horror stories, he is writing about something that is purely of the imagination for him. Contrast that with [Philip K Dick](#) who had very profound religious experiences. And – in naked self-interest again – I'm working on a companion book to ADT, which will be called *America's Reluctant Prophet*, which does exactly what I did with Stephen King with Philip K Dick. But with Philip K Dick you have to be able to map his biography onto the fiction. Because his biography and his fiction are so interrelated. He actually includes, in one novel, a character called Philip K Dick in (audio unclear). In Stephen King you can't do that. There have been a couple of attempts to try and map his own religious thinking onto his fiction. I saw no evidence that you could actually do that, He's really interested in his questions. In fact he says as much. He says, “Answers change. I'm not interested in answers. I'm interested in questions.” And this is where I came up with the idea of “properly human questions” (5:00). That's in this book.

CC: *Yes*

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019

DC: We have what we traditionally call, in RS classes, religious questions: where do come from? Where are we going? What happens when we die? What do we believe about all these sorts of things? Those are not religious questions. Religion has claimed ownership over them. Religion has claimed proprietary rights over them. Religion has claimed, obviously, to have answered them, but they are not religious questions per se. What they are, are properly human questions. They are ours by right of our humanity and our humanness, not our participation in one particular religious tradition or another. And I think this is where I got mostly from King, is that King is saying mostly the same thing. So every time you think you've got it figured out, I'm going to come at this from another angle and say, "Really? Really? You think you have it figured out?" I mean people say that [The Stand](#) . . . It's very common to write that *The Stand* is his most religious novel. I don't think it is.

CC: *What do you think is?*

DC: His most religious novel? That's a really good question. I think it's the novel [Desperation](#).

CC: *Really? Why?*

DC: *Desperation* . . . If you know the novel *The Stand* . . . *The Stand* is this massive sort-of good-versus-evil war that takes place in the aftermath of a global pandemic, called the Captain Tripps virus. And there is a devil figure, and there is – people say it's a god figure. It isn't. It's actually more of a Moses figure. But it's this big clash of ideas, and who's going to win? And even then, you know who's going to win in the end. Because there's a rather clumsy *deus ex machina* at the end, that ends *Stand*, when the trap comes in and detonates the nuclear bomb. *Desperation's* very different. *Desperation* takes place at the level at which religion takes place for real people, which is to say, individual relationships. And it is much more theologically sophisticated, in that what it does is it questions the relationships that we have with the unseen order in the way that the *Stand* never does. And it questions them through the eyes of the people who have a lot at stake; particularly a young boy named David, and an old man who is trying to like recover lost glory. And they come at the same question of, who is God and why is God so cruel? *Desperation*, I think, is one of his best books, because it's about theodicy. The entire book is about theodicy. And the other thing that's interesting about *Desperation* was it was also published at the same time with a book called [The Regulators](#). *The Regulators* is the same story told from a slightly different perspective. Because he published *The Regulators* as [Richard Bachman](#).

CC: *Really?*

DC: Whereas *Desperation* takes place in this abandoned mining town called Desperation – it's about a

Citation Info: Cowan, Douglas and Carmen Celestini. 2019. "America's Dark Theologian Stephen King: A Religious Imagination Explored", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 11 February 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 18 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.religioustudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-dark-theologian-stephen-king-a-religious-imagination-explored/>

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019

quadruple entendre the title – *The Regulators* takes place on one block in street in Iowa. I think it's Iowa. And all the characters are there, but they have different aspects. David, in *Desperation*, is not the twelve-thirteen year-old boy, who is the voice crying in the Wilderness, going “Why are you so cruel, God?” David is one of the guys who gets killed in the first chapter.

CC: *Oh my God!*

DC: Right, so it's a very different way of looking at it. So, even then, even offering us *Desperation*, King says, “You know what? Don't ever take this as the Gospel. Here's another way at coming at exactly the same story.” So when I think of books that are most religious in this sense, I actually think of *Desperation*. When we think of those properly human questions. I think of books like [Revival](#), which is his nod to *Frankenstein*. *Salem's Lot* is his nod to *Dracula*, *Revival* is his nod to *Frankenstein*.

CC: *Such fascinating stuff! Now I'm going to have to read Desperation. How do you do this research?*

DC: Basically, what I was interested in And people ask me, “Did you interview King?” “No, that's not useful.” “Did you interview . . . audience reception?” “No. That's not useful.” The reason is – it's the same way I approach film and television – is I want to approach the pop culture product with the same valence, or the same eyes, that anybody else would approach it. Which is to say the vast majority of people who read a Stephen King novel are never going to watch an interview with Stephen King (10:00). They're certainly never going to meet him. They're certainly never going to have the chance to ask him, “So, what did you really mean on page 27?” Right?

CC: (Laughs).

DC: They're never going to have the chance to do that. So I 'm interested in this kind of . . . the true popular nature, if I can put it that way, of his work. So basically, what I did is I read it as a reader. But I read it as a reader who has a certain critical eye as it relates to Religious Studies. And I sort-of started asking questions of the text, which would be like For example, in *Desperation* I said, “That book is all about Theodicy.” Why do we suffer? Why does God make the small children die – horribly, in fact? Why was mum taken away? Why is God so cruel? And if God is so cruel, is God the only God. Or is God in contention? There's big-G-God in contention with other gods? And those are profound questions, now especially, I think. It's one of I wrote – I think it's at the end of [Sacred Terror](#) – that people have criticised horror incorrectly, as this kind of stealth nod to secularisation. I don't believe that's true at all. I believe that what horror films, horror culture writ large, horror novels like this, what they speak to is this profound ambivalence that we have towards our religious beliefs;

Citation Info: Cowan, Douglas and Carmen Celestini. 2019. “America's Dark Theologian Stephen King: A Religious Imagination Explored”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 11 February 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 18 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.religioustudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-dark-theologian-stephen-king-a-religious-imagination-explored/>

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019

religious beliefs that we absolutely don't want to give up, but we don't completely believe, but we're afraid to kind-of abandon. So we're in this very strangely ambivalent place about religion. And it all turns on these same questions. I mean, anybody with first year knowledge of Religious Studies, is going to go, "Oh, well, yeah. But that's just the Job story."

CC: *Yes.*

DC: Except – and this is the question that I consider in [Magic, Monsters and Make-Believe Heroes](#) – why do we keep telling the same stories over and over? We keep telling the same stories over and over because our answers change. But the questions remain the same. You can be told . . . I don't know, maybe you grow up Catholic? I don't know. Let's say you grow up Catholic and you're told that God . . . you know: things happen in this life because we're meant to endure them, and we get our reward in Heaven. For 2000 years people were told that, right? Well there's a time when that answer satisfies – or at least there's a time when that answer shuts the questioner up, whether it satisfies or not. But when people start asking the same question without being willing to accept traditional answers, right? I mean that's what moves religion along. The Reformation happened, the [Filioque](#) split happened, that's why all of the different streams of Christianity in the first three centuries . . . And the other thing that is really, really important about this, is they're all stories! Religion is about stories. It's not about fact, it's not about truth, it's about stories. Stories motivate us. That's the reason, or at least one of the reasons, the [Gospel of Thomas](#) doesn't make it in – because it's a sayings Gospel, right? Stories stick with us, as Homo Narrans, right? As the ones who tell stories. We are addicted to narrative. Anything of value we pass on through story. And I think one of the things that is so interesting about Stephen King is he absolutely recognises To give you an example, [Pet Sematary](#) – which I understand that they're remaking next year.

CC: *Really? Excellent!*

DC: John Lithgow as the Jud character.

CC: *Really?!*

DC: It is as though Stephen King had Turner's [The Ritual Process](#) open on the desk beside him when he was writing the sequence in the novel! And just to be clear I don't deal with TV or film adaptations. I just deal with his novels. And I don't deal with his fantasy novels. I don't deal with [The Dark Tower](#). Because he's clear that that's high fantasy. There's a scene in *Pet Sematary* when Jud and Louis are taking Church the cat (15:00) – and by the way it's short for Winston Churchill, so nothing should be read into that!

Citation Info: Cowan, Douglas and Carmen Celestini. 2019. "America's Dark Theologian Stephen King: A Religious Imagination Explored", *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 11 February 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 18 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.religioustudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-dark-theologian-stephen-king-a-religious-imagination-explored/>

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019

CC: (Laughs).

DC: They're taking the cat who's been killed in the road – it's a bog-standard sadness – up to the pet “Sematary”. So they're going through the woods. They're going up to the pet sematary. But Judd says they're going further because, just on the other side of the pet sematary is a dead fall: a bunch of trees that have come down, branches. Very, very dangerous to cross if you've ever been hiking over a dead fall. Very dangerous to cross. That is the boundary between the real world and the liminal space on the way to the [Mi'kmaq](#) burying ground. And they go through a number of these: they have to cross the deadfall; and they have to go through this swamp, where the ground actually seems to drop away because of the ground fog; then they have to climb up on to this hilltop, right, to get to the *Mi'kmaq* burial ground. So it is absolutely the ritual process, going back, and Jud is his initiator. There is a difference . . . I made this point in the book. There is a difference between a transgression, transcendence and trespass. Transcendence and transgression both involve – although to different degrees – the idea of a guide: someone who has said, “You have permission, and I will show you the way.” And Jud says this – he actually says it explicitly, “Put your feet where I put mine. And don't look down.” Which is to say, “You trust your guide in the ritual process.” And then, when you read that section – like I say, it's like he had Turner's *Ritual Process* open, or he was reading [van Gennepe](#).

CC: *Right.*

DC: Does that make sense?

CC: *It makes complete sense. Absolutely. I remember that scene. I remember how scary Pet Sematary was when I was reading it.*

DC: Yes. It's actually one of the books that if people say, “What's the scariest Stephen King book you've read?” they tend to think about [It](#), and they tend to think about *Pet Sematary*. The interesting thing about *Pet Sematary* is Stephen King himself didn't want to publish it. He had one more book left on a contract with a particular publisher – I think it was Viking, but I don't know – and he had one more book to fulfil the contract and Tabitha, his wife, said, “Well why don't you publish *Pet Sematary*?” And he goes: “No. It goes too far.” Because it involves the death of a two-year-old boy. The whole thing is energised by the death of a two-year-old boy. And for Stephen King that was even too far. Of course, he goes further than that. I mean the novel I read at Hartsfield-Jackson Airport was [Doctor Sleep](#), which I actually really like. I actually really like *Doctor Sleep*. It is the sequel to [The Shining](#).

CC: *I haven't read that one yet. But *Pet Sematary* scared me. It didn't scare me – because I don't think*

Citation Info: Cowan, Douglas and Carmen Celestini. 2019. “America's Dark Theologian Stephen King: A Religious Imagination Explored”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 11 February 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 18 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.religioustudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-dark-theologian-stephen-king-a-religious-imagination-explored/>

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019

I'm afraid of violence. I mean, you said that at the beginning of your book too. It's not the thing you're most terrified of.

DC: Yes. Spiders.

CC: *I'm with you on that one.*

DC: Spiders get my “fight or flight” in gear . . .

CC: *Actually, when I read that in the book I kind of smiled. Because I'm terrified of spiders. I'll just point and be scared of them. And I was like, “Doug's afraid of spiders! Really?” (Laughs).*

DC: And horses – because they're crafty at both ends and evil in the middle.

CC: *That is true. So one final question. Why do you think that this research matters?*

DC: That's a really good question. One of the things that, if you do pop culture, you have to deal with in the academy is people not believing that it should be taken seriously as . . . a barometer, as an indicator, as a way of understanding popular perception . . . of anything. And I actually think that you could not be more wrong in that. And here's why: ask yourself how many conversations you've been in that began – I mean aside from graduate school – that you've been in that began, “Well, you know, as they say in Chapter Three of *The Ritual Process* What do you think about Turner?” And you just . . . like, your eyes glaze over. Or, how many conversations have you been in where, “Well, French existentialism believes that suicide is the option that everybody. . . .” As opposed to every conversation you've ever been in that begins, “Hey, did you see the latest episode of Dr Who last night?”

CC: *Yes.*

DC: Hey, have you read the latest Stephen King novel? Hey, have you see the new film version of *It*? Right? And you get drawn into those stories (20:00). I think people denigrate genre fiction because they believe that it is simply “boarding lounge fare”. It's simply what you read from Toronto to Vancouver when you're going to a conference. And my argument, in all four pop culture books is . . . although Philip K Dick is taken much more seriously. But I argue that these are not a new mythology, in the sense that people have said, “Well, Star Wars is a new mythology”. That's not true at all. What it is, is these are one more way in which we approach those same properly human questions. At some point in the book, I think, I write about how this is not religion. This not horror as religion. It's not horror in place of religion – which is to say, secularisation. It's not even horror on top of religion –

Citation Info: Cowan, Douglas and Carmen Celestini. 2019. “America’s Dark Theologian Stephen King: A Religious Imagination Explored”, *The Religious Studies Project (Podcast Transcript)*. 11 February 2019. Transcribed by Helen Bradstock. Version 1.1, 18 January 2018. Available at: <http://www.religioustudiesproject.com/podcast/americas-dark-theologian-stephen-king-a-religious-imagination-explored/>

Podcast Transcript

Version 1.1, 18 January 2019

which is to say, religion is somehow a substrate. What it is, is horror alongside religion – which is to say, Stephen King and religious believers are asking the same questions. And because religion is based in story. Religion is based in what are called “unnatural narratives”. In fact, the very unnatural nature of them is used to validate them. “Who could possibly make up a story about a giant boat with all the animals in the world? Therefore it must be true.” “Well, who would possibly make up a story about flying horse taking the Prophet from Mecca to Jerusalem in one night? That's absurd. Therefore it must be true.” It's like, you know What is it? *Credo quia absurdum*: I believe because it is absurd. They're all stories. So what makes these stories that answer properly human questions, that we have valorised as religion, fundamentally better than these stories which also purport to address, if not answer . . . ? Because Stephen King is absolutely clear, he's not answering questions. He's going to continue to kind of poke the bear, right? Does that make sense?

CC: *Yes. It make complete sense. Thank you so much. Thank you for your time.*

DC: You're welcome.

If you spot any errors in this transcription, please let us know at editors@religiousstudiesproject.com. If you would be willing to help with transcribing the Religious Studies Project archive, or know of any sources of funding for the broader [transcription project](#), please get in touch. Thanks for reading.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution- NonCommercial- NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License. The views expressed in podcasts are the views of the individual contributors, and do not necessarily reflect the views of THE RELIGIOUS STUDIES PROJECT or the British Association for the Study of Religions.