

The Conjuring 3: The Devil Made Do It and the Evangelical Imagination

In *The Conjuring 3: The Devil Made Me Do It*, former Catholic priest Father Kastner (John Noble) reveals to Lorraine Warren (Vera Farmiga) that The Occultist (Eugenie Bondurant), the film's main antagonist, is indeed his estranged daughter. Being obsessed with understanding the occult himself, Father Kastner warns Lorraine and in tandem, the film's conservative Christian audience: "We must be careful how our obsessions are passed to our children." If the previous entries had advocated for taking the demonic seriously, this new entry is quick to caution its Christian viewers of the potential danger in occult curiosity. Set in the backdrop of the 1980s satanic panic, *The Conjuring 3*, like its predecessors, explores the horrors of the occult, the power of the Christian faith, and the lives of the Warrens. These films, along with this third entry, have an explicit agenda designed to reinforce existing conservative Christian beliefs. From secret satanic cabals to demonic forces, *The Conjuring 3* serves as a perfect example of how Christian horror, especially Evangelical horror, highlight the fear and anxieties of American conservative Christians.

In this recent sequel, *The Conjuring 3* continues to follow the cases of the American demonologists. This time Gerard Brittle's biographical book *The Devil in Connecticut*, exploring the case of Arne Johnson, serves as the film's inspiration. Adopting a new writer, David Leslie Johnson-McGoldrick, and *The Curse Of La Llorona* director, Michael Chaves, *The Conjuring 3*, while following much of the same ideas as the first two films, also diverts in key ways. Gone are former director James Wan's crafty and effective long suspenseful sequences that redeemed the infamous jump scare from cheap "gotcha moments" to an artistic feat. Instead, in the film's opening sequence, the sound design is turned up to an irritating degree as if to conceal the uninspired cinematography. On a technical level, *The Conjuring 3* is a constant reminder of how crucial James Wan's direction is to this franchise. While the *Conjuring* universe have spawned many imitators, they almost always pale in comparison.

The change of writer is, however, less drastic. Johnson-McGoldrick's script offers a more Lorraine-centric focus and considering she has always been the more compelling character, this is a welcome shift. Vera Farmiga and Patrick Wilson have always been the most compelling aspects of this universe and in this sequel, they are still delightful as the Warrens while adding a much-needed emotional heft. In addition, *The Conjuring 3*, with its newfound Catholic director, is more steeped in Catholicism than ever before. For the first time in the mainline series, the Warrens feel like they are a part of the Catholic institution. Surrounded by a broader network, this third entry shows not one but two Catholic priests performing exorcists. This is a stark contrast to the previous entry which make the unqualified Warrens perform the exorcists. While it is still the Warrens (this time Ed) that ultimately saves Arne, the Catholic institution has a more prominent role than in previous entries.

While some scholars might want to classify the *Conjuring* universe as Catholic horror, I suggest they are more appropriately classified as Evangelical horror. For one, these films' Catholicism are often constrained and decorative. Instead, the Christianity that is portrayed in the film is a mixture of various conservative Christian traditions, reminiscent of larger tent groups such as the Christian Right. While the real Warrens were conservative Catholics, in the *Conjuring* universe, their characters were created by evangelicals Chad and Carey Hayes and as a result, the Warrens espoused more Protestant understanding of Christianity. However, by no means do the *Conjuring* films have nothing to say about American Catholicism. In fact, this franchise has plenty to say about conservative Catholicism in the tradition of the Christian Right

or the subsections which adheres to Christian nationalist sentiments. In this sense, the term “evangelical,” as used in its post-Trump era political form, is an umbrella term that is highly malleable that includes a broad set of conservative Christian ideologies and in recent years, even non-religious conservatives that support Trumpian Christian nationalist ideals (Burge 2021).

As such, while still exceedingly relevant, the term becomes difficult to define and study. In lieu, scholars have insisted on studying the “evangelical imagination,” which is defined as: “a fairly narrow set of answers that are repeated within a broadly shared set of cultural forms, images and practices that usually organize themselves around basic narrative form of the testimonial or personal witness” (Paradis 2019, 230).

Moving away from the study of individual Evangelicals, the evangelical imagination posits that the vast library of evangelical media is indicative of the group’s politics, beliefs, and most importantly for this essay, fears and anxieties. Evangelical horror, like the broader horror genre, tends to reveal a given population’s repressed worries. By analyzing *The Conjuring 3* and other evangelical horror, scholars can uncover the fears and anxieties at the center of the evangelical imagination.

The Conjuring 3, like its universe, adopts, rather uncritically, the evangelical imagination. It creates a world dominated by magical thinking, one strongly aligned with conservative Christian ideology. For example, during the opening exorcist gone wrong, Ed is attacked by the entity. As it punches his heart, the demon says, “I’ll stop your heart old man!” For the rest of the film, Ed suffers from heart issues. The medical establishment, according to *The Conjuring 3*, can only help regulate his health issues since the cause is demonic. As for the case of Arne Johnson (Ruairi O’Connor), since the audience already understands the cause of the murder, the film is spent, not in the courtroom debating whether demons exist, but with the Warrens’ task of proving to the secular world (and in extension, to the viewer) that demons do, in fact, exist. Since the film adopts the evangelical imagination, their ultimate failure to prove Arne’s innocence via the demonic possession defense is assumed to be the film’s only possible ending. How else can secular American society, infested with demons and their worshippers, possibly be awoken to this hard truth? This victim-complex and illusion of minority is a reoccurring trope of the evangelical imagination, especially in the popular *God’s Not Dead* films.

Why? Why would a big budget horror film, backed by a mainstream distribution, tell such an explicitly conservative religious film? And why are these films still widely popular? Within these “why” questions are where scholars might find the most fruitful answers. The *Conjuring* films go to great lengths to portray powerful demonic forces, proper conservative Christian ethics, and drastic historical revisionism. As horror becomes more critically acclaimed and accepted in “arthouse” cinema, it ceases to play into such uncritical religious pandering and looks to deconstruct or critique this assumed worldview. Both *Saint Maud* and *The Witch* deconstruct religious fanaticism and the fear that comes with pleasing an ambiguous powerful entity. *The Conjuring 3*, and the rest of the *Conjuring* franchise, seem content to rehash many of the old clichés of 1970s and 1980s Christian/apocalyptic horror to fulfill their agenda. However, instead of dismissing its success as insignificant, scholars interested in the intersection between horror cinema and Christian ideologies might want to explore the reasons why these films continue to reinforce evangelical ideas, both political and theological, sequel after sequel.

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