

On the Phenomenological Reality of Monsters

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Abstract: This article suggests that monster studies can benefit from a phenomenological approach. Namely, phenomenology provides a method for scholars to examine monster narratives as they are reported by experiencers, and then, to investigate what religious and moral frameworks might emerge from those reports. So, too, a phenomenological method can serve to challenge any social or academic attitudes that marginalize monster narratives (or beliefs in monsters) as nonserious. To that end, this article will neither reduce the subject of the monster as an illusionary psychological experience, nor will it defer to the representational mode of monster studies that reads the monster as symbolic of a cultural crisis or condition. Rather, by approaching monster narratives phenomenologically, scholars of religion can investigate how new or revised religious frameworks sometimes emerge from monster encounters. This article will also interrogate why monster narratives are sometimes treated less seriously than other religious subjects, especially when monster experiences are coded and marginalized as paranormal in nature.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Mothman, Religious Experience, Jeffrey Kripal

AN INTRIGUING QUESTION

“What if we approach the field assuming that monsters are real?”

This was a question posed—not by a paranormal hunter in a room full of believers—but by a scholar of religion at the 2021 Annual Meeting of the *American Academy of Religion* in San Antonio, Texas. I was in the room that day, hoping to glean some insights for a new book project that I’m writing on paranormal beliefs, and how these might reshape religious and ethical frameworks in North America. The panelists did not disappoint.

And then *that* question was posed, “What if we approach the field assuming that monsters are real?” As I remember it, no one ridiculed the idea, but neither did the room immediately jump to answer. There was a notable pause. All in attendance seemed to consider the implications of the question itself—of which there are many. For example, in some sectors of monster theory, scholars have been quick to presume the opposite. Namely, that monsters do not really exist, and that where monster lore is present in a society, these narratives should be interpreted as signs or symbols of something else going on within that community—sociologically, politically, psychologically, and so forth. Or, as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has suggested in his book, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, we can “read cultures from the

monsters they engender.”¹ Without dispute, that is one illuminating approach to monster theory. A person might agree with Cohen that:

The monster is born only at metaphoric crossroads, as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy...giving them life and an uncanny independence. The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically “that which reveals,” “that which warns,” a glyph that seeks a hierophant. Like a letter on the page, the monster signifies something other than itself: it is always displacement, always inhabits the gap between the time of upheaval that created it and the moment into which it is received, to be born again.²

Such insights are important; but they can also conceal or ignore what monster narratives mean to the people who believe in them. That’s a problem.

Namely, reductive theories can be deployed in such a way that the scholar ignores the meaning of a subject from the perspective of the believer. I appreciate Steven Engler’s recognition that “Scholarly methods too often surgically remove talk of religious entities (spirits, monsters, gods, etc.) from their native networks of semantic associations and graft them onto an alien web of scholarly concepts and categories.”³ Engler goes on to say, “[such methods] excise the monster from its home territory and relocate it on scholarly maps. This violent act of translation is what I call monstrous representation.”⁴ I agree with Engler that such is a monstrous representation, “because it distorts what the people we study intend when they talk about monsters.”⁵ What is more, when we look closely at a variety of monster narratives, I suggest that we will not only find earnest claims about “real life” encounters, but we will also find emerging religious beliefs and frameworks.

THE MONSTER ENCOUNTER AS RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Certainly, there are monster narratives that are purely works of fiction, either to entertain or to serve as cautionary tales. So, too, one must be mindful of how to interpret the monsters of folklore and legend. Not every tale purports a real-world encounter. Even so, there are monster narratives that come from earnest reports of human experience. In these cases, when people report that they’ve encountered a species of vampire, werewolf, or some terrorizing flying cryptid, they are seeking to communicate an apparent sensory experience of *something* that does not quite fit within the (known) natural order of things. Thus, when they come out and dare to

¹ Jeffrey Jerome Cohen. *Monster Theory*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 3.

² Ibid.

³ Steven Engler, “The Semantic Reduction of Spirits and Monsters,” *Journal of Gods and Monsters*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (2021): 6.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 7.

report their monster, they are giving voice to a phenomenon that—at the very least—was real to them.

Experiencers may draw on existing cultural lexicons to interpret or classify their monster encounter. But doing so doesn't mean they are simply "making up" the incident—it means they are trying to make sense of it.⁶ For them, the werewolf was not simply a dog. The vampire was not just a shadow in the night. When such experiencers say that they have encountered a monster, to them, *it was a monster*, however it is that they define that term; whether as an unnatural or demonic evil, a hidden creature, an omen-bringing entity, or something else entirely.

Admittedly, many people find it easy to dismiss alleged monster encounters as products of psychiatric episodes, psychological projections born of social anxieties, or utter fiction. But for people who dare to report a monster encounter (as well as for those who believe in such reports), reductive explanations appear to willfully ignore the sincerity of the claim. When we do take such reports seriously, the monster encounter serves—in the language of Rudolf Otto—as a poignant moment of *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (i.e., a mystery before which one is both fearful and fascinated).⁷ Namely, the monster encounter reveals a great mystery: that the order of reality is one in which supernatural beings exist. Humans are fearful of that—not only in the sense of being immediately afraid; but also, in the sense of being overwhelmed and humbled by such a mystery. But in turn, that mystery and awe (or fear) can lead to fascination about the experience or about the entity itself. As a result, belief in the veracity of certain monster encounters also functions to open the door of contemplation about what kind of reality we live in, where such things are possible. This is important, as beliefs about ultimate reality very much concern religious perspectives, and therefore should be of interest to scholars of religion. Unfortunately, beliefs associated with monsters (not to mention other paranormal subjects and entities) have often been treated as non-serious by certain sectors of the academy, and sometimes ridiculed in the wider society. As a result, we can very well miss opportunities to analyze unique religious worldviews when we participate in the generic and conventional rejection of monster encounters as pure fiction, hoax, or absurdity.

What is more, various beliefs in monsters not only have the capacity to inform (or reform) religious beliefs, but they may also have the power to shape what one values in the here and now. This is otherwise the domain of social and moral reasoning. As scholars of ethics have observed, religious beliefs often function as defining frameworks from which intellectual and moral perspectives are formed.⁸ Thus, the study of religion is not only about what people believe to be true about ultimate reality, it also includes how such beliefs shape the ways in which believers live their lives. For example, various beliefs in God as a purposeful creator have resulted in formulations of natural law thinking. These, in turn, have shaped influential models of social order and moral norms for practitioners and non-practitioners alike.⁹ Given the relationship between religion and ethics, we should consider how belief in monsters—as an

⁶ See, for example: D.W. Pasulka. *American Cosmic*. (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 99.

⁷ Rudolf Otto. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. (London, Oxford, and New York: Oxford University Press, Second Edition, 1950), 12-40.

⁸ Charles Matthews. *Understanding Religious Ethics* (West Sussex: Blackwell Publishing, 2010), 21-37.

⁹ For example, Thomistic natural law thinking in the *Summa Theologica* provided some of the building blocks for the marital and procreative norm in Catholic Christianity; as well as the invention of sodomy codes, which had serious implications for people (believers or not) in religion and state.

expression of religious belief—can shape personal values and social norms. Consider, briefly, existing evidence of such connections.

Take first, the Fae, or fairies. Belief in the Fae, and warnings about disturbing the fairy-folk, have literally resulted in contemporary concerns about where roads are built or what habitats are preserved.¹⁰ Or, consider various lore about vampires. Beliefs about vampires have inspired communities to hypothesize about what human transgressions result in vampiric transformation after death. These hypotheses have included moral and religious concerns about what it means to live a good life and how to identify sin and evil. For example, John Michael Greer notes that some communities have believed vampires are people who once practiced sorcery or were excommunicated from a church (for heresy or willful sin), or who died by suicide.¹¹ In these cases, vampirism is a kind of spiritual consequence for moral and religious evil. What is more, belief in vampires has also resulted in changes in social practices, especially in terms of how certain communities engage in burial rites to keep the vampire from rising (e.g., keeping the vampire in place with wooden stakes, cages, and so forth).¹² All such responses to the vampire as a real monster have had observable influences on people's theological, social, and moral attitudes and values. Thus, as these examples suggest, there are good reasons to take a more serious look at claims of monster encounters. Belief in such encounters has the power to shape not only concepts about the order of reality, but also how people live their lives. I suggest we take this closer look by analyzing monsters as religious subjects through the phenomenological method.

PHENOMENOLOGY: A SUGGESTED APPROACH FOR STUDYING MONSTERS

To study monsters as religious phenomena, I encourage scholars of religion to take Steven Engler's invitation seriously. Namely, we need to deploy a methodology that does not "surgically remove monster narratives from their native frameworks." I do so with the specific invitation to dig more deeply into *phenomenological* accounts of monsters. In religious studies, the phenomenological method has a primary agenda to learn about a given religion (or religious subject) as it presents itself to us. Understood this way, I take Mircea Eliade's point as a valid one that "a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious."¹³ To that end, the phenomenological method helps us to examine religious subjects, not as theologians looking for "the truth," but as scholars seeking to understand the shape and content of that which calls itself "religion."

However, my suggestion that we deploy the phenomenological approach to read monsters as religious subjects does require a caveat. Namely, it is not necessarily the case that every

¹⁰ See, for example: Amanda Palumbo, "The Fairy Tree; Ireland's ugly and mystical bush that rerouted a motorway," *Stripes Europe*, September 5, 2019. Online: <https://europe.stripes.com/travel/2019-09-05/the-fairy-tree:-ireland%E2%80%99s-ugly-and-mystical-bush-that-rerouted-a-motorway-9169800.html>

¹¹ John Michael Greer. *Monsters: An Investigator's Guide to Magical Beings* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2017), 37.

¹² See: Paul Barber. *Vampires, Burial, and Death: Folklore and Reality* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

¹³ Daniel L. Pals, *Eight Theories of Religion*, Second Edition (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006), 196-197.

person who reports a monster encounter understands that experience as a religious experience. So, we must be careful not to put words or concepts into the mouths of those who have experienced, or believe in, monsters. Even so, a phenomenological approach to monster studies—i.e., studying monster narratives as they present themselves to us—does reveal that at least some monster encounters inspire beliefs and worldviews that can be reasonably categorized as religious in nature. This is a matter of defining religion itself.

I take my definition of religion from Diana Cates, who suggests that religious perspectives “offer an account of the fundamental nature of reality and a vision of what is possible for humans, in life and death, given the way things [really] are.”¹⁴ This definition of religion illuminates why (in many cases) the word “religion” is meaningful across a wide variety of institutions, beliefs, and practices. Namely, what very often sets something apart as *religious* is its orientation to beliefs and concepts about ultimate reality (e.g., animism, atheism, monotheism, polytheism, apotheosis, Buddhahood, etc.), and how these concepts of ultimate reality inspire people to live their lives.

Defining religion this way, various monsters can be read as religious subjects. Namely, if people believe that Bigfoot is lurking in woodlands; or that Mothman is appearing before terrible disasters; or that vampires rise from the dead in ethereal bodies (not with the sultry looks of Hollywood, but as feeders of urine and feces and blood); or that Skinwalkers prowl certain geographies accompanied by ghosts, orbs, and UFOs; or that the Fae cross between worlds; and kobolds dwell in our homes; then such believed realities bear on how one frames what is possible in life and death given the way things really are.

Key here is that many people do believe such entities or phenomena are not only possible, but that they have been *encountered*; that the threshold between the natural and supernatural realms has been crossed. As a result, there are people who believe that monster experiences do, in fact, reveal or confirm the order of reality.¹⁵ The phenomenological method allows us to analyze such monster narratives without needing to confirm the veracity of the report. So, too, the phenomenological method does not require us to “explain away” why certain people believe that they have, indeed, encountered a monster. Instead, the phenomenological method allows us to do the vital work of understanding and accurately describing the substance and contours of monster reports, insofar as we seek to understand how at least some of these incidents inspire new or revised religious perspectives.

What is more, the phenomenological method provides the necessary data to engage in comparative religious studies. Namely, as we accumulate more data on religious subjects, we can step from a phenomenological study to consider how various religious phenomena relate (or not) to one another.¹⁶ This applies to monster studies as well. As we find and archive monster

¹⁴ The concept of the really real has been attributed to a number of scholars of religion, I note the work of John Reeder, Jr., with appreciation for Diana Cates’ attribution and explanation of Reeder’s concept of religion as one that is broader than conventional definitions usually support. See: Diana Fritz Cates. *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious Ethical Inquiry*. (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 24-25.

¹⁵ Or, that the ‘natural’ order is far more ‘super’ than what materialism suggest. See: Jeffrey Kripal and Whitley Strieber. *The Super Natural: A New Vision of the Unexplained* (New York, NY: Tarcher | Penguin, 2016), 6.

¹⁶ Jeffrey Kripal, *Comparing Religions*. (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 4. “1. The negotiation of sameness/difference in a set of observations; 2. The identification of patterns in that data set; 3. The

narratives, we can begin to consider categories of monsters and how experiencers interpret their monsters (e.g., as demons, cryptids, omen-bringers, etc.). Although a phenomenological study of religion can be engaged without also attending to comparative analyses, in many cases the scholar of religion will be curious to investigate how various religious phenomena relate to one another—as one part of making sense of- and understanding religion altogether. We will find this to be true with a phenomenological approach to monsters as well.

SELECTED PHENOMENOLOGICAL ACCOUNTS OF MONSTERS AND THEIR RELIGIOUS IMPLICATIONS

The invitation to engage monster studies through the phenomenological method does require us to collect narratives about monster experiences. I am especially interested in monster encounters that are relatively recent. To be sure, legends of antiquity also reveal how monster narratives can generate religious beliefs or frameworks. As we shall see, legends of antiquity sometimes inform how monsters are interpreted and classified. Even so, there is something about contemporary monster reports that challenge the perspective that monsters are merely the stuff of cautionary tales, mythology, or literary fiction. When we take people seriously, we will find that some beliefs about monsters have been forged by startling experiences, which in turn (can and do) generate various kinds of religious beliefs and interpretations. Gratefully, a considerable number of such contemporary reports have been collected by authors and documentarians interested in the domain of paranormal subjects. For the purpose of this article, I invite the reader to consider only a few contemporary monster encounters, from which we can reflect on the benefits of the phenomenological method.

An Unexpected Beast

Take first a peculiar monster experience narrated by Linda Godfrey in her book, *Monsters Among Us*. She calls this the case of “The Church Lady Monster.” The story was sent to her in April 2015, but took place in 1992; allegedly with multiple eyewitnesses at “a Baptist church in a small Midwestern town, in the middle of a Sunday worship service.”¹⁷ Godfrey writes:

A pleasant, religious couple in their sixties (I’ll call them Ken and Sara [their real names withheld for anonymity]), witnessed this event from a close—almost too close—vantage point, along with more than two hundred congregation members. ...Ken wrote, “What I want to tell you about is a creature that actually came out of a woman in a small church about twenty-five years ago in a morning service. The church was occupied with about 225 people, and the sermon was being given by a minister. He was on a stage approximately twenty feet from the front row of pews where this woman sat... For some reason, my eyes were drawn to this lady... I could sense there was something strange about her... she had this strange, very strange grayness about her...”

construction of a classificatory scheme that organizes these patterns into some meaningful whole; and 4. A theory to explain the patterns one sees.”

¹⁷ Linda Godfrey, *Monsters Among Us* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, LLC. 2016), 58.

The woman had dark hair and very ordinary features, said Sara. She wore a white shirt and black [pants]. Although there was nothing especially memorable about the woman's appearance, Sara noticed that she seemed to be fidgeting a lot. Suddenly, the unthinkable—the inconceivable—happened.

Ken continued, “Our minister had just wrapped up his ending and had closed the sermon and had left the podium to go sit with his wife and family. For him to do that, he had to walk past this woman. As he grabbed his Bible and papers, he stepped down off the stage and proceeded toward her when all of a sudden she stood up, let out a bloodcurdling scream, and began to literally contort her head and body. Now I had never believed in such things [Ken admitted], but on that day, right then, I saw the real thing taking place, as did my wife and everyone else who was in the morning service.

As she contorted, suddenly she just changed into a hideous creature. I mean she just transformed into this huge beastly creature similar to what people might call a wolf, but actually wasn't. This creature that came out of her was quite large. It stood on hind legs and roared a roar that would have made a lion cower. It had fur, it had legs like the Pan creature [of Greek and Roman religion], long teeth, and very long claws, and its growling and screaming echoed in every corner of the church from ceiling to floor.” It also seemed to emit a foul odor that reminded [Ken] of sulfur.¹⁸

According to Ken and Sara, eventually some members of the church grabbed the woman-turned-beast and held her down on the pew. Not much later, she was instantly back in her human form, clothes and all. Ken and Sara report that the entire church was shaken by the experience. Curiously, it became a buried story within the church (or, perhaps, hidden), as no one seemed willing or wanting to talk about it again.¹⁹

While the church (now no longer in operation) avoided talk about this monster incident, Ken and Sara situated it within their given religious framework. Ken said, “. . . what it was, we still to this day do not know. . . It was not a guardian spirit and we knew that it wasn't human but a demon of some sort. The thing about this was, the woman it came out of, we didn't see her [physical body] after this thing came out of her. . . What I know is, whatever [these creatures] are, they're real. Either I'm nuts or they're real.”²⁰

Ken and Sara profess that this monster experience was indeed a real encounter in time/space, and one that was registered by a community through natural human senses. Reductive readings of this narrative might appeal to psychological projection or mass hallucination. Ardent skeptics might simply note that the church's closure means that the story not only has no possible means of verification, but that the “Church Lady Monster” is perhaps nothing more than a lie, or maybe fanciful storytelling born of religious zeal. But a phenomenological reading provides another approach. Namely, it not only collects the basic

¹⁸ Ibid., 59-61.

¹⁹ Ibid., 62-63.

²⁰ Ibid., 65-66.

narrative—including the historical, ecclesiastical, and geographical contexts of the encounter—but it also reveals that a meaningful religious worldview was informed by this monster encounter.

In particular, the manifestation of the “Church Lady Monster” was interpreted as a confirmation of a specific Christian worldview, insofar as this brand of the faith affirmed the reality of demonic entities. Notice, again, Ken’s words, “It was a demon of some sort.” This classifies the monster by associating it with a known category of supernatural creatures. As such, Ken and Sara’s story demonstrates a basic form of comparative analysis. Namely, Ken and Sara sorted the creature into the category of demons, instead of associating it with werewolf-like creatures—even though “the wolf” aspect of the monster was an identifiable trait. Thus, Ken and Sara interpreted the encounter through a theological lens. One can reasonably imagine that various New Testament references to Satan, or demonic possessions, informed that interpretation.

Traditional Christian theology often describes demons as evil, fallen angels. But even as people who believed in such entities, Ken and Sara appeared to be surprised about how this monster manifested. Their demonology (to the extent that they had one), didn’t seem to anticipate the kind of creature that emerged from the woman in the pew. So, while their interpretation of the “Church Lady Monster” served as a confirmation of their religious beliefs—insofar as the monster was read as a demon—it also appears to have opened their concepts (and beliefs) about how such beings manifest. Recall Ken’s admission, “...what it was, we still to this day do not know...it was not a guardian spirit and we know that it wasn’t human but a demon of some sort... What I know is, whatever [these creatures] are, they’re real. Either I’m nuts or they’re real.” Taking Ken’s words seriously, this is a testimony of someone’s earnest experience of a mystery—one that powerfully substantiated his religious beliefs, while also revealing that there is much about supernatural beings that humans will never fully understand. *Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, indeed.

If this were the only reported case of a human turning into a monster, our phenomenological analysis of such a shape shifting creature would be limited to this one report, and the very particular religious interpretation that Ken and Sara offered. But as it turns out, “the Church Lady Monster” is not the only report of a shapeshifting, beast-like creature. When we seek out comparisons from other sources, we can find other reports of such phenomena, and in many cases, these have not relied on Christian demonology for an explanation or interpretation. Legends from antiquity provide a helpful resource for comparison. For example, in John Michael Greer’s exploration of the shapeshifting nature of werewolves, he notes that “Norse werewolves... murmured a charm over a cup of ale and then drank it [to transform]...and among the Slavic peoples of the same period, the process involved rubbing a magical ointment all over the body and then donning a wolf’s pelt or belt made of wolfskin;” and Greer further writes, “The Greek historian Herodotus mentions a nomadic tribe called the Neuri, each member of which turns into a wolf for several days each year.”²¹

The phenomenological method does not allow us to conclude that “The Church Lady Monster” and Norse, Slavic, and Greek lycanthropy are all the same things. If someone *were* to

²¹ John Michael Greer. *Monsters*, Fourth Edition. (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2017), 80, 81. Greer, as self-described, is both an occult scholar and practitioner of magic and the Western mystery traditions; including initiation in occult and Druid orders.

draw that conclusion, it would function as a unifying theory. But what the phenomenological approach provides for are detailed accounts of monsters that can be compared with one another. From careful comparative analysis, we can construct classificatory schemes (e.g., werewolves, shapeshifters, demons, etc.). As we engage in these phenomenological and comparative analyses, we should be aware that people often make sense of unexplained phenomena from the resources of their own culture (as Ken and Sara did with Christian demonology). That said, in other cases, monster reports are not interpreted within an existing religious system. Sometimes, they provoke people and communities to revise or create new religious frameworks altogether.

A Monster Difficult to Define

For example, consider the narrative of the Mothman as told by John Keel. While the Hollywood film (by the same name) entertained and gave people spooky thrills, Keel's account in the book, *The Mothman Prophecies* revealed a narrative far more peculiar.²² Namely, that in Point Pleasant, West Virginia, a large humanoid winged creature—dubbed “Mothman”—was appearing to residents and city officials alike in 1966. If we take Keel's narrative as a phenomenological study, this monster was believed to manifest in a material way. According to reports, the Mothman was almost seven feet tall, with large wings, and glowing red eyes.²³ In fact, one group of residents, reported that Mothman chased their car going 100 miles per hour.²⁴

Keel also reported that Mothman wasn't alone. With this monster's appearance, other paranormal entities emerged: strange orbs in the skies, physical UFOs, extraterrestrial visitations, and men in black who would come to interrogate those who had seen such arial mysteries.²⁵ According to Keel, these paranormal phenomena attracted the interest of many people around the region, many of whom wanted to experience these things for themselves. All of that would end, however, when the Silver Bridge in Point Pleasant would collapse on December 15, 1967. After which, Mothman and the other paranormal occurrences ceased. It led many to believe that Mothman—and the attending phenomena—were omens of the coming devastation.

But more than that, it provoked a city (demographically Christian) to examine its beliefs in what is possible in life and death given the way things really are. Various explanations were offered. One cultural interpretation assigned to Mothman—and the accompanying high strangeness—relied on Christian demonology.²⁶ From this perspective, Mothman and the other strange creatures were indeed visiting Point Pleasant, and truly intersecting our space and time, but they were really only demons seeking to harm and confuse the faithful. Although not all Christian practitioners are quick to assign paranormal phenomena as demonic activity, it is a common interpretive strategy among many evangelical and fundamentalist Christians.²⁷ Another cultural interpretation (of a more skeptical sort) was to simply assign the Mothman as a mass

²² J. Keel. *The Mothman Prophecies: A True Story* (A Tor Book/Tom Doherty Associates, 1975, 1991).

²³ *Ibid.*, 77.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 66-122.

²⁶ See Shayla Klein, “The Legend of Mothman—Paranormal W.Va.,” 12WBOY.com, Online: <https://www.wboy.com/only-on-wboy-com/paranormal-w-va/the-legend-of-mothman-paranormal-w-va/>

²⁷ See, for example, demonic explanations of UFOS and extraterrestials in: Christopher D. Bader, Joseph O. Baker, and F. Carson Mencken, *Paranormal America, Second Edition.*, 120.

hallucination (or psychological projection), or perhaps just a captivating piece of modern folklore, but nothing more.²⁸ Even so, for many others in Point Pleasant, West Virginia the Mothman encounter has inspired new ways of thinking—and believing. Namely, to entertain the possibility that “reality” is quite mysterious; a reality in which omen bringing monsters are neither angel, nor demon; nor might ever visit again—and thus, that certain monsters are not so easy to classify.²⁹

To my knowledge, there are no systematic studies concerning how the people of Point Pleasant either reformed or syncretized their existing religious views (where people held those) with the strange events of 1966. But what we can find are townspeople reflecting on the memory of the event at the annual Mothman festival; as well as recollections recorded and archived through a number of paranormal documentaries about the events.³⁰ In these, people seem willing to live in the ambiguity of mystery. And thus, for believers in Mothman, neither mainstream religion, nor science, have all the answers.³¹

What is more, the lingering deep questions that Mothman has created reveals how monster encounters can provoke new ways of thinking about religion and the order of reality. In particular, we find that some people regard the Mothman as revealing a more complex metaphysical world—one in which monsters like Mothman do not fit into traditional religious scripts. Rather, Mothman opens the religious imagination to consider that this entity (and perhaps others like it) has something to do with omens and perhaps the power to unleash wider paranormal phenomena.

In short, I do not think we can underestimate how new religious frameworks may be emerging from belief in monsters, like Mothman. Whether they are read as unnatural, demons, or perhaps even omen-bringers, monsters often inspire people to conceive or reconceive beliefs about the order of reality. The existence of such beliefs is not something we have to guess about. According to Bader, Baker, and Mencken, 52% of people in North America hold one or more paranormal beliefs simultaneously; and sometimes such believers also participate in mainstream religious traditions with some measurable frequency. Of these people, some have found a way to revise their existing (mainstream) religious worldviews with their paranormal beliefs—which include, in some cases, the belief in monsters.³²

THE PARANORMAL AND THE ACADEMY

Analyzing monsters as religious phenomena not only widens the scope of religious studies, it also invites us to reflect on our academic perspectives. In particular, I want to push back on any presumption that monster studies or religious studies can only be taken seriously if we share a presupposition that we’re not really studying anything ontologically or metaphysically real. Neither do I think we must share a presupposition that anything we study

²⁸ Gwen Mallow, “An Ode to a Hometown Creature: Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia,” *Folklife*, June 7, 2021, online: <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/mothman-point-pleasant-west-virginia>

²⁹ Shayla Klein, “The Legend of Mothman—Paranormal W.Va.,” *12WBOY.com*, Online: <https://www.wboy.com/only-on-wboy-com/paranormal-w-va/the-legend-of-mothman-paranormal-w-va/>

³⁰ Gwen Mallow, “An Ode to a Hometown Creature: Mothman of Point Pleasant, West Virginia,” *Folklife*, June 7, 2021, online: <https://folklife.si.edu/magazine/mothman-point-pleasant-west-virginia>

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Bader, Baker, and Mencken, 122, 164.

has ontological or metaphysical reality. I seek to inhabit a third space, one of intellectual spaciousness—in which we are able to respectfully consider a wide variety of religious phenomena without immediate judgment, and in which we don't participate in the marginalization of any one subject simply because it has been regarded as fringe, or unserious, by mainstream cultural norms. Scholars of religion especially need to be careful about participating in such value judgments. The history of our academy has been one of learning to widen the definition, scope, and extent of “religion.” That effort needs to be one that is ongoing.

Of the wide variety of subfields in the academic study of religion, paranormal subjects and experiences (including those of monsters) appear to suffer from some professional trepidation about the category. As sociologists have noted, the categorization of the paranormal exists as “a cultural category that can shift across time and place” based on what is—and what is not—counted as reliable material science or mainstream religion.³³ In other words, the paranormal often exists as a designated category to marginalize what is considered fringe or bizarre.³⁴ Monsters are sometimes put in that categorical box by scholars who make uncritical associations of paranormal subjects with absurdity—even though monsters are not regarded as fringe, unserious, or absurd by given cultures or subsets of people. Where such an attitude exists in the academy, it's a problem.

Religious claims, in general, and monster narratives, in particular, can poke at the structure of our own beliefs and worldviews, not to mention our stakes in cultural or disciplinary conformity.³⁵ If we're not careful, scholars can perpetuate systems of privilege and marginality by deferring to conventionality in what we designate as serious subjects worthy of the academy's scope. In truth, it is sometimes difficult to discern where healthy skepticism and dispassionate scholarship might unconsciously slide into intellectual narrowness, especially when religious subjects are treated or dismissed as fringe. This can be true in the study of monsters, specifically, and paranormal subjects more broadly. My concern, here, is not a unique one.

In his book, *Authors of the Impossible*, Jeffrey Kripal narrates this reality well. He writes, “I do now suspect, however, that the study of religion as a discipline, as a structure of thought, as a field of possibility, has severely limited itself precisely to the extent that it has followed Western culture on this particular point, that is, to the extent that the discipline constantly encounters robust paranormal phenomena in its data—the stuff is everywhere—and then refuses to talk about such things in any truly serious and sustained way. The paranormal is our secret in plain sight too. Weird.”³⁶ Kripal's comments are worth lingering upon.

Consider, in the academic study of religion, we have various subfields and program units devoted to humanism, technology, mysticism, sacred texts, sacraments, pilgrimage, music, food, and even denominationalism (to name a few). But we do not find, as readily, projects that study paranormal subjects as religious subjects unto themselves. Such research projects and subfields exist, by virtue of a cohort of intrepid scholars. But they appear to be less researched than other subfields—and one must consider the question if scholars of religion are merely deferring to the respectability of convention for fear of being seen as unserious.

³³ Ibid., 28.

³⁴ Ibid., 178-180.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jeffrey Kripal. *Authors of the Impossible*. (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), 7.

As sociologists of religion who have investigated paranormal subjects, Christopher D. Bader, F. Carson Mencken, and Joseph Baker have noted, “people who are more tied to the conventional order will be more concerned with conventionality. People who have significant investments in conventional lines of action will be loathe to risk those investments.”³⁷ We might consider how that sociological insight plays out in the chosen research projects of scholars of religion. In particular, if the field of monster studies is at all marginalized as paranormal, or “fringe,” and thus as unserious, then scholars with high stakes in conformity (inclusive of such things as funding, respectability, tenure, etc.) might very well bypass this substantive area of religious studies out of fear of ridicule or losing privilege.

And yet, data of the paranormal is—as Kripal says—all around us: congressional hearings on UFOs and nonhuman intelligences; dozens of television shows devoted to earnest belief in ghost hauntings and monster sightings; pilgrimage sites to places disrupted by otherworldly visitors; paranormal conventions that attract thousands—the evidence for sincere belief in the paranormal is all around us. The failure to study these as religious subjects is one of our own making. After all, we have scholars who investigate Marian apparitions, Hindu temple phenomena, purgatorial artifacts, Pentecostal faith healings, Eucharistic miracles, and so forth. These are, from certain perspectives, no less “bizarre” than claims of vampire encounters in New Orleans, or ancient pelt rituals among Baltic lycanthropies. So, one has to wonder then, why there is sometimes an academic hesitancy towards the paranormal in general, and monsters more specifically. One might only surmise that this attitude will fade as paranormal subjects are demarginalized by wider social interest in the field. That said, academics need not wait for subjects to become mainstream.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS ON NEW WAYS FORWARD

Let me conclude, then, by returning to the opening question, “What if we approach the field assuming monsters are real?” By pursuing that question with the methodology of phenomenology, I believe we will discover new frontiers of study. On the one hand, taking the phenomenological approach allows scholars to shift beyond reductive analyses of religious traditions that have monsters as part of their existing religious frameworks. It also allows us to engage contemporary real-life reports about monster encounters, which in some cases are leading people (and sometimes entire communities) to create new visions of ultimate reality and religious truth. So, too, this invitation to engage in the phenomenological study of monsters requires us to examine and reflect on our own biases; to interrogate our own stakes in cultural conformity, and to sit with our own consciousness about what we take, personally, to be possible or really real.

And as I signaled in the introduction of this article, I believe we will find that religious frameworks informed by belief in monsters will sometimes yield revisions and innovations in *religious ethics*. For example, belief in monsters of the cryptozoological sort (like Bigfoot or Loch Ness) may result in new articulations of—and appreciation for—environmental ethics. Namely, if there are hidden creatures in our woodlands and lakes, those who believe in such creatures may find a new appreciation for protecting natural habits where such creatures (secretly) flourish. Consider, also, how belief in monsters (or otherworldly creatures) might serve to reconceive concepts of personhood. For example, contemporary discourses about

³⁷ Bader, Baker, and Mencken, 179.

extraterrestrials, extradimensional, and non-human intelligences are heuristically requiring cultures to adjust their thinking about who (and what) we might count as a person. Such social and moral concerns may not seem like standard ethical inquiries, but where they are inspired by religious beliefs, we need to attend to them as scholars of religion.

To be clear, I am not arguing against the place of critical or reductive theories in monster studies or religious studies. I simply find that a robust study of monsters (and religious phenomena more generally) should not undersell the importance of phenomenological analyses. A phenomenological approach allows us to better appreciate why belief in monsters can function as one part of a religious worldview. And given that religious worldviews have the power to shape intellectual, social, and moral perspectives, belief in monsters is no small thing. Indeed, as the sociological data suggests, various beliefs in monsters (and other paranormal subjects) are meaningful to a wide variety of people. For that reason alone, monsters deserve our attention—and as a matter of professionalism, phenomenology provides an approach to study monsters that avoids ridicule and marginalization. But perhaps most intriguing of all, the phenomenological method allows us to study monsters from the perspective that they are, indeed, real.

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