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## Comparing Themes in Supernatural and Left Behind

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## Comparing Themes in *Supernatural* and *Left Behind*

### **Introduction**

In recent years, religious undertones have permeated American popular culture. Television, movies, and books are all drawn to religious themes such as Angels, The Rapture, and the battle between Heaven and Hell. While the fight between good and evil is a popular theme, many religious based mediums have very different goals. For example, the television show *Supernatural* was created to entertain people, specifically millennials. *Supernatural* portrays characters that face the same questions that many millennials face when it comes to religion, which allows the television series to remain entertaining while grappling with many religious themes. While *Supernatural* portrays many religious themes with the goal to entertain, the *Left Behind* book series is a guide for those who are preparing for The Rapture. This book series contains very prominent themes about evangelical Christianity. Even though each of these mediums have very different agendas, they also have some similarities. Both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* have themes of violence that play to an overarching narrative between good and evil. Additionally, they both create a hierarchy of religions with Christianity at the top. Both simultaneously have a large amount of action-packed, violent scenes to draw in the consumer as well as religious imagery that makes Christianity seem to be good and all other religions seem to be evil. Even though the *Left Behind* series and the television show *Supernatural* seem completely different, with different audiences and different goals, they both have the two overarching themes towards violence and placing Christianity at the top of the hierarchy of religions by playing into the good versus evil narrative with Christianity being the good, and all other religions being the evil.

## ***Supernatural and Left Behind Overview***

*Supernatural* is the story of two brothers, Sam and Dean Winchester, who hunt supernatural beings that bring havoc to the people of America. The supernatural phenomena that they encounter include a range of demons, monsters, and spirits. The story begins when the brothers are in their early 20s. Sam, the younger one, is in college, and Dean arrives to surprise Sam with news that their father never returned from a “hunting” trip, meaning he never came home after going to fight a monster. This news, along with Sam’s girlfriend being killed by the same demon that killed the brothers’ mother, sparks their journey that the viewers have followed through twelve seasons that are still airing in 2017. *Supernatural* first aired on The CW in 2005. The first few seasons focus primarily on Sam and Dean fighting enemies from different religions, myths, and folklore. In the later seasons, the series focuses on the fight between Heaven and Hell and the eventual war that will come, Armageddon.

*Supernatural*’s target audience is generally Americans between the ages of twelve to thirty-two. In the book, *Millennial Rising*, by Neil Howe and William Strauss, the authors introduced the term millennial. They argued that Millennials were a group of people who were born in the range of 1970s to late 1990s. This group of people all seem to share the same cultural values. Having such a large group of people with these same values is very important to various groups such as the media, businesses, political organizations, and religions.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have looked at the religious tendencies of Millennials. Many have concluded that Millennials’ relationship with religion is not traditional. For example, it seems that it is no

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<sup>1</sup> Strauss, William, and Neil Howe. 2000. *Millennial rising*. New York: Vintage.

longer the standard to go to church every Sunday and pray every night before bed. Stephen Prothero, a professor from Boston University, has found that among millennials, there is a “widespread discomfort with traditional religion, or at least with certain dimensions of traditional religion — dimensions that many would see as key to religious belief systems: dogma, divinity, and Heaven.”<sup>2</sup> Prothero goes on to talk about the ways in which each of these ideas play into the Millennials’ beliefs, such as Millennials not focusing as much on Heaven, or an afterlife, because they are more concerned with the life they are living on earth.

Additionally, authors have researched Millennials’ interest in Angels. In the article, “Angels Among Us,” written by Nancy Gibbs and Sam Allis, the authors look into how America has in recent years become more interested in Angels and have asked a lot more questions about Angels than in the past. Gibbs and Allis point out that the recent resurgence of interest in Angels is mostly related to popular cultural and not theology. This theme fits in with Prothero’s argument that Millennials are, in general, not thinking about religion very much. They conclude their article with some general demographic information about Angels in America: 69% of Americans believe in Angels, 46% believe in having a guardian angel, and 49% of people believe that fallen Angels and the Devil exist. These statistics show that a large portion of Americans believe in Angels. *Supernatural* plays off of this fascination and makes Angels a crucial theme throughout the series.

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<sup>2</sup> Stein, Louisa Ellen. 2010. "What you don't know": *Supernatural* fan vids and millennial theology. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0158>. doi:10.3983/twc.2010.0158

The *Left Behind* series is about the people on Earth who were not taken to Heaven after The Rapture. It focuses on a specific group of people who were left behind and their journey navigating their way through the new Earth. Their loved ones, who were strong in the faith, disappeared and went to Heaven, which left the world in chaos. The main characters convert to dispensationalist evangelical Christianity to make it through the violence. Dispensationalist believe that God has divided history into a set of periods, and humanity is responsible with being in charge of the revelation that God has given for that time. Due to their conversion to evangelical Christianity, the group eventually makes it to Heaven. While still on Earth, the group survives by learning Christian practices and prophetic scripture to reach their goals. Because of this use of Christian imagery, the interpretation of the book has been a guide for those who want to prepare for The Rapture.

The audience for *Left Behind* is different than the audience for *Supernatural*. In the book, *Rapture Culture Left Behind in Evangelical America*, by Amy Johnson Frykholm, the author points out that most of the readers of *Left Behind* are “white, evangelical in religious orientation, and committed to belief in The Rapture and The Tribulation before they open the first page.”<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, she says that most readers are a part of the group of “dispensationalist premillennialism,” which is the believe that Jesus will return in this period.<sup>4</sup> She also points out that often times, this series is not read by an isolated individual, but within particular social networks such as churches or home families. She says,

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<sup>3</sup> Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture Left Behind in Evangelical America*, pg. 67.

<sup>4</sup> , pg. 15,

“*Left Behind* is read and interpreted in the context of these families with their shared world views, their tensions, and their disagreements.”<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that the *Left Behind* books are a part of popular culture because it illustrates the influence the series had on American Evangelicals.

## **Historiography**

Many people have studied both *Supernatural* and the *Left Behind* book series. *Supernatural* interests scholars because of the religious themes added to the plot line. *Left Behind*, however, is interesting because the books are popular despite the prophetic religious themes. Scholars study both series for their violent content and because they both placed Christianity over other religions. The intention of many of these studies is to show how religion has become more present in recent popular culture mediums. I intend to add a comparison of the similar themes found in both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind*.

The book, *Plotting Apocalypse: Reading, Agency, and Identity in the Left Behind Series*, by Jennie Chapman, contains a detailed analysis of the *Left Behind* Series. As a sixteen-book series, which started in 1995, *Left Behind* is about The Rapture and the battle between the antichrist and Jesus. Chapman points out that the series sold many more copies than originally expected. Chapman notes that this is intriguing because even though the books are fiction, they still lay out a clear path for what to do when the end comes. The main group of characters convert to evangelicalism and use the Bible to discern clues about how they can make it through The Rapture. In Chapman’s opinion, the reason the books sold so well despite the clear

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<sup>5</sup>, pg. 40.

evangelical agenda is what makes them worth analysis. Chapman argues that the series portrays the perfect evangelical community and its ideals — according to the authors — that the reader should try to adhere to so they can survive the apocalypse.

In the book, *Rapture Culture Left Behind in Evangelical America*, the author, Amy Johnson Frykholm, discusses the lives of people who read and followed the *Left Behind* series as a guide. She conducted her research by listening to the stories of the lives of the readers and by going to church with them. The aim of her research was to “seek the multiple meanings of The Rapture in its multiple transactions — between text and reader, between readers and their social networks, and in the fluid realm of text reader, and culture.”<sup>6</sup> Frykholm found that oftentimes, the readers of the *Left Behind* series were more scared of the end times than readers of other texts, such as the Book of Revelations, because the series is a view directly into our modern world. She says,

[o]ften readers narrate their own integration with the novels as a spiritual turning point where they realize how pressing and significant God’s plan for history is, how imminent the end may be. They feel compelled to share this concern with others, with unsaved or religiously marginal people in their lives who need to know that The Rapture is imminent and also with fellow believers who need to share the message.<sup>7</sup>

She goes on to say that because of this sharing of the novels, the series became its own cultural force.

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<sup>6</sup> Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rapture Culture Left Behind in Evangelical America*, pg. 11

<sup>7</sup>, pg. 11

In an article “Demon Hunters and Hegemony: Portrayal of Religion on the CW’s *Supernatural*,” by Erika Engstrom and Joseph M. Valenzano III, the authors conduct a deep analysis of the first three seasons of *Supernatural* before the overarching Armageddon storyline picks up. In numerical data, their findings can be found in this chart:

TABLE 1  
Appearance of Christianity, Western (Judeo, Muslim, and Hindu) by Episode Frequency

Item/Element	Number of Episodes*
Christianity	2 (33.3%)
Crosses - altars, pulpits, or walls	2 (33.3%)
Bibles or religious books	14 (233%)
Baptism	4 (66.7%)
Prayer - rosary, silent prayer	2 (33.3%)
Western (Judeo)	2 (33.3%)
Salt	1 (16.7%)
Holy water	1 (16.7%)
Specialized crosses (lighting objects, including Catholic crosses with salt)	1 (16.7%)
Fire	1 (16.7%)
Muslim	4 (66.7%)
Quran	1 (16.7%)
Prayer	3 (50%)
Hindu	2 (33.3%)
No mention of religion	1 (16.7%)
Hinduism	1 (16.7%)
Other	0 (0%)

\*Note: \*Statistical significance could not be determined due to small sample size percentages may not equal 100%.

As shown in this chart, the authors were able to conclude that the show did a good job of presenting many religions within one show without being a “religious” TV show. They also concluded that the show presented religions in a unique way. However, their research also shows the use of certain Catholic aspects to fight evil, such as salt, holy water, a crucifix, and fire. Furthermore, the chart shows that non-Christian religions create the monsters that the brothers have to fight. The authors show that *Supernatural* portrays Catholicism as good and other religions as evil.<sup>8</sup>

The article, “What you don't know’: *Supernatural* fan vids and millennial theology” by Louisa Ellen Stein, is about the ways that Millennials deal with religion and more specifically

<sup>8</sup> Engstrom, Erika, and Joseph M. Valenzano. 2010. "Demon Hunters and Hegemony: Portrayal of Religion on the CW's *Supernatural*." *Journal Of Media & Religion* 9, no. 2: 67-83. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2016).

how they deal with religion in terms of popular culture mediums. Stein starts by describing how some Millennials are dealing with religion today, saying that key religious aspects such as dogma, divinity, and Heaven, make a lot of Millennials uncomfortable. *Supernatural* reflects the questioning of shared morals that many Millennials believe. She finds that Millennials have used *Supernatural* as a way to ask questions about the role of religion, dogma, faith, and belief. She continues by saying that Millennials have even used *Supernatural* as a part of their discourse because the television show gave many Millennials the space to ask questions about religion.<sup>9</sup>

In the article, “Angel invasion From Angels to Aliens: Teenagers, the Media, and the Supernaturals,” by Lynn Schofield Clark, the author looks at the way that teenagers are affected by television shows that portray a multitude of supernatural beings together. She specifically mentions *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, which has supernatural beings such as vampires, werewolves, and Angels living in the same universe. Clark argued about how TV shows about the supernatural play into the religious lives of teenagers in America. She concludes that a teenager is more likely to bring the possibilities of the supernatural into their life when their family is far from the dominant culture and the institutions that regulate its power, such as the government and the church.

## **Violence**

Both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* contain high amounts of violence. This violence includes violent acts committed against other humans, non-human beings, and the earth. Since

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<sup>9</sup> Stein, Louisa Ellen. 2010. "What you don't know": *Supernatural* fan vids and millennial theology. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 4. <http://dx.doi.org/10.3983/twc.2010.0158>.

*Supernatural* is a show on television in modern America, it is not surprising that it contains violence because of the high amounts of violence in almost all American popular culture mediums. However, it is surprising that the *Left Behind* series has violence because the main agenda is conversion to evangelical Christianity. Evangelical Christianity is a form of Protestantism that focusses on the teachings of the bible. Furthermore, there is a specific type of violence that connects *Supernatural* and *Left Behind*. The violence in both is a part of a greater narrative of the fight between good and evil, and more specifically, the apocalyptic battle between Heaven and Hell. In the book, *Terror In the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence*, the author, Mark Juergensmeyer, discussed the idea of the Cosmic War. He argues that there are “images of divine warfare” that are in religious violence and that these images come from centuries of religious traditions and texts.<sup>10</sup> Juergensmeyer says, “I call such images ‘cosmic’ because they are larger than life. They evoke great battles of the legendary past, and they relate to metaphysical conflict between good and evil.”<sup>11</sup> The great battles that Juergensmeyer talks about can be seen in both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind*.

There are daily acts of violence that can be seen from episode to episode, or chapter to chapter, but all of these violent acts are committed in the name of the greater war between Heaven and Hell. For *Supernatural*, the demons that are introduced in Season 1 that Sam and Dean fight off are doing the work of the Devil which leads the brothers to the Cosmic War of the entire series – a war that is bigger than just the monsters they are killing in each episode.

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<sup>10</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2000; repr. 2004), 151.

<sup>11</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* , 151.

Similarly, the characters in *Left Behind* have to commit acts of violence in many ways to survive in order to see Jesus return to Earth to fight the Antichrist. The conflict between good and evil is prominent in the violence that is committed in both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind*.

Having an overarching, apocalyptic cosmic war drives the narratives of both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* forward by giving the characters a victory to look towards.

Juergensmeyer argues that:

The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and... it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of cosmic war this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope itself.<sup>12</sup>

The characters in both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* commit horrible act of violence in the name of impending Cosmic War. In both, the characters feel that they are a part of a greater Cosmic War between Heaven and Hell and between good and evil that no longer just involves the main characters but all of humanity.

*Supernatural* contains overt and sometimes gruesome violent episodes. While violence within a television show is less surprising than within the *Left Behind* series, the it is still worth note. The violence in *Supernatural* is different than the violence of many other television shows because it is about the Cosmic War. The episode titled, "Sex and Violence," from Season 4 Episode 14, is particularly violent. The premise of this episode is that Sam and Dean go to a small town in Iowa to follow-up on a string of murders. They find out the villain of the episode is a siren who craves love convinces people to kill to be with the siren. While this may seem like a

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<sup>12</sup> Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* , 158.

pretty standard episode, it actually is quite violent. The string of murders all involve a man who has killed a woman that he loved. In the opening scene the viewer sees the first murder which depicts Adam killing his wife Vicky. Vicky accepts an invitation to a party without consulting Adam. This infuriates Adam, and leads him to beat her to death with a meat tenderizer. The next murder is of a mother, who is killed by her son. The son lives with his mother full-time to take care of her health problems. This is the first murder that the audience gets to see the relationship between the killer and the siren. The siren is a stripper that the man brings home, and after they have sex, she says to him that they can be together forever if the son kills his mother. He agrees and takes a fire poker into the bedroom of his mother and beats her to death. The final violent scene of the episode ends up being between Sam and Dean. The siren takes the form of a man and presents himself in a way that makes the brothers want to fight for the siren's perfect brotherly love. The last fight between the two brothers is particularly violent because they get in both a physically and verbally abusive fight. They trade words that they know will hurt the other almost worse than their punches could, and in the end, Sam is barely saved by an outsider stepping in when Dean is about to kill him with an axe.<sup>13</sup>

While every episode contains violence, this one is particularly gruesome. It has intimate violence between humans instead of a monster or a demon directly inflicting pain on others, which blurs the line between good and evil. Each case of violence comes from relationships where each person seems to truly love the one that they killed or attempted to kill. Furthermore, each weapon used requires the killer to have a very active and intimate role in the murder which causes the murder to be incredibly gruesome. Also interesting, is that "Sex and Violence" is so

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<sup>13</sup> Supernatural, Episode 14, Season 4, 2009.

violent because it is one of the many episodes that does not call on any Christian religious pieces. Furthermore, the monster they are fighting, a siren, stems from Greek mythology. In an episode that is particularly violent, and contains multiple scenes depicting sex, the writers chose to not include any Christian imagery and make the evil come from a different religion. This promotes both violence and the perception that other religions besides Christianity are violent and evil.

Similarly, the *Left Behind* series also includes violence. In the book, *Plotting Apocalypse: Reading, Agency, and Identity in the Left Behind Series*, Jennie Chapman, the author, says, “The series therefore has an overtly pedagogical objective: to instruct its readers in the way of dispensational hermeneutics [interpretations of literature, especially the Bible] so that they too can discern the prophetic ‘truth’ contained in the Bible and hence avoid the terrible fate of being ‘left behind.’”<sup>14</sup> It seems that in American culture today, other religions are perceived as violent - such as Islam - whereas the predominant religion of the West (Christianity) is seen as non-violent and peaceful. Islam, for example, is seen as incredibly violent after terrorist attacks such as the attacks carried out on September 11, 2001. Why, then, are books and television shows with clear Christian and religious influences also full of violence?

In the book, *Rapture Exposed: The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*, Barbara Rossing argues that in *Left Behind*, there was violence towards both people and the earth. Rossing believes that this violence against the earth was unnecessary because God loves the earth and would not destroy it. The violence committed against the earth had to do with the way

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<sup>14</sup> Chapman, Jennie. *Plotting Apocalypse : Reading, Agency, and Identity in the Left Behind Series*. Jackson, US: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Accessed November 10, 2016. ProQuest ebrary, pg. 5

the main characters treated the environment. For example, they drove hummers and stopped caring about recycling or their trash. Since God and Jesus are mostly missing from the series, it promotes the idea that Earth, the world on which we as humans exist, is evil and that is why violent things happen here. Since Heaven is the place where everyone is trying to get, it becomes the good, and everything else, including the earth, becomes evil. Rossing says:

The world cannot be saved — that is the basic Rapture credo, proclaimed by televangelists, radio preachers, and best-selling end-times thrillers. Rapture proponents seem willing to live in the world with no more responsibility for caring for it than just letting the clock run out. They love to cite statistics about how the world is getting worse: crime is on the increase, wars and earthquakes are more frequent, the oceans are polluted, environmental degradation is worsening. To them, these ‘signs’ prove that the prophetic clock has counted down almost all the way and then they can soon escape.<sup>15</sup>

There are many violent acts committed against the earth in the series because the main characters no longer feel the need to take care of it. The earth will not matter once Christ returns to save them. *Left Behind* glorifies violence with the constant use and carrying of weapons and having bunkers full of weapons that the main characters either visit frequently or do not want to leave. While the book’s violence is very clear throughout the entire series, one time that the violence is rationalized is at the end of book one. The main character is talking to his daughter about the violence that they will have to face in the journey ahead of them. Their conversation is as follows:

‘But doesn’t part of you want to jump into the battle?’  
Rayford was intrigued but not sure. Chloe was more eager. ‘A cause,’ she said,  
‘something not just to die for but to live for.’

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<sup>15</sup> Rossing, Barbara R.. 2007. *The Rapture Exposed : The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. New York, US: Basic Books. Accessed November 14, 2016. ProQuest ebrary. pg. 13

‘Yes!’”

‘A group, a team, a force,’ Chloe said. ‘You’ve got it. A force.’

‘The Tribulation,’ Bruce said.

‘So your little group inside the group, a sort of Green Berrets, would be your Tribulation force.’<sup>16</sup>

Here, the authors are glorifying the violence that will come for the main characters.

Furthermore, the main characters believe that anyone who tries to remain peaceful in this time of war should not be trusted. In a stream of consciousness from the main character, he thinks,

[w]hat scared him most was that it seemed, from what Bruce was teaching, that many people would be deceived during these days. Whoever came forward with proclamations of peace and unity was suspect. There would be no peace. There would be no unity. This was the beginning of the end, and all would be chaos from now on.<sup>17</sup>

This attitude towards peace subtly puts down any possibility of the main characters trying to lead a peaceful life until Jesus returns to Earth. They must commit acts of violence to be saved.

These themes of violence in the series are dangerous since the point of the books is to prepare people for The Rapture in real life. The series promotes the idea that man can ravage the Earth, that caring for the Earth is not important, and that to survive The Rapture, a multitude of weaponry is needed. When talking about the authors of *Left Behind*, Rossing said, “[t]heir justifications for focusing on such violent and drastic scenarios is that we are already living at the

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<sup>16</sup> Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, (Wheaton, Illinois, Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.) 1995, pg. 420.

<sup>17</sup> Tim LaHaye, Jerry B. Jenkins, *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth’s Last Days*, pg. 344.

brink of the end-times.”<sup>18</sup> This mentality promotes the idea that violence is happening all around us already, so people should prepare themselves with more violence. Furthermore, Rossing said, “Rapture and Armageddon scenarios tap into Americans’ love for disaster films and survivalist plot lines.”<sup>19</sup> The Cosmic War that is depicted also taps into the consumers love for violence and the fight for something bigger than the individual. While the main goal of the book is to guide people in the evangelical religion, there is also some intention to entertain, and using violence is one way to make books entertaining. In addition to Rossing’s observations about violence in *Left Behind*, Chapman has also commented on violence as a theme in the series. Chapman said:

Thus while high-octane action sequences, intriguing conspiracies, and personal rivalries and romances may titillate audiences, the overarching purpose of the novels is deadly serious: to warn of what will happen at the end of history, to show how the events preceding it are described in the Bible, and to use unrepentant readers to ‘get right with Christ’ before it is too late.<sup>20</sup>

Adding violence to this book series made it popular in American culture. Additionally, the violence added a level of appeal to readers who originally would not have read the book without it. Those who were reading for the religious themes also were supplied a good guide on how to be righteously violent.

### **Christianity Hierarchy Over Other Religions.**

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<sup>18</sup> Rossing, Barbara R.. 2007. *The Rapture Exposed : The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. New York, US: Basic Books. Accessed November 14, 2016. ProQuest ebrary. pg. 15

<sup>19</sup> Rossing, Barbara R.. 2007. *The Rapture Exposed : The Message of Hope in the Book of Revelation*. New York, US: Basic Books. Accessed November 14, 2016. ProQuest ebrary. pg. 4

<sup>20</sup> Chapman, Jennie. *Plotting Apocalypse : Reading, Agency, and Identity in the Left Behind Series*. Jackson, US: University Press of Mississippi, 2013. Accessed November 10, 2016. ProQuest ebrary, pg. 5

That *Left Behind's* goal is to convert its audience to evangelical Christianity is clear. Because of this goal, the books naturally place evangelical Christianity above all other religions. *Supernatural* however, does not have this same goal, which is interesting that the show also places Christianity as the main religion that promotes good, healing, and a solution, while portraying other religions as evil, dark, and the creators of monsters.

The tale of good and evil appears in every *Supernatural* episode. Good and evil as a theme which is not surprising because most popular culture storylines follow this, but it is noteworthy in a story that contains religious elements. Engstrom and Valenzano point out that:

This classic 'good vs. evil' plot structure invokes Christian/Judeo-Christian themes based on biblical references to specific Angels and demons. The centrality of this plot line in the fictional world of *Supernatural*, where elements and characters from different religious lore exist, also creates the impression that christianity holds a higher status in the hierarchy of religions.<sup>21</sup>

Even though the *Left Behind* series favors evangelical Christianity, it seems that *Supernatural* favors Catholicism over Protestantism. Many times, the main characters have to use Christian imagery like holy water to fight off demons. In the television show, water can only become holy by a Catholic priest blessing it or by the hunters using proper Catholic artifacts and blessings. Furthermore, Catholic imagery such as rosaries, crucifixes, and Latin incantations are also used. Engstrom and Valenzano point out that "the repeated use of holy water and Latin, both

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<sup>21</sup> Engstrom, Erika, and Joseph M. Valenzano. 2010. "Demon Hunters and Hegemony: Portrayal of Religion on the CW's *Supernatural*." *Journal Of Media & Religion* 9, no. 2: 67-83. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2016). pg. 76

decidedly Catholic in origin, furthers the effectiveness of this particular religion and its practices against the main enemies of the series' protagonists."<sup>22</sup>

These Catholic themes are seen very clearly in Season 1, Episode 4, titled "Phantom Traveler." In this episode, Sam and Dean fight a demon that possesses passengers or pilots on a plane in order to cause the plane to crash. This episode presents the first time the brothers fight against a demon thus creating an episode filled with Christian and Catholic imagery. The brothers originally believe a demon might be the cause of the plane crashes, because when they examine the wreckage of one of the affected planes, they find sulfur. Throughout the series *Supernatural*, sulfur is a sign of demons. Sulfur is often associated with Hell. For example, Revelations 21:8 talks about people going to Hell as being thrown into a lake that burns with fire and sulfur.<sup>23</sup> Sam and Dean follow many leads that bring them to a plane with the demon, although they do not know who the demon is. In order to find out, the brothers talk to passengers on the plane saying, "Christo," to try to get the demon to react. "Christo" is the Latin word for Christ, and when they finally say it to the person who was possessed by the demon (the co-pilot), his eyes turn black. To save the people of the plane, Sam and Dean convince the flight attendant to help them draw the co-pilot to the back of the plane where they use a crucifix and holy water to exorcise the demon from the co-pilot's body. Since this is the first episode where Sam and Dean have to fight a demon directly, the show is full of the very obvious Catholic references,

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<sup>22</sup> Engstrom, Erika, and Joseph M. Valenzano. 2010. "Demon Hunters and Hegemony: Portrayal of Religion on the CW's *Supernatural*." *Journal Of Media & Religion* 9, no. 2: 67-83. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2016). pg. 77

<sup>23</sup> Obayashi, Hiroshi. "Afterlife: Christian Concepts." In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, 156-159. Vol. 1. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005. *Gale Virtual Reference Library* (accessed November 15, 2016).

such as speaking in Latin, holy water, and a crucifix. Even though the series favors Catholicism over Protestantism, it still favors Christianity in general over all other religions.

*Supernatural* not only promotes Catholicism, but it also marginalizes other religions.

Engstrom and Valenzano give many examples of this:

For example, Hinduism was represented by the flesh-eating *rakshasa* in “Everybody Loves a Clown” (Episode 2.2), and Islam by the life-draining *djinn*, a creature mentioned throughout the Koran, as noted by Sam in “What Is and Never Should Be” (Episode 2.20). Though not mentioned specifically as such, we determined that Buddhism was represented by the *tulpa*, a thought form or golem associated with meditative practices of Tibetan monks, in “Hell House”(Episode 1.17). “Shadows” (Episode 1.16) includes a mention to Zoroastrianism as the source of shadow demons called *daevas*.<sup>24</sup>

In the overarching narrative mentioned before between good and evil, *Supernatural* almost always portrays Christianity as good, and all other religions as evil. This may not have been deliberate, or with a religious agenda in mind, which is what makes this theme unique.

*Left Behind* also promotes Christianity over other religions. However, the authors choose to do so with Protestant Evangelical Christianity at the top of the hierarchy and not Catholicism like *Supernatural*. One example of a different religion being portrayed as less than or worse than Christianity in *Left Behind* is seen through the storyline about the Rabbi named Tsion Ben-Judah. After having a faith changing experience, Ben-Judah converts to Evangelical Christianity and starts teaching others to do the same. After the leader of a group of Evangelical converts in Chicago dies a violent death at the start of World War III, Ben-Judah becomes the new leader of

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<sup>24</sup> Engstrom, Erika, and Joseph M. Valenzano. 2010. "Demon Hunters and Hegemony: Portrayal of Religion on the CW's *Supernatural*." *Journal Of Media & Religion* 9, no. 2: 67-83. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 14, 2016). pg. 78

the group. As the new leader, he uses this power to convince and teach other Jews that Jesus is the Messiah. In this story, we see Ben-Judah portraying Jesus and Christianity above Judaism. The authors make this theme very apparent by having a rabbi convert to Christianity. The authors then reaffirm that Christianity is better than Judaism by giving him authority to convert others to the ‘winning’ and ‘good’ side of religion.

Not only does *Left Behind* create a hierarchy of religions with Christianity at the top, it creates a hierarchy of all social organizations with Christianity at the top. The ideas that LaHaye and Jenkins had while they were writing causes a dichotomy between Christians and non-Christians, or in their minds, between good and evil. In an interview on Jerry Falwell’s show *Listen America*, LaHaye said, “[w]e’re in a religious war and we need to aggressively oppose secular humanism; these people are as religiously motivated as we are and they are filled with the devil.”<sup>25</sup> Here, LaHaye is speaking out about the violence that is committed against all other humans that are not Christian. Frykholm points out that this means “[h]e [LaHaye] believes that secularists are in a quest for ‘world domination’ and that Christians have no choice but to fight back.”<sup>26</sup> This is a place within *Left Behind* that the violence in the books, and the violence that the audience believes needs to be committed, intersects with the books ability to place Christianity at the top of all social groups.

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<sup>25</sup> LaHaye quoted in Jane Lampman, “Apocalyptic—and Atop the Bestseller Lists,” *Christian Science Monitor*, August 29, 2002, 14.

<sup>26</sup> Amy Johnson Frykholm, *Rature Culture Left Behind in Evangelical America*, pg. 175

## Conclusion

In conclusion, both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* use tools to accomplish their goals that are somewhat unique to their medium. While *Supernatural's* goal is to entertain, *Left Behind's* goal is to convince its readers that The Rapture is coming and to convert readers to evangelical Christianity in order to be saved. It is interesting that *Supernatural* uses religion as a main theme in the storyline. Not only is there an overarching story line of a Cosmic War, as the scholar Juergensmeyer calls it, between Heaven and Hell, but almost every episode draws on monsters from different religions. Even though different religions are drawn on, it seems that whenever there is a religion besides Christianity in an episode, the religion is depicted as being the evil problem that the main characters have to solve. One episode of *Supernatural* that does a good job of showing how Christianity is portrayed within the show is Episode 4 of Season 1, titled, "Phantom Traveler." It is the first episode where the main characters have to fight against a demon, so the Catholic imagery used to battle it is very clear. They speak in Latin, use a crucifix, and use holy water to identify and perform an exorcism on the demon. The use of Catholicism to fight against a demon is a subtle way of promoting Christianity as a religion that can be used to fight against evil. On the other hand, a particularly violent episode of *Supernatural* is Episode 14 from Season 4 titled, "Sex and Violence." In this episode, there are no Christian symbols, and the evil character is from Greek mythology which shows other religions as being lower than Christianity. Furthermore, *Supernatural* marginalizes other religions by continuing to use Christianity as a way to solve their problems, and portraying all other religions as the cause of their problems. In the grand narrative of the fight between good and evil, Christianity becomes the good, and all other religions become the evil.

*Left Behind* is a book series about The Rapture written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins. The books' primary goal is to educate its readers on why they should convert to Evangelical Christianity, and prepare them for The Rapture. Where *Supernatural's* portrayal of Christianity as the only good religion seems subtler, *Left Behind* is very obvious in making sure the reader knows that Evangelicalism is the only religion to follow if you want to be saved. *Left Behind* is also incredibly violent. The authors promote a view of the world being a violent place on the brink of war. This means that not only is violence against others justified, but also violence against the Earth is seen as necessary in order to survive. The main characters are told to be suspicious of anyone who promotes peace, and the authors in real life tell people that Christians are constantly fighting a war against secularists. At the end of the first book, the daughter of the main character talks to her father about how she is excited to start fighting in the Cosmic Wars that are about to come over the rest of the series. The promotion of Christianity over all other religions becomes very apparent in the story line of Tsion Ben-Judah. Ben-Judah is a Rabbi who, according to the book, realizes the errors of his ways and converts to Christianity. He is then put into a position of power so he can teach and convert others. Finally, the authors promote the idea that not only is Christianity better than all other religions, but that it is better than all other social organizations. Christians, the good, must fight against non-Christians, the evil, in order to be saved by Jesus.

Even though *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* have two different audiences and two very different goals, they both use the same tools and themes. Both mediums use high amounts of Christian imagery and violence to accomplish tasks and convey messages. Furthermore, both *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* create a hierarchy of religions with Christianity at the top with

symbols of being good, and all other religions below Christianity with symbols of being the evil. *Supernatural* and *Left Behind* differ in their portrayal of the specific hierarchy. *Left Behind* specifically promotes Evangelical Christianity whereas *Supernatural* promotes Catholicism. Also, *Left Behind* promotes Christianity in a very obvious way whereas *Supernatural* is subtler. Even though this hierarchy of religions looks slightly different across the two mediums, it is still note-worthy because of the clearly different goals and audiences of each. Additionally, it is interesting that two fiction stories seem to be completely different, yet have many of the same themes. The hierarchy of religions makes sense for *Left Behind*, but is a little more surprising for *Supernatural* because the show purposefully labels the main characters as non-religious so they can appear to be a non-religious television show. It seems that *Supernatural* is borrowing from religious aspects from *Left Behind*, while *Left Behind* is borrowing violence from *Supernatural*. These two mediums do not seem to make sense outside of their context, but when used properly, they help further each of their goals.

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## **Abstract**

This paper is a comparing of the television show *Supernatural*, and the book series *Left Behind*. I argue that both have very similar themes even though they are made for different audiences, and have different purposes. *Supernatural* is for entertainment, while *Left Behind* is written to help prepare and warn people of the coming rapture. Even with these two differences, both have themes of violence, and create a hierarchy of religions, with Christianity being at the top.