

HAUNTED MIDDLETOWN, USA:
AN ANALYSIS OF SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS OF
PROTESTANTS IN MUNCIE, INDIANA

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Abstract

In the early twenty-first century, Americans have been showing a high interest in ghosts and hauntings, as evidenced by the overwhelming amount of supernatural media available. Despite this, there has been little anthropological research specifically investigating the relationship between popular ghost beliefs and America's largest system of supernatural beliefs- Protestant Christianity. This study uses qualitative research methods to examine the beliefs of Protestants in Muncie, Indiana, and whether they participate in popular ghost culture. Results suggest that while Muncie Protestants do not generally believe in ghosts, they accept the possibility that demonic forces can haunt locations and interact with humans. Most of those informants who do believe in ghosts base their beliefs on personal experiences. However, in the case of demonic beliefs, this was not necessary. Informants state that their beliefs about demons are based **on** Christian media sources, such as literature

and the Internet, rather than church teachings. Although the Muncie Protestants interviewed here consider it dangerous to participate directly in efforts to communicate with the deceased, most consistently watch reality television shows about the paranormal, as the media provides a degree of separation in which they can safely participate in ghost culture.

Chapter I: Introduction

Ghosts in Contemporary America

More than forty years ago, historian Keith Thomas claimed that "the social function of belief in ghosts is obviously much diminished'" (1971:605). In a culture like the United States, one that is increasingly dependent on technology and science to answer the mysteries of our world, one might expect this statement to be true today. Yet in the early 21st century, there is much evidence to suggest that people have not abandoned their interest or beliefs in the supernatural. Folklore pertaining to ghosts and hauntings in fact plays an undeniable role in contemporary American culture.

Far from just a Halloween treat, ghosts haunt Americans every day in popular culture. The theme of the paranormal has been the subject of films since the very beginning of cinema. The first horror movie featuring ghosts is thought to be silent British film

The Haunted Castle, which premiered in 1897. Hollywood has been steadily pumping out ghost flicks since the 1930s. Over the last few decades, American films about ghosts range from the spooky, like *A Haunting in Connecticut* (2009) *The Grudge* (2004), to the silly, like *Ghosts from Girlfriend's Past* (2009), to the romantic, such as *Ghost* (1990), and even the inspirational, such as *Field of Dreams* (1989).

Americans aren't just watching ghosts at the movie theaters, though. Perhaps the best place to observe America's fascination with ghosts is on television. As independent cable stations proliferated between the 1990s to the present, so has the number of reality television shows devoted to the supernatural. Besides the SyFy Channel's popular plumbers-by-day and paranormal-investigators-by night, Jason Hawes and Grant Wilson of *Ghost Hunters*, there is also *Ghost Adventurers*, *Paranormal State*, and *Ghost Lab*. There are shows where the informants detail their personal paranormal encounters, such as *Ghostly Encounters*, *Celebrity Ghost Stories*, and *A Haunting*, as well as historically-based documentary shows, such as *Haunted History* and *America's Most Haunted Places*. Some

programs, like *Scariest Places on Earth*, had people stay in dark, supposedly haunted locations and film their experiences with night vision cameras. Other shows focus on mediums and portray them using their abilities to communicate with the spirit world, such as *Crossing Over with John Edwards* and *Psychic at Large*. These examples do not include all of the paranormal shows that feature ghosts as one part of their exploration into the uncanny, like *Destination Truth* and *Encounters*. These are just a few of the many examples of ghost reality television that have been featured from 2001-2011 (see Appendix C).

With reality shows appearing on such a variety of networks, including A&E, Fox, MTV, Biography, Discovery, Syfy, HBO, National Geographic, the Travel Channel, the History Channel and even Animal Planet, it seems no network is complete without providing the possibility of ghosts to their viewers. Ghostly images and stories sometimes even end up on the news, such as the CNN sightings of Michael Jackson's ghost at Neverland Ranch (YouTube) or the blue shadow caught on the surveillance camera at a gas station in Parma, Ohio (YouTube). There are also popular fictional

shows about hauntings, such as *Ghost Whisperer*, *Medium*, and *American Horror Story*, suggesting that sometimes Americans just enjoy a good supernatural story. However, the prominence of ghost reality shows implies the American's are particularly interested in exploring the possibility of actual hauntings as part of their entertainment intake.

Ghosts have also moved beyond television into more cutting edge popular technologies. In 2006, iPod users were offered instructions for using digital music devices to communicate with the dead (Uberreview). More recently, Smartphone owners can now seek out supernatural activity just like their favorite ghost hunter television stars. Owners of Windows 7 phones can download the Spudpickle's Ghost Radar app, a free application that claims to use "sensors that measure electromagnetic fields, vibrations, and sounds" and is believed to be "as effective as an EMF (electromagnetic field) detector," a device commonly used in ghost detection (Spudpickle). Even if a person does not have a Smartphone, individuals interested doing their own supernatural investigations have easy access to the

same technologies. The shopping website Amazon sells a large variety of ghost detecting equipment, including EMF detectors, thermometers designed to detect cold spots, motion sensors and electronic voice phenomenon listeners. These products are sold either individually or grouped together in special ghost hunting kits. With so many ways of participating in popular ghost culture, it seems technology-hungry Americans cannot get enough of the paranormal.

Supernatural Scholarship and Religious Context

Popular media culture suggests that the supernatural retains an important social function in modern American culture. Yet until recently, the study of the paranormal in contemporary popular Western culture has been largely ignored by academia. In the 1970s, Gladys-Marie Fry contributed her classic oral history account of 19th century African Americans, the Ku Klux Klan, and spirit beliefs, *Night Riders in Black Folk History* (1975). More scholarship pertaining to beliefs about the supernatural in North America, Europe and other settler societies began to appear in the mid-1990s,

primarily in the fields of folklore (Walker 1995), sociology (Gordon 1997), history (Finucane 1996) and literary criticism (Brogan 1995). This trend continued from the late 1990s to the present, with significant contributions from early American historians and literary critics (Bergland 2000; Richardson 2003; Weinstock 2004) and a growing interest from cultural studies fields (Motz 1998; Gillian 1999; Anderson 2004; Tucker 2005, 2007; Goldstein 2007). Marilyn Motz's even went so far as to assert that "Ghosts are becoming fashionable in academic discourse these days," (1998:1). Recently, a sociological study revealed that some two-thirds of all Americans hold paranormal beliefs, from the acceptance of ghosts to the presence of alien abductors (Bader, et al 2011).

Yet, despite anthropology's long history of analyzing the supernatural beliefs of other cultures, comparatively little work had been done on the ghost beliefs of North Americans. Within anthropology, the study of ghosts, spirits and modernity takes a cross-cultural turn with Colleen Boyd and Coll Thrush's edited volume, *Phantom Past, Indigenous Presence:*

Native Ghosts in North American Culture and History (Boyd and Thrush 2011). Boyd's work, in particular, is based on ethnographic research concerning contemporary Native and non-native beliefs about spirits (Boyd 2009; 2011). Nevertheless, few contemporary ethnographers have tackled the subject of what white Americans or Europeans believe about ghosts today. Notable exceptions include Robert Anderson's work in Iceland (2004) and Gillian Bennett's study of paranormal beliefs among elderly women in the United Kingdom (1999).

Not only is the American attraction to ghosts and hauntings a largely unexplored phenomenon in anthropology, it also has yet to be placed in the context of the culture's largest supernatural presence, religion. Popular culture often intertwines the two concepts of the otherworld. For instance, A&E's *Paranormal State* has depicted paranormal researchers praying during their investigations. There is also Discovery Channel's *Haunted*, where some episodes feature priests blessing possessed homes to rid them of evil spirits. However, there has been little research done looking at whether those members

of the American public that identifies as religious also profess a belief in ghosts. Amazingly, the Gallup Poll has done studies examining the differences in ghost beliefs between ages, gender, English-speaking country of residence and even political affiliation, but none that examines people's religious beliefs (Gallup 2005). Perhaps this is because there has been doubt in the academic world that the two realms of supernatural belief could so easily coexist. George Steiner professed that occult beliefs and practices such as ghosts and hauntings arose out of "the decay of religion" (Steiner in Kerr and Crow 1983:12). However, the dual presence of religion, most notably Christianity, and ghosts in popular culture clearly show that this is not the case for many American Protestant Christians.

When considering how ghost beliefs in popular culture might interact with the religious beliefs of the American public, the best course of action would be to look at one of the country's largest demographics- white, middle-class Protestants. The 2010 Gallup poll showed that 45% of Americans identified themselves as Protestants, and the 2010

Census claims 72% of Americans identify themselves as white (U.S Census Bureau). This will also contribute greatly to the field of anthropology, as white American Protestants, despite being one of the largest populations, are one of the least studied ethnographically. Historically, cultural anthropologists have focused their attention on non-Western cultures, resulting in a gap of cultural knowledge about mainstream American culture.

Chart 1: Religious Preference of Americans (2010)

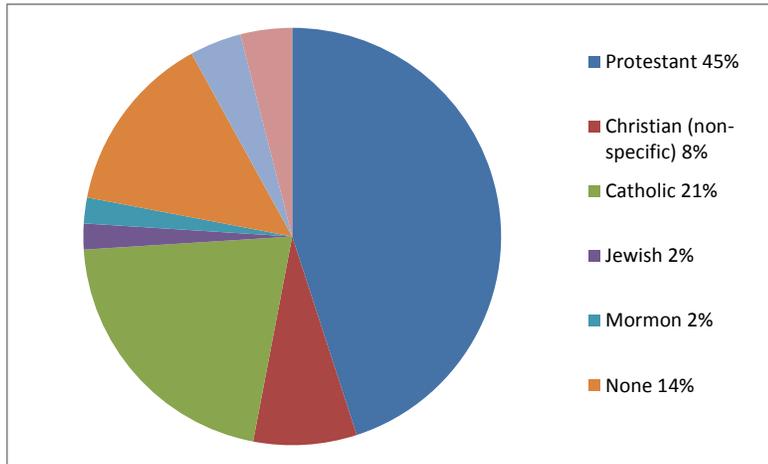


Chart 1 shows how a majority of Americans identified as a Protestant Christian in 2010. Source: Gallup Poll (2010)

Purpose of this Study

The purpose of this study is to explore what white, Protestant Midwesterners from Muncie, Indiana believe with regards to the supernatural, both in terms of Protestant Christian doctrine and popular beliefs about ghosts. In particular, this study was designed to investigate how the informants interpret hauntings. Do they hold any kind of supernatural beliefs outside the parameters of Protestant Christianity? If they do believe in hauntings, do they think the entities are actual ghosts or a different paranormal phenomenon? Have they or someone they know had a supernatural encounter, and how does that affect their beliefs? In addition, informants were asked how their church addresses the subject of popular ghost folklore, and whether their beliefs differ from what is taught at their church.

It is important to note that this thesis does not concern itself with the existence of ghosts. Whether or not ghosts are real has been a heated debate throughout Western history, and will continue to be so into the future. The role of anthropology is to collect, record and examine the beliefs of the people

they study, not to pass judgment or test the accuracy of those beliefs. This is a principle which folklorists have been applying to the study of ghost stories. As noted by folklorist Donald Ward, it is not the role of the social scientist to "question...the existence or non-existence of paranormal phenomenon" (1977:216). This study abides by this philosophy and did not include questions of authenticity during interviews.

Terminology

It is important for the purposes of this study to clarify what is meant when using the term *supernatural*, as it is difficult to define. Does it refer to all beliefs, both religious and folkloric, that pertain to the spiritual realm? Can only certain kinds of otherworldly experiences and beliefs be considered supernatural? For the purposes of this study, I define the supernatural as any belief in the uncanny or alleged experience reported by informants that references the afterlife or a non-material realm. Therefore, if personal beliefs in life after death are "supernatural," as are personal visitations from the

dead, so then are more orthodox Christian views regarding the resurrected body or the presence of immaterial beings like angels and demons. This study will ask informants to consider the range of their beliefs about different kinds of supernatural phenomena in order to see with which cultural beliefs they identify.

Furthermore, what kind of supernatural experiences should be considered ghostly encounters? What kinds of details are essential for considering an individual's run-in with the otherworldly specifically a ghost incident? *Ghost* is an ambiguous word, and not just in contemporary American culture. Historian Kathryn Edwards emphasizes the nebulous nature of the term, stating "No matter which reference work one consults, one thing is clear; ghosts mean different things to different people at different times" (2002:26). Supernatural investigation television programs often claim to be hunting ghosts, but then discuss the possibility of a location being inhabited by evil "inhuman" presences, which could be demons or deceased humans, or even the latter which had become the former. Popular culture seems to want to use

"ghost" as an all-encompassing term for these kinds of supernatural experiences. However, for the purposes of clarity in this study, the term "ghost" will only be used in reference to the sentient souls of formerly living people with no demonic stigma attached. This distinction was explained to the informants during the interview.

In addition, folklorist George Schoemaker notes that "Like ghosts, folklore and pop culture itself are problematic terms" (2008:1). Though, perhaps the more important question is under which cultural category do ghosts fit? The vague connotations of the term *ghost* have lead to it being pigeonholed under both categories. Yet according to Schoemaker, popular culture and folklore are opposites, with folklore defined as "continuity over time," and pop culture as "continuity over space" (2008:5). Folklore's connection with traditionality should automatically clash with popular culture, which is associated with short term, widespread esteem. And yet, ghosts clearly haunt both realms of American cultural expression. As described in the introduction, in America, human souls are as likely to appear on Prime

Time television as in camp fire stories. The idea of human souls roaming the earth has been a nearly universal concept throughout the world's history. However, as we will find below, the beliefs surrounding their tales have changed according the popular convictions of the day. Therefore, I have deemed it inappropriate to constrict ghosts to either category. I believe a third category is necessary to accommodate this problem. I shall therefore refer to ghosts as a part of *popular folklore*, or folklore that has molded itself to remain a part of a society's popular culture throughout its history.

Chapter II: Literature Review

The origins of American ghost culture go far beyond the first European settlers, stretching back all the way to the Middle Ages. The following is a brief historical overview of Western ghost culture, beginning with Medieval England and ending the Spiritualist Movement.

Early English Ghost Beliefs

To understand the depth of Protestant Christianity's relationship with folklore, including supernatural beliefs, one can begin as far back as the Middle Ages. In particular, social historian Owen Davies notes a strong historical presence of ghosts in medieval England. Apparitions were on the minds of pre-Reformation medieval clergy, who were the main recorders of ghost tales during that time (Davies 2009:14). Ghosts were even associated with one of Christianity's most holy holidays- Christmas. According to medieval writings, ghosts were thought

to make more appearances between the days of Christmas and the Epiphany than any other time of the year (Davies 2009:15). Davies believes that the combination of religious and cultural history of the English had resulted in a "love affair with ghosts" for the past several centuries (2009:1).

However, these beliefs were associated with pre-Reformation Catholicism. Davies believes that the relationship between Christianity and popular ghost folklore should have theoretically diminished after the Reformation, stating "as a Protestant country, the population should have rejected ghosts centuries ago along with Catholicism. During the Reformation, Protestant theologians denounced the idea of ghosts as the 'superstitious' product of the medieval Catholic concept of purgatory" (Davies 2009:2). Kathryn Edwards goes even further, describing the Reformation as movement toward "doing away with the 'third world' of the medieval cosmos...and stressing the supernatural as a part of a binary opposition between divine and demonic forces" (2002:xii). Yet, ghosts refused to leave post-Reformation England, and were not usually considered an evil presence. Davies confirms this

when he states, "most ghosts were not considered evil, the Devil's minions, or eternally damned, and furthermore, after the Reformation they were not bound by purgatorial punishment. They often helped the living, returning to right wrongs and reveal injustice" (2009:16-17). This is the first example of a prominent theme of this thesis- the cultural adaptability of ghosts.

Ghosts continued to adapt to the English religious culture throughout the early modern period. Ghosts stories usually consisted as what Davies refers to as "purposeful ghosts," or ghosts that "actively intervened in the affairs of the living" (2009:4-5). It seems that ghost stories were highly reflective of their religious beliefs, as spirits in these tales often served as sources of moral authority. Davies supports this idea, stating that ghosts often returned to "haunt the sinful and plague the consciences of moral transgressors" (2009:4). Stories about supernatural entities were not just popular with a certain class or education of people, but pervasive among the "literate, illiterate, and the larger community in between" (Edwards 2002:ix).

Despite Edward's statement that the Reformation increased the dichotomy between demonic and holy forces, ghosts managed to remain a grey area of interest among English Protestants. In fact, according to historian R.C. Finucane, 17th century English Protestants began one of the first efforts in the West to collect "testimonials about ghosts, haunting, poltergeists and other supernatural phenomenon linked to the afterlife," as a way to prove the existence of life after death and refute atheists (Finucane 2001:10). Finucane also emphasizes the inclusive nature of ghost beliefs, noting these testimonials were gathered by "people of varying classes and occupations, including clergymen" (Finucane 2001:10).

Migration of Ghost Beliefs from England to America

At the same time this was occurring, there was a select group of Protestants who considered their fellow Englishmen too liberal in their beliefs. These were the Puritans, who set off to found their own land and eventually became the first European Americans. The American Puritans also expressed a strong interest

in the supernatural, but from a much less positive viewpoint. In 1692, Cotton Mathers published his work, *On Witchcraft: Being, the Wonders of the Invisible World*, a study of supernatural beliefs in America. Mathers was considered an authority on the subject of the otherworldly. Unlike the English Protestants of the time, Mathers did not view apparitions as ghosts, but as "evil spirits" (1692:26). Far from being sources of moral authority, the presence of spirits was thought to be the result of witchcraft and implied Satan's influence (1692:26). American literature scholar Renee Bergland highlighted this in *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*, stating that "Seventeenth century New Englanders often saw specters who they knew to be allied with Satan" (2000:25).

By the early 19th century, the supernatural had not only established itself in the United States, but was banking in on its popularity. Ghosts had taken to the stage through phantasmagoria, a spooky visual performance brought to America from Europe in 1803 (Barber 1989:78). Phantasmagoria performances are portrayed in the book *Popular Ghosts: The Haunted*

Spaces of Everyday Culture, describing how “proto-cinematic devices such as magic lanterns were used to create spectral spectacles under the guise of demonstrating new technologies in optical sciences” (2010:149).

Phantasmagoria introduced two trends that are still significant in contemporary ghost culture. One, the American supernatural is enlisted as a form of entertainment. One could even say that phantasmagoria shows were the original horror movie. Second, technology is an important part of the American popular ghost folklore experience. Compare the simple technology of the phantasmagoria lanterns with the modern day, high-tech spook detecting equipment featured on every ghost investigation television show. While it is controversial whether or not contemporary ghost investigators are trying to create an illusion like the phantasmagoria shows or simply portraying their experiences in an entertaining manner, it is clear that both are using technology in order to provoke a sense of thrilling fear from their audience.

Spiritualism and Skepticism

Although the popularity of phantasmagoria had dried up by the 1840s, many ghost enthusiasts quickly found a place in the Spiritualist Movement. Spiritualists were Protestant Christians, mainly white and middle class, who also believed in mysticism and searched for alternative means of spiritual fulfillment (McGarry 2008:65). Many Americans found this crossover of supernatural beliefs to be coherent, even natural. Pulitzer-prize winning historical science writer Deborah Blum quotes the famous 19th century medium Daniel Douglas Home, who stated "I believe in my heart that this presence (of Spiritualism) is being spread more and more every day to draw us nearer to God...It teaches us that He is love and there is no death" (2006:21).

Perhaps the most illustrious of 19th century Spiritualist beliefs was in the possibility of communicating with the dead through séances and other folkloric methods. Spiritualism called for a new level of involvement from its participants. Now, not only could individuals share ghost stories and watch spectral performances, they could directly interact

with the supernatural world, or at least were led to believe they could. This belief in direct interaction has continued into contemporary popular folklore, often invoking the same methods as used during the Spiritualist movement, such as using mediums to sense or communicate with a spirit.

Although Spiritualist beliefs were by no means considered part of mainstream Protestant practices, it was popular option for those who wanted to visit mediums, but still be identified as Christian. By the mid-19th century, significant portions of the population were adding ghost activities to their social calendars. Blum notes this, stating that "In the early 1850s America, especially, seemed possessed...at least two million solid citizens could be counted as believers, perhaps half again that many in Europe" and "Invitations to 'tea and table-tilting' became standard social events" (2006:20).

However, not all were impressed by table games and shadowy images claimed to be materialized spirits. The Victorian period was a time of contention between the religious and scientific communities, a strain brought on most notably by Charles Darwin's theory of

natural selection (Blum 2006:33). For example, Thomas Neely, an early settler to Muncie, Indiana was a proper Victorian man and staunch Presbyterian his entire life. In June, 1867 Muncie hosted "a Spiritualist and Mesmerist convention." On June 1, Mr. Neely complained in his diary that "Their influence for evil is very manifest" (Neely 1867). Yet Neely was not immune to similar desires brought forth by personal grief. After his beloved wife, Matilda, passed away in September, 1886, Mr. Neely reported several "visits" with her in his dreams where they had long and intimate "conversations" (Neely 1886-1892).

British ghost culture was already seeing an empirical backlash by the last 19th century, perhaps most significantly by the development of the British Society for Psychical Research in 1882 (Blum 2006:72). This group counted many famous names among their members, including Carl Jung, William James, Arthur Conan Doyle, and William Butler Yeats. American scientific thinkers quickly followed suit, creating the American Society for Psychical Research in 1884 (Blum 2006:118). These researchers made it their goal

to hold mediums up to scientific scrutiny by systematically testing their spiritual powers.

However, this is not to say that all the researchers were merely trying to debunk evidence of the supernatural. Some were consciously trying to find evidence of the supernatural that could not be disproven by science. One of the most notable examples of these researchers was Frederic William Henry Myers, co-author of *Phantasms of the Living* and president of the British Society for Psychical Research. Myers believed that by scientifically verifying the existence of the supernatural, they could bridge the gap between science and religion, and "show that they were not incompatible, that one could even help explain the other" (Blum 2006:109). It is also worth noting that that the Spiritualists did not consider their beliefs to be necessarily incompatible with the scientific world. In fact, cultural historian Molly McGarry states that "Mystical Spiritualists drew their language from popular tracts on scientific empiricism, invoking a secular optimism and faith in human material progress," making them as

"American and mainstream as they were counterculture"
(2008:6).

This leads us to contemporary ghost culture. An examination of the history of ghosts in America brings to light two features of today's popular ghost culture. Those who participate are looking for one, to be entertained, and two, to see some indisputable evidence that hauntings are real. This explains the popularity of ghost hunting reality shows, which attempt to accomplish both of these

Social Scientific Theories

In order to understand the relationship between popular ghost folklore and the supernatural beliefs of American Protestant Christianity, it is important to examine how classic anthropological theory and modern research in the social sciences reflects upon the supernatural. First of all, it is interesting to note that many anthropological theorists do not make any distinction between organized religion and the folkloric belief in 'spirits' or 'spiritual beings,' as we might in American culture. For example, consider the definition proposed by the founding

father of the anthropology of religion, E.B. Tylor. In his classic work *Primitive Culture*, Tylor defined religion simply as a "belief in spiritual beings" (1871:424). There is also an equally minimal definition put forth by cultural anthropologist Melford Spiro. He described religious beliefs as "beliefs related to supernatural beings" (Spiro 1978:xii). This indicates that earlier anthropological theorists did not see the two sets of supernatural beliefs as mutually exclusive. In fact, it suggests that some theorists expected there to be cross-over supernatural beliefs, and because this blending will naturally occur within cultures, it is necessary to locate both supernatural folk beliefs and organized religion under one category.

However, does this conjecture hold true with American Protestant Christianity? Émile Durkheim stated in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, that at certain times, "Christianity has forced itself to absorb and assimilate [folk belief]" (Durkheim 1915:36). Modern folklorist David Hufford concurs with this classic sociological belief. In his essay *Beings without Bodies*, he asserts that spiritual folk

belief should have long since been crushed by the "official pressure" of institutional religion in America (Hufford 1995:26). Despite this, he claims that in reality "Folk tradition has not only survived, it has given rise to a successful revival of spiritual beliefs within modern institutional religion" (Hufford 1995:26).

Folk beliefs, it seems, have a long history of integrating themselves into institutional religion. Such occurrences continue to appear in ethnographic research of the West today. For example, anthropologist Lawrence Taylor's fieldwork in Donegal, Ireland suggests folkloric healing rituals have been incorporated into local beliefs and practices of Roman Catholicism, most notably by the annual pilgrimage to the Well of the Holy Women (Taylor 1995:34). Anthropological research on minority populations identifies this phenomenon in America as well. Kristy Nabhan-Warren's work on a Mexican American community in Phoenix, AZ demonstrates how visions and appearances of the Virgin Mary and the "language of healing through [her] touch" have become an intricate

part of their community's Catholic identity (Nabhan-Warren 2005:4).

In addition to the theory that the belief in ghosts could be lurking within the boundaries of Christianity, there is also the possibility that Americans are holding multiple, conflicting beliefs simultaneously as a means of strengthening their *supernatural security*. Such a phenomenon is explained by economist Lawrence Iannaccone by applying economic principles to religious belief. According to *Paranormal America*, a sociological examination of popular paranormal phenomena's relationship to religion in American culture, Iannaccone claims that following a religion is akin to making a risky investment:

...it is human nature to hedge our bets with regards to religion: given the option, people will naturally explore many different religious and spiritual alternatives...Should one religious investment strategy "fail," then at least there is another possibility for salvation to fall back on [In Bader 2011:88-89]

In other words, it might be logical for people to want to explore multiple supernatural belief systems concurrently. While individuals run the risk of experiencing spiritual contradiction, they are secure

in that should they suddenly lose their *spiritual currency*, or faith, in one supernatural approach, there is another to which they can turn. In American culture, holding the two folk beliefs of ghosts and Protestant Christianity simultaneously could increase the people's spiritual welfare.

On top of examining the role of folk belief within the Protestant belief system, it is important for the purposes of this research to consider the historical role of Protestants within Western culture. Sociologist Max Weber has been perhaps the most influential scholar on this subject. Despite the fact that religion is generally associated with moving away from the worldly and profane, Weber argued that the Protestants viewed hard work and personal economic venture as virtuous; it was the spending the money on luxuries that was sinful (Weber 2002:9-12). He saw this to be the case in the Calvinist, or Puritan sects, of Christianity, which included European Christians like Cotton Mather who first settled North America (Weber 2002:32-33). If Protestant culture is historically founded on having a strong work ethic and denying pleasure, how might this effect modern-day

Protestant Christians' participation in ghost culture? In the 21st century, the supernatural has come to be viewed as media "infotainment." Therefore, one might expect them to be less involved, as the supernatural tends to fall under that category of frivolous "entertainment" in American culture. On the other hand, there is also a lingering sense among Protestants that the supernatural is "dangerous" or "malevolent" as Thomas Neely clearly viewed it in the mid-19th century. This research will examine how historical beliefs and contemporary media culture might both encourage and undermine White, Protestant beliefs and participation in the supernatural.

Middletown, USA: Background Research on Muncie, Indiana

For this study, I selected the Midwestern community of Muncie, Indiana. Muncie is unique, as it was the site of the famous Middletown Studies project. In 1924, Robert and Helen Lynd came to Muncie to "study synchronously the interwoven trends that are the life of a small American city" (Lynd and Lynd 1929:3). Muncie was selected as their small city

study site as they believed it was highly representative of American life and was located "in that common-denominator of America, the Middle West" (Lynd and Lynd 1929:3). In other words, the Middletown Studies Project has made Muncie a model location for determining American opinions. Their original research has sparked several follow up studies over the last eighty years (Condran 1976; Caplow 1982, 1983; Geelhoed 2000; Johnson 1992; Johnson and Tamney 1983, 1984, 1987; Hoover 1986,

Chart 2: Religious Preference of Residents of Muncie, Indiana (2004)

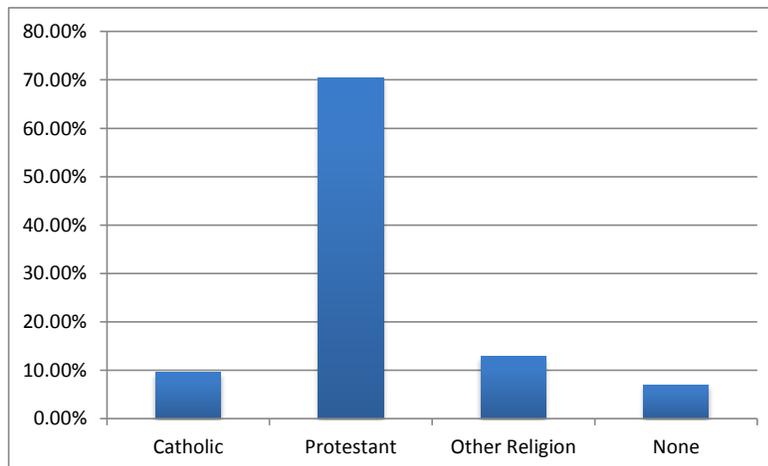


Chart 2 shows how the majority of Muncie's residents identify as a Protestant Christian
Source: Association of Religion Data Archives (2011)

1987; Tambo 1988), examining such categories established by the Lynds as employment, recreation, family, community education, and, of course, religion (Lynd and Lynd 1929:4. In addition, there has been research done to fill in the statistical racial gaps of the original Middletown Studies, such as Luke Eric Lassiter's *The Other Side of Middletown: Exploring Muncie's African American Community*. Today, Ball State University's Center for Middletown Studies retains as its mission support for research related to "Middletown" and small cities.

Historically, religion has played a significant role in the lives of Muncie's residents. This is clear from the book *All Faithful People* (1983), an expansion of the Middletown Studies devoted to exploring religious behavior in Muncie during the 1970s. For example, a quantitative analysis of their findings show that 71.6 percent of those surveyed identified themselves as a member of a Christian denomination (Caplow 1983:305). This is concurrent with contemporary data collected during the 2004 Middletown Area Study, which found that 70 percent of

those surveyed considered themselves to be members of the Protestant institution (Association of Religion Data Archives 2009). Muncie is an appropriate place to gather a population sample of my demographic interest due to its majority population of White Protestants and its location in the heart of Middle America.

Chapter III: Methods

Ghosts have made their mark on Western religious and cultural history. Yet, what exactly do they mean to modern Americans? Their overwhelming presence in the media suggests they are a subject of interest, but in what way? What of the religious element? Does the history of interplay between Protestant Christianity and popular ghost folklore still apply to contemporary religious beliefs? Are contemporary White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants among the consumers of popular ghost folklore? There have been, unfortunately, little very few studies delving into these questions. The methods for this study were developed to help answer these questions.

The Use of Qualitative Methods

Despite the historical connection between Protestant Christianity and popular ghost folklore discussed in the literature section, there has been

little effort to explore their relationship using the tools of ethnography or the theories of anthropology. While there have been a number of studies comparing Christian, particularly Protestant, beliefs and church attendance to paranormal beliefs (Emmons and Sobal 1981; Markovsky and Thye 2001; McKinnon 2003; Orenstein 2002; Rice 2003), these works focus on other areas of the uncanny, such as extra-sensory perception (ESP), reincarnation, astrology, psychic healing and unidentified flying objects (UFOs), including little to no discussion on the belief in ghosts or hauntings. In addition, all of these studies were based on quantitative methods, mainly by using data gathered from national poll samplings, such as the Southern Focus Poll (Rice 2003), Project Canada (McKinnon 2003; Orenstein 2002) and the Gallup Poll (Emmons and Sobal 1981). There has been essentially no religious studies research using qualitative and ethnographic data for the purposes of analyzing contemporary Protestant beliefs about supernatural experiences. By providing a qualitative perspective on the relationship between Protestant and supernatural beliefs, this study will

contribute additional information to anthropological and religious studies literature.

Data Collection

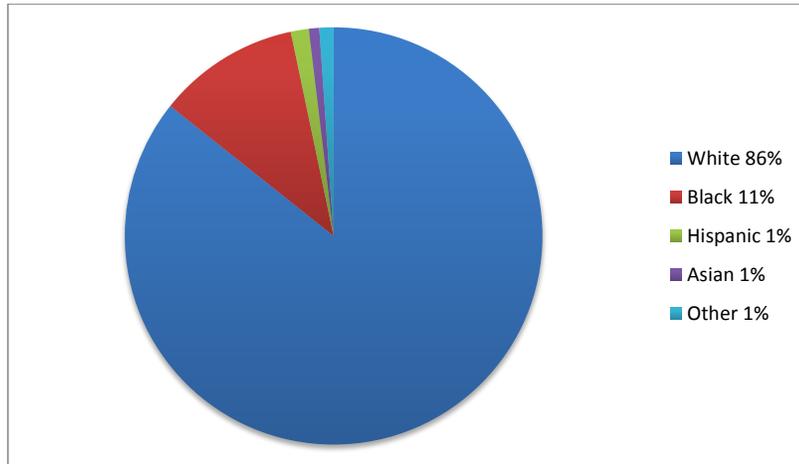
In order to better understand historic and contemporary demographic data already available about the belief system of White Protestants, I developed qualitative methods to determine how people in Muncie integrate Christian beliefs with popular ghost folklore. Since the relationship between religion and supernatural beliefs is one of the primary focuses of the study, the "sampling frame" (see Bernard 2006:149) was drawn from local Protestant churches whose congregations are primarily comprised of white middle-class parishioners. I chose to focus exclusively on the white middle-class demographic of the Protestant community, as this sub-culture of the American population is rarely studied anthropologically (Aitken 1998; Beuka 2004; Dorst 1989).

In order to get as extensive a view of Muncie's Protestant population as possible, I took a small sample from several types of Protestant churches. Using the church listing section of the

City of Muncie website (City of Muncie) as a guide, I determined which Protestant denominations were most representative of the white population of Muncie. So that I could get an accurate representation of Muncie's white Protestant population, I concluded my sample needed to include at least one representative from each of the following denominations- Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Methodist, Non-Denominational, Presbyterian, and Quaker.

Methods for recruiting were done using the snowball method, which allowed me to tap existing social networks for recruitment (Bernard 2011:144; Davis and Wagner 2003). The fieldwork contained participant observation, including attending church services and church-organized Bible studies. However, the bulk of the data was gathered from semi-structured personal interviews with individuals about their religious beliefs and their participation in popular ghost culture. In the end, I gathered data from 18 informants (10 women, 8 men), representing 6 Protestant denominations (see Table 1) and ranging in ages between 20-79. Although all were residents, two were members of churches

Chart 3: Ethnicity in Muncie, Indiana (2000)



**Chart 3 shows a how Muncie, Indiana contains a large, white majority, showing that it is an appropriate place to gather a data sample.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau, State and County QuickFacts**

outside of Muncie. However, in both cases, the churches are located nearby, and therefore would still be representative of central Indiana Protestantism.

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews conducted for this study consisted mainly of talking to individuals about their beliefs in the supernatural, both religious and ghost-related, as well as their participation in popular ghost culture, such as using Ouija boards or

watching reality television shows with paranormal themes. Interviews ranged in length between 20-87 minutes, although the average length was between 35-40 minutes. Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings according to the convenience of individual informant, including offices, cafes, restaurants and their church. All but two of the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, as these informants requested to not be tape recorded. Extensive notes were taken during the interviews of these two informants.

Table 1: Informant Demographics		
Gender	Age	Denomination
Man	24	Baptist
Man	26	Non-Denominational
Man	26	Quaker
Man	28	Episcopalian
Man	32	Lutheran
Man	46	Non-Denominational
Man	57	Baptist
Woman	20	Quaker
Woman	21	Baptist
Woman	21	Non-Denominational
Woman	22	Non-Denominational
Woman	22	Non-Denominational
Woman	25	Episcopalian
Woman	29	Non-Denominational
Woman	47	Methodist
Woman	61	Methodist
Woman	79	Episcopalian

Table 1 Informants by Gender, Age and Denomination

Chapter IV: Results

Ghostly Experiences

Of the 18 Protestants interviewed, 11 responded yes when asked if they believed a location could be haunted by some kind of supernatural force, though not necessarily by a ghost. These beliefs are based highly on personal experiences, either their own or those had by sources they trust, such as friends or family. Eight of the informants described their own supernatural experiences and three knew people who reported supernatural experiences, though they did not report any of their own. Only four of the informants believed that these haunting supernatural forces were actually ghosts, or the souls of departed humans. Three out of the four of these informants base their belief on their own supernatural experiences.

The ghost experiences of the informants varied. A 29 year-old woman belonging to a non-

denominational church described working in what she described as a haunted gas station:

Um, I worked at a gas station that was haunted. Sometimes, like the freezer doors would open, one by one, and then they'd all shut. We would hear things fly in the kitchen and we'd find things on the floor. Um, one night I was closing, and there was only one other person was with me, and it sounded like every single thing in the kitchen clattered to the floor. All the silverware, all of the pans, all of the boxes in the backed, it was just like a huge crash. And we went back there to look and not a thing had moved. Um, I never personally experienced this but the women who opened say they have heard someone call their names. Um, but mostly it was just things like that. We would, we would um, things would fly around, the doors would open. Sometimes the phone would ring on line 2 even though there was no one on line 1. And every time you answered there would be nobody there. And it would do that for an hour or so, and then stop.

A 26 year-old male member of a Non-Denominational church described two experiences he could recall:

I have seen strange things happen you know out at my folks, you know out in their woods. I can't really explain but at the same time I would see stuff...Like you know I have seen you know, the silhouette of an image you know of somebody in the middle of the night wasn't there. I mean that only happened in like the terms of twice. And, you know, it's kind of a happy fortune I haven't seen it again. But it was just like someone was standing up against a tree looking at ya, you know. But this house has, you know my folk's house has history. There's, you

know, a guy there that died. It was their property you know years back, so...it was drug overdose, I think, and the guy drowned. What I was told anyway.

Uh, you know at [my friend's] house we'd hear children late at night a lot, because there used to be children that lived there somewhere. It would sound like footsteps and people would just, people laughing...Yeah, so we used to hear children up there at night, a lot if no one was up there. Like footsteps and a lot of laughter. And sometimes you'd hear like, someone was throwing a ball.

Finally, a 47 year-old Methodist woman had two experiences she shared, including a visitation from a friend who had passed away:

There have been instances where I believe that there are spirits that occupy the house prior to the person moving in and/or is built on something that is, it shouldn't be, like a burial ground. The reason I believe this my sister's house in Phoenix, her first home was built on an Indian burial ground. And, nobody said anything, except that you'd be sleeping and all of a sudden you would awaken and you would see images. And it wasn't that I believe they were going to get me or something like this, or they were going to get her. But it just was, this was there place. And they were living in their space.

I have had experiences where I have been visited. I lived in Terra Haute for a long time. And a friend of mine died. He committed suicide. It was very difficult for me. So I have this big green stability ball that I always

keep on a rocking chair. And I am kind of particular about how things work. But, I would wake up in the morning and the stability ball would be in the middle of the floor.

Completely off of the chair. The first time I was like, really? There was no ventilation in the room where the ball was at. There was no way it could not have been moved by something else. So, I believe it was my friend Paul, because after about a week of this, I called his wife and I said, alright, have you noticed anything odd? And she said She said, I find toys out, I find all kinds of stuff all over the house. When I go to work and come home, and the dogs are completely exhausted because they have been playing all day. So, I do believe.

The informant who did not have any personal experiences with ghosts was not positive that they existed, but accepted it as a firm possibility. When describing her beliefs about ghosts, the 22 year-old female Quaker tended to reference popular cultural belief, such as the concept of unfinished business. She believed:

I think if a person had some like unfinished business, or like they weren't ready to, to move on, to the next um, to the afterlife they would...if something needed to be done still on earth, it would be keeping them and tying them down and keeping them from moving on.

It is also worthwhile to note that there was negative correlation between the belief in ghosts and authority in the church. The positions amongst the informants are one pastor, one Bible study leader, one Minister of Music, and 15 members of the congregation. Only general congregation members professed haunting experiences or would consider possibility that ghosts are real. This is most likely due to do their not having an official position within the church. As part of the theoretical center of supernatural authority, those given titles by their church have a greater incentive to preserve the institutions of Christianity. The parishioners, on the other hand, are freer to dabble into the alternative options of paranormal popular culture.

Alternative Theories and Demonic Forces

Many of the informants had alternative views over what constituted a haunting. Seventy-seven percent of the informants interviewed did not believe that human souls could be present on earth. When prompted as to why they do not accept this possibility, most would

cite the authority of the Bible and the belief in Heaven. For instance, a 57 year-old Baptist man said,

No, I don't believe that [souls can stay on earth]. Why I don't believe that, my study of the Bible. I think it's pretty clear that, I think when somebody dies, they are not confined by time and space.

Despite this reasoning, every informant believed the basic Christian tenant of Heaven, including those who accepted the possibility of ghosts. The Christian afterlife was interpreted in four ways amongst the informants. One, all souls of those who have passed away immediately enter Heaven and are reunited with loved ones. A 47 year-old Methodist woman described this view:

I believe that we go to Heaven. I am not of the belief that there is a purgatory. Um, I am not of the belief that, I am of the belief that when my time comes, that God will send an angel and my spirit will go to Heaven. And I am going to be held accountable for my actions here, which I am pretty well ok with that. I have had my moments. I hold the belief that I am going to be in Heaven...I am going to be reunited with people who have gone there before me...if my parents go before me, I would think that they would send my Mom or Dad when it is my turn.

Two, upon death, all souls immediately enter Heaven or Hell. A 21 year-old woman who was a member of a Baptist-based, non-denominational church said,

I think I just believe in, like the afterworld, like Heaven and Hell. I don't really believe

people can be like stuck on earth. When they die, I believe they go to either. I don't believe in people being stuck.

Three, souls lay dormant until Judgment Day, and then will enter Heaven or Hell. This was held by the 57 year-old Baptist man, who said:

So to say that you die today as a Christian, and instantly, you're in Heaven, or you are not a Christian and you are in Hell, you know. I don't buy that. So I think that, uh, too many places especially in the Book of Revelations in talks about the dead and Christ shall rise first, on that day. But if there weren't going to rise then, where are they now? So I think the person that dies today and the person that died in 1300 all have this realization of being somewhere at the same moment, on that day. So do they go to sleep, and Catholics have the belief in Purgatory, the Mormons have sort of like Purgatory. I am not sure they are all wrong, uh, but I go to too many funerals where they say well, you know, Lauren is with her daddy now, you know, and she's with grandma, or you know and all that. I think people say those things to make them feel better. I fundamentally don't believe that. I think that when you die, for lack of a better phrase you go to sleep. That's a live term, not a dead term, that's all I can think of. The bible also says you see Christ in that moment.

Finally, one informant, a 61 year-old Methodist woman held a fourth theory, that we experience Heaven, but it is more of a symbolic state of peace than an actual location:

I do believe that we are promised peace after death. I don't know that that is, I don't read in the Bible, nor do I personally believe, that

that means that I am going to walk smack up to my mother after I'm dead. I don't believe that. That may not be typical though. Um, especially working with our small rural congregation, I definitely hear the other part of that and they're Methodists, too. So, I don't know how typical I am in my belief with that. But, I don't read myself anything that suggests to me that I am going to get to say hi to my mama again. It's not like that. I do believe that having worked hard and um, to feel the closeness of God's will in my life, and work toward God's will in my life, that when I die, there will be peace. Now, what that peace looks like after death may be the absence of any other reality. It may just be that I am gone and that Heaven then is um, just the absence of chaos in your life, and the closeness to God, and I don't though believe that there are pearly gates and walking on clouds and playing a harp. I don't think it's like that. I think it's spirits uniting in the universe with God, into peace.

Another alternative theory mentioned to explain the causes of hauntings is non-sentient residual energy. For example, a 21 year-old female belonging to a non-denominational church said that

I think that, like an energy can just, be tied to the house...I don't feel like I believe in, ghosts, like as a, like as people think of it. I believe in, um, in an impression, maybe? Like someone can leave an impression and you can just feel it, in a way...Like a person who was maybe emotionally um, like really highly emotional. A highly emotional event or a highly emotional person.

The most common alternative theory about hauntings among the informants was the belief in non-human evil entities. Informants would refer to these

entities as either demons or evil spirits, but the terms appear to be used interchangeably. Both refer to supernatural creatures that exist to influence people, particularly Christians, away from God's path. With the exception of mentioning Satan's influence, informants do not use any traditional mythologies, Christian or not, to identify these evil entities. They have no names, no identity. They are anonymous, sentient beings that exist to cause malevolence in the world. This seems to be a popular view outside of the Muncie community as well, as evidenced by the supposed presence of evil entities on popular culture reality shows like *Paranormal State*.

A large percentage of the informants felt that those who think they have seen ghosts actually had encounters with evil forces masquerading as deceased humans. Unlike ghost beliefs, ideas about the presence of demons in the world are not based on personal experiences or the occurrences of other trusted sources. Only one of the informants professed to have met face-to face with evil forces, a 32 year-old Lutheran man. He believes he has experienced multiple encounters with demons. He described one encounter:

I 'saw' but not saw evil spirits before. I saw them, but not like I see you, not with my eyes. It's hard to explain. This one time, this was when I was 27 living in Colorado, I woke up and saw this man in my room without face. He had a fedora, his legs were crossed, black shoes, dressed nice. He looked at me, well not looked but turned his head so he would have been looking at me and said 'ran 13 miles today what did you do?' I said I hate myself, then a grey hand started choking me on the bed. Then it made a withering sound as it withered away.

Later in the interview, this informant highlighted another demonic encounter,

There were these furry things with glowing eyes, 15 in all. They lifted me off the bed, and I said, "In the name of Jesus Christ, go away!"

And they did, and I fell 4-5 feet down on the bed.

Lastly, he described a third encounter,

When I was 24, I was on a bus, and the holy spirit/God sensed to me that this person was at the front of the bus was inflicted by an evil spirit. I prayed for them, and when I got off they snarled at me!

Despite the lack of experiential evidence among the majority of informants, the belief that demons have real influence on the world and people's individual behavior influences their actions, especially when it came to participating in supernatural popular culture experiences.

Although those in positions of authority do not include ghosts in their spectrum of supernatural

belief, all three do believe in demonic influences. When asked if he believed an area could be occupied by a demon, a 57 year-old Baptist man and Bible study leader, said,

Yeah, I think there are demon spirits around. I think there could be one right next to you right now...I think that just they are there and they are part of the devil's crew. Just like angels, they are not human beings, they are part of God's crew, and there is this war going on.

Again, he emphasizes the fact that these ethereal creatures are separate from deceased human beings. In accordance with Christian history, it seems more important for those involved in positions of church authority to strictly follow Biblical teachings over popular culture when it comes to the supernatural.

The Holy Spirit as an Anti-Viral System

The informants were clear that they do not believe one could talk to deceased people through ghost activities, or pastimes which involve trying to communicate with the dead such as Ouija boards and séances. Active efforts to communicate with the dead do not fit into their framework of the afterlife. This was stressed by a 22 year-old woman belonging to a non-denominational church, who stated

"I don't think that souls have the ability to communicate with uh, people still on earth like that." Although most denied that one could use the activities to speak to ghosts, the majority of the informants felt that participating in such rituals was risky as it was highly likely one could end up talking to an evil entity. This concern was noted by a 21 year-old Baptist woman, who said:

I think they're bad ideas, I don't think good can come from them. The thought of them is just scary, people think that they will bring about spiritual activity. I think trying to engage in that kind of stuff is a bad idea...I feel like Ouija boards are more of like a demonic thing. You're more likely to talk to a demon.

Her beliefs were shared by other informants. A 32

year-old Lutheran man stated that:

It's possible they are communicating with supernatural, almost as though, communicating with some sort of spiritual entity. The problem is sometimes evil can use that to talk to people. It can be an [inherent] danger to communicating with supernatural cause there are malevolent forces out there.

The "[inherent] danger" in such activities was

reiterated by a 24 year-old Baptist man, who stated:

I think it is the actions of humans that bring about, I mean, if a demon wants to be there, a demon's going to be there to do what it wants. But I believe people make themselves susceptible to demons by like Ouija boards. We were always taught never to play with Ouija boards, cause anything you do, anytime you have an unhealthy

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interest in the occult, when you have an but unhealthy interest, you need a healthy respect, when you have an unhealthy interest and you don't know what you are doing and you are not a strong Christian person about such things, I feel like you get into uncharted territory. And you don't know what you are doing and you leave yourself open to, you know, attacks.

Only two of the informants revealed having ever experimented with occult devices, and in both cases it was with a spirit board. One, a 61 year-old Methodist woman, made it clear that she did not believe in of either ghosts or demons. She stated that,

I have done Ouija board, I think it's fun! It's not true. I don't think it's real but it is fun to play with. I like the idea of it. I don't think I can communicate with the dead or anything else.

The second, a 26 year-old Quaker also claimed to not believe in that spirit boards could allow a person to communicate with supernatural entities. However, that did not stop him from feeling scared of it. He said:

I was brought up to think Ouija boards are really evil. I think when I was 22, I went out and bought one, and me and a friend messed around with it. It didn't really work, it just seemed like nonsense. So I put it back in my closet, and I think the next day I was like, I just feel weird having it in my house. I mean I felt like it was evil. I was worried that I don't know, that something bad was going to happen to me. So I just took it and I threw it away. So I guess my answer would be, I don't believe in them but I have played around with one, and it kind of

creeped me out. So while I don't necessarily believe they are evil, you know I acted like I thought it was evil. I threw it away out of my possession.

Informants reported that feeling a sense of evil from these kinds of supernatural activities even extended beyond actual spirit boards into replica items. A 20 year-old Quaker woman described being fearful of keychain Ouija board her aunt gave her for Christmas, saying "...it like scared me so much I like had to get rid of it, cause I just felt there was something like evil."

The idea that a demon could take control of a Parker Brother's game board and manipulate the minds of its users is very real to the Muncie Protestants who were interviewed. When asked why a demon would want to speak to a person playing on an Ouija board, the 22 year-old non-denominational woman responded:

To fuck with you! Like, that's the whole, that's the whole purpose of, demonic force is to uh, is to make humans uh, stray or uh, think differently or act differently and, so I think a demonic force, would um, be more likely to, to pick up on a uh, Ouija board or someone trying to communicate like that. And then you fall to their advantage.

Some of the informants were against the idea of participating themselves, but were not adverse to the idea of a "professional" dabbling in such

rituals. For example, the 20 year-old Quaker who was afraid of an Ouija keychain admitted that:

...if you are like a professional and you have valid like reason to do that and experience. Then maybe like I could, I wouldn't say that it was like totally wrong, but otherwise I think you shouldn't play around with stuff like that. You don't really know what you are doing.

A 46 year-old male member of a different non-denominational church described it being particularly unsafe for Christians, stating "To seek out demons, ghosts, outside of a Holy connection is dangerous for a Christian. It's like getting on the Internet without an anti-viral system... you should exercise caution." In addition to being dangerous, he saw testing those waters as unnecessary, as it is not a way to communicate with God. In other words, he believed that "the spiritual world affects [him], but it must be through God." His opinion was shared by a 21 year-old Baptist woman, who said:

If I was to have an experience with an angel, I feel like God would bring it around. I don't know His ways, but I feel like God can do it in so many ways that He doesn't need me to seek it out...When people sincerely use them, it's because they want answers. That's why God gave us prayer. If they talk to God, they wouldn't need man-made ways of seeking answers. He answers all prayers, just not always exactly the way we want it. And I am glad, because I mess up and sin daily. Why would we need any human made object when we can talk to Him through prayer? Ouija boards are a human thing that was made.

Paranormal Reality-based Television Shows

Despite the caution the informants applied to the ghost games, many of them stated that they often watched ghost reality shows. 13 out of the 18 informants said they enjoyed watching paranormal investigation shows such as *Ghost Hunters*.

Interestingly, when asked why, few could give a straight answer, other than it was "fun". A 61 year-old Methodist woman said:

Um, I think the idea of it is titillating. The whole idea of having a life living after this one is titillating. It's such an interesting idea...I don't know I think it's just a fun idea to play with.

It is significant that the informant describes watching ghosts shows as "playing" with different ideas about the supernatural. The amount of informants watching ghost shows suggests that they have the desire to experiment with supernatural ideas outside their own. Media scholar Annette Hill states that "In popular culture, paranormal attitudes and beliefs are transformed into lifestyle choices" (2010:37). Perhaps in the case of informants, popular culture provides a way for them to experiment with alternative lifestyle choices outside of their faith.

And yet, their fear of the Ouija boards shows that many informants also believe it is unsafe to get too personally involved in popular ghost

culture. This is what makes television significant- it provides a screen through which they can experience the paranormal "safely". As a 21 year-old Baptist woman said:

It's interesting cause like, why would you put yourself into that circumstance? Plus it's on TV so you don't know how much of it is true. It's always same thing, like 'oh my gosh I am getting cold.' I haven't experienced anything like that so it's hard to believe if it's true or not. They keep making more but nothing ever happens. Ghostbusters machines suck up goo, doesn't really happen. They are ridiculous, nothing happens. They just scare themselves, like me in house by myself. That's common with everything. Same appeal as like scary movies, gives you a thrill even though it's not real.

Here, the informant illustrates their sense of safety of indulging in this kind of ghostly activity. To the informant, watching people perform these activities is no longer dangerous because the experience is filtered through technology. She is experiencing it remotely from a place of security- her living room. Thanks to the television, viewers can experience what it is like to participate in a ghost hunt without personally provoking the supernatural. It works, perhaps, as a hazmat suit against the "viral" nature of the supernatural discussed in the previous section. Furthermore, their experiences are legitimized by the programs being reality shows, making their second-hand supernatural encounter more real than watching a

fictional horror television show or movie. On the other hand, as the informant implied, there is security in the idea that because it is on television, it is likely fictive. Either way, popular channels appear to have become more than just entertainment. They have become a safe realm.

Chapter V: Discussion

Lack of Discussion in Church

Despite the beliefs of congregation, the Protestant churches attended by the informants are generally not places where individuals have opportunities to explore the meanings of hauntings, ghostly or demonic. A 32 year-old Lutheran man said that in his case this is because "Lutherans are very traditional, not a lot of emphasis on the spiritual realm. In a Lutheran setting, if it were brought up, I think it would be awkward. If they wanted to talk about it, they wouldn't do it in church cause it would seem foolish." Only one informant, the 61 year-old female member of a Methodist Church, said that ghost beliefs were discussed in the church setting. In this case, she said that the subject appeared as part of a small group discussion between the pastor and teenage members of the congregation. While it was not the designated topic of the group discussion for that day, the teenagers asked ghost-related questions and the

pastor was willing to talk about it. However, she also stated that ghosts and hauntings have never been included as part of a sermon, and would most likely never be. When asked why, she stated that "the message of the church puts more emphasis on life than the hereafter".

Another theory was presented by a 47 year-old woman who was a member of a different Methodist Church, who said:

I believe that a lot of the people went to seminary in another era. And the ministers that we've had, with the exception of two, have been older than me. So, that would not have been addressed in seminary as much as forgiveness and sin. It's not a top ten sermon kind of a thing. Now the younger probably have more of an awareness of this but, I don't know. That would be my guess. We talk about faith and we talk about what we know. And if we are unsure or unaware, you are not going to bring it up in church.

This is an interesting perspective, considering one of the main issues that organized religions deals with is providing explanations for life's unknowns. Why would Muncie's Protestant churches choose only to deal with one kind of supernatural and not another? When asked about this, she responded, "Uh yes, but there is that book, the Bible. The Bible tells us this [Christian supernatural phenomenon], but the Bible does not really address that

[ghosts and hauntings] in here." The Bible, it seems, legitimizes certain uncanny events by including them, allowing them to be an acceptable subject for discussion in a church setting.

The closest that most of these churches came to discussing supernatural phenomena relating to popular culture was in the form of spiritual warfare. Four of the informants mentioned spiritual warfare when asked about discussion of ghosts and demons in a church setting. Spiritual warfare was described in two different ways. One was the external fight, or the war going on in the world around us. For example, a 46 year-old non-denominational man described this world as being in a "constant fight between good and evil." This battle is waged through influencing humans, but this is not to say we automatically bend to the will of good or evil supernatural forces. A 24 year-old Baptist man said:

Yes, I believe there are angels...I believe there is spiritual warfare...A person has to choose to be susceptible to demons. [Because]if you are really spiritual and you are really seeking God, I don't think Satan has any power over God, so whatever Satan does, he is allowed to do by God. If you're really strong in your faith and you accept God completely, then I don't believe you will ever be susceptible to demons.

The second was described as an internal struggle in individual Christians or people in general. A 21 year-old Baptist woman described is as being an "internal struggle," but not a symbolic one. She believed that:

This stuff rarely gets brought up in any church related setting. The most common form of it would be talked about is with spiritual warfare. Spiritual warfare is when demon attacking you. Satan having you question your beliefs...I think the other stuff is rarely talked about cause it makes people uneasy and spiritual warfare is more about internal struggle. People don't think about on a daily basis.

It is important to note that three out of the four informants who mentioned spiritual warfare were either members of a Baptist church or, in one case, a non-denominational but formerly Baptist church.

Therefore, the presence of spiritual warfare may not be an accurate representation of all Muncie Protestants

Church Transitions

One possible reason for the consistency of beliefs among members of different denominations is that the many of the informants have belonged to more than one Protestant denomination in their life. When

asked about their history as a Christian, nine out of the 18 informants said they had belonged to more than one denomination in their life, ranging from two to four different denominations. Only one person had ever belonged to a belief system outside of Protestant Christianity, a 79 year-old Episcopalian woman who spent much of her life as a Catholic. 62 percent of men had belonged to more than one denomination throughout their life, while only 40 percent of women had changed denominations. This suggests the possibility that, among the individuals interviewed for this study, devotion to a specific church or denomination is more important to Muncie's Protestant women than men. Although a devout Christian, a 24 year-old man said that the only reason he specifically belongs to a Baptist church is because it's what his wife wants. He believed that "nowadays all churches, Wesleyan, Baptist, Methodist, have really similar doctrines anyways. I don't really distinguish too much between the three of them."

The informants' history of belonging to multiple Christian denominations throughout their lifetime suggests their beliefs are more fluid in nature than

stagnant. While firmly Christian, and generally Protestant, many of the informants have been willing to explore multiple ways of being "Christian" in America. Although there is the perception that many mainstream Protestant churches are the same, as shown in the quote by the 24 year-old Baptist man, there are discrepancies between different denominations. The informants are willing to accept new beliefs as long as they can make them work within their larger Christian context, such as interpreting hauntings as demonic encounters or residual energy instead of trapped souls.

David Hufford's Experiential Source Theory

The results of this study greatly support David Hufford's experiential source theory in terms of ghosts. Hufford proposed that the primary reason spiritual beliefs continue to thrive is because they are often based on individual experiences (Hufford 1995:18). Almost all of the informants who believe in ghosts had previous personal encounters with the supernatural, which they in turn interpreted as "ghostly" or "supernatural" incidents. Hufford argues

that uncanny experiences "...provide a central empirical foundation from which some supernatural beliefs develop rationally" (Hufford 1995:28).

Although only a few of the informants declared a belief in ghosts, the high correlation they expressed between personal experiences and belief in the supernatural upholds Hufford's theory.

However, these findings also suggest that the experiential source theory does not work when it comes to beliefs about demons. Although this was generally not a subject ever brought up in a church setting, many of the informants believed in the existence of demons, not as metaphorical symbols but rather as sentient creatures of evil actively trying to harm human beings. Despite this belief, only one of the informants claimed actually shared a "demonic" experience.

Role of the Media

One of the most significant aspects of this study was the relationship between the informants and supernatural media. As discussed previously, many of the informants chose to watch ghost reality television

shows for entertainment. They did not ascribe the same danger to these programs as they did other ghost-related activities, such as Ouija boards. Media scholar Annette Hill suggests that the supernatural becomes more mundane when filtered through popular culture. She believes that, "As paranormal ideas and beliefs become part of popular culture, they change meaning. The extraordinary transforms into something more ordinary" (2010:37). This appears to hold true for ghosts in the media. However, I would argue that ghost games such as Ouija boards should also be considered to be part of popular ghost culture, and the informants held them in a much more serious and fearful regard. Therefore, I believe that Hill's statement holds true for supernatural media, but not popular culture in general.

It also appears that many Protestant Christians draw some of their ideas about demons from the media. Many alternative resources for religious information are found in media such as books, television programs and the Internet. Without any prompting, some informants provided examples of media sources from which they have taken a religious message. For

example, several of the informants provided me with suggestions for further reading on various subjects, both fiction and non-fiction. However, all of the works contained lessons about understanding the modern world in a Christian context. A 24 year-old Baptist man described how his view of demons was influenced by C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape Letters*:

You really need to read them. It gives you what I believe. C.S. Lewis was a Christian scholar.. Basically he says the demons use little subversive ways to defeat you in that way. He made a comment that there's certain people who, when they pray, the demons don't have to ability to influence them. He said there's like a cloud that is impenetrable to demons. I know it's a little Hollywoodesque but he made the comment that there are certain people who are so strong in their faith that they are constantly within that cloud and they are completely impervious to attacks by demons.

Another strong media influence over Christian thought is the Internet. Many of the results in this study are further supported by opinions posted on Christian websites concerning the existence of ghosts. For example, the Christian Broadcasting Network's (CBN) website posted a commentary article entitled *Do You Believe in Ghosts?* The writer maintained that ghosts are not a biblical concept and the departed are in Heaven with God, and not on earth

with their living friends and relatives (CBN.com). Like informants in this study, the author of the article believed that those who think they have seen their deceased relatives were actually visited by demons (CBN.com). There was also reference to individuals "opening themselves up" to Satan's influence by showing interest in the spirit world (CBN.com).

CBN also plays a role in other areas of the paranormal, such as the Newswatch's discussion of UFO phenomenon, of which they conclude alien abductions as being caused by Satanic influences (Bader 2011:91). Research shows this is equally the case on smaller Christian websites. Two articles from associatedcontent.com maintain the interviewees' belief that ghosts are actually demons. In one, a pastor uses the bible to support his claim, describing how Ecclesiastes 9:5 explains that the dead are not conscious beings (Do Christians Believe in Ghosts?). Another explains that demonic impersonation of the dead is the Protestant interpretation of supernatural occurrences. Yet another article goes so far as to say that it is not possible for Christianity

and the belief in ghosts coexist, as the belief in an afterlife is a basic tenant of the Christian religion (Belief in Ghosts and Christianity).

Chapter VI: Conclusions

Beginning with our earliest ancestors, humans have sought answers for the central question, "what happens after death?" As human beings, we are inclined to experiment with ideas about our reality, especially when dealing with that which is unknown, frightening and beyond our control. Thus, the subject of death is forever associated with religious convictions and stories of the supernatural. Contemporary American culture's fascination with ghosts and other supernatural entities clearly illustrates this phenomenon. From Victorian phantasmagoria to modern reality television, popular culture provides countless ways for Americans of all ages to interact with and be entertained by the otherworldly. Yet for the Protestant Christian segment of the population, it is both an enticing and dangerous realm to in which to dabble.

The Protestants of Muncie, Indiana are divided when it comes to the existence of ghosts. Most would not consider the possibility that a human soul could return, and even less thought it could be trapped in this world. Those who did believe in ghosts almost always based their belief on personal experiences, supporting David Hufford's experiential source theory. However, an overwhelming majority of those interviewed believed in demonic forces, despite the fact that only one informant stated they had direct encounters with sentient evil beings. Considering the informants almost always considered this to fall within the term 'haunting', this belief suggests that Hufford's theory should be re-evaluated in order to deal with demonic supernatural beliefs.

Though rarely discussed in church, the belief in demons was an important aspect of the way Muncie's white Protestants recognize the supernatural. There is fluidity to their convictions that allows them to take popular supernatural ideas and reinterpret them in a Christian context- the presence of demons. This fluid nature allows them to gather their information outside of the church from other Christian sources, most often as fiction and non-fiction books. There was also lots of similar information I found available

from media sources, such as the Christian Broadcasting Network and individual websites that discuss Christian interpretations for ghosts. The belief in demons also highly influences the ways in which Muncie's white Protestants participate in ghost culture, as traditional popular culture ways of touching the supernatural, such as Ouija boards and other ghost games, is to open oneself up to malignant forces and risk being led astray from God's path.

However, technology is influencing the America's Christian culture now providing a way for at least some Protestants to safely participate in supernatural popular culture. Some Christians are even thinking about the supernatural realm in terms of technological syntax, such as the minister suggesting that playing with Ouija boards is akin to exposing one's self to the threat of a computer virus. By allowing their viewers to experience the paranormal second-hand, reality television shows about the supernatural provide a kind of firewall that protects Christians from the uncanny. Time magazine recently defended reality television by saying it is providing us with "a new way to tell involving human stories" (Time). This appears to include going beyond the realm of the living humans and into the Great Beyond. In other words, reality ghost television is a

new medium of folkloric sharing. Television technology gives Christians a means participate in a part of popular American folklore to which they would otherwise have little access.

From this data, one can gain some insight into the extremely complicated relationship between two of the faces of white America- the religious Christian and the skeptical scientist. Much as it has been historically, popular supernatural folklore continues to haunt the space between these aspects of American culture. A ghostly experience can be used to further support the idea of Heaven, and unexplained phenomena can be interpreted as demons. Scientific equipment can be used to detect entities as proof of the supernatural, but as long as these informants see them as demons, they can observe the results as entertainment without damaging their spiritual beliefs. No matter how attached Americans become to scientific empiricism, I believe that as long as they maintain their religious beliefs, popular supernatural folklore is there to stay.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Do you believe a house can be haunted?

Does your position as Christian make it easier or harder to believe in ghosts?

If you had a friend you told you they think they were visited by their dead father, mother, etc., what would you tell them?

What are your feelings on attempts to communicate with the dead, like séances and Ouija boards?

Have you ever had an encounter that you think could have been due to supernatural causes?

Do you feel like you felt the presence of deceased friend or family member?

If you have/did have a ghostly encounter, did/would you tell other people? Who? Other members of the church?

Has supernatural folklore ever been discussed during church services, such as in a sermon or group discussion?

Do you ever watch supernatural shows, such as programs recalling legends of haunted places or paranormal investigations reality shows? What do you think about them?

Do you think the idea of evil plays a role in supernatural beliefs?

Appendix B

Consent Form

HAUNTED MIDDLE AMERICA: AN ANALYSIS OF SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS OF PROTESTANTS IN MUNCIE, INDIANA

Principal Investigator: Lauren Holditch

The purpose of this research project is to what white, middle-class Christian Midwesterners from central Indiana believe with regards to the supernatural. Findings from this research will provide anthropologists with insight into the role of ghost and haunting in the beliefs of this facet of American culture. To be eligible to participate in this study, you must be over the age of 18, Caucasian, and an active member of the Christian faith. For this project, you will be asked to answer questions and share stories pertaining to your religious beliefs and beliefs and experiences with the supernatural. Interviews may be as long or short as you desire. For purposes of accuracy, with your permission, the interviews will be tape recorded. This is not required to participate, and you may request for the investigator to cease recording at any time. Any names used on the audiotape will be changed to pseudonyms when the tapes are transcribed. All data will be maintained as confidential and no identifying information such as names will appear in any publication or presentation of the data. The only anticipated risk from participating in this study is that you may not feel comfortable answering some of the questions. You may choose not to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable and you may quit the study at any time. Should you experience any feelings of anxiety, there are counseling services available to you through the Davidson Counseling Center, (765) 282-4317, and Union Chapel (765) 288-8862, both located in Muncie. One benefit you may gain from participating in this study may be the chance to share and explore

your personal beliefs. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you are free to withdraw your permission at anytime for any reason without penalty or prejudice from the investigator. Please feel free to ask any questions of the investigator before signing this form and at any time during the study. For one's rights as a research subject, you may contact the following: Research Compliance, Sponsored Programs Office, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306, (765) 285-5070, irb@bsu.edu.

I, _____, agree to participate in this research project entitled, "Supernatural Folklore and Protestant Christianity in Midwest America." I have had the study explained to me and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I have read the description of this project and give my consent to participate. I understand that I will receive a copy of this informed consent form to keep for future reference.

To the best of my knowledge, I meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria for participation (described on the previous page) in this study.

Signature

Date

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Appendix C

American Television Featuring Ghosts (1998-2010)

Fictional Ghost Shows

Haunted (2002)
Ghost Whisperer (2005-2010)
Medium (2005-)
American Horror Story (2011-)

Haunting Investigation Shows

Ghost Hunters (2004-)
Ghost Trackers (2005-2008)
Haunting Evidence (2005-2008)
Paranormal State (2007-2011)
Ghost Hunters International (2008-)
Ghost Adventurers (2008-)
Paranormal US (2009)
Paranormal Cops (2009)
Ghost Lab (2009-2010)
Ghost Hunters Academy (2009-2010)
GZ Celebrity Ghost Hunt (2010-2011)
Haunted Collector (2011-)
The Dead Files (2011-)
Haunted Highway (2012-)
Haunted Encounters Face-to-Face (2012-)

Haunting Investigation Television

Documentary Specials

Ghost Hunting: World of the Weird (2004)
Possessed Possessions (2005)
Children of the Grave (2007)

Personal Experience Storytelling Shows

A Haunting (2005-2007)
Ghostly Encounters (2005-)
Celebrity Ghost Stories (2008-)
The Haunted (2009-2011)
My Ghost Story (2010)

Paranormal Witness (2011-)
Paranormal Trauma (2012-)
The Haunting of... (2012-)

Historically-Based Documentary Shows

Haunted History (1999-2001)
America's Most Haunted Places (2001)

Haunted House Competition Shows

Scariest Places on Earth (2000-2001)
MTV's Fear (2000-2002)

Medium Shows

Crossing Over with John Edwards (1999-2004)
Mediums: We See Dead People (2005)
Psychic at Large (2006)
Psychic Kid: Children of the Paranormal (2008-)
Psychic Search (2009)
Medium PI (2009)
Mary Knows Best (2010)
The Dead Files (2011-)
Long Island Medium (2011-)

General Paranormal Investigation Shows

Featuring Ghosts

Proof Positive: Fact or Fake (2004)
Destination Truth (2007-)
Fact or Fake: Paranormal Files (2010-)
Paranormal Paparazzi (2012-)