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The religious affordance of fiction: a semiotic approach

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A curious aspect of late modern religion is the emergence of fiction-based religions, such as Jediism, based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga, and Tolkien spirituality, based on J.R.R. Tolkien's literary mythology about Middle-earth. This article draws on narrative semiotics to explain why some fictional narratives (and not others) afford religious use and have hence given rise to fiction-based religions. I show that to afford religious use it is not enough that supernatural fiction tells about supernatural agents; it must also, to some extent, construct an aura of factuality around these supernatural agents. The main aim of this article is to identify and discuss those textual 'veracity mechanisms' that in various ways can help achieve such a sense of factuality. Each veracity mechanism is discussed and illustrated with examples from supernatural fiction, especially from *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I furthermore show how conceptual blending theory can be used to analyse the cognitive processes involved in the religious interpretation of supernatural fiction. While the empirical focus is on supernatural fiction and fiction-based religion, the wider implications for the study of religious narratives are discussed throughout.

KEY WORDS religious affordance; supernatural fiction; religious narratives; fiction-based religion; narratology; narrative semiotics; conceptual blending theory

1. Introduction

Supernatural fiction is a major source of inspiration and plausibility in late modern religion.¹ People pick up new religious ideas from supernatural fiction or find that such fiction conveys and reinforces beliefs they already hold (Partridge 2004, Ch. 6; Possamai 2005). But that is not all. In some cases, self-conscious new religions have emerged that use supernatural fiction as their main source of inspiration. I refer to such movements as fiction-based religions. Examples of fiction-based religions include Jediism, based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* universe, and Tolkien spirituality,

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¹Supernatural fiction refers to fiction that projects a story-world whose inventory includes elements, such as elves, gods, and prophecies coming true, that must be considered supernatural from the point of view of the actual world (though they may be perceived as 'natural' or 'real' within the story-world). This meta-genre covers fantasy and most of the horror and science fiction genres.

based on J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-earth mythology. In the case of Jediism, members have adopted two things in particular from *Star Wars* (esp. Lucas 1980, 1999): belief in 'the Force' and an identity as Jedi Knights. Around this core, Jediism has developed theology and rituals that blend *Star Wars* material with (Western) Buddhist and Christian beliefs and practices.² Tolkien spirituality is based mainly on *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954–55) and *The Silmarillion* (Tolkien 1977). In ritual, practitioners seek to communicate with the superhuman characters of Tolkien's literary mythology, including the wizard Gandalf and the Valar (gods); in addition, some members self-identify as Elves. Around this core, theology and rituals have emerged that blend Tolkien material with different branches of Neo-paganism, and, to a lesser extent, with other religious traditions (Davidsen 2012, 2014, forthcoming).

Adam Possamai (2005) and Carole Cusack (2010), two pioneers in the field, have explained the emergence of fiction-based religions as a corollary of general processes of change in contemporary religion.³ As they point out, individuals in late modern society enjoy a wide-ranging freedom of choice, including religious choice. As religious *bricoleurs*, many of our contemporaries assemble their own spiritualities out of bits and pieces of religious traditions – both established, indigenous, and extinct-but-revived ones – which they combine with material from popular science, alternative medicine, and fiction (see esp. Possamai 2003, 2005). Within this context of religious bricolage, we can speak of fiction-based religion when fictional sources are given priority as the most important sources of inspiration for the spirituality of an individual or group. Fiction-based religions take the late modern freedom of choice of authoritative religious texts to the extreme, but they are part of a continuum of individualised spiritual practices that must itself be regarded as mainstream.⁴

Without questioning the relevance of Possamai and Cusack's analysis, this article substitutes their sociological focus on the agency of the religious *bricoleur* with a semiotic interest in the 'agency' of those fictional texts that inform contemporary

²Jediism is the largest fiction-based religion, but remains understudied. For some preliminary research, see Possamai (2005, 71–83), Cusack (2010, 120–128), McCormick (2012), Singler (2014), and Davidsen (2016).

³The term fiction-based religion is my own (cf. Davidsen 2013). Possamai (2005, 2012) uses the term hyper-real religion to refer to new religions anchored more or less in fiction. While hyper-real religion and fiction-based religion are synonyms, Cusack's notion of invented religions refers to a different but overlapping set of phenomena, namely 'those religions that announce their invented status' (Cusack 2010, 1). For Cusack, this category includes both fiction-based religions, such as Jediism and the Church of All Worlds, and parody religions, such as Discordianism and the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster. This is problematic, as fiction-based religions turn out not to announce their invented status, but are keen on proving themselves as 'real religions' (see Singler 2014 and Davidsen 2016 on Jediism in this respect), while parody religions by their very nature are not religions at all.

⁴We can distinguish between fiction-based religion *sensu stricto* and *sensu lato*. Fiction-based religion *sensu stricto* refers to those religions that take the narratives about a particular fictional world as their main authoritative texts. Jediism and Tolkien spirituality are good examples of this category. Fiction-based religion *sensu lato* includes all religions that in significant measure have integrated fictional elements into their beliefs and practices. Examples of this broader category include the Neo-Pagan organisation Church of All Worlds which has taken its name and several ritual practices from Robert A. Heinlein's science fiction novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* (Cusack 2016, with more references), the Otherkin who believe themselves to be Elves, Dragons, or other non-human beings (Laycock 2012a; Kirby 2013), and the Vampire community (Keyworth 2002; Laycock 2009, 2012b). In the two latter cases, religious communities have formed around particular identities supported by a fiction genre (e.g., the Vampire community around vampires inspired by Anne Rice's novels, including *Interview with the Vampire*).

spirituality. My thesis is that even the religious creativity of late modern *bricoleurs* is constrained by the texts they work with, and that some works of fiction become authoritative texts for religion not (only) because religious actors *choose* to make these fictional texts the base of their own religious life, but also because those texts *afford* religious use more so than other works of fiction.

I borrow the concept of affordances from the ecological psychologist James Gibson who argued that objects in the environment possess particular ‘affordances’ that present themselves as ‘action possibilities’ for animals and humans (1979, Ch. 8). Hollow trees, for instance, afford living-in for certain animals. Going beyond Gibson, archaeologists have also applied the notion of affordances to human artefacts (e.g., Knappett 2005). Some of the affordances of a given artefact will be functions of the designer’s intention, but not all. Chairs, for instance, afford sitting-on, but also standing-on, throwing, and so on. I argue that the same is true of texts. Texts tend to afford both an intended use (analogous to sitting-on the chair) and a range of unintended but possible uses (analogous to standing-on and throwing the chair). The intended use, and also the most obvious affordance of supernatural fiction, is processing-as-fiction, which includes both reading-as-fiction and playing-with-as-fiction, as when fans dress up as characters, write fan fiction, and role-play within the narrative universe. Next to this intended and dominant *fictional affordance*, some pieces of supernatural fiction include another – unintended and sub-dominant – affordance as well: a *religious affordance*. These texts afford a religious reading of the text (besides a reading of the text as fiction) and ritual interaction with the supernatural agents of the story (besides merely playing with the fictional universe). In short, they afford religious use.

We know that some fiction has a religious affordance, but we do not know what it is that makes some pieces of fiction, but not others, afford religious use. To advance the study of fiction-based religion, I propose that we ask ourselves a new question: which textual features make it possible for certain pieces of supernatural fiction to afford religious use? This is a crucial question for the study of fiction-based religion, but it is also essentially a rephrasing of one of the key questions in the general study of religion, namely which textual features make it possible for certain narratives to function as authoritative texts for religion? Therefore, while the main aim of this article is to contribute to the study of fiction-based religion by explaining how supernatural fiction can afford religious use, I hope also to contribute to our general understanding of how religious narratives work.

The argument will proceed in three steps. In Section 2, I review some previous work on the defining features and rhetorical strategies of religious narratives. The general consensus in the field is that religious narratives are characterised by the presence of supernatural agents with whom humans can interact, and by the texts’ construction of a sense of factuality and referentiality around these supernatural agents. Religious narratives tell of human interaction with supernatural agents and invite their audiences to participate in the interaction with these supernatural agents in their own world. In other words: religious narratives are narratives that afford and promote religious use.

Section 3, the backbone of the article, demonstrates that supernatural fiction affords religious use in so far as it imitates the rhetorical strategies of religious narratives: supernatural fiction affords religious use if it includes supernatural agents and presents those agents as potential interaction partners in the readers’ world. To explain in more detail how supernatural fiction can come to afford religious use, I

catalogue and analyse the ‘veracity mechanisms’ that supernatural fiction can use – implicitly and relatively – to construct an aura of factuality around the supernatural agents in the narrative. I identify seven intratextual veracity mechanisms and show that these can all be found either in *Star Wars*, in *The Lord of the Rings*, or in both texts. This explains why these pieces of supernatural fiction have in fact given rise to fiction-based religions, while no fiction-based religions have emerged from works of supernatural fiction that do not have these veracity mechanisms. To get a better grip on the material, I introduce an analytical distinction between two types of veracity mechanisms: *evidence mechanisms*, which present the supernatural as evidently real within the story-world, and *anchoring mechanisms*, such as author-narrator conflation, which link the story-world to the actual world. I also discuss how particular combinations of veracity mechanisms can reinforce each other. A separate subsection analyses how other texts, which stand in a transtextual relation to a fictional narrative, can reinforce the religious affordance of the narrative in question. Examples of such transtexts include prefaces, interviews, and letters in which the author comments on his or her work.

A careful textual analysis can identify which textual building-blocks make it possible for certain fictional narratives to be read in a religious mode – but such an analysis cannot explain *how* a religious interpretation emerges in the mind of readers or viewers. We need to supplement textual analysis with cognitive analysis, and in Section 4 I propose that Fauconnier and Turner’s theory of conceptual blending (2002) gives us just the tools we need. I show that the presence of evidence mechanisms allows supernatural fiction to be read in a cosmological mode, i.e., as fictional stories about real supernatural agents, and that the presence of anchoring mechanisms adds the possibility for a historical interpretation that considers at least some of the narrated events to have taken place in the actual world.

2. Defining features and rhetorical strategies of religious narratives

2.1. How religious traditions work

The fundamental aim of this article is to find out what makes certain fictional narratives equipped to afford religious use. As this question can only be answered relative to a particular conceptualisation of religion, it is necessary that I briefly make explicit what I understand as religion for the purpose of this article. Three points are crucial, though not controversial.

First, and drawing on such scholars as Melford Spiro (1966), Ilkka Pyysiäinen (2009), and Martin Riesebrodt (2008), I take the *sine qua non* of religion to be practices that assume the existence of supernatural agents. These fundamental religious practices, which Riesebrodt (2008, 30–31) terms ‘interventive practices’, can be seen as ‘culturally imagined ways to communicate with [supernatural agents], manipulate them, or internally activate them if they are believed to reside in the human being’ (Riesebrodt 2008, 29).⁵ Of course, religion is also much more besides

⁵Riesebrodt (2008, 31) talks of ‘superhuman powers’ rather than of supernatural agents because it is important for him to include also non-personal and intrapersonal powers within the category. I too want to catch all of this, but follow Pyysiäinen in considering the category supernatural agents to encompass both (a) extrahuman supernatural persons (gods, spirits); (b) extrahuman supernatural non-

interventive practices, but for the purpose of this article we can use the occurrence of such practices as a simple litmus test for whether some phenomenon constitutes religion or not. Concretely, Jediists meditate to experience the Force and even pray to the Force (Davidsen 2016), while *Star Wars* fans do no such things. That is why Jediism is a religion and *Star Wars* fandom is not. In the same way, adherents of Tolkien spirituality communicate in ritual with the Elves, with Gandalf, and with the so-called Valar, the gods of Tolkien's cosmology. Tolkien fans do no such things, and that is why Tolkien fandom is not religion, while Tolkien spirituality is.⁶

Second, I believe that it is possible and useful to distinguish between two dimensions of religious traditions: elemental religion and rationalised religion. Elemental religion refers to (1) practices that assume the existence of supernatural agents in a straightforward literal sense; (2) the assumptions (or first-order beliefs) that underpin these practices; and (3) the experiences that these practices induce. A prayer to God, for example, constitutes an example of elemental religion, as does the underlying belief, namely that a personal God exists who answers prayers, as well as the experience, which prayer can give, of being connected to God. The core of all living religious traditions is constituted by elemental religion, but this core can, as a logical second step, become the object of processes of religious rationalisation. Religious rationalisation involves the explication and justification of elemental religion and leads to the formulation of reflective, systematic second-order beliefs, i.e., rationalised religion. It is crucial, however, that such *post hoc* rationalisations do not render elemental religion itself any less literalist, and that they are only possible where literalist elemental religious practices are present to be reinterpreted.⁷

The third point is that elemental religion and rationalised religion are supported by different types of texts. Elemental religion is supported by religious narratives rather than by discursive texts, because interventive practices and religious narratives operate according to the same narrative and social logic. Religious narratives tell about the supernatural agents and how they interact with people. Interventive practices offer people a way to inscribe themselves into the narrative and continue the interaction with the divine powers of whom the authoritative narratives tell.⁸ Rationalised religion, by contrast, is not about living the religious narrative, but about reflecting on religious practice and narratives, thereby developing systems of religious knowledge ('theology'). Consequently, the texts that most directly support rationalised religion are discursive rather than narrative; treaties on dogmatics, rather than myths and testimonies.

I can now qualify what I mean by a fictional narrative *affording religious use*: I want to know what it takes for a fictional narrative to give rise to elemental religion. For the purpose of this article, I will say that a piece of fiction affords religious use if it can inspire readers to engage in interventive practices relative to the supernatural agents of which the narrative tells. (It is not enough that the text affords to be

personal powers (such as spiritual energies); and (c) intrahuman supernatural entities (such as souls and the Buddha nature).

⁶For a more developed discussion of the difference between fandom and fiction-based religion, see Davidsen (2013).

⁷For a more developed discussion of the dynamics of belief in religious traditions, based on the categories of elemental religion and rationalised religion, see Davidsen (2014, 120–144).

⁸Due to the intimate relation between ritual and narrative, ritual studies and narratology have much to gain from entering into a dialogue with each other. On this point, see Ryan (2013).

interpreted in light of an established religious narrative, for example as a retelling of the Christian Gospels.) The question now becomes which textual features or building-blocks a piece of supernatural fiction must have in order to afford religious use. Fortunately, there is no need to begin from scratch in answering this question. We can begin by looking at what scholars of religion have already argued about the textual features responsible for the religious affordance of religious narratives proper.

2.2. *How religious narratives work*

There exists no general theory of religious narratives, but scholars of religion have drawn on narratology and narrative semiotics to theorise the structure and strategies of such texts. In particular, Ole Davidsen (1993, 1995, 2005a) and Anders Klostergaard Petersen (2005, 2016) have pioneered the theoretical study of how religious narratives work and have demonstrated the usefulness for this endeavour of Genette's narratology (e.g., Genette 1980, 1988, 2007) and the narrative semiotics developed by Algirdas Julien Greimas (e.g., Greimas 1987, Greimas and Courtés 1982) and Umberto Eco (e.g., Eco 1990).⁹ Davidsen and Petersen agree that certain textual features can be considered characteristic for religious narratives, and that these features have to do with two different aspects of the narrative discourse, which I will call story and narration. *Story* refers to those events in the story-world which the narrative recounts; the 'what' of the narrative. *Narration*, by contrast, is about the 'how' of the narrative. This aspect covers the communicative, story-telling act of the author addressing the reader explicitly, and of the author communicating implicitly through a narrator situated within the story-world or through authoritative characters within the story who speaks on the author's behalf. Narration is about who gets the word, so to speak, and therefore about the point of view taken by the narrative discourse vis-à-vis the narrated events. This is important, for religious narratives are 'interpretative narratives' (Ricoeur 1990) which try to steer their recipients towards a particular (religious) interpretation of the narrated events.¹⁰

⁹Narratology is the study of literary narratives, while narrative semiotics is the general study of meaning, based on the assumption that human cognition is fundamentally narrative. A very useful resource on narratology is the *Handbook of Narratology* (Hühn et al. 2009) of which an updated version is available on the Internet. The canonical handbook on Greimassian narrative semiotics is Greimas and Courtés (1982); a good introduction to narrative semiotics is provided by Martin and Ringham (2006). For more references on narrative semiotics, see also Petersen (2016).

¹⁰The distinction between story and narration draws on the work of Greimas and Genette. According to Greimas, all texts have two aspects: the utterance (or enunciate), i.e., that which is said (the content), and the enunciation, i.e., the way in which that is said – by an enunciator to an enunciatee (the form; Greimas and Courtés 1982, art. 'Enunciation', 'Enunciator/Enunciatee', 'Utterance'). For narrative discourses in particular, Greimas distinguishes between the narrative utterance (corresponding to the enunciate) and the narration (corresponding to the enunciation; Greimas and Courtés 1982, art. 'Narrativity'). To avoid the cumbersome phrase 'narrative utterance', Davidsen prefers to label this aspect of a narrative discourse 'the narrate', here using the word narrate as a noun. This terminology was introduced in Davidsen (1993, 1995) and has been adopted by Petersen (2016) and several other Scandinavian theologians and scholars of religion. However, narrate (noun) does not sound quite right to speakers of English and has never become part of the standard narratological lexicon. In this article, I therefore adopt Genette's term 'story' rather than narrate. For Genette, *histoire* (story) is 'the signified or narrative content', while *narration* (rendered either as narrating or narration in English) is 'the producing narrative

As Davidsen and Petersen point out, it is a distinctive feature of religious narratives on the story level that they tell about supernatural agents, such as gods, spirits, and angels. This is of course true, but I would like to add that religious narratives tend to tell particular things about the supernatural agents (see also Petersen 2016). Religious narratives tell of the relationship between the supernatural agents and the human protagonists of the story – about who the supernatural agents are, what they want, and how people can have a beneficial relationship with them. In other words: religious narratives present the reader with *narrative religion*. This narrative religion can be constituted by religious practice engaged in by the characters of the story, or by instructions given by authoritative characters on how to engage in such practice. Prometheus' institution of sacrifice to the gods in Hesiod's *Theogony* (actual practice) and Jesus' lecture to the disciples on how to pray in Luke 11:1–4 (instruction) are examples of each type. The function of narrative religion is to offer a 'model of' religion (cf. Geertz 1966) which the readers can enact in their own world.

The presence of supernatural agents in religious narratives helps explain why these narratives afford religious use, but cannot yet explain why some narratives afford religious use while others do not. Conventional religious narratives with supernatural agents/narrative religion clearly afford religious use, but there are many works of supernatural fiction which do not (seem to) afford religious use even though they tell of supernatural agents (think of the lion Aslan in C.S. Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*) or even include narrative religion (such as the cult of the Seven Gods in George Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* series). Clearly the substantive criteria 'supernatural agents' and 'narrative religion' are not enough to demarcate religious narratives from other narratives, nor to explain why some narratives afford religious use while others do not. It is therefore necessary to look also at the mode of narration.

In their contributions to *Litteraturen og det hellige [Literature and the Holy]* (Davidsen 2005b), Anders Klostergaard Petersen, Ole Davidsen, and Torsten Pettersson have sought the difference between supernatural fiction and religious narratives in the mode of narration. Petersen (2005, 429) has pointed out that some religious texts, which he refers to as 'holy texts', claim not only to tell *about* the supernatural, but also claim to *stem from* a supernatural source, as a result of revelation or divine inspiration. In Davidsen's terms, such texts claim that a 'discursive determinator' stands behind the human author as the text's ultimate addressor (Davidsen 2005a, 390, 397–398). This is a good point, but since only some religious narratives rely on this rhetorical move, the claim to stem from a divine source cannot be taken as a defining feature of religious narratives, nor as a prerequisite for narratives to afford religious use.

action and, by extension, the whole of the real or fictional situation in which that action takes place' (Genette 1980, 27). Genette's concept pair – story/narration – can thus for our purposes be treated as synonymous with Greimas' concept pair – narrative utterance/narration. We need not be too concerned with the fact that Genette operates also with a third aspect of narrative discourse, besides story and narration, which he terms narrative (*récit*). Narrative in this sense is 'the signifier, statement, discourse or narrative text itself' (Genette 1980, 27), and an analysis of this level of a narrative discourse covers such aspects as order and voice. In his actual analysis, however, Genette often covers these matters under the caption of narration, thereby effectively dissolving his three-tiered model into a simpler two-tiered model (story/narration) which is essentially identical to Greimas' model.

Davidsen and Pettersson point to a more fundamental feature of religious narration, namely the narrator's claim to speak about the actual world rather than about a fictional world. In Pettersson's words, the religious narrative has 'reference ambition', i.e., it 'claims to communicate the truth about the actual world, 'truth' here referring to a postulated correspondence between the textual discourse and the subject matter it refers to' (Pettersson 2005, 219).¹¹ By contrast, fictional texts lack reference ambition, though they can have the ambition to convey representative truths about what is true in general, for instance of a certain type of person or situation (Pettersson 2005, 221). Davidsen formulates the difference between fiction and religious texts in a similar way when he writes that:

[w]hereas fiction remains within its own world into which the reader has to transport himself, [the religious narrative] intrudes into the life-world of the reader. Fiction speaks about the world of the reader, but only indirectly. It tells of a fictional world which the reader can use as a mirror for his own world. The religious text does not only speak about, but *blends into*, its reader's world. (Davidsen 2005a, 397–398; emphasis in original)¹²

With O. Davidsen and Pettersson, I believe that it is meaningful and possible to distinguish between fictional and religious narratives, and that we must do so on the basis of reference ambition, not on basis of actual factuality (see also M. Davidsen 2013, 384–388). Fictional narratives, then, are narratives that create their own world, rather than referring to the actual world. Factual narratives (or referential narratives, or 'history'), by contrast, are narratives that claim to refer to events that really happened in the actual world. News reports fall into this category, and so do religious narratives.¹³ Religious narratives, specifically, are narratives that tell of human interaction with supernatural agents and invite their audiences to participate in the interaction with these supernatural agents in their own world. I believe that it is useful to operate with a clear conceptual distinction between fictional and factional (including religious) narratives, even if some texts are difficult to classify, either because they are (intentionally) ambiguous, because they are amalgamates of fictional and factional narration, or because, as in the case of many religious narratives, the intentions of the author cannot be known for certain, but must be inferred from the text itself. Crucially, such a clear distinction does not rule out that supernatural fiction can afford religious use in so far as it imitates, within a general framework of fictionality, the rhetoric of religious narration.¹⁴

Petersen (2016) agrees with O. Davidsen and Pettersson that religious narratives seek to persuade by creating a sense of referentiality, and he identifies a number of

¹¹My translation from the Swedish original.

¹²My translation from the Danish original. See also O. Davidsen (1993, 7–8).

¹³The pragmatic distinction between fictional and factual narratives adopted here is not the only way in which a distinction can be drawn between fiction and non-fiction. Some literary scholars, but none of those referred to throughout this article, distinguish between fiction and non-fiction as a function of actual correspondence between the story-world and the actual world. For an overview of the different views on the border between fictional and factional narratives, see Schaeffer (2009) and Ryan (2002).

¹⁴The distinction between fiction and religious narratives also does not rule out the existence of religious fiction, i.e., narratives that are meant to tell fictional tales about real supernatural beings. This category includes religious parables, jokes about God, and perhaps some ancient myths as well. Crucially, I consider religious fiction a sub-category of fiction, not of religious narratives proper.

ways in which this can be done.¹⁵ For example, the narrator can intrude into the narrative to address the intended audience directly (as in the Gospel of John (20:30f): ‘Now Jesus did many other signs in the disciples [...] so that you [the implied reader] may invest trustfulness in that Jesus is Christ’ (Petersen 2016, 515; Petersen’s translation). The narrator can also communicate indirectly via one of the narrative subjects, as in the Gospel of Matthew (28:18b–20):

All authority on heaven and earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of time. (Petersen 2016, 515; Petersen’s translation)

In both cases the ‘indeterminacy with respect to p–s–t-coordinates [person, space, time]’ (Petersen 2016, 518) invites the audience to inscribe itself into the recounted story and interpret their own present as the narrative’s foretold future. The religious narratives assert their veracity by establishing an indexical and temporal link between the story-world and the readers’ world.

Where does this leave us? First, we can conclude that religious narratives work by presenting supernatural agents as real beings and potential interaction partners for the audience, and that this narrative effect can be achieved by the means of various rhetorical mechanisms. This opens up for a number of empirical questions: how many ‘veracity mechanisms’ are there? Which ones are most successful? Regarding the religious affordance of supernatural fiction more specifically, we may ask: which veracity mechanisms can be found in supernatural fiction? Do some veracity mechanisms enhance each other’s effect when present together? Can some mechanisms be identified as necessary and/or sufficient for a fictional narrative to afford religious use (or a particular type of religious use)?

In the next section, I set out to answer these questions. To put some flesh on the bones, I will illustrate all the veracity mechanisms with examples from real texts, especially *Star Wars* and Tolkien’s literary mythology. Indeed, as it turns out, each of the identified veracity mechanisms can be found in either *Star Wars*, Tolkien’s literary mythology, or both, and this provides much of the explanation for why these texts have given rise to fiction-based religions, while no religions have emerged from science fiction and fantasy texts that do not have these mechanisms.

3. A catalogue of veracity mechanisms in supernatural fiction

We can distinguish between two main categories of veracity mechanisms in supernatural fiction: evidence mechanisms and anchoring mechanisms. Evidence mechanisms assert the reality of supernatural agents *within* the story-world, while anchoring mechanisms destabilise a narrative’s fictional status by implying that it ultimately speaks about the actual world rather than only about a fictional world. In other words, evidence mechanisms promote the interpretation that the

¹⁵Contrary to O. Davidsen, Pettersson, and myself, Petersen (2016) insists that the difference between religious narratives and fiction must be conceptualised as gradual rather than categorical. This difference in conceptualisation, however, does not impede the compatibility of our discussions of the rhetorical strategies employed by narratives (religious narratives and supernatural fiction) to create a sense of referentiality or factuality.

Table 1. Veracity mechanisms in religious narratives and supernatural fiction.

	Evidence mechanisms	Anchoring mechanisms (textual)	Anchoring mechanisms (transtextual)
Story-world	Matter-of-fact effect	Onomastic anchoring	Hypotextual foundation
Narration	Teacher discourse Justification	Author-narrator conflation Reader inscription Thematic mirroring	Paratextual priming Metatextual reflection

'textual world' produced by the narrator (his or her discourse) is an accurate depiction of the 'textual reference world' (the story-world) to which he or she claims to refer ($TW = TRW$), while anchoring mechanisms promote the interpretation that the textual reference world in question is ultimately not a fictional story-world, but in fact the actual world ($TRW = AW$). When the two types of veracity mechanisms operate in tandem, the effect of verisimilitude produced by the evidence mechanisms and the effect of referentiality produced by the anchoring mechanisms together promote the interpretation that the narrative is essentially a truthful, factual story ($TW = AW$).

Both evidence mechanisms and anchoring mechanisms can play out either on the level of the story-world or on the level of narration. Veracity mechanisms that play out on the level of the story-world work because they demonstrate the reality of the supernatural (evidence) or because they *demonstrate* a link between the story-world and the actual world (anchoring). By contrast, veracity mechanisms that play out on the level of narration work because the author, or someone speaking on the author's behalf, *tells of* the reality and true nature of the supernatural agents (evidence) or thematises the referentiality of the story (anchoring). Both evidence mechanisms and anchoring mechanisms can be found in any narrative, but furthermore, anchoring mechanisms can be found also in transtexts, which are linked to the main narrative by the author. These transtexts can be paratexts, such as a foreword by the author; metatexts, such as letters or interviews in which the author reflects on his narrative; or hypotexts, such as easily recognisable religious narratives that the fictional narrative draws on.¹⁶ I refer the reader to [Table 1](#) for an overview of the ten veracity mechanisms discussed in the following subsections.

3.1. Evidence mechanisms: matter-of-fact effect, teacher discourse, and justification

The most fundamental evidence mechanism is the *matter-of-fact effect*. We have this effect when an all-knowing, implicit narrator presents the supernatural agents as straightforwardly real within the story-world. The matter-of-fact effect is present in most works of supernatural fiction, and in all religious narratives. Think, for

¹⁶I borrow the terms transtext, paratext, metatext, and hypotext from Genette (1997). Transtextuality, rather than intertextuality, is Genette's hypernym for all types of indexical relations that can exist between texts.

example, of Yahweh in the Bible, the Elves in *The Lord of the Rings*, and the Force in *Star Wars*. All these agents are extraordinary within their respective story-worlds, but they are clearly real: they act within the narrative, are addressed by other characters, and – with the exception of the Force – themselves address other characters directly. They are presented as real in a straightforward way, just as magic – within these story-worlds – really works, prophecies really come true, and so on.

It is important to stress that while the effectiveness of the matter-of-fact effect hinges on the narrator's plausible demonstration of the reality of the supernatural agents within the story-world, it does not require belief in the supernatural to be shared by all characters in the narrative. In many cases – and this goes for both religious narratives and supernatural fiction – not all characters are believers – at least not initially. In *Star Wars*, for example, Han Solo first doubts the existence of the Force and prefers a good blaster to a 'hokey religion' (Lucas 1977). However, faced with the evidence of the Force's existence, Solo comes to believe. Similarly, in Exodus 1–18, the Israelites long doubt whether it is really Yahweh who stands behind the plagues that hit the Egyptians, even though Yahweh himself states that this is the case within the narrative (Feldt 2011). Given the polyperspectivism of the text, Feldt (2011, 266–267) has concluded that Exodus stimulates 'an interpretative search for meaning in the recipient', aimed at finding out what really happened. Because the status of the phantasms (the miracles, hyperboles, and paradoxes in the text) long remains uncertain, the text allows readers to reach different conclusions: they can adopt the perspective of Yahweh and the narrator (i.e., that Yahweh sends the plagues) or the perspective of the disbelieving Israelites (i.e., that it is not Yahweh; Feldt 2011, 267–270). The choice is not completely open, however, for the text nudges the reader in a particular direction. Of the text's several voices, the narrator endorses Yahweh's voice above that of the Israelites, and this fact, as well as the Israelites' conversion from unbelievers to believers throughout the course of the narrative, are parts of the text's persuasive project. This is to say that the matter-of-fact effect in supernatural fiction and religious narratives can work even when the narrative's message is challenged by narrative subjects, and in fact such challenges – when overcome over the course of the narrative – can add extra weight to the matter-of-fact effect as they invite the reader to go through the same conversion process as the initially unconvinced narrative subjects.

So what is the impact of the matter-of-fact effect on the reader? As far as religious narratives go, Feldt (2011) is right to point out that such narratives do not always succeed in persuading their readers. But that is because religious narratives claim to speak of the actual world and hence require their readers to believe the unbelievable. The case is somewhat different for supernatural fiction. Supernatural fiction concerns a fictional world, not the actual world, so here the narrator only has to persuade the reader that he speaks truthfully about the fictional world. As a rule, this goes automatically. For supernatural fiction, the matter-of-fact presence of supernatural agents and processes normally has the reader simply accept the reality of those supernatural agents and processes within the story-world. In other words, while reading, readers of supernatural fiction not only process representations of supernatural agents; they are also compelled to attach to these representations the meta-representation 'this is real' – real within the story-world. This invokes a situation in which the reader must juggle with no less than three levels of representations. First, there are representations of the supernatural agents (the Force, Elves).

Second, there is the meta-representation of realness within the story-world, which is attached to these agents. Third, there is another meta-representation at stake, namely the notion that the story-world *in toto* is fictional, and hence unreal. Logically, the third representation (fictionality) should trump the second (reality), but our minds do not always work that way, and that has to do with the way we cognitively process fiction.

As David Suits (2006) has pointed out, it is not belief, but *disbelief* in fiction that requires a cognitive effort. Our natural inclination is not to make-believe or fictionally-believe, but to *really believe* in fiction – although we normally stay in this mode only temporarily, namely until we remind ourselves that ‘it was only fiction’. In Suits’ terms, we tend to believe because the story, simply by being told (or written or screened), provides a kind of ‘evidence’ – Suits also uses that term – about the characters and events it tells about (Suits 2006, 382–383). Support for Suits’ thesis is provided by Lisa Zunshine (2006) and Michael Burke (2011) who have studied emotional and cognitive responses to literature, and by Torben Grodal (2009) who has studied how we process visual stimuli from movies. These studies show that we process narratives along two cognitive routes, and that the results of these two different processes can be in conflict with in each other. The ‘fast’ cognitive circuit, which is unconscious and tied to emotional reactions, does not discriminate between fictional and non-fictional stimuli, but reacts to fictional narratives in the same way as to other stimuli. It is because of this circuit that we can empathise with the characters in a novel and be scared of monsters on the screen. Above this gut-processing we also have a ‘slow’ and conscious cognitive circuit, which is able to label a given narrative as ‘just fiction’. The slow circuit does not always succeed in trumping the fast one, however, and that is why readers and viewers who have been deeply immersed in a narrative can find it difficult to shed off the gut-feeling of reality, even when they know that the narrative is fictional.

Where the matter-of-fact effect works by simply showing that the supernatural is real within the story-world, the second evidence mechanism, which I refer to as *teacher discourse*, rests on the trustworthiness of authoritative characters’ claims about the reality of the supernatural. This mechanism comes into play when authoritative teacher figures instruct less knowledgeable characters – with whom the reader is invited to identify – about supernatural matters. As a rhetorical strategy, teacher discourse is common in religious narratives. Think, for example, of the Christian Gospels in which Jesus, a character with narratively constructed authority, instructs the disciples about the Kingdom of God. The author here tries to persuade the reader by having an authoritative character speaking on his behalf, hoping that the reader will identify with the disciples and be compelled by the authority of the narrative Jesus.

Teacher discourse is also prevalent in supernatural fiction, and can here have the same persuasive effect as in religious narratives. In *Star Wars*, for example, Obi-Wan Kenobi (Lucas 1977) and Yoda (Lucas 1980) instruct Luke Skywalker in the mysteries of the Force. Such spiritual lectures are persuasive for three reasons. First, the very presence of an authoritative teacher figure, even a fictional one, prompts a stance of responsiveness in the reader/viewer. When viewers watch Yoda on screen and recognise him as a religious sage, they automatically and unconsciously activate their associations with religious sages in general, and project these associations onto Yoda. Concretely, viewers will be inclined to

assume that Yoda, being a religious sage, is sincere and an expert who knows what he is talking about. In other words, viewers unconsciously attach a meta-representation of reality to Yoda's teacher discourse, and this cognitive process plays out despite the fact that Yoda himself is a fictional character whose authority is a purely narrative construction. The second reason for the persuasiveness of teacher discourse is that readers/viewers are invited to identify with the disciple(s) to whom the teacher speaks – in this case Luke Skywalker. This creates a feeling in the reader/viewer of being addressed directly, which again makes one more prone to accept the message as also valid in one's own world, the actual world. Third, teacher discourse constitutes its own textual level as an 'embedded discourse' within the narrative frame, and that makes it possible to process it relatively independently from that frame. Indeed, that is how Jediists respond to *Star Wars*. They are persuaded by Yoda's discourse because of his narratively constructed authority, and they even quote Yoda's teachings about the Force on their homepages. At the same time, however, they consider Yoda himself and *Star Wars* in general, i.e., the narrative frame, to be fictional. In other words: they accept Yoda's authority and the truth of his discourse, even though they reject as fictional the very story that constructs Yoda's authority. Teacher discourse plays a smaller role in *The Lord of the Rings*, but we have it, for example, when Gandalf explains to Bilbo that a providential power is at work in the world and that this power *meant* for Bilbo to find the Ring (FR, I, iv, 73).¹⁷ However, Gandalf's teachings do not have the capacity to be disembedded from the narrative frame in the same way as Obi-Wan and Yoda's teachings, because Gandalf always uses theology to interpret particular events and thus anchors his embedded discourse in the story-world, while Obi-Wan and Yoda speak about the Force in a general way that is meaningful independently of the plot.

I have thus far discussed the matter-of-fact effect and teacher discourse as two independent mechanisms, but they often operate in tandem to reinforce each other. In particular, the matter-of-fact effect can be used to support teacher discourse. For example, when Obi-Wan Kenobi uses the Jedi Mind Trick to take control of the Stormtrooper's consciousness on Tatooine in the first *Star Wars* movie (Lucas 1977), this demonstration of his connection with the Force (matter-of-fact effect) enhances his religious authority and hence the authority of his teacher discourse. We have the same effect when the Gospels' narrators demonstrate the divine nature of Jesus (within the story-world) by attributing to him wonder-working powers, a fact that enhances the authority of the narrative Jesus' teacher discourse.

The third evidence mechanism is *justification of the tale*. We have this mechanism when the narrator in one way or the other informs the narratee about his own sources of information. A justification of this sort is an index of factuality for, as Genette (1991, 763) has pointed out, under normal circumstances only narrators of factual narratives (e.g., historians and reporters) explicitly discuss or quote

¹⁷Because there are so many different editions of *The Lord of the Rings*, I follow the convention in Tolkien Studies and refer to passages in the work using the format Volume, book, chapter, page. The present reference is to *The Fellowship of the Ring*, book one, chapter four, page 73. The three volumes are abbreviated as follows: *The Fellowship of the Ring*, FR; *The Two Towers*, TT; and *The Return of the King*, RK. References to *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 1937) use the format H, chapter, page.

their sources. Fictional narrators normally do not refer to their sources, because they have none; but this fact has, of course, not restrained some authors of fiction from constructing a corpus of fictional sources that their narrators can invoke, thereby imitating a key feature of factual narration.

In supernatural fiction, justification comes in two main forms, the narrator's use of an apparatus and his claim to have inherited the story. J.R.R. Tolkien toys with both of these forms. For example, *The Lord of the Rings* includes a massive apparatus, including several maps and more than a hundred pages of appendices. This allows the narrator to present his story as a well-researched historical account and thus adds an aura of scholarship to the narrative. We must assume that the apparatus of *The Lord of the Rings* has contributed to that text's interpretability as a 'more-than-fictional' narrative. Moreover, Tolkien's use of an apparatus struck a chord, for after Tolkien it has been the norm that fantasy literature comes with maps, glossaries, and notes. However, as Michael Saler (2004) has pointed out, Tolkien was not the first author to make extensive use of 'paratextual appurtenances'.¹⁸ This practice emerged with the New Romance in the end of the 19th century, and Saler (2004, 143–144) notes that it was exactly because of the maps and explanatory notes that many readers mistook H. Rider Haggard's *She* (1887) and other New Romances as non-fiction.

The second way of justifying the tale is for the narrator to claim that he did not create the story, but that he speaks on behalf of somebody else with more authority or knowledge. In religious narratives, this claim comes in three forms: the narrator can claim to speak on behalf of a divine being who has revealed itself to him, he can emphasise his use of witnesses who were closer to the narrated account, or he can claim that his account is based on an older or holier *manuscrit trouvé*, or recovered manuscript. One could mention the Quran and 4 Ezra as examples of prophetic disavowal of authorship and the Gospel of Luke (1:1–4) as an example of the testimonial strategy. The textbook example of a recovered manuscript is the law book allegedly found in the Temple in Jerusalem according to 2 Kings 22.¹⁹ I do not know of any fiction in which the narrator claims divine inspiration, but there are several examples of fiction narrators who claim to base their account wholly or in part on recovered manuscripts and eye-witness accounts. In *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, the narrator states in the prologue that the main narrative was composed by Hobbits long ago (*FR*, prologue, 18–19). Supposedly, the narrative was written down by Frodo and Bilbo (who themselves were eye-witnesses) and the story was then preserved through the ages until it has now come into the narrator's possession. The recovered manuscript motif creates an aura of factuality around *The Lord of the Rings*, and that is especially the case because this evidence mechanism works intimately together with an anchoring mechanism that conflates the narrator of the story with Tolkien-the-author and hence allows for the conception of the narrative about the War of the Ring as our world's historical past. It is to this and a number of other anchoring mechanisms that we now turn.

¹⁸It may be argued that the apparatus of *The Lord of the Rings* and similar romances constitute a form of paratext, but it must then be specified that we here talk about *narratorial paratext*. I treat the veracity effects of authorial and allographic paratexts in Section 3.3 below.

¹⁹On the *manuscrit trouvé* motif in religious narratives and new age fiction, see Wieggers (2008).

3.2. *Anchoring mechanisms within the narrative: author-narrator conflation, reader inscription, onomastic anchoring, and thematic mirroring*

Anchoring mechanisms are veracity mechanisms that promote a reading of the narrative as a referential story about the actual world, rather than as a fictional story about a fictional world. Author-narrator conflation destabilises the disjunction between the text-external author and the text-internal narrator, and by doing so opens up the text for an interpretation as a factual, rather than fictional, narrative. In a similar way, reader inscription establishes a connection between the story-world and the reader's world, either by means of the narrator directly addressing the narratee or through the inscription of the reader's present into the narrative's foreshadowed future (external prolepsis). Onomastic anchoring, in turn, connects the story-world to the actual world by having persons, places, and events from the actual world appear in the story-world. Thematic mirroring works in a more indirect way than the other three anchoring mechanisms by presenting hints on the story level about how to interpret the narration.

Of the various intratextual anchoring mechanisms in supernatural fiction, *author-narrator-conflation* is perhaps most effective, as it challenges fictional convention in the most direct way. Indeed, as Genette has argued, the 'rigorous identification [of author and narrator] ($A = N$), to the degree that this can be established, defines factual narrative [...] Conversely, their dissociation ($A \neq N$) defines fiction' (Genette 1991, 764). Therefore, readers of fiction *expect* a disjunction of the text-external author and the text-internal narrator and perceive any degree of author-narrator conflation as an index of non-fictionality. If the reader becomes convinced that the author and the narrator are in fact one and the same, he will dispense with a fictional reading mode and approach the text instead in a referential mode. We see this happen, for example, in New Age fiction, such as James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* (1993), Luke Rhinehart's *The Dice Man* (1971), and Dan Millman's *Way of the Peaceful Warrior* (1980). These books all have what Genette calls an auto-diegetic narrator, i.e., a narrator who is both a first-person narrator and the main protagonist of the story, and in all cases the narrator-protagonist is presented as so strikingly similar to the author that many readers have come to believe that the narrator and the author are really one and the same.

The effect of author-narrator conflation is not restricted to autodiegetic fiction, but can also be achieved in fiction with other types of narrators. Regardless of the type of narrator, the effect of author-narrator conflation can be achieved in two ways – an implicit and an explicit one. In *The Lord of the Rings* we have mainly the implicit strategy. Here, the narrator is represented as being very much like the author, but the two are not explicitly identified with each other. The similarity of the narrator to Tolkien himself becomes clear especially in the prologue and the appendices. First of all, the narrator is clearly a scholar – and indeed a scholar of old history and languages – just as Tolkien. The narrator is furthermore depicted as a human and not, for example, as a hobbit. Addressing the reader in the prologue, the narrator says that the Hobbits refer to 'us' as 'The Big Folk' (FR, prologue, 1), and he compares the calendar of the Elves in Middle-earth with 'our' Gregorian calendar (RK, appendix D, 1451–1460). The similarity of Tolkien and his narrator can leave readers to wonder whether the narrative is really fact disguised as fiction, rather than fiction disguised as fact. The effect is even greater when the conflation of author and narrator is explicit, as in the prologue to the first edition of

The Fellowship of the Ring. In the same short text the author assures the reader that the map of the Shire included in the book has 'been approved as reasonably correct by those Hobbits that still concern themselves with ancient history' (Tolkien 1954, 8), but he also includes statements that are clearly authorial, such as the dedication of the book to his sons and daughter and to the Inklings (Tolkien 1954, 7). Here is no disjunction between Tolkien (as author) and the narrator; the two are completely conflated. The original prologue can therefore be read as Tolkien's serious claim that hobbits still exist and had assisted in publishing the book.

Author-narrator conflation is an important veracity mechanism because it enhances the effect of some of the evidence mechanisms discussed above, namely the matter-of-fact effect and justification. In the first case, if the narrator and the author are in fact the same person, then the matter-of-fact account of the supernatural must be true not only of a fictional world but also of the actual world – unless the author is lying or mistaken. Also, if it is really the author (and not just the narrator) whose account is based on some authoritative source, then that source must be real (assuming, again, that the author is not lying), a 'fact' that can easily slide into the notion that the story which the source allegedly tells is also true. This is what happens in *The Lord of the Rings* where author-narrator conflation and the *manuscrit trouvé* motif together anchor the distant narrative past (the War of the Ring) in a present that is both Tolkien's own and the reader's, thereby producing the feeling that Tolkien retells the actual world's ancient history. Some readers believe this to be the case, and Ratliff and Flinn even claimed that Tolkien had told them 'that in England most of the lending libraries over his protests classified the trilogy as history and non-fiction' (Ratliff and Flinn 1968, 143). In fact, most practitioners of Tolkien spirituality recognise that the story is not actual history, but they do maintain that it has a historical or referential quality to it. It seems that while most readers are not persuaded to read *The Lord of the Rings* as actual history, the veracity mechanisms of the text succeed in producing a general aura of referentiality. Readers feel that 'there must be something more to it' or that 'Tolkien must have played with history for a reason'. This feeling has prompted some readers to speculate about the historical truths Tolkien might 'actually' have been hinting at – such as the alleged reality of an Elven bloodline or the destruction of Atlantis (cf. Kloet and Kuipers 2007; Davidsen 2014).

Reader inscription, the twin mechanism to author-narrator conflation, works when the narrator connects the story-world to the reader's world in either space or time. This can happen in two ways, which have already been touched upon in Section 2 above, as they play a major role in Petersen's argument (2016). First, the narrator can be explicit and address a named narratee. Consider, for example, Luke addressing Theophilus in the beginning of his gospel, thereby embedding his narrative within an epistolic discourse. For even greater effect, the narrator can address a generic reader ('you'). This establishes a general indexical link between story and narration, and hence between the story-world and the reader's world. This strategy is used by the narrator in the Gospel of John when he becomes explicit and addresses the narratee: 'Now Jesus did many other signs in the disciples [...] so that you [the reader] may invest trustfulness in that Jesus is Christ' (Petersen 2016, 515; Petersen's translation).

Fludernik (2003, 392) has pointed out that it can enhance the realistic illusion in realistic novels if the narrator sometimes stops narrating and instead comments on the narrative or directly addresses the reader. Fludernik refers to such temporary changes in the mode of narration from utterative to enunciative as rhetorical metalepses (or discourse metalepses; Fludernik 2003, 289).²⁰ We have a number of such factuality-enhancing rhetorical metalepses in *The Lord of the Rings*. In fact, we have already encountered one of them, namely the narrator's remark to the narratee that the Hobbits refer to 'us' – the human species, including narrator and narratee – as 'The Big Folk' (*FR*, prologue, 1).²¹ In the main narrative of *The Lord of the Rings*, there are two additional rhetorical metalepses, but in these instances the narrator does not directly address the reader – he merely stops to comment on the unfolding story. Even so, these two instances connect the story-world with the reader's world because they combine rhetorical metalepsis with the related device of external prolepsis.

Genette (1980, 40) defines prolepsis as 'any narrative maneuver that consists of narrating or evoking in advance an event that will take place later'. External prolepsis, in turn, is a prolepsis that extends beyond the end-point of the narrative (Genette 1980, 68). Like rhetorical metalepsis, external prolepsis is a narrative device employed in the Christian Gospels to connect the story-world to the world of the reader. In another passage discussed by Petersen and referred to in Section 2 above, Jesus tells the disciples: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations [...] And behold, I am with you always, to the end of time' (Matthew 28: 19–20; Petersen 2016, 515; Petersen's translation). Here, the connection between the world of the story and the world of the reader is achieved not by rhetorical metalepsis, but by an external prolepsis: Jesus speaks about a future (to the end of time) which lies beyond the end-point of the narrative, but in which he will still be with the disciples. As this open-ended point in time lies in the narrative's future, a reader can interpret Jesus' words as being about his or her own present.

²⁰Rhetorical metalepsis stands in contrast to 'real' or ontological metalepsis which, in Genette's definition, refers to

any intrusion by the extradiegetic [=who is not a character in the story] narrator or narratee into the diegetic universe [=the story-world] (or by the diegetic characters into a metadiegetic universe [=a story-world belonging to a second-order narrative told by a character within the main narrative], etc.), or the inverse. (Genette 1980, 234–235)

One example of an ontological metalepsis could be Frank Underwood's direct address to the audience in *House of Cards*. As Genette points out, an ontological metalepsis produces an effect of humour or of the fantastic or 'some mixture of the two' (Genette 1988, 88). As such, ontological metalepses stress the fictional nature of the narrative. By contrast, a rhetorical metalepsis does not include any ontological breaches, and the rhetorical function is in most cases the exact opposite of the ontological metalepsis, namely to increase the illusion of non-fictionality.

²¹Rhetorical metalepsis does not always instantiate a sense of factuality, but can also serve to stress the fictionality of a narrative (in the same way as an ontological metalepsis does). We have an example of this in *The Hobbit* where the narrator suddenly stops narrating and addresses the narratee directly with the words:

Now certainly Bilbo was in what is called a tight place. But you must remember it was not quite so tight for him as it would have been for me or for you. Hobbits are not quite like ordinary people [...] I should not have liked to be in Mr. Baggins' place, all the same. (*H*, v, 83)

External prolepsis also works in supernatural fiction where it can create the notion that the story is actual history. As I mentioned, *The Lord of the Rings* includes two instances of combined rhetorical metalepsis and external prolepsis, and the most interesting of the two occurs during the fellowship's departure from Lothlórien. All of a sudden, the narrator stops telling and starts commenting (rhetorical metalepsis): he compares the physical appearance of the Elves at the time of the narrative with apparitions of Elves in 'later days', i.e., his own time, which is far removed from the narrative but close to the reader's (external prolepsis) (FR, II, viii, 486). As Frodo sails away, the narrator informs us that Galadriel seemed to him 'as by men of later days Elves still at times are seen: present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of Time' (FR, II, viii, 486). This passage can be used (and has been used) to interpret visions of elves in the relatively recent past of pre-Christian Europe and visions of elves today as echoes of *what was*, namely the Elves as they are described in *The Lord of the Rings*; I will return to this in Section 4.²²

I refer to the third anchoring mechanism, which contrary to the other anchoring mechanisms plays out on the level of the story-world, as *onomastic anchoring*. This veracity mechanism operates when a story-world features specific onomastic components (anthroponyms, toponyms, and chrononyms), which are also part of the actual world.²³ Consider, for example, Luke 2:1–2 (NIV): 'In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) The explicit reference to historical persons (Caesar Augustus; Quirinius), actual places (Syria), and historical time (while Quirinius was governor) creates the meaning effect of referentiality. The effect of onomastic anchoring works best in non-fictional narratives as these narratives – to put it in possible worlds terminology – not only demonstrate overlap between the 'inventory' of the story-world and the inventory of the actual world, but also explicitly state that their reference world is the actual world (cf. Ryan 1991, esp. 558–561). Fictional narratives, by contrast, do not have the actual world as their reference world – but refer instead to a made-up, fictional world. Fiction, thus, does not have *reference ambition*, but many fictional worlds share inventory with the actual world even so, and for that reason fiction can be ascribed *reference authority* by their readers (the terms *reference ambition* and *reference authority* are from Pettersson 2005). Put in possible worlds terms: whereas the text itself does not claim the actual world to be its reference world, an overlap in inventory between story-world and actual world can lead readers to insist that the actual world *is* indeed the text's reference world. This can go so far that some readers become 'naïve believers' (Saler 2004) who, for example, believe that Sherlock Holmes lived in the real Baker Street, or who visit King's Cross station to look for platform 9¾ and the train to Hogwarts.²⁴

²²The second combined rhetorical metalepsis and external prolepsis in *The Lord of the Rings* has the narrator compare the size of oliphaunts at the time of the story (when they were truly big and fierce) and in his own time: 'the like of him does not walk now in Middle-earth; his kin that live still in latter days are but memories of his girth and majesty' (TT, IV, iv, 864).

²³Greimas and Courtés (1982, art. 'Anchoring') refer to this effect as 'historical anchoring'.

²⁴Strictly speaking, onomastic anchoring comes in two degrees. A preliminary level of onomastic anchoring is achieved by the very inclusion of an onomastic register; onomastic anchoring proper requires that

As Bettina Gruber (2009) has shown, legends about the Holy Grail, which were originally intended as fiction, could by later generations be read as referential texts because of their onomastic anchoring in the actual world.²⁵

Neither *Star Wars* nor *The Lord of the Rings* have onomastic anchoring in the actual world, but Tolkien had wished to connect his literary mythology explicitly to the history of England. He tried to do so in two unfinished ‘time travel’ stories, *The Lost Road* and *The Notion Club Papers*, both of which have been published by Christopher Tolkien after Tolkien’s death (Tolkien 1987, 36–104, 1992, 145–327). The plot is the same in both stories: characters from contemporary England travel back in time by means of ancestral regression. They re-experience the memories of ever more remote ancestors, and Tolkien’s plan was to follow the regressions back in time until the characters re-experienced key scenes from *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Silmarillion* (for a more thorough discussion, see Davidsen 2014, 348–352). Practitioners of Tolkien spirituality read these stories and interpret Tolkien’s more well-known books (such *The Lord of the Rings*) in the light of them. The time travel stories identify an overlap in the inventories of the actual world and the textual world (as both include England and Oxford), and this in turn makes possible the interpretation that the textual world and the actual world are in fact one and the same – that Tolkien’s narratives provide information about the actual world’s inventory and history.

The fourth and final anchoring mechanism is *thematic mirroring*. We have this effect when a narrative told by a character is thematically linked to the main narrative

the register overlaps with the inventory of the actual world. On preliminary onomastic anchoring, consider two text examples. First, the Gospel of Luke 1,5–7 (NIV):

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord’s commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Compare the introduction of the Russian fairy-tale Ivan the Cow’s Son (Afanasev 1975, 234–235):

In a certain kingdom, in a certain land, there lived a king with his queen; they had no children, and after they had lived ten years together, the king issued a call to all the kings, all the cities, all the nations, and even to the common people, asking who could cure the queen of her barrenness and make her bear a child.

Both narratives come with PST-coordinates – i.e., specifications about the persons, space, and time of the story-world, but only the Gospel of Luke adds an onomastic register (P: Zechariah/Elizabeth; S: Judea; T: time of Herod). In the fairy tale, time and space remains vague, and the persons are defined by their roles (as king, queen, etc.), not by their individual character. This lack of an onomastic register works as an index of fictionality. By contrast, the very presence of an onomastic register creates an effect of verisimilitude, regardless of whether the particular anthroponyms, toponyms, and chrononyms of the narrative have a counterpart in the actual world. Obviously, this effect is strongly reinforced when the onomastic register has counterparts in the actual world. I thank Ole Davidsen for pointing out the text examples used here and for allowing me to use them. On the notion of PST-coordinates, see Davidsen (2015, 127–128). See also Petersen (2016) for a discussion of onomastic anchoring.

²⁵While Gruber explicitly declares that the difference between religious narratives and literary narratives ‘cannot be found in the text itself’ (Gruber 2009, 27), her actual analysis demonstrates otherwise. In the concrete case of the Grail legends, the texts were intended as fiction, but the presence of supernatural elements in combination with author-narrator conflation and onomastic anchoring afforded a religious interpretation of the texts.

and meant to make a point on that level (as in the case of Jesus' parables in the Christian gospels), or when events and dialogue on the level of the story can be interpreted as hints about the level of narration. We have the second form in *The Lord of the Rings*. It is a recurrent theme that old tales always contain a core of truth (e.g., *TT*, III, v, 650–651; *RK*, appendix F, 1494), and on three occasions authoritative characters explicitly scold less wise characters for dismissing legendary lore as old wives' tales. The Elven Lord Celeborn, who is counted as one of the three wisest elves, lectures Boromir: '[D]o not despise the lore that has come down from distant years; for oft it may chance that old wives keep in memory word of things that once were needful for the wise to know' (*FR*, II, viii, 487). Gandalf similarly scolds Théoden for not believing in the fireside stories about Ents (*TT*, III, viii, 717), and later he rebukes the herb-master of Minas Tirith who does not remember the 'rhymes of old days' and therefore has lost the knowledge of healing plants passed down by them (*RK*, V, viii, 1131–1132). All of this affords the reading that Tolkien is hinting on the story level at that which he dares not state explicitly on the level of narration, namely that also *The Lord of the Rings* has a kernel of historical truth.

3.3. *Transtextual anchoring: paratextual priming, hypotextual foundation, and metatextual reflection*

All texts acquire some of their meaning from their relation to other texts. Of particular importance to the present argument, supernatural fiction can achieve a semiotic quality of anchoring by transtextual means. This can happen through paratextual priming, hypotextual foundation, and metatextual reflection.

In Genette's terminology, the paratext refers to all the auxiliary texts that are published together with a main text, but do not belong to it in a strict sense. The paratext includes prefaces (both authorial and allographic), the book cover, indices, notes, and so on (Genette 1997, 3). An important function of the paratext is to help the reader identify the genre of the main text. The back cover of the one-volume 50-years anniversary edition of *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, quotes a review from the *Sunday Telegraph* that identifies the book as being 'among the greatest works of *imaginative fiction* of the 20th century' (Tolkien 2007; emphasis added). Under most circumstances readers pick up such paratextual clues and let them determine the mode in which they read the main text. Neither *Star Wars* nor the versions of *The Lord of the Rings* currently in print use paratextual priming to anchor the main narrative in the actual world, but Tolkien's preface to the first edition of *The Fellowship of the Ring* discussed above, in which he thanks the Hobbits for helping him with the map of the Shire, does just that – and therefore constitutes both an example of paratextual priming (the authorial preface is part of the paratext) and of author-narrator conflation (which is the effect of this particular paratextual priming). In fact, that preface also establishes onomastic anchoring of the story-world in the actual world, by insisting that the Shire is/was a real place. Onomastic anchoring is also the effect created by paratextual priming in other works of fiction. One good example of this is Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* which opens with a page headed 'FACT'. This page, which is placed after the acknowledgements but before the main narrative – and which therefore occupies a borderland between paratext and main narrative – concludes with the statement: 'All descriptions of artwork, architecture, documents, and

secret rituals in this novel are accurate' (Brown 2004, 11). Of course, Brown does not say explicitly that all conspiracy theories employed in the novel, including the notion that Jesus married and that his descendants have been persecuted through the ages, are also facts. But the general sense of factuality created by the FACT page has primed many readers of Brown's story to believe that that is in fact the case.²⁶

The second type of transtexts that can serve to anchor a fictional narrative in the actual world are hypotexts – Genette's term for texts upon which a given text is grafted. If readers recognise that a fictional text borrows from religious texts which they already consider authoritative, the hypotext's semiotic quality of authority or veracity can rub off unto the fictional hypertext. We see this happen in Tolkien spirituality. As Elizabeth Whittingham (2008) has analysed in depth, much of Tolkien's literary mythology is inspired by real-world mythology, and this is easy to see for his readers. In *The Silmarillion*, for example, Tolkien tells us that Númenor, an island continent which is destroyed by the over-god Eru as a punishment for its inhabitants' rebellion against the Valar, is called Atalantë in the human language. Atalantë is strikingly similar to Atlantis, and since many practitioners of Tolkien spirituality already believe in the historicity of Atlantis, they conclude that Tolkien is really telling about Atlantis here. While it is perhaps more prudent to conclude that Tolkien borrowed from Plato, some practitioners of Tolkien spirituality argue that it is the other way around: Plato and Tolkien refer to the same historical event, but Tolkien's account is more accurate.

The third and last type of transtexts that can anchor supernatural fiction in the actual world are metatexts, i.e., texts that reflect on other texts. For example, George Lucas has in several interviews explained that *Star Wars* was a religio-didactical project and that he wanted the Force in the movies to inspire curiosity about the divine in his young audience (cf. Davidsen 2016, 381–382). While Lucas in these interviews does not espouse a belief in the Force, he does acknowledge that the notion of the Force was inspired by Christianity, Buddhism, and other religions from the actual world, thus anchoring, if only in a weak and derived sense, the fictional world in the actual world. Like Lucas, Tolkien has reflected on his own narratives, and in his letters he sometimes goes much further than Lucas. In one letter Tolkien states, 'I have long ceased to *invent* [...] I wait till I seem to know what really happened. Or till it writes itself' (Tolkien 1981, 231; original emphasis); in another letter he plays with the idea of being a 'chosen instrument' (Tolkien 1981, 413). These passages suggest that Tolkien believed himself to have received (divine) inspiration, and it is obvious that his Middle-earth narratives change character when read in this light. It is no surprise, therefore, that practitioners of Tolkien spirituality regularly refer to these passages in Tolkien's letters to legitimise their religious use of his narratives.

4. Religious reception of supernatural fiction: a case of conceptual blending

In this last section, I shift focus from the veracity mechanisms on the textual and transtextual level to the interpretative processes that play out on the cognitive level when supernatural fiction is used religiously in fiction-based religion. This

²⁶On the religious impact of *The Da Vinci Code*, see Frykholm (2006) and Partridge (2008).

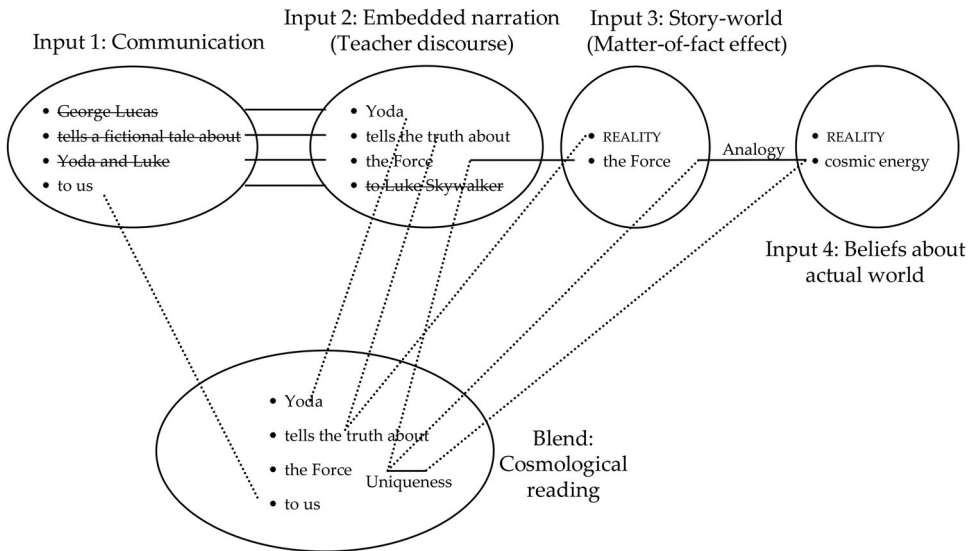


Figure 1. Cosmological reading of *Star Wars*.

is an issue that deserves a full-length article on its own, but I would like to give just a few illustrations of how the theory of conceptual blending can help us better understand how the veracity mechanisms produce the cognitive effect they do. Conceptual blending, or conceptual integration, is a theory developed by Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner (2002) that aims to explain how humans generate new ideas by blending already stored information in novel ways. A fundamental assumption is that human cognition can be understood as the manipulation of semantic content encapsulated in so-called mental spaces within working memory. New understandings emerge when semantic content from two or more related input spaces is projected into a blended space, and when some of the so-called Vital Relations that link information across different input spaces are compressed. The analytical utility of conceptual blending theory is that it helps one reconstruct the cognitive processes that have given rise to a blend. This reconstruction is called 'running the blend'.²⁷

Jediists read *Star Wars* in what I call the cosmological (or mytho-cosmological) mode. This means that people do not consider the narrated events to have taken place in the actual world, but merely believe that some of the supernatural

²⁷For a short introduction to conceptual blending theory in general, I recommend Evans and Green (2006). For an introduction to conceptual blending in the context of narrative analysis, see Dancygier (2006). Within literary studies, conceptual blending theory has been used for two decades to analyse the semantic structure of texts, and more recently the theory has also been applied to religious narratives, especially to the analysis of metaphors and metonymies in such narratives (for good examples, see Lundhaug 2010; Slingerland 2011). Within literary studies, scholars are now beginning to take conceptual blending beyond its initial scope of an 'extended metaphor theory' and use it also to analyse the reception of literature (see, for example, Tobin 2006; Dancygier 2012). I think this new utilisation of conceptual blending theory also holds great promise for the study of religion, but as far as I know, no scholar of religion has so far used conceptual blending to analyse the interpretation and use of religious narratives (or the religious interpretation of supernatural fiction).

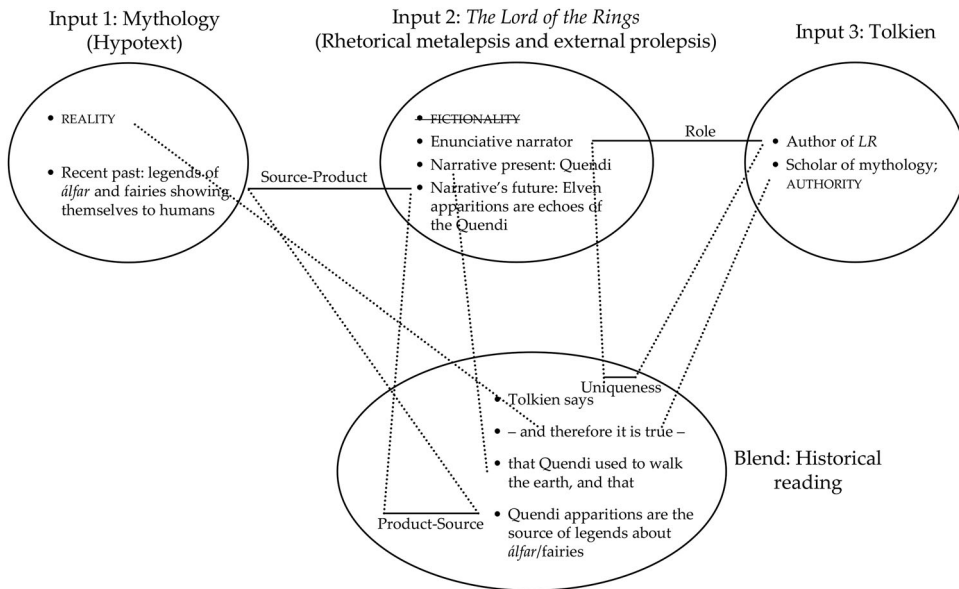


Figure 2. Historical reading of *The Lord of the Rings*.

agents of the story-world (here: the Force) exist in the actual world. In other words, they read *Star Wars* as religious fiction. Figure 1 shows how the evidence mechanisms in *Star Wars* afford a cosmological reading of the text. Four input spaces are involved: a 'communication' space with George Lucas communicating the narrative of *Star Wars* to us, the audience; an 'embedded narration' space in which Yoda instructs Luke Skywalker about the Force; a 'story-world' space in which the reality of the Force is demonstrated; and finally an 'actual world' space that includes relevant beliefs about supernatural agents in the actual world. (I here assume that our hypothetical interpreter already holds a belief in a higher, cosmic power.) The communication and embedded narration spaces include the same generic roles (an addressor, a veracity marker, a message, and an addressee), and it is this analogy that allows the elements in the two spaces to be mapped unto each other, and to be blended. The blend yields a blended space with the same four generic roles: Yoda (addressor) telling the truth (veracity marker) about the Force (message) to us, the audience (addressee). This part of the blend shows how Yoda's teacher discourse about the Force can become disembedded from the fictional frame of the communication and be experienced as addressed directly to the audience. Input space 3 illustrates the matter-of-fact effect. From this space is projected both the Force and a meta-representation of reality into the blended space. Both elements are also projected from input space 2, and the double projection enhances the effect. The relation between the *Star Wars* spaces (inputs 2 and 3) and the beliefs about the actual world space (input 4) shows an additional process taking place in the blend. The cosmic energy, which our interpreter already believes in, and the fictional concept of the Force are identified as analogous, and this Analogy is compressed into Uniqueness in the blend. In this way the meaning emerges that the Force which Yoda talks about is in fact the same power that our interpreter already believes to exist in the actual world.

Some pieces of supernatural fiction include anchoring mechanisms as well as evidence mechanisms. Such fiction, and this includes *The Lord of the Rings* and the rest of Tolkien's literary mythology, can be read either in the cosmological or in the historical (or mytho-historical) mode (Davidsen forthcoming). In the case of a historical reading, not only are the supernatural agents of the narrative universe considered real, but some of the narrated events are also considered to have taken place in the actual world. Figure 2 depicts a historical reading of *The Lord of the Rings*. There are three input spaces: a 'mythology' space including knowledge of legends of fairy apparitions; a 'Tolkien' space featuring Tolkien as author of *The Lord of the Rings* and expert on mythology; and a '*Lord of the Rings*' space concerning the scene discussed in Section 3.2 in which the narrator becomes explicit as Frodo leaves Lothlórien. In this space, we have the explicit (enunciative) narrator, the narrative present in which Elves (Quendi) appear in flesh and blood, and the narrative future in which Elves appear only as shadows of what once was. The diagram captures the effect of the external prolepsis in the passage, as the narrative future is identified as the reader's own past: the legends of elven apparitions which are known from Celtic and Germanic folklore are identified as echoes of the Quendi. This works in part because practitioners of Tolkien spirituality already believe that Tolkien's hypotexts (Celtic and Germanic mythology) refer to fairy apparitions that really have taken place. So when the narrator of *The Lord of the Rings* refers to these supposedly historical apparitions, a semiotic quality of historicity rubs off unto *The Lord of the Rings* itself. It is a particular type of compression that takes place across inputs 1 and 2, and I suggest terming this process *Source-Product reversal* (it is a type of Cause-Effect reversal). The point is that while the real connection between the input spaces mythology and *The Lord of the Rings* is that the Celtic fairies and Germanic *álfar* inspired (as sources) Tolkien's Quendi (the product), the blend turns the connection on its head and presents the Quendi as the real-world source for those apparitions that gave rise to the folklore about elves (the product). The blending diagram also captures a second anchoring mechanism, besides the Source-Product reversal produced by the hypotextual connection and the external prolepsis, namely that of author-narrator conflation: while the narrator is in fact a role which Tolkien plays, the blend identifies the voice of the enunciative narrator as the very voice of Tolkien the author. It is this compression of Role into Uniqueness that allows the projection of features which belong to Tolkien (he is a scholar; he is an actual person) to be projected into the same space as features belonging to the narrator (his statements about the Elves now and then).

5. Four tentative conclusions

I think that four tentative conclusions emerge from the analysis. First of all, I am convinced that the very notion of veracity mechanisms helps explain why fiction-based religions have emerged from some pieces of supernatural fiction and not from others. Recall that of the ten veracity mechanisms identified above, *Star Wars* has the matter-of-fact effect, teacher discourse, and metatextual reflection, and Tolkien's literary mythology has them all. By comparison, George Martin's *Song of Ice and Fire* series and Robert Jordan's *Wheel of Time* series, none of which have given rise to a fiction-based religious movement, have only the matter-of-fact effect and justification. This suggests that veracity mechanisms matter, and it also suggests – and that is my second conclusion – that some veracity

mechanisms are more powerful than others. More comparative research is needed on this point, but my impression so far is that the most persuasive mechanisms are teacher discourse, author-narrator conflation, and reader inscription. I suggest a hypothesis to be tested in future research, namely that supernatural fiction that includes only veracity mechanisms on the level of the story-world (matter-of-fact effect, onomastic anchoring, hypotextual foundation) does not afford religious use, while supernatural fiction that also includes veracity mechanisms on the level of narration does afford religious use. This might explain, for example, why J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series, which has both matter-of-fact effect and onomastic anchoring, but no veracity mechanisms linked to narration, does not seem to afford religious use, while both *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which also have various veracity mechanisms on the narration levels, in fact do afford religious use.²⁸

A text's repertoire of veracity mechanisms not only enables us to reveal whether it affords religious use or not; it also enables us to reveal which types of religious use it affords. This is the third conclusion. Supernatural fiction that only has evidence mechanisms and no anchoring mechanisms affords a religious reading only in the cosmological mode. Such texts, and this include *Star Wars*, can be read as fictional stories about real supernatural agents (as religious fiction), but they cannot be read in the historical mode (as religious narratives proper). By contrast, supernatural fiction that has both evidence mechanisms and anchoring mechanisms – as in the case of Tolkien's literary mythology – can be read both in the cosmological and in the historical mode.

It must be pointed out, however, that not all practitioners of Tolkien spirituality approach Tolkien's literary mythology in the historical mode. In fact, most members prefer a cosmological reading and insist that Tolkien's narratives should not be read as history. This fact demonstrates that the presence of anchoring mechanisms in a text does not determine that a religious reading of that text will be of a historical nature; it only makes such a reading possible. Even so, I think that the veracity effect generated by a text's anchoring mechanisms is also relevant for religious users who ultimately settle for a cosmological reading mode. My fourth tentative conclusion, which is really more of a hypothesis that needs to be tested in future research, is that the veracity effect generated by each individual veracity mechanism can detach itself from the mechanism that generated it and potentially re-attach itself to other aspects of the story. In this way, the author-narrator conflation in *The Lord of the Rings*, for example, even when not convincing the reader to approach the narrative as history, can still generate a general semiotic effect of factuality, which can attach itself to the supernatural agents of the story-world, *in casu* the Valar and the Elves. In sum, I believe that narrative and cognitive semiotics are valuable theory formations that can allow us to move beyond a description of what

²⁸ Apparent counter-evidence is found in Zoe Alderton's (2014) description of the Snapewife community, a group of women who have claimed that Snape is real and have married him on the astral plane. Alderton argues that Snapeism is a fiction-based religion, but the evidence she presents demonstrates that it is a very poor example of the category. The activities of the group seem tongue-in-cheek – and hence rather fan culture than fiction-based religion – and the phenomenon was restricted to a single, short-lived online community. By contrast, both Jediism and Tolkien spirituality are practised in serious communities, some of which have existed for decades.

religious narratives are about to a serious analysis of how religious narratives work.

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