Fiction-based religion: Conceptualising a new category against history-based religion and fandom

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During the last decade, scholars of religion have researched *Star Wars*-based Jediism, the Tolkien-inspired Elven community, and other religious movements inspired by popular fiction. This article raises two related questions about this new kind of religion: what should we call it?, and what differentiates it from conventional religion on the one hand, and from fandom on the other? Referring to Jean Baudrillard, Adam Possamai has suggested referring to new religions based on popular culture as 'hyper-real religions'. I contend, however, that for Baudrillard, *all* religions are hyper-real in the sense that they ascribe reality to the socially constructed. I therefore offer fiction-based religion as a more accurate term. Fiction-based religions draw their main inspiration from fictional narratives (e.g. *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*) which *do not* claim to refer to the actual world, but create a fictional world of their own. As such, they can be contrasted with conventional (or 'history'-based) religions whose core narratives (e.g. the Gospels) *do* claim to refer to the actual world and therefore fall under the narrative meta-genre of history, although they do not correspond with the actual world from a historian's perspective. Despite their fictional basis, fiction-based religions are genuine religions because the activity and beliefs of which they consist refer to supernatural entities which are claimed to exist in the actual world. As such, fiction-based religions can be contrasted with fandom which, as a form of play, creates a fictional play world rather than making assertions about the actual world. Fiction-based religion emerges when fictional narratives are used as authoritative texts for actual religious practice.

Keywords: fiction-based religion; hyper-real religion; Adam Possamai; defining religion; fiction; religious narratives; fandom

1. Introduction: speculative fiction as source for alternative religion

During the last decade, scholars of religion have begun to pay attention to the interplay between speculative fiction and alternative religion.[1] It has been noted how fantasy fiction borrows motifs such as magic and otherworlds from pagan mythologies, how science fiction taps into the occult fascination with 'powers of the mind' and how horror fiction explores demons, revenants and other aspects of the dark side of the supernatural. What is more, speculative fiction disperses these

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ideas to a wide audience and enhances their plausibility by inviting people to identify with protagonists who inhabit worlds in which the supernatural is notoriously real, and by investing the alternative supernatural with symbolic capital (e.g. Partridge 2004, Ch. 6; 2008; Possamai 2005; Hjarvard 2008).

As a result, the religious convictions and values of our contemporaries are increasingly inspired and supported by films such as George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977, 1980, 1983, 1999, 2002, 2005) and James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), TV series such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003) and *Charmed* (1998–2006) and novels such as Marion Zimmer Bradley's *The Mists of Avalon* (1983) and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003). In some of these cases the authors or directors deliberately intend to convey specific religious ideas (e.g. Bradley) or a general religious sentiment through a popular medium (e.g. Lucas), but others simply employ alternative religious motifs because they fascinate the audience (e.g. Brown). Regardless of the author's intention, such fiction can be used, and indeed is used, as a resource for the construction of individual religious beliefs, practices and identities. Some studies of the religious use of fiction have focused on teenagers (e.g. Clark 2003; Berger and Ezzy 2009; Petersen 2012), but the phenomenon is not restricted to the young, being rather an aspect of alternative spirituality in general since at least the late 1960s.

The interpenetration of fiction and alternative religion, and especially the impact of speculative fiction on real-life religious belief and practice, long escaped academic attention because of its non-institutional nature. A great eye-opener for the religious potential of fiction was the so-called Jedi Census Phenomenon in 2001 in which more than 500,000 individuals in Great Britain, Australia, New Zealand and Canada claimed to belong to the Jedi religion (Possamai 2005, 71–73; Cusack 2010a, 120–28). After the Jedi Census, scholars started systematically investigating the religious use of fiction, and they found that although the Census Phenomenon was largely a prank, a number of distinctively religious movements and milieus also exist which are based on ideas, practices and identities from particular fictional works or genres. As I will discuss, Adam Possamai has suggested referring to such religions as 'hyper-real religions' (2005, 2009, Ch. 6, 2012), while Carole Cusack has made references to 'invented religions' (2010a), and I have used the term 'fiction-based religions' (Davidsen 2012).

Examples of fiction-based religions 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 2010a, Ch. 3, 2010b), Chaos Magicians who invoke the monster gods from H.P. Lovecraft's horror cycle, the so-called Cthulhu Mythos (Hanegraaff 2007), and various self-identified pagan, Christian, and gnostic groups who draw on J.R.R. Tolkien's literary mythology and claim to communicate with the Valar, the lower gods of Tolkien's universe (Davidsen 2012, 2014b). Additional examples include the Otherkin who believe themselves to be 'other-than-humans'; for instance, Elves, Dragons or Angels (Kirby 2009a, 2009b, 2012; Laycock 2012a) and the

Vampire community (Keyworth 2002; Hume 2006; Laycock 2009, 2012b). Behind the Jedi Census Phenomenon a real, but much smaller, movement of *Star Wars*-based Jediism exists whose members identify as Jedi Knights and believe in the Force (Possamai 2005, 71–83; Davidsen 2010, 2011, 2014a; McCormick 2012). In these various cases, religious communities have formed around a particular identity supported by a fiction genre (e.g. the Vampire community around Anne Rice-type vampires), or around a particular fictional text or narrative universe (e.g. Jediism around *Star Wars*).

Scholars of religion researching fiction-based religions, and theologians and lay persons responding to them, have all pondered the question: Are religions that draw their inspiration from popular fiction genuine religions? Scholars of religion tend to answer affirmatively, both when they base themselves on a substantive (e. g. Possamai 2005) and a functionalist (e.g. Cusack 2010a) understanding of religion. People who doubt whether Jediism and other fiction-based religions can qualify as 'real' religions also draw on both substantive and functionalist understandings of religion when they identify the shortcomings of fiction-based religions as resulting from their fictional origins and alleged insincerity (substance), and from their lack of ethical teachings and social impact (function). The aim of this article is to take the discussion further by examining religions based on fiction as a cultural or semiotic kind. I seek to answer two questions: first, what should we call such religions?; and second, how do religions based on fiction, as a category, relate to the contiguous types of cultural activity of, on the one hand, conventional religion (i.e. religion that is not based on fiction) and, on the other hand, fandom (i.e. patterned activity around fictional texts that is not religious)?

The argument proceeds in three steps. First, I take issue with Possamai's suggestion that we should refer to religions based on fiction as 'hyper-real religions'. Possamai develops this term with reference to Jean Baudrillard, but I revisit the French philosopher to show that according to him *all* religions are hyper-real. I draw the conclusion that Possamai has identified a distinct class of religions, but that we cannot meaningfully refer to them as hyper-real. I therefore, as a second step, offer fiction-based religion as a more accurate term. I draw a distinction between *fiction* (such as *Star Wars*), which *does not* claim to refer to the actual world, and '*history*', including religious narratives (such as the Christian Gospels), which *does* make such a claim.[2] I here use the term history to refer to narratives with reference ambition, regardless of their actual correspondence. Based on the distinction between fiction and history, one can distinguish between fiction-based religions and conventional (or 'history'-based) religions. Third, I go against scholars who argue that fandom, for instance *Star Trek* fandom (Jindra 1994), is a form of religion. Based on a substantive definition of religion, I draw up an analytical distinction between religion and play, which makes it possible to distinguish between religious use of fiction (fiction-based religion) and playful engagement with fiction (fandom).

2.   The concept of hyper-real religion revisited

With reference to Baudrillard (1994), Adam Possamai has defined a hyper-real religion as a 'simulacrum of a religion created out of popular culture that provides inspiration for believers/consumers at a metaphorical level' (2003, 37; 2005, 79; 2009, 85). I criticised an aspect of this definition in an earlier publication (Davidsen 2012, 201–02) by calling into question Possamai's insistence that the inspiration from popular culture in hyper-real religions is always metaphorical. It is easy to demonstrate that hyper-real religions often involve belief in entities that are lifted out of the fictional context and ascribed metaphysical reality. Many Tolkien religionists, for example, believe (seriously and ontologically) to possess Elven souls or are convinced that Middle-earth exists on another plane (Davidsen 2012, 2014b). Also in Jediism, Possamai's favourite case, people really believe that the Force exists, even if they do not consider *Star Wars* to be factual history. Possamai has responded constructively to the critique (2012, 19–20), and now defines a hyper-real religion as 'a simulacrum of a religion created out of, or in symbiosis with, commodified popular culture which provides inspiration at a metaphorical level *and/or is a source of beliefs for everyday life*' (2012, 20; emphasis added). I now want to take our exchange one step further by problematising the very term 'hyper-real religion'. To do so, we must revisit Baudrillard's concept of hyper-reality.

Baudrillard is famous for pointing out how, in postmodern society, media no longer simply transmit information but actively construct knowledge and establish social norms, and how this media-constructed 'reality' often comes to be perceived as reality itself. This observation, and the social critique it implies, is only the second step of his analysis, however. Preceding and enabling this move, Baudrillard sketches a theory of signs which is social constructionist in nature. Baudrillard himself never applied this sign theory to contemporary religion (as Possamai does), but in the opening passage of *Simulacra and Simulation* he actually develops the key semiotic concepts of simulacrum, simulation and hyper-reality in the context of a discussion of the Christian concept of God (1994, 1–7).

As a semiotician, Baudrillard is interested in the relationship between signs and their assumed and actual objects, and he makes a distinction between two types of signs based on differences in referentiality. Signs that refer to a real object in the actual world are called *representations*, and signs that have no object, or, more precisely, signs whose object is an evidently constructed or 'made-up' idea without real substance are referred to as *simulacra*. The word 'cow' and a picture of a four-legged milk-producing bovine, for instance, refer to real cows and are therefore representations. A plastic figure of Mickey Mouse, on the other hand, does not refer to a real being, but to a fictional character, and is therefore a mere simulacrum. Although representations refer to real objects (either by similarity or convention), simulacra have 'no relation to any reality whatsoever' (Baudrillard 1994, 6). A semiotic quality of 'realness' can be

attributed to simulacra, however, and simulacra can therefore come to be *perceived* as real. Baudrillard calls this simulacric reality the 'hyperreal' (1994, 1–2), and refers to the action through which it is constructed and maintained as 'simulation' (1994, 1, 3). Following Baudrillard's logic, the celebration of national holidays can be seen as a form of simulation that reinforces the ascribed hyper-reality of the nation, itself a rather intangible or simulacric entity. Nations are not the best example of simulacra, however, for the people who make up a nation do tend to share some very real things, including practices, memories and perhaps genes. Baudrillard instead offers the Christian God as his prime example of a simulacrum which has been elevated to hyper-real status. At the same time, Baudrillard discusses how the hyper-reality of God has been called into question in the modern era.

Until the Protestant Reformation, Baudrillard tells us, Christians unproblematically considered both the concept 'God' and physical images of God to be viable signs for a real God-object. With the Reformation something changed, however, for suddenly images of God were considered so problematic that they needed to be destroyed. Baudrillard wonders what animated the iconoclasm, and suggests that it had less to do with the Biblical prohibition against idol worshipping, and more with a dawning suspicion that God himself was a simulacrum (Baudrillard 1994, 4). As Baudrillard puts it, the iconoclasts destroyed the icons because they feared 'the destructive, annihilating truth that they allowed to appear – that deep down God never existed, that only the simulacrum ever existed, even that God himself was never anything but his own simulacrum' (1994, 4). But why was this suddenly necessary? Baudrillard assumes that a significant change had taken place in the religious epistemology. As he says: 'If [the iconoclasts] could have believed that these images only obfuscated or masked the Platonic Idea of God, there would have been no reason to destroy them' (Baudrillard 1994, 4–5). Baudrillard thus believes that religion before the Reformation counted on a Platonic higher reality behind empirical reality, but that the self-evidence of such a higher reality had now become challenged. He points out that this challenge was met by two different religious reactions. One was the iconoclastic destruction of the images as an attempt to reinvigorate the higher reality of God. The other reaction was continued iconolatry, but now combined with the realisation that there was no higher reality to which these images could refer. Baudrillard speculates that continued (but self-conscious and ironic) iconolatry was actually the most modern reaction since it was compatible with the loss of ontology of the God concept: if God does not exist, there is nothing gained from worshipping himself rather than his image. Baudrillard is not sure whether the icon worshippers were conscious that the God images 'no longer represented anything' and that religion was, in reality, 'purely a game' or a social construction, but he thinks that the Jesuits were among those who were (1994, 5).

We can distinguish between an epistemological and an ontological level of Baudrillard's argument. On the *epistemological* level, Baudrillard points to the modern period as one of increased doubt within Christianity itself concerning

its ontological grounding. This epistemological change brought Christian theologians to realise an *ontological* constant, a 'truth' says Baudrillard (1994, 4), namely the simulacric nature of the God concept as such. In other words, the God concept is a simulacrum no matter whether the worshipper considers it to be a simulacrum or not, simply because the concept 'God', objectively speaking, is void of reference to any reality whatsoever. This has important implications, for if God is a simulacrum, then all other religious notions referring to supernatural agents, worlds or processes are also simulacra and all religions are per definition systems of simulacra.

To sum up, Baudrillard makes a distinction between the referentiality of religious concepts in themselves (they have none) and the reference authority which religionists ascribe to them. In themselves, religious concepts are simulacra, devoid of any referentiality whatsoever. But when the God sign (as concept or as image) or indeed any other religious simulacrum is treated as a representation with a real object, and as long as this simulation (or reality-maintenance) goes on, then the religious simulacrum can be said to have achieved an ascribed status as real. Because this reality is only ascribed, and hence 'hyper' compared to its lack of ontological referentiality, Baudrillard refers to it as *hyper-real*. It thus follows logically from Baudrillard's argument that all living religions are hyper-real. I use the expression 'living religions' here because religions only continue to possess hyper-real status as long as people simulate their reality through practice. Religions that are no longer practised lose their hyper-reality.

The question now is whether Possamai's reference to a particular *class* of religions as hyper-real religions can be reconciled with Baudrillard's position that *all* religions are hyper-real. I think there are two reasons for not following Possamai. To begin with, it is simply too confusing to dub a category of religions 'hyper-real' when religion *per se*, according to Baudrillard's definition, is hyper-real. Secondly, the actual religions singled out by Possamai are not more hyper-real than other religions, but rather less so. In fact, Possamai himself brings the hyper-reality of his so-called hyper-real religions into doubt when he says that the popular cultural narratives on which they are based typically provide inspiration on a metaphorical level only. How can a religious notion (say, the Force) be deemed hyper-real when its referentiality is explicitly called into question by considering it only a metaphor? If the religions that Possamai refers to are really characterised by a metaphorical interpretation of their texts (and they often are, though not always), and if that would make them categorically different from other kinds of religion (although it would not), then it would be more intuitive to refer to them as 'hypo-real' religions.[3]

The situation is thus that Possamai has identified a real class of religions, but that the concept which he uses to refer to them needs to be replaced. One could consider taking advantage of Possamai's definition of hyper-real religions as religions that are 'created out of [...] commodified popular culture' and introduce the alternative term 'popular culture-based religion'. Not only would that be a mouth full, however, the term popular culture is also not precise enough.

What Possamai really has in mind is religion based on popular *fiction* (such as comics, novels, films and games), so one can simply substitute his term hyper-real religion with my term *fiction-based religion*. Having identified the problems with the terms hyper-real religion, let me now explain why I hold fiction-based religion to be analytically superior.

3.   Conceptualising fiction-based religion against history-based religion

I define fiction-based religion as *religion in which fictional texts are used as authoritative texts*. There are two elements in this definition that need some clarification, 'authoritative text' and 'fiction'. Let me very briefly unfold what I mean by the notion of authoritative text, before zooming in on the key concept of fiction.

A text is authoritative for religious activity if it inspires and supports that religious activity. Texts can be authoritative in this sense to different degrees, and it is therefore analytically useful to distinguish between three types or degrees of fiction-based religion. *Fiction-inspired religions* are influenced and supported by fiction in a general way, but do not incorporate notions from fiction into their beliefs and practices. One example is neo-pagans who are avid readers of fantasy, including the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and Terry Pratchett, and for whom such fantasy has worked as 'metaphorical binoculars' through which the world of Faery becomes visible, to use Graham Harvey's expression (2000). An older example of fiction-inspired religion is the Theosophical Society which found inspiration in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novels, especially *Zanoni* (1842), and compared Bulwer-Lytton's notion of Vril from *The Coming Race* (1871) to other concepts of universal energy (cf. Crow 2012, 694, 709–10; Strube 2013, 65–71). *Fiction-integrating religions* go further than fiction-inspired religions by selectively adopting fictional elements and integrating them into an existing religious frame. An example is the Church of All Worlds which has adopted its name, a water-sharing ritual, and more from *Stranger in a Strange Land* and integrated them into a neo-pagan frame. *Fiction-based religions* (in a narrow sense) take a certain fictional text or corpus as their very foundation. Jediism belongs to this category.[4]

I define fiction as *any literary narrative which is not intended by its author to refer to events which have taken place in the actual world prior to being entextualised*. This definition represents the accepted technical meaning of the term fiction in literary studies. It elaborates on Dorrit Cohn's minimal definition of fiction as 'a literary nonreferential narrative' (1999, 12) and is formulated to mirror Robert Scholes' definition of history as 'a narrative discourse [whose] producer [. . .] affirms that the events entextualized did indeed occur before entextualization' (1980, 211). We have thus a distinction between fiction and history as two narrative meta-genres. The difference between the two hinges on the author's intention as it can be deduced from the text, not on any actual correspondence or lack thereof between text and world. History, in Scholes' sense, refers to narratives that *claim* to refer to the actual world, regardless of the

author's honesty (he/she could mean to deceive) and regardless of the actual correspondence between the text and the world (the author could be sincere, but mistaken). Note that the notion of history as it is used in literary studies refers to more than what a historian would include. For instance, a simple story about what one had for dinner yesterday also falls under the rubric of history because its reference world is the actual world. Even a conspiracy theory claiming that the Holocaust did not occur would qualify as 'history' in this sense because its reference world is the actual world. It does not matter that there is no correspondence between the actual world and that which the conspiracy theory postulates about it.

That fiction is a non-referential narrative means, by contrast, that it does not claim to tell the truth about the actual world. As literary scholars inspired by possible worlds theory (e.g. Pavel 1986; Doležel 1998; Ryan 1991) put it, fiction projects a world of its own, a textual world, indeed a fictional world.[5] This fictional world, not the actual world, is the text's reference world, i.e. the world that the narrative tells about. Of course, fictional worlds can resemble the actual world. For while the *story* of a fictional narrative, i.e. the string of narrated events, is made up, many factual elements from the actual world (such as places, objects, persons, words, etc.) can be projected into the fictional world. This makes the fictional world comprehensible. In many cases, for instance in historical fiction, fictional narratives can even provide reliable information about aspects of the actual world. When this is the case, we can speak of hybridisation between the meta-genres of fiction and history. Even in such hybrid cases, however, 'signposts of fictionality' (Cohn 1999, viii, 131), such as the description of the inner mental states of the characters which only a fiction author (but never a historian) can know, clearly show that the work is to be taken 'on the whole' as fiction. Even if a detective story set in London can give accurate information about the Thames, the reader will not dive into the river to look for the dead body.

That is, the reader will do no such thing if he/she understands and commits to that 'contract' or 'pact' (Lejeune 1996; Behrendt 2006) which the author attempts to make with the reader about how the text should be read. The author hints at the intended reading key by way of signposts of fictionality (or non-fictionality), and readers are generally able to deduce how to read the text by paying attention to such signposts. Authors seek to guide their readers into adopting one of two basic reading modes – Cohn speaks of 'referential' or 'fictional' readings (1999, 34) and Marie-Laure Ryan of 'historicising' and 'fictionalising' modes (2008) – but both Cohn and Ryan grant that readers have the interpretive freedom to read texts against the author's intentions and the cues provided by him/her. Ryan emphasises that mode switching can sometimes be natural and even demanded by the text, namely in the case of hybrid texts (such as historical novels) that include a number of quite accurate descriptive passages fit for the historicising reading mode, but within an overall fictional frame (2002, 356). I follow Cohn and Ryan in letting the intention of the author (as it can be reconstructed on the basis of signposts in text and paratext)[6] determine whether a text is fictional or not, while

still emphasising that both fiction and history can be read against the intention of their author – this being a major feature of the religious use of fiction in fiction-based religion.

It makes sense to single out fiction-based religion as a special type of religion because religions in general base themselves on narratives which claim to tell of the actions of supernatural agents in the actual world. Indeed we can formally define a religious narrative as *a narrative which claims to tell of the actions of supernatural agents and/or the effects of supernatural processes in the actual world* (further on this, see Petersen 2005; Davidsen 2014b). Religious narratives are similar to fictional narratives which can also tell of supernatural agents and processes, but also different because fictional narratives place the supernatural in a fictional world, whereas religious narratives claim that the supernatural is real. As a class, religious narratives therefore fall under the rubric of history. That is to say, the narratives which form the textual basis of most religious traditions (think, for instance, of the Christian Gospels, the Buddha legend and the Babylonian creation story) *claim* to refer to events that have taken place in the actual world. In other words and in contrast to fiction-based religions, most religions can be qualified as 'history-based religions', though in practice this qualification is implied and does not need to be stated explicitly.

Since it might strike some readers as counter-intuitive to speak of religious narratives as history and of religions as history-based, let me elaborate a bit. It is easy to see that the main religious narratives from the so-called historical religions are historical narratives, for these texts fix their narrated events to notoriously real places, let these events play out within historical time, and insist on their own historicity. For instance, in Joshua 6:1-27, Jahve helps the Israelites take the real city of Jericho in the actual world, and according to the Gospels, the Holy Spirit came very literally to a group of real people in the actual world while they were hiding in Jerusalem. Such texts belong to a sub-class of religious narratives, namely religious legends. But also religious myths, defined as religious narratives set in the mythical past, must be considered a form of history according to a technical definition, for also myths claim to recount events that took place in the actual world, although they are not bound to the same degree of accuracy as legends. Of course, it is important to distinguish between religious narratives set in the far past (myths) and religious narratives set in historical times (religious legends), but together they can be contrasted to fiction because they are presented as historically true, at least to some extent.[7]

What matters here are the claims made in the text themselves, not the plausibility of those claims to a modern reader, and not even whether religionists believed the texts literally in the past or do so in the present. Indeed, the dynamics of belief in modern history-based religions often involve a weakening of the claims put forward in their authoritative texts, but such a relativising does not reduce the texts themselves to fiction. They also usually do not reduce the referential claims of the authoritative texts to mere metaphor, but rather take the form of 'selective affirmation', like when liberal Christians dismiss that Jesus

walked on water, but retain belief in the resurrection and in the reality of God. To counter a final possible objection, none of what I have said rules out that the canonical scripture of a predominantly history-based religion can include texts other than historical narratives (e.g. the Song of Songs), or fictional passages embedded within historical narratives (e.g. the parables told by Jesus in the Gospels).

In contrast to history-based religion, the authoritative texts in fiction-based religion are intended by their authors to be non-referential and the fictionality of these texts is acknowledged by most recipients. We have fiction-based religious activity when parts of the fictional supernatural are ascribed some measure of reality in the actual world and when such fiction-based beliefs form the basis of practices and identities. For instance, Tolkien's Middle-earth is an entirely fictional place, and the Valar, the under-gods or archangels of Tolkien's world, are fictional beings. Nevertheless, some individuals consider Middle-earth to exist on the astral plan and claim to be able to travel there by means of astral projection or shamanic travelling techniques and communicate with the Valar whom they consider to be real spiritual beings (Davidsen 2012, 2014b). Here, reality is ascribed to beings and places which are themselves fictional. Since fictionality is a matter of the author's intention and the text's message, such ascription of reality to the text's fictional supernatural does not change the nature of the text (which remains fictional), though it does determine the interpretive activity as religion rather than play (this is the subject of Section 4 below). Fiction-based religion can include a reading of the authoritative, fictional text as history, i.e. as a text which refers to the actual world, but that is not always the case. Most Jediists will admit that *Star Wars* is fiction, but they nevertheless use it as their main authoritative text when they speak about the cosmic power as 'the Force', quote Master Yoda's teachings and identify as Jedi Knights (Davidsen 2014a).

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the technical definition of fiction that I here adopt differs from the denotation of 'all that is untrue, false, or mistaken' which fiction often carries in everyday speech. Unfortunately, scholars of religion also tend to use 'fiction' in this colloquial way, and therefore much of what is written about fiction in relation to religion is rather imprecise and confusing. Michael York's otherwise splendid article on the 'fictional origins of contemporary Paganism' (1999) can serve an as example of the conceptual imprecision which one often encounters. York argues that modern paganism is based on 'fictional' sources, and names three of these sources in particular: Charles Leland's forgery *Aradia, or the Gospel of the Witches* (1899), Margareth Murray's speculative work of history *The Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921) and Robert Graves' purportedly inspired work *The White Goddess* ([1948] 1997). All three works are replete with misinterpretations, idiosyncrasies and even forgeries. From the point of view of contemporary history, none of them gives a truthful picture of the old forms of paganism that modern paganism is allegedly a continuation of. Despite being inaccurate history, however, *none of the three works are fiction* according to a technical definition. They all fall under the

category of history because they *claim* to refer to events and states of affairs in the actual world. The fact that contemporary paganism is based on tenets in these works does not therefore warrant the classification of the movement as fiction-based religion. That contemporary paganism is *also* inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien's works and other fictional narratives, and can *for that reason* be qualified as fiction-inspired religion, is another matter.

4.   Conceptualising fiction-based religion against fandom

Fiction-based religion has two 'others'. I have already discussed how fiction-based religion differs from religions based on narratives with reference ambition ('history-based' religions). Let me now address the distinction between fiction-based religion and fandom. It is worth doing so because many scholars have argued that fandom itself can be considered a religious phenomenon. For lack of space, I can here neither present an extensive overview of the 'fandom-as-religion' discourse, nor go into a detailed discussion of its assumptions and arguments.[8] *In lieu* of this, let me briefly discuss as an illustrative approach Michael Jindra's influential article '*Star Trek* Fandom as a Religious Phenomenon' (1994, 2000).

Jindra finds seven dimensions of religion in *Star Trek* fandom. First, *Star Trek* fandom has *belief* or *faith*, namely in such values as humanism, scientism and cultural relativism (Jindra 1994, 34). Second, it has a *myth*, namely the *Star Trek* narrative which Jindra sees as an American 'frontier' myth pushed into space (1994, 32–33). Third, *Star Trek* fandom is characterised by *community* and even by a sense of superiority vis-à-vis non-fan 'mundanes' (Jindra 1994, 38–39). Fourth, *Star Trek* fandom has its own *ritual gatherings*, especially conventions (Jindra 1994, 38–39), and involves, fifth, *pilgrimage* to places such as the *Star Trek* set in Universal Studios' theme park in California (Jindra 1994, 39–40). Sixth, *Star Trek* points to another world which is made real through participation, for instance in role-play (called 'simming') (Jindra 2000, 172–73). Seventh, *Star Trek* has such an *effect* on the lives of its fans that many of them become inspired by the show to take up a specific profession as engineer, doctor or scientist (Jindra 2000, 173). Jindra clearly favours a broadly functionalist definition of religion in which any communal activity which expresses values or commitment can count as religion. While such an approach can certainly serve to highlight some interesting *similarities* between communal religion and other social activities, its potential weakness is to equate all that is meaningful, social or important to people with religion.

In order to distinguish between the generally social and the particularly religious, we need a substantive definition of religion. Hence, I suggest conceptualising religion as *beliefs, practices, experiences and discourses which assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds and/or processes.*[9] The virtue of a definition of this type is that precisely because it contains no reference to the forms (e.g. the presence of a canon) and functions (e.g. securing or

disrupting social cohesion) commonly associated with communal religion, it is particularly suitable for identifying religion in unexpected places (outside of institutions), in unexpected guises (also when parading as non-religion) and in unexpected modes (such as the casual and playful). It also makes it possible to distinguish between fiction-based religion and non-religious activity engaging with fiction, such as fandom, where broadly functionalist approaches such as Jindra's conflate the two.

Jindra states that *Star Trek* points to another world which fans make real through participation, especially through role-play. This is true in the trivial sense that fans enact the fan text when taking on roles within the fictional universe. But it is misleading to suggest that the enactment or 'making real' in role-play is identical to the way in which religious activity assumes and affirms the reality of supernatural agents and powers. Despite superficial similarities, role-play and religion are in fact quite different activities. The difference between religion and role-play is one of reference world and hence congruent with the difference between religious narratives and fiction. Religious activity (and religious narratives) refers to supernatural entities that are postulated to exist in the actual world. Role-playing fans (and fictional narratives) create and project a fictional world. Let me unpack what I mean.

Role-play can be understood as a semiotic activity that projects a play world which exists parallel to the actual world and whose status as 'set apart' is consciously recognised by the players. Scandinavian drama theorists capture this when they say that role play (like theatre and fiction) is governed by a 'fiction contract' (e.g. Riis 2006). Gregory Bateson formulates the same point differently when he argues that play is framed by the 'metacommunicative' message 'this is play' (1956). This means that assertions made within the play world, such as the assertion that a clump of sand is a cake, have reference authority only within the play world and that they are judged as such. It would be to misunderstand the play situation to judge assertions made within the play world against the reality of the actual world and argue that the 'cake' is really only a clump of sand. But it would also be to misunderstand the play situation to conflate the actual world and the play world and eat the sand cake. In other words, fictionality is *inherent* to play as a type of social activity, just as it is inherent to fiction as a type of narrative. Of course, this does not rule out that there can be significant similarities between the play world and the actual world – for instance in the values that are deemed important – and that the play world can therefore serve as a mirror for the actual world.

Religious activity, especially fiction-based religious activity, might look like play from the perspective of the non-believing outsider, but it is in fact radically different. Indeed, where play is governed by a fiction contract, religious activity is governed by what we can term a 'reality contract'. Religious claims about gods and supernatural agency are made about the actual world; this is also the case when those making the claims doubt their truth. As a consequence, in religious ritual, the cake is actually eaten. In the Eucharist, one does not eat bread ($\approx$ sand), but the body of Christ ($\approx$ cake). In rituals of faith healing, people actually urge a

god in the actual world to intervene. Of course, religious claims can subsequently be weakened through rationalisation, relativisation and so on. But these moves presuppose that immediate, *literal and affirmative* religious claims have been made in the first instance, and do not in themselves reduce religion to play.

The engagement with the fan text which characterises *Star Trek* fans – and *Star Wars* fans and Tolkien fans for that matter – is playful rather than religious, because fans acknowledge that the fan text projects its own fictional world. One can temporarily enter the fictional world in role-play, and also other fan activities are confined to the fictional world. Think for instance of the production of fan fiction or 'scientific' studies of the languages of Middle-earth or the technology of the *Star Wars* universe. Also in these cases, fans enter the fictional universe to expand and explore it, and make no assertions about the actual world. That a clear distinction between fandom and fiction-based religion can be drawn analytically does not rule out, of course, that the one can evolve into the other in real life. While Jediists and Tolkien religionists are correct to consider their practices to be radically different from fandom, many of them have a background as fans. Indeed, fiction-based religion often seems to arise as the convergence of fandom and alternative religious engagements. We see this, for example, with neo-pagan Tolkien fans who merge the two engagements into the belief that they are themselves (Tolkien-like) Elves, and with *Star Wars* fans who believe in a higher power which they with time come to identify as the Force (Davidsen 2011).

5.   Conclusion

To sum up, fiction-based religion refers to religious activity and religious traditions in which fictional texts are used as authoritative texts. Fiction-based religion differs from conventional ('history-based') religion because it bases itself on fictional narratives, i.e. narratives that do not claim to refer to events that took place in the actual, historical-empirical world prior to their entextualisation, while conventional religion is based on narratives that claim to tell of the actions of supernatural agents in the actual world. Along another axis, fiction-based religion differs from fandom in that fiction-based religious activity assumes the existence of supernatural agents (such as the Force) in the actual world, while fans engage with the authoritative text solely in the mode of play. In short, we can speak of fiction-based religion when fictional narratives are used as authoritative texts for actual religious practice. It is more precise to refer to religions with these characteristics as 'fiction-based religions' rather than as 'hyper-real religions'. For while hyper-real religion is the fancier term, the qualifier hyper-real has no analytical power because all religions are hyper-real in Baudrillard's sense of the term.

Obviously, the reflections on the category fiction-based religion which I have presented in this article do not exhaust this interesting subject. For instance, we still need to know why only some fictional texts are usable as sources for fiction-based religion. Why is there a *Star Wars*-religion, but no *Narnia*-religion or *Harry Potter*-religion? And can the fact that there are many more Jediists than

Tolkien religionists be explained by the superior 'religious affordance' of *Star Wars* compared to Tolkien's literary mythology? It seems that fictional narratives can be used as authoritative texts for religion if they (a) tell of superhuman agents or powers that are real within the fictional universe, but supernatural from the perspective of the reader/viewer and if (b) these agents and powers are not obvious analogical references to one particular existing religion. This is why Tolkien's literary mythology can be used as an authoritative basis for religion while *Narnia* can not. It furthermore seems to boost the religious potential of fiction when it includes (c) an explicit and institutionalised 'narrative religion' (such as the Force religion of the Jedi Knights in *Star Wars*) whose (d) main ideas are presented by an authoritative teacher figure to a 'disciple' with whom the reader/viewer is invited to identify. This is the key to Jediism's success. Other topics that we need to look at is how fictional sources are combined with conventional religious elements in fiction-based religion, and how religionists legitimise their use of fiction. It would also be interesting to know whether fiction-based religions over time tend to move away from their fictional origins, or whether they increasingly affirm their fictional foundation; or, better, why some fiction-based religions take the first course and some the latter. Finally, there are questions about how fiction-based religion is made plausible, and what it says about contemporary religion in general that many religionists are more comfortable basing their religious activity on fiction rather than on conventional and 'historical' religious narratives.

Notes

1. Speculative fiction is an umbrella term for fantasy, science fiction, horror and other fantastic forms of fiction, including superhero fiction, apocalyptic fiction and alternate history.
2. In this article, I use the term 'actual world' to refer to the real world in contrast to imagined worlds (e.g. textual, fictional, counterfactual and utopian worlds). This usage is inspired by possible worlds theory, cf. Section 3.
3. Most of Possamai's references to Baudrillard are found in Possamai (2005). Readers are invited to compare my account of hyper-reality and religion in the work of Baudrillard and Possamai with those by Geoffroy (2012) and Cusack (2010a, 125). Especially Geoffroy's emphasis and understanding of Baudrillard differs somewhat from mine.
4. I propose this typology as a more refined analytical instrument than Possamai's distinction between hyper-real religions that use popular culture as a source of 'secondary inspiration' (2009, 89) and hyper-real religions that use popular culture as a 'first hand source of inspiration' (2009, 89) so that popular culture is 'appropriated as the spiritual work in itself' (2009, 90). This typology is discussed in more detail in Davidsen (2014b).
5. Possible worlds theory is a form of modal logic which analyses propositions in terms of their truth value in the actual world and in other possible worlds.
6. The paratext includes all the auxiliary texts around the main text, such as the authorial preface, but also the book cover and notes from the publisher (Genette 1997). The function of the paratext is to make it clear to the reader how to read the main text.

7. On the difference between myths and legends in relation to folktales (which are fictional), see Bascom (1965).
8. The fandom-as-religion discourse is not restricted to text-centred fandom such as *Star Trek* fandom; it has also been argued that celebrity fandom and sports fandom constitute religious phenomena (e.g. Chidester 1996).
9. Supernatural agents include both personalised agents, such as gods and spirits, and impersonal powers with will and power of action, such as 'the Universe' or the cosmic life force. Supernatural worlds include both dualistic concepts of a spiritual world, for example the Christian Heaven and the Celtic Otherworld, and notions of other planes or dimensions, such as the astral plane. Supernatural processes refer to supernatural 'laws', such as the karma law, that are believed to govern the workings of the universe, and to magical processes by which the universe can allegedly be influenced. My definition follows Steve Bruce who defines religion as 'beliefs, actions and institutions which assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose' (2011, 112).

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