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Fiction and religion: how narratives about the supernatural inspire religious belief – introducing the thematic issue

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This article introduces a thematic issue of *Religion* that interrogates the religious use of fantasy and science fiction in the contemporary religious field. The overall aim of the thematic issue is to identify those textual features that make it possible for a given fictional story to be used as a religious narrative, that is, to inspire belief in the supernatural beings of the story-world, and to facilitate ritual interaction with said beings. The contributions analyse the religious affordance and actual use of a wide range of texts, spanning from *Harry Potter* and *Star Wars*, over *The Lord of the Rings* and late 19th-century Scandinavian fantasy, to the Christian Gospels. Over the course of the thematic issue, the conclusion emerges that there exists a hierarchy of three levels of religious affordance that fictional narratives can possess: to afford belief in the supernatural beings of the story, a text must present those supernatural beings as real within the story-world; to afford ritual interaction with said beings, a text must include model rituals and inscribe the reader into the narrative; to afford belief in the historicity of the narrated events, a text must anchor the story-world in the actual world. Although we focus on the religious affordance of fictional texts, we also spell out implications for the study of religious narratives in general, and for the narrativist study of religion.

KEY Words fiction; religious narrative; contemporary religion; narratology; religious affordance

Supernatural fiction functioning as religious narratives

Works of fiction that include supernatural features within their story-worlds (=supernatural fiction) serve as sources of religious inspiration and plausibility in the contemporary religious field.¹ Films, such as George Lucas' *Star Wars* (e.g.,

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¹In this thematic issue, we use the term fiction to denote a narrative that does not refer to the actual world, but instead creates its own made-up story-world. In this way, we adopt the dominant understanding within literary studies of what constitutes fiction (e.g., Cohn 1999). That fiction is nonreferential in this sense does not rule out that the story-world projected by a fictional narrative can overlap with the

1980, 1999), TV series, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003), and novels, such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), discuss and disperse religious ideas of all sorts – about cosmic forces, witchcraft, and the dark secrets of the Catholic Church. What is more, by inviting readers and viewers to immerse themselves in story-worlds in which supernatural beings and powers are evidently real, supernatural fiction constitutes a 'plausibility structure' (cf. Berger and Luckmann 1966, 174) for religious belief.² Spokespersons for alternative religions, including Brian Bates (1983) and James Redfield (1993), have recognised this and have strategically used fiction to spread their message.³

In some cases, popular fiction not only inspires belief but also prompts readers and viewers to engage in religious practices that incorporate the story-world into their own lives. For example, members of Jediism, a new religious movement based on George Lucas' *Star Wars* saga, aim to live spiritual and ethical lives according to the Jedi Code and perform rituals (mainly meditation, but sometimes also prayer) to communicate with the Force (Davidsen 2016a; also Possamai 2005, 71–83; McCormick 2012). Jediism is just one example of a 'fiction-based religion' (Davidsen 2013) – others include the 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 2010, Ch. 3, 2016), and religion based on J.R.R. Tolkien's literary mythology (Davidsen 2012, 2014). In sum, fantasy and science fiction have taken over many of the functions that we normally associate with institutionally sanctioned religious texts.

Guiding questions on the religious affordance of supernatural fiction

This thematic issue sets out to advance our understanding of the use of supernatural fiction as religious narratives. Two research questions, on the distinctiveness and religious affordance of supernatural fiction, have guided our investigation:

- (1) Can a distinction be drawn at all between religious narratives and supernatural fiction? Does the fact that both genres tell of gods and magic mean that supernatural fiction and religious narratives together in fact constitute one common genre, and that the only difference between fiction and religious texts lies in the way the texts are interpreted and used? Or can we distinguish supernatural fiction from religious narratives proper based on differences in the texts themselves – for example differences in the truth claims the texts make about the narrated events?

actual world. *Harry Potter*, for example, plays out in London, but in a *fictional* London that includes Diagon Alley and the Ministry of Magic. Supernatural fiction, specifically, tells of story-worlds that include 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). Fantasy, science fiction, and horror are forms of supernatural fiction.

²On supernatural fiction as a source of inspiration and plausibility for alternative religion, see Partridge (2004, Ch. 6) and Possamai (2005). On the significance of *The Da Vinci Code* in particular, see Partridge (2008).

³The use of fiction within the New Age movement remains curiously understudied. On the religio-didactic use of fiction within the theosophical current, see Gilhus and Mikaelsson (2013). For a preliminary overview of the religio-didactic use of fiction within neo-paganism, see Davidsen (2014, 89–90, 200–202; with more references).

- (2) Can we determine which textual features it takes for a fictional narrative to afford religious use? Can we determine, step by step, which textual features are necessary and sufficient for a fictional narrative to (i) be read as a religious text, (ii) to inspire people to engage in ritual communication with the supernatural beings of the story, and (iii) to consider the narrative to be historically true?

These questions were discussed at the symposium ‘Narrative and Belief: International Symposium on the Persuasive Power of Religious Narratives and Supernatural Fiction’ which has held at Leiden University on 17 October 2014. The articles by Petersen, Davidsen, Cusack, and Johannsen are based on presentations delivered at this meeting. Feldt kindly accepted a later invitation to join the project.

The five contributions

In the opening article, ‘The Difference Between Religious Narratives and Fictional Literature: A Matter of Degree Only’, Anders Klostergaard Petersen (2016) makes the case that no clear boundary can be drawn between fictional and religious narratives. As Petersen sees it, no boundary can be drawn on the basis of content, for both religious and fictional narratives can tell of gods, rituals, and ethics. A border can also not be drawn on the basis of the text’s claim to tell either a fictional or a factual story, for claims to factuality can be absent, ambiguous, or faked. (For example explicit claims to factuality are absent in many myths, and claims to factuality are explicit, but faked in modern auto-fiction.) In those cases, one must know the intention of the author in order to establish whether a text makes a claim to fictionality or factuality – and while the intention of the author can sometimes be deduced from the text, that is not always the case, especially for ancient sources. Given this muddy situation, Petersen concludes that the difference between fictional and religious narratives is one of degree only, and that it is ultimately the use of a text that defines whether the text in question belongs to one category or the other. The second step in Petersen’s argument is to use narrative semiotics and narratology to identify the textual features that promote the reading of a given narrative as a referential, religious text. Through a detailed analysis of the literary strategies and actual use of a number of fictional and religious narratives (ranging from Thomas Mann’s *Buddenbrooks* to the Christian Gospels), Petersen identifies three such textual traits. In his view, narratives are more likely to promote religious use if they (1) include a repertoire of p–s–t-coordinates (person–space–time) that allows elements of the story-world to be projected onto an actual landscape; (2) tell of agents with counter-intuitive abilities that are able to intervene in the ordinary world, and of human interaction with such agents; and (3) invite readers to view their own lives as continuations of the narrative.

In my own article, ‘The Religious Affordance of Fiction: A Semiotic Approach’ (Davidsen 2016b), I take up the same questions as Petersen, but reach slightly different conclusions. Contrary to Petersen, I argue that an analytical distinction between religious and fictional narratives can and should be drawn, and that this distinction should be based on the author’s reference ambition. Religious narratives, according to this definition, are narratives whose authors claim to tell about superhuman beings who really exist in the actual world and who intervene in this

world for the benefit (or detriment) of humans. I thus take religious narratives to constitute a sub-set of factual narratives (where by factual narratives I mean narratives that make a *claim* to factuality). By contrast, supernatural fiction tells of superhuman beings and their actions within a made-up, fictional world. This approach has the advantage over Petersen's that it avoids situations where we cannot classify a given text, say the Gospel of Luke, because some readers use it as a religious narrative, while others consider it to be fictional. I hold that the author's reference ambition can usually be deduced from the text, but obviously my approach faces the problem that where claims to fictionality or factuality are absent, ambiguous, or faked, one runs the risk of misclassification. Like Petersen, I go on to identify the textual traits in supernatural fiction and religious narratives that promote religious use. I identify ten 'veracity mechanisms', each of which can help to establish a narrative's religious affordance, that is, the narrative's usability as an authoritative religious text and a source of inspiration for religious practice. I illustrate each veracity mechanism with examples from *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings*. The analysis suggests that only narratives which demonstrate the reality of the supernatural beings within the story-world (by means of 'evidence mechanisms') and anchor this story-world in the actual world (by means of 'anchoring mechanisms') can inspire the belief that the narrative tells the historical truth of divine intervention in the actual world's past. Both the Christian Gospels and Tolkien's literary mythology anchor the narrative events in the actual world, and that is why these texts have been able to inspire Christians and practitioners of Tolkien spirituality to believe in the historical factuality of the narrated events. By contrast, narratives (such as *Star Wars*) that lack anchoring in the actual world can only inspire 'cosmological' belief – that is, belief in the reality of the supernatural powers of the narrative (such as the Force), but not in the historicity of the story-line. A separate section on conceptual blending illustrates how various veracity mechanisms play together on the cognitive level to produce historical or cosmological readings of supernatural fiction.

The next article is Laura Feldt's 'Contemporary Fantasy Fiction and Representations of Religion: Playing with Reality, Myth, and Magic in *His Dark Materials* and *Harry Potter*' (2016). Neither Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* nor J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* has led to the formation of a fiction-based religion, but both series have been appreciated as spiritual works by progressive Christians and spiritual seekers. Through an engaging analysis of the two fantasy series, Feldt formulates three theoretical points. First, and agreeing with Petersen, she argues that no categorical distinction can be made between fantasy fiction and religious narratives. This is because religious narratives in fact *are* fantasy stories. In terms of content there is no difference between the two genres – it is religious use that turns some fantasy stories into religious (or authoritative and sacred) narratives. This explains why only supernatural fiction, but not other forms of contemporary literature, can be used as authoritative texts for religion. Feldt's second point concerns the textual features that it takes for supernatural fiction to afford religious use. Contrary to Petersen and myself, she argues that the necessary textual features all have to do with how the story-world is portrayed (evidence mechanisms in my terminology), while explicit claims to veracity or referentiality (anchoring mechanisms) are unnecessary. Concretely, according to Feldt the relevant textual features are (i) that the narrative includes 'transempirical or superhuman events, actors, actions, and spaces', (ii) that it presents a 'providential world structure' in which 'an

invisible power reigns and operates from behind the scenes', and (iii) that role model characters (e.g., Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter* and the angel Xaphania in *His Dark Materials*) explain and assert the reality of the supernatural elements and the providential world structure within the story-world. These features are all present in both *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials* and that allows for a religious reading of these works. Feldt's third point is that contemporary fantasy constitutes a part of the religious field and that scholars of religion should analyse it as such. As she points out, it is striking that in most contemporary fantasy institutional religion is either absent (*Harry Potter*) or portrayed negatively (*His Dark Materials*), whereas individualised spiritual seeking is encouraged and magic is shown to be real. This shows that fantasy participates in a power struggle between institutional-doctrinal religion and individualised-aesthetic spirituality, on the side of the latter. To fully understand this struggle, and hence to fully appreciate the current constitution of contemporary religion, Feldt urges us to expand our definition of the religious field (and of our very category of 'religion') to include also the production and consumption of fantasy fiction.

Carole Cusack's article 'Fiction into Religion: Imagination, Other Worlds, and Play in the Formation of Community' (2016) analyses the case of the Church of All Worlds, a fiction-based religion (in her terms: invented religion) based on Robert A. Heinlein's novel *Stranger in a Strange Land* from 1961. Founded in 1962, the organisation took its name from the fictional Church of All Worlds in the novel, and members have emulated rituals (such as 'water-sharing') and expressions (e.g., to 'grok' as a term for intuitive knowing) from the book, as well as the lifestyle (communal living and polyamorous relations) and even biographies (e.g., founder Tim Zell taking a doctorate in divinity) of the key characters. (Members do not, however, engage in rituals directed at the characters in the novel, but venerate instead the earth as Gaia, a practice foreign to Heinlein's book.) A theoretical key question raised by Cusack is why this particular novel inspired the rise of a religious movement, and she points to a number of factors. Similar to Petersen, Feldt, and myself, Cusack emphasises that a fictional narrative (and *Stranger* is a good example) affords religious use in so far as it includes reference to supernatural elements (*Stranger* includes angels, paranormal powers, and the post-mortem existence of protagonist Mike as an archangel) and describes religious rituals and organisations that can be used as models by their readers. To this she adds that not only the narrative in itself but also the narrative's relation to its host culture is of crucial importance: *Stranger* could work as an authoritative text for a new religion because of the strong congruence between the values espoused by the novel (e.g., freethinking and sexual liberation) and those of the emerging counterculture at the time of the novel's publication.

The final article in the thematic issue is Dirk Johannsen's 'On Elves and Freethinkers: Criticism of Religion and the Emergence of the Literary Fantastic in Nordic Literature' (2016). Like several other contributors, Johannsen discusses the distinction between religious and fictional narratives, but he historicises the distinction rather than arguing for or against its appropriateness. Adopting a conceptual history approach, Johannsen demonstrates that the distinction between religion and fiction only became explicit in the late 19th century; hence, it was only possible to theorise and challenge the distinction from that time onwards. Indeed, this happened in various ways. Preceding the cognitive science of religion by a hundred years, folklorists, such as the Norwegian Moltke Moe, argued that the 'primitive'

imagination naturally provided the 'poetic roots' (today we might say the counter-intuitive representations) for both religious narratives and folktales. For Moe, the difference between religious narratives and folktales was therefore not one of content, but one of interpretation. At the same time, novelists began to write fiction in which the reality of the supernatural was intentionally kept ambiguous, thus leaving it to the reader to 'consolidate' the story (in Moe's terms) as either religious or fictional. Johannsen analyses how the literary fantastic emerged in Nordic literature in reaction to the critical realism championed by the influential Danish critic George Brandes. In particular, he focuses on the Norwegian author Arne Garborg's epic poem cycle *Haugtussa: a story* from 1895. Veslemøy, the protagonist of the story, experiences strange visions, speaks with the dead, and is taken to the mountain, but it remains ambiguous throughout the narrative whether these visions are a product of real psychic powers or of Veslemøy's wild-running imagination. Because of this ambiguity vis-à-vis the supernatural, *Haugtussa* can be classified as a 'fantastic' tale in Todorov's sense; it is not a 'marvellous' tale in which the reality of the supernatural is demonstrated by the narrator. *Haugtussa* thus differs from the cases of supernatural fiction discussed in the other four contributions (all of which are marvellous stories), and Johannsen's analysis hereby shows that not only marvellous but also fantastic stories can impact the religious belief of readers. This is so, for even though *Haugtussa* is ambiguous, the story *does* afford the reading that Veslemøy is psychic and, by implication, that psychics, and those supernatural powers and worlds they claim to communicate with, exist also in the actual world. Garborg considered his work to herald a new form of 'modern religiosity' in which the poet was to take the theologian's place, and where belief would not be judged on its historical-literal truth but on its ability to render the world meaningful. As this thematic issue demonstrates, such modern religiosity flourishes at least as much today as it did in the late 19th century.

Where does this leave us?

The discussions in this thematic issue reveal both agreements and disagreements regarding the research questions that we formulated at the outset. The discussion of the first question, whether a distinction between religious and fictional narratives is possible or useful, has ended in a stalemate: I argue that an analytical distinction *can* be drawn, namely one based on the author's ambition to tell a fictional or a factual story, and that it is usually easy to classify a text as belonging to either one category or the other. Petersen and Feldt, by contrast, argue that an analytical distinction between fiction and religion based on the text's reference ambition is unhelpful, as it can sometimes not be established for sure whether a text is intended as fictional or factual. After carefully evaluating all the arguments, I have come to think that Johannsen's historical contextualisation of the fiction–history divide provides the key we need to solve the problem. My suggestion is that I am right for the contemporary world, whereas Petersen and Feldt are right for all other cases. In the contemporary, Western world, narratives with supernatural content can easily and unambiguously be classified as either religious narratives or as supernatural fiction because in our part of the world, this distinction has become culturally entrenched – we have developed conventions through which a text's membership of one category or the other can easily be communicated and understood. For example,

the fictional status of fantasy and science fiction is marked paratextually when a book is marketed as a 'novel'. Also, signposts of fictionality can be found in the text itself, such as the fairy tale opening in *Star Wars*: 'A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away ...' By contrast, if one works with texts that originate from a communication context that did not operate with a conscious distinction between fiction and religion, and therefore had no conventional ways of marking a text as fiction or religious fiction, it may be of little use to impose the modern fiction/religion distinction on the material. Even in those cases, however, I believe that it is both possible and useful to distinguish between different textual genres according to the degree of postulated correspondence between the story-world and the actual world.

All five contributors have developed ideas about the second question: which textual features it takes for a narrative to afford religious use. Four preliminary conclusions can be drawn from the arguments. First, as Johannsen and Feldt demonstrate, narratives can provide inspiration and plausibility for religious beliefs if they present supernatural beings and powers as real within the story-world, from the point of view of either the narrator, an authoritative teacher figure, or the protagonist. Importantly, for a narrative to afford a religious reading, it is *not* necessary for the text to anchor its story-world in the actual world; demonstrating the reality of the supernatural *within* the story-world is sufficient. Second, as Cusack and Petersen show in their articles, some narratives not only afford being read as religious texts, but also offer readers a model for religious *practice*. Cusack's case study of the Church of All Worlds shows that for a narrative to afford religious use in this way, it must as a minimum tell of rituals and religious institutions that readers can recreate in their own lives. This is the case with Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. The book includes rituals and religious institutions which the Church of All Worlds has transferred to the actual world. Even so, the Church of All Worlds constitutes a bit of a border-case for our discussion, as the rituals that the group has adopted from *Stranger* (such as water-sharing) are similar to the social rituals that can be found in fandom, whereas the most important religious rituals of the movement, involving communication with postulated divine beings, have been adopted from the broader neo-pagan movement. Perhaps Petersen and I are therefore right when we argue that for a narrative to inspire readers to engage in ritual communication with the supernatural beings from the story-world, it is necessary that the text, besides providing model rituals which can be recreated by the readers in their own world, also employs a mode of narration that invites the readers to view their own lives as continuations of the narrative. Such 'reader inscription' can work both when the narrator addresses the reader directly and when the narrator addresses the reader indirectly through one of the authoritative characters in the story (e.g., Jesus in the Christian Gospels; Yoda in *Star Wars*). If Petersen and I are right, it is the inscription of the reader into the narrative universe that accounts for why the Christian Gospels and *Star Wars* can inspire religious practice, whereas for example George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* cannot. Petersen points to a third textual trait, besides model rituals and reader inscription, that can help promote the ritual use of a narrative. That is the inclusion of p-s-t-coordinates that allow elements of the story-world to be mapped onto the actual world. While *Star Wars*-based Jediism demonstrates that such onomastic anchoring is not necessary for a text to inspire ritual use, Petersen might still have a point. Consider that Jediism is a

young and tiny movement, whereas Christianity is old and large. It might be that while onomastic anchoring is not *necessary* for a narrative to become the authoritative narrative for a religious community, narratives that anchor their story-world in the actual world still have a selection advantage, over the course of cultural evolution, over narratives that lack onomastic anchoring. Third, as I show in my article, a combination of evidence mechanisms (demonstrating the reality of the supernatural within the story-world) and anchoring mechanisms (that anchor the story-world in the actual world) is necessary for narratives to inspire *historical belief*, that is, the belief that the narrated events, including the actions of the supernatural beings, have taken place in the actual world. All in all, we have thus established a hierarchy of three 'levels of religious affordance': level 1, affording cosmological belief (i.e., the belief that some of the supernatural beings or powers are real but that the story-line is fictional), requires that supernatural beings or powers are presented as real within the story-world; level 2, affording ritual use, requires the addition of model rituals and reader inscription; level 3, affording historical belief, requires the addition of anchoring mechanisms. Finally, it seems that the presence of veracity mechanisms that enable a higher level of religious affordance also enhance the lower level religious affordances of a narrative. On the balance, a narrative that includes both supernatural beings, model rituals and reader inscription, and anchoring, not only affords historical belief whereas narratives without anchoring do not; it also affords cosmological belief and ritual use more forcefully than narratives without anchoring.

A suggestion for the future: theorising religion as narrative culture

While focusing particularly on the religious affordance of fiction, the discussions in this thematic issue have a bearing also on religious narratives in general. Indeed, with our contributions we hope to give an impulse to the general discussion on the role of narrative(s) in religious traditions, within the study of religion. Such an impulse is badly needed, for while religious narratives are of crucial importance for structuring and maintaining religious belief and practice, surprisingly little research has been done on how religious narratives work. For example, out of the roughly 1000 articles published in the journals *Religion*, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, and *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* since 2000, only 14 concern religious narratives. Of these 14 articles, only one utilises narrative theory in the analysis of the material (Feldt 2011), and not a single article theorises the religious function of narratives at a general level.⁴ To give another example, there are no articles on 'narrative' in any of the major handbooks, companions, and guides to the study of religion published over the last 20 years.⁵ Key issues pertaining to the persuasive power and use of religious narratives (and supernatural fiction) thus remain unscrutinised. For example, we still have little theoretical knowledge of how religious narratives inspire belief, what makes some narratives more successful than others, and to what extent narratives can control their readers' use of them.

⁴Of these 14 articles, 11 were published in *JAAR*, three in *Religion*, and none in *MTSR*.

⁵I have consulted Taylor (1998), McCutcheon and Braun (2000), Hinnells (2005), Segal (2006), Olson (2010), and Orsi (2012). Three of these companions include a chapter on myth, but none of these engages with theories of narrative.

Fortunately, the interest in narrative seems to be growing within our discipline. Both classical narratology, concerned with narrative structure (e.g., Genette 1980), and cultural and cognitive narratology, concerned with the pragmatics of narration (cf. Kindt and Müller 2003), have been taken up by several subfields within the study of religion. These subfields include Bible studies (e.g., Davidsen 1995, 2015; Feldt 2012), Buddhist studies (Rheingans 2014), and the study of new religions (Cusack 2012; Davidsen 2014).⁶ Furthermore, the next, forthcoming handbook for our discipline, *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion* (Stausberg and Engler, forthcoming) *does* include a chapter on narrative. In this insightful chapter, Jensen (forthcoming) not only discusses the value of narratology and narrative semiotics for the study of religious texts, but also points out that religious identities and religious worlds are constructed and constituted through narrative. To fully understand the narrative nature of religion, we must therefore supplement the study of authoritative narratives with a study of the narrative construction of religious identities, experiences, and worlds. Pioneering work on the narrative construction of religious selves and religious experiences has been carried out by, among others, Bouzar (2013) and Yamane (2000), while Paden (1994, 69–92) and Jensen (2014, 83–94) have studied the narrative constitution of religious worlds. Furthermore, as called for by both scholars of religion (e.g., Flood 1999, 117–142) and narratologists (Ryan 2013), we may benefit from approaching rituals and religious practices as enacted narratives. Bringing all these concerns together, Johannsen and Kirsch (forthcoming) suggest that we study religious traditions as ‘narrative cultures’ (*Erzählkulturen*). From this perspective, religions are sociocultural formations whose very fabric is made up of narratives about the world, the self, and the divine, and of practices and experiences that enact and reflect those narratives. I propose that we take up narrative and narrativity as key concerns in the study of religion, both because religion is fundamentally narrative and hence necessitates a narrativist approach, and because, as Geertz and Jensen (2011) have demonstrated, a focus on narrative and narrativity promotes the integration of the newest theories of culture and cognition into our discipline.

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⁶A good and recent introduction to structural (or ‘classical’) narratology is Fludernik (2009). The best handbook focused on structural narratology is Hühn et al. (2009). Important works within cognitive narratology, which have proved useful for the study for religion, include Hogan (2003), Zunshine (2006), and Herman (2013).

Notes on contributor

Markus Altena Davidsen completed his BA and MA in the Study of Religion at the University of Aarhus. In 2014 he received his Ph.D. (*cum laude*) from Leiden University for his dissertation 'The Spiritual Tolkien Milieu: A Study of Fiction-based Religion'. He is employed as assistant professor in the Sociology of Religion at the Leiden University Centre for the Study of Religion.

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