FORUM

False Faith or False Comparison? A Critique of the Religious Interpretation of Elvis Fan Culture

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Introduction

In her 1999 book *Elvis Culture*, Erika Doss became the latest academic to argue that Elvis fandom is best understood as a secular form of religion. Since *Elvis Culture* is based on four years' contact with American devotees, and since fans occasionally use spiritual words to express their feelings, Doss’s claim that “veneration of Elvis is one strong form of religiosity” is hard to dismiss (75). Nevertheless, this article will argue that the religious comparison provides a limited understanding of fandom. Doss’s theory sees fans as servile and misguided believers. It is based on a parody that remains popular because it disparages them. The “religiosity” idea maintains its grip by producing “evidence” that is an artifact of its own perception. Its central premise—that fandom is a religion because it looks like one—is weak because it is impossible to test conclusively in the field. As we shall see when we examine the details of the argument, writers like Doss are not setting out inductively to explore, understand, or contextualize Elvis culture. When glaring differences appear between fandom and religion, advocates of the “religiosity” idea would rather stretch definitions and discredit research subjects than question the merits of their framework. As a consequence, research into Elvis culture has been handicapped by a set of inappropriate ideas.

From joke to concept: the emergence of the religious interpretation

In order to understand the function of an idea, we have to look at its history. The comparison between Elvis fandom and religion arose outside academia; by the early 1990s, the idea that a “cult” had formed around the King was circulating in the public imagination. It became so popular that it spawned several book-length commentaries portraying Presley devotees as ignorant and misguided zealots. Ted Harrison’s 1992 volume *Elvis People*, for example, was so successful that its author made BBC radio and TV programs on the subject. Reviewing the radio show for a piece titled “Elvis of Nazareth,” Simon Hoggart reported “on the miraculous birth, death, and suspiciously frequent resurrection of the King”:

I enjoyed *The Elvis Cult* on Radio 4 this week. It described how, for many Americans, the late Mr Presley has become a religious figure, offering spiritual
comfort which may not be so easily available in churches.... Actually, this has been the case for some time. The Elvis myth was being formed while Elvis was still alive, and it's startling how often it jibes with the other great story American people, even—perhaps especially—near-literate southerners learn at their mother's knees.... It's particularly surprising that Elvis's story should reflect that of Jesus, since Elvis was by the end self-indulgent, drug-sodden, and probably a sexual deviate to boot. (24)

Hoggart was writing in a British magazine and the subtext of anti-Americanism is not hard to spot, but what is equally striking is the way that his wholesale acceptance of the religious interpretation supports two additional prejudices. One is that Elvis fans are typically dumb, unsophisticated, or, at least, poorly educated people who learn about their hero through family traditions rather than electronic media. The other is that instead of being inspired and appreciating Elvis as talented entertainer, they blindly ignore his failings and revere him as a substitute savior.

Just as Harrison and Hoggart were beginning to circulate the “Elvis cult” interpretation in the UK, the King started to appear as a spoof messiah in art exhibitions across the Atlantic:

Scholars attending the 1992 meeting of the Chicago Art Association were treated to the opening of the second annual All-Elvis Art Show. Images of the King were silk-screened, sculpted, cartooned, and painted on velvet. Marilyn Houlbert, an associate professor of art and anthropology at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, exhibited a multimedia shrine decorated with palm trees, Halloween skeletons, and three hundred pounds of sand. By means of a slide projection on the mirrored back wall, Elvis appeared to levitate over the sand. A painting of Elvis on stamped tin wearing Mickey Mouse ears was entitled “American Icon.” Wendy McDaris, an independent curator, told The Chronicle of Higher Education that the singer was an iconic figure. “He tends to be the embodiment of both radical and negative aspects of American culture,” she said. (Gregory and Gregory 226)

As if displaying Elvis in Mickey Mouse ears were not degrading enough, in a Memphis College of Art exhibition that year he was pictured naked and crucified in one piece and portrayed as the baby Jesus in another. Elvis appeared two years later at a gallery show in Berkeley, complete with sideburns, as the baby Jesus. “WRITE TO ELVIS IN HELL—Help feed the King,” read a postcard at the Berkeley show.

It seems clear that the artists and curators who pictured Elvis in these ways were collectively making a statement about the nature of his popularity. They implied that religious elements pervade Elvis fandom and are obvious if we examine fans' practices of devotion. Also they suggested that Elvis fans are essentially misguided because their hero was never worth such devotion for his achievements as a performer. This collective interpretation is important because it was put forward in places and in ways—through the language of generic art conventions, of ambiguous humor, of in-jokes, irony, and decontextualization—that never gave ordinary fans a voice. After making a visit to the Berkeley show, Greil Marcus reported, “The conventional, the obscene, the blasphemous, and the worshipful were all mixed up” (78).

By the mid-1990s, scholarship on the King was just waking up to religious interpretation. In 1994, Simon Frith reported that “the academy never had much interest in Elvis Presley” (275). He went on to explain that Elvis had been
dismissed by critics of popular culture and virtually ignored by musicologists, sociologists, and writers from cultural studies. A year later, Serge Denisoff and George Plasketes delivered what remains the most measured empirical account of the “religious” comparison: True Disbelievers. They were clearly inspired by existing writers:

In addition to fans, theologians, sociologists, and scholars are among those who have pondered Elvis as religion…. The Elvis underground has been commonly and conveniently placed by Ted Harrison, Richard Corliss, and many others at some point along the axis of church, cult, sect, and social or religious movement.

After Denisoff and Plasketes came Gilbert Rodman’s Elvis After Elvis: The Posthumous Career of a Living Legend, Vernon Chadwick’s conference reader In Search of Elvis: Music, Art, Race, Religion, and, of course, Erika Doss’s Elvis Culture: Fans, Faith & Image. In other words a sea change took place. In the five years following Simon Frith’s declaration, popular music studies, folk anthropology, cultural studies, and the fine arts had joined forces in a sustained effort to explore and explain Elvis as a religious icon.

Readers might be forgiven for thinking that after this wave of research we would know for sure whether the Elvis phenomenon is really a religion. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, a “religion” is a system of faith and worship; a human recognition of superhuman power, and especially of a God figure who is entitled to obedience. If we follow the “religiosity” line of thinking, the similarity of Elvis fandom to anything like that seems to rest on an empirical question: (In what sense) is Elvis fandom a religion?

The “Elvis cult” is not an institutionally organized paradigm. Doss acknowledges that and says it is, instead, a diverse and flexible system of personal faith; a form of “religiosity” that rests on “privatized spiritual assimilation” (106). Behind her claim is an epistemological question: How do we know when we actually find a faith? The Oxford English Dictionary defines “faith” as knowledge of divine truth which needs no proof. The associated term “worship” means rites, acts, or ceremonies of homage and adoration. So, have we found a faith if we find “shrines” and “acts of worship”? These terms collapse back upon each other. Acts of adoration become acts of worship because they are part of a religion. Trips to Graceland become pilgrimages because they are part of a faith. But are acts of adoration always proof of worship? Are all domestic assemblages of memorabilia actually shrines—even if fans call them “quiet places”? (see Doss 78)

The question of whether the comparison is valid appears to rest upon the precise degree of similarity: to say that fandom is a religion is to assert that a line has been crossed. Yet fandom and religion are both abstract categories of collective experience. That line can never be clear and the question is impossible to answer conclusively with reference to the field. Whether Elvis fandom is a religion does not depend on apparent empirical similarity, but instead upon the speaker’s authority. The assertion that fandom is a religion rests on nothing more than an arbitrary decision bolstered by authority—in Erika Doss’s case, for instance, her standing as a professor of fine arts.

Doss says that her book is as objective as possible. As if one will inevitably obstruct the other, she aims for “analysis, not adoration” (26). Yet despite such neutral aims, Professor Doss presents a decidedly non-neutral mixture of insight and critique. For example, at one point she explains:
Fandom in general thrives on stuff that bears some trace (literally) of the figure that the fans adore: the pap smear from Madonna that is treasured by one of the kids in the movie *Slackers*; the reliquary-like “Abba Turd” that is the prized possession of one of the characters in *Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*; the black leather jacket worn by Elvis that is lovingly highlighted at Graceland Too. Like many fans, the MacLeods [proprietors of Graceland Too] rely on visual, touchable stuff to signal Elvis’s special status and stake their claims on him. (59–60)

The interesting thing about this passage is how smoothly, in the middle of an audience study, it moves from fictional parodies of fandom to fans’ actual experiences. Since Doss’s work is guided by such stereotypes, her investigation cannot be inductive. Instead of simply reporting on the emergence of a new religion, academics like Doss and others who see fandom as religion are agents making meaning and promoting a particular understanding of a phenomenon that could be seen in other ways. They *actively manage* fandom, positioning it as a folk superstition rather than a media response.

These writers and artists rightly draw attention to the fact that some fans *have* identified their feelings as moments of transcendence, but by 1994—the year of the Berkeley exhibition—the *Rolling Stone* writer Chet Flippo was careful to qualify the size and creed of this group: “Although a tiny minority, there were those who sought to venerate the memory of Elvis to the point of it being almost an act of religious faith” (215, emphasis added). Flippo’s wary tones indicate his recognition of the connotations of the religious idea. Nevertheless, John Strausbaugh kept the comparison afloat by publishing another book-length exposé that year called *E: Reflections on the Birth of the Elvis Faith*. Strausbaugh explains:

> Outsiders do not perceive the Elvis faith as threatening or dangerous to society; at worst it strikes them as outlandish and pitiful…. Outsiders don’t fear it, they just laugh at it…. Who knows what will become of the Elvis faith? (220)

Strausbaugh’s commentary shows that “outsiders” found the “Elvis faith” funny. They laughed at the “cult” precisely because it so closely resembled what it was not. Advocates of religious interpretation are therefore drawing on a parody of fandom that makes fans’ interests seem bizarre, trivial, overblown, silly, misguided, and sad *by dint of the comparison*. It is particularly interesting in this respect that the next appearance of “Saint Elvis” was in academia; nobody from Denisoff to Doss openly discussed the wisdom of basing an academic theory on such a pervasive popular parody.

**The anxiety behind the parody: Saint Elvis as a bourgeois response**

Elvis may be dead, but his body won’t keep quiet. It still tells contradictory stories, it is still a terrain of struggle. (Fiske 107)

Doss’s study began with her sense of surprise that Elvis’s image has become so popular in homes across America. Instead of asking why Elvis’s image is popular, and pointing to a need for religion as the answer, we might be better off asking why his image so often gets degraded. Also, why do other icons so rarely receive the same treatment—was Elvis more hypocritical than Lennon, for example? Was he less creative than Hendrix? Are his fans any more obsessive than, say, followers of the Grateful Dead? These questions do not have objective answers because they
Parody is mimicry in the service of ridicule; it implies anxiety. “Blasphemous” paintings of Elvis imply an anxiety about Elvis culture that emerges from a shared concern about the emotional overload of his performance and his fans’ embrace of it. When Elvis was alive he always engendered a peculiar intensity of response. His death in 1977 reawakened a kind of mass hysteria not seen since the 1950s, despite his declining popularity and recent scandal. The sense of public shock over Elvis Presley’s demise was so strong that reluctant newspaper editors and TV networks were forced to make it their top story (see Gregory and Gregory 32).

Since 1977, Elvis has enjoyed periodic episodes of increasing legitimacy. When Graceland was opened to the public in 1982 the Smithsonian Institution called its famous resident “probably the most significant influence” on two centuries of American music (Dundy 132). A decade later Elvis was in the news again because members of the babyboom generation pushed to make one of the best-loved performers in America part of its cultural furniture. The new wave of interest was signaled in several ways. For the first time in a decade the idea of having a national Elvis Presley Day was revived in Congress; it gained the backing of fifteen Representatives. As a result of Graceland’s “exceptional significance,” the National Park Service placed the mansion on its Register of Historic Places. During the New York primary election campaign, the soon-to-be president Bill Clinton played “Don’t Be Cruel” on the Arsenio Hall TV show. Finally, around ten million people voted when the United States postal service held an “election” to decide upon the definitive version of their new Elvis stamp. For a man who had been dead for well over a decade, Elvis Presley’s prospects were looking good. As Greil Marcus said, “He had put his stamp on the nation, just as the nation was now putting his stamp on its mail” (175).

But every time Elvis seemed to be making a comeback, opposition was waiting in the wings. During the year that Graceland opened, Albert Goldman’s “hatchet job” biography Elvis subjected the star to a full character assassination and unleashed a parody in the mainstream media. The King was portrayed as a figure of decadence and fun—a fat loser eclipsed by the daft antics of his many impersonators. Ten years later the media enlarged the spotlight to ridicule his fans. Continually drawing attention to people who swore they saw Elvis alive, for instance, was a way to maintain the notion that typical fans were deluded believers. Hosting the University of Mississippi conference Elvis Now and Then, in 1997, John Bakke said in response that derogatory references to Presley and his fans were the last widely acceptable form of discrimination in an age of political correctness.

Because popular music represents American society and Elvis is still hailed by many as its King, it is not surprising that different factions have struggled over his place and value. Behind the religious parody, I would suggest, is a form of class prejudice. The “religiosity” idea may not have started with middle-class commentators, but it was unquestioningly adopted and, more importantly, legitimated by them: Ted Harrison on Radio 4; Simon Hoggart for New Statesman and Society; the members of the Chicago Art Association—plus, of course, all the more recent academics. Their collective interpretation of fandom can be understood as a
reaction to the growing legitimacy of Elvis’s memory and the associated vindication of his fans.

Henry Jenkins notes that middle-class commentators often feel that fans are “sitting too close” to the text. Long before, the Elvis phenomenon Theodor Adorno, for instance, condescendingly called fans “temple slaves” for their attachment to the shallow fads of popular culture (280). If only by implication, such barbs promote a more detached stance. Pierre Bourdieu called it the “bourgeois” aesthetic: a position basing itself upon the assumption that insight can only be gained by contemplative distance, disinterested comparison, and rational control. As Jenkins explains:

The “bourgeois” aesthetic that Bourdieu identifies often distrusts strong feelings and fears the loss of rational control suggested by such intense and close engagement with the popular. Even when such critics accept some popular culture as worthy of serious attention, they typically read popular works as if they were materials of elite culture, introducing “a distance, a gap” between themselves and the text; the intellectual reader of popular texts focusses less on their emotional qualities or narrative interests than upon those aspects which “are only appreciated rationally through a comparison with other works” (upon evaluative notions of authorship, for example). (61)

Framing Erika Doss’s work with this proves revealing: not only does Doss distrust Elvis culture, her work also follows Bourdieu’s notion of distancing to the letter. She even starts in rational comparative mode by asking:

Why Elvis? Why has Elvis Presley been sanctified as the central figure in what some are calling a quasi-religion? Why not some other popular culture martyr who died young like John Lennon, Buddy Holly, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, or, more recently, Kurt Cobain or Selena? Why is Elvis—more so than Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and JFK—consistently held up as “icon of the twentieth century”? (2)

Beyond the difficulty of calling fandom a “quasi-religion”—the only people who claim status for it as a religion are “outsiders”—my point here is that fans are not arriving at their attachment by making a comparison between either Elvis or Buddy (they can like both); or Elvis rather than Jesus or Martin Luther King. At least one empirical study suggests that only a fraction of Elvis fans listen exclusively to Elvis (Duffett 222). If they have a picture of him it suggests that they have developed an interest, but it does not necessarily imply a decision to ignore Buddy Holly, Malcolm X, or anyone else. A fan’s passion for Elvis may inspire him or her to learn about those people.

I want to argue that, instead of making a neutral comparison, Erika Doss used the notion of religion because it supported her concern as a representative of bourgeois culture: “I am a middle-class, highly educated and highly opinionated college professor. Perhaps more important, I’m not an Elvis fan—which I explained in conversations with fans when they asked me who I was and what I was doing” (26).

From her perspective, Doss is suggesting exactly where the lines are drawn.

Lying or lacking: why the religious comparison is such a limited explanation

Fans engage in specific rituals during Elvis week, although, again, most of them wouldn’t see them as rituals. (Doss 91)
According to Doss, the “worship” of Elvis Presley somehow answers spiritual needs in an age when established religions have lost their relevance. Her interpretation can be compared to a much older notion of audience behavior: uses and gratifications theory. Uses and gratifications theory emerged in the 1970s when American scholars put forward the idea that media products are designed to serve needs that already exist in mass society: needs for diversion, personal relationships, identity, and information (see McQuail et al.). The theory was soon questioned for being simplistic, circular, negligent, and conservative. Uses and gratifications theory artificially homogenized the media audience and separated its members from their immediate social environment. Crucial aspects of both texts and their audiences—such as the possibility of polysemy or viewer dissatisfaction—were neglected while researchers pursued their own trails. They could maintain the relevance of ahistoric generalizations by pointing to broad collective needs—needs so broad, in fact, that they could never be rejected.

In Doss’s world, fans supposedly need God but find Elvis. I want to argue that this idea is merely a replay of the much older uses and gratifications paradigm. Just as criticisms were leveled against uses and gratifications, so we can question the foundations of the “religiosity” idea. It could be argued that devotion to Elvis does not actually fulfill a spiritual need, not least because some fans are Christians too. More fundamentally, spiritual needs can themselves be seen as products of social discourse rather than the foundational yearnings of humanity. Researchers are able to sustain the idea of need by continually making the comparison. They can then hallucinate the “Elvis cult” to fill it.

Once religion is understood as a loaded analytical tool brought to fan studies—rather than an obvious similarity urging us to make a natural comparison—we can begin to make sense of how it guides interpretation. The notion is so pervasive that it operates as an assumption and a structuring device, presiding over our interpretation of what fans actually have to say. If we accept the metaphor, we effectively force people to speak through it, either in a confessional or resistant mode. Owing to the hegemonic nature of the comparison—due to the fact that it becomes an assumption—fans who deny the religious quality of their experience are, in the eyes of their own disbelievers, either lacking or lying. Writers like Ted Harrison must then discount what they say and look for reasons why they seem to be covering up. After asking whether fans pray to Elvis, he says “some will admit it, others not” (67), and continues:

So it is that many Elvis fans will hotly deny any religious suggestion that they have turned their hero into a cult religious figure. In addition to the possible Protestant reservations, they sense that for it to be perceived that they have “deified” a pop star will attract unwelcome ridicule. Fans are very sensitive about the way people laugh about the very idea of devotion to a rock and roll singer. Yet from time to time a fan will “come out.” (75)

Erika Doss reaches the same conclusions by the same logic. She asks, “What does it mean when adherents deny the religiosity of something that looks so much like a religion?” (73). It means they can be presented as inflexible and blind to their own predicament, or hypocritical and shame-faced. The idea that their confessions may be honest statements of feeling cannot be entertained; fans are supposed to be too obsessed or too ashamed to give an honest picture of their own experience.
Duffett

Doss says, “their resistance begs consideration” (74). Yet she does not use this “resistance” to question her own theory. By contrast, John Strausbaugh at least recognizes that some of the evidence is valid enough to disturb his “cult” idea, although he too refuses to discard the notion. Instead he stretches it to accommodate the evidence: “A lot of people seem to think that Elvis faithful are also mad, yet the cult of Elvis doesn’t conform to what cults are and how ‘cult madness’ works” (220). An accommodation as elastic as Strausbaugh’s highlights a key flaw in the theory: if Elvis fandom does not work like a cult, or have a central institution or theology, then why should it be compared to one? In the face of such questions, both popular and academic researchers refuse to let go. The “religiosity” interpretation remains in demand because it normalizes nonfans. Writers and artists who portray Elvis fandom as a cult are communicating to a largely mainstream, nonfan audience. Their representations of fandom establish this audience as “normal” by Othering and castigating fans, and perceiving them as the benign victims of a joke for the way that they “place inappropriate importance on devalued cultural material” (Jenkins 10). The idea that fans follow a misguided faith reduces their activity to a form of obsessive servility. It normalizes the nonfan audience in turn through implication. They are positioned as the opposite of servants: autonomous individuals who can believe that they have actively chosen not to “worship” the King. Because audiences want to see fandom as the other side of a binary that normalizes them, researchers can imply that Elvis culture is a phony faith or “quasi-religion” and avoid exposing themselves as the makers of a false comparison.

Comparisons can provide intriguing starting points because they inspire us to think, but there are serious problems with using them as an analytical tool. Despite highlighting a few striking similarities, the comparison between religion and fan culture promoted by writers like Erika Doss offers a weak explanatory framework. Rather than building upon the results of previous field research (like Julia Aparin’s ethnographic study of Elvis fans), it encourages us to meditate on the connotations of a stereotype. It also approaches what we could fruitfully examine—fans’ assumptions about the unstable balance of power between themselves and their hero—through an extremely crude metaphor. Trying to understand Elvis fandom by way of a religious comparison is so reductive that something seems almost laughable about the idea, especially if we compare it to advances elsewhere in fan studies (see, e.g., Jenkins; see also Cavicchi).

I am not denying that Elvis fans express an unusual intensity of interest that must indicate something about their empowerment, or that they indulge their pleasures, in part, through visual images of their hero. Their thrills are better explained, however, as a response to Elvis’s performance and popularity than as moments of religious madness. If we settle for the religious understanding, we miss the complexity of the audience—text relationship, the diversity of investments, and the rich array of informal institutions that support fans’ interests. Furthermore, the theory is impossible to rescue as a neutral analytical tool from its context in parody. Rather than pursuing a comparison that neglects the music, has derogatory connotations, and actually contradicts what fans have to say, we should aim to analyze, contextualize, and compare their own accounts of their experience.

Writers and artists who define Elvis fandom as a form of religion speak in a forum in which fans can rarely reply. In that respect it seems only fair to leave the
last word to a fan called David Neale, who reviewed Doss’s Elvis Culture in The Official Elvis Presley Fan Club Magazine:

Author Erika Doss, a professor of fine arts and director of the American Studies programme at the University of Colorado, Boulder, examines the cultural impact of Elvis in a number of contexts and delivers a sometimes fatuous, sometimes worrying, sometimes intriguing and always fascinating look at the results…. Fatuous I consider Doss’ concentration on extreme forms of fandom, with almost no indication that the majority of Elvis people are really quite normal.

Notes

1. Although they all approach Elvis as a visual, religious icon rather than a musical one, there are still important differences between these writers. Denisoff and Plasketes had the most license to make the comparison as they restricted their discussion to a subgroup of fans and opinion leaders who actually held the (dis)belief that Elvis was alive.

2. Phillip Elliot’s response, which was first published in 1974, offers a critique of the paradigm.

Works cited


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